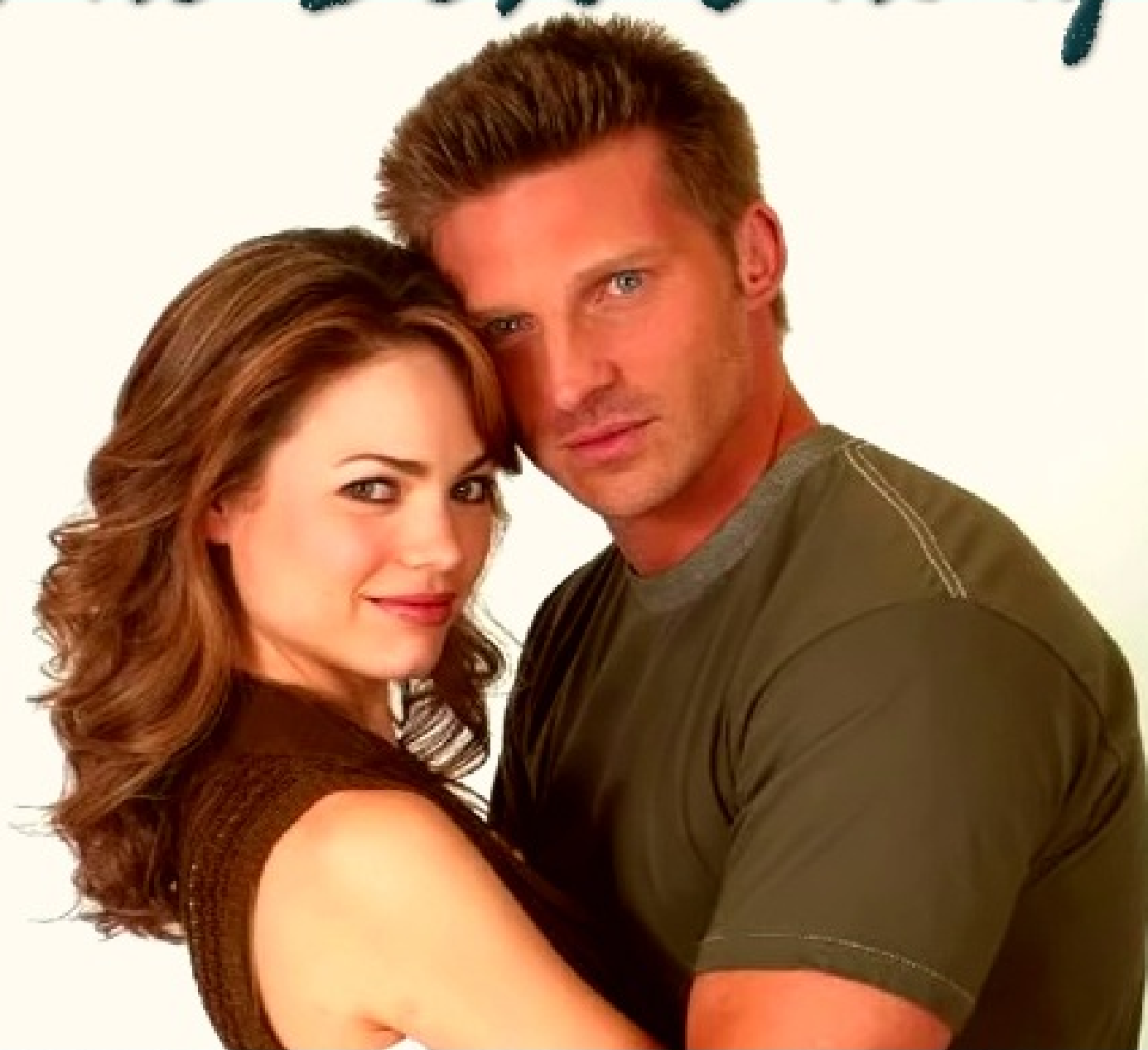




# The Best Thing



*I am here still waiting though I still have my doubts  
I am damaged at best, like you've already figured out*

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This story was written 2014-15.

## Disclaimer

I have no affiliation with General Hospital, ABC, Disney, any of the cast or crew that works at any of the above companies. This site is meant for entertainment purposes and I do not own the characters that the show has created, though I wouldn't mind owning Patrick or Dillon.

I'm just saying.

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*To Cora, who made this a much better and complex story.*

# Background

## Inspiration

This story has changed so much since I originally envisioned it in 2004. Lila Quartermaine had just died, and I found myself wondering how Port Charles would handle Audrey's death. So I began writing based on that idea, and had six or seven chapters written before a computer crash killed them all. Almost ten years later, I returned to it, and changed it around so that there are very few aspects of that old story that remained: really just the title and the way I deal with Jason changing Sam's paternity results.

## Timeline

For the most part, the major backstory will be explained in the first few chapters. I've changed only a few things. I pick up the show about May 2004 (or whenever Jason changed the paternity results), and go from there. So from that period on, only what's in my story is what happened. Basically — just how Sonny and Jason deal with his changing the results. Elizabeth does not come home in June 2004 and enroll the nursing program. Emily and Nikolas are together, after he comes back from the dead. None of the Mary Bishop going insane stuff happens. Not that it's important, but I liked Mary so... pfft.

Steven Webber is played by Shaun Benson, rather than Scott Reeves, simply because I never really watched Scott as Steven, but I really liked Shaun's portrayal back then. A note about Steven as a character: John Durant is not a factor in this story, so he's just a normal doctor at General Hospital, having moved to Port Charles over the summer.

Carly is played by Tamara Braun because she was playing her in 2004 and her characterization drives Carly's motives, rather than LW or SBr.

This is going to be a slow boiling story, in which the build up may seem endless, but I promise you I know what I'm doing. I know exactly how this is going to end, and how I'm getting there. Every thing has a purpose.

# The Best Thing

*But remember the time I told you the way that I felt  
That I'd be lost without you and never find myself  
Let's hold onto each other above everything else*

# Part One: Sanctuary

*“When you are mad, mad like this, you don't know it. Reality is what you see. When what you see shifts, departing from anyone else's reality, it's still reality to you.”*

— Marya Hornbacher, *Madness: A Bipolar Life*

# Chapter One

*You can count on me  
When you cannot see  
Let me spell it out  
Plain and simple now  
When your numbers called  
Backs against the wall  
Pick you up when you fall  
Be there when you call*  
- Count on Me, Mat Kearney

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*Saturday, December 6, 2004*

## **Elm Street Pier**

He wished he could feel the cold. He wished that the bitter winds of an upstate New York winter would seep through his leather jacket and into his bones, leaving him numb.

If his body were numb, it might lessen the fatigue in his muscles, in his eyes. He could not remember this level of exhaustion—even though during the various problems created by his life, when people he loved had been kidnapped or hurt, he had not slept.

But Jason Morgan realized maybe the adrenaline in those situations had staved off the worst of the effects, just long enough to resolve the situation, and then he would sleep for a day.

There was no adrenaline now. No sense that anything would be resolved.

For a month, he had been a single father to a little girl that was not his, while her biological father lived across the hall, swimming in his own guilt.

Jason knew every time Sonny called in the middle of the night to talk to someone, to run a shipment, to check on something at the warehouse, forcing him to wake the baby and take her to the other penthouse, he was being punished for taking Sam's side in this whole mess.

As if it had been as simple as taking sides.

He was not a man who thought in pictures or dreamed, but he had a memory for faces and voices. And the sound of Sam's cries, her pleas to him to raise her daughter, to keep Sam alive as a memory for her, to keep her away from Sonny... Jason had been unable to ignore her. He could hear those words, remember her grief as a doctor told them they couldn't stop the bleeding.

Sam had only lived a half hour after giving birth to her daughter, the result of a complication in childbirth. She'd held her daughter, made Jason promise to love her the way she would have, to remember her, and then she'd died.

And Jason had kept his promise.

He didn't hear her footsteps until she called his name.

“Jason?”

He looked up, through the snowflakes sliding gently to the ground and saw Elizabeth Webber standing at the bottom of the stairs, her hands wrapped around a cup from Kelly's. Filled with hot chocolate, he was sure.

He cleared his throat. “Elizabeth.” Jason got to his feet. He hadn't seen her in months, save for a brief moment at his grandmother's funeral earlier that summer. Emily had told him she'd flown in for a few days then, and he almost remembered seeing another baby at Wyndemere when he'd been there an hour ago to drop off his daughter.

“Hey.” A hesitant smile spread across her face, and she stepped forward. “I was on my way to the island to pick up Cam.” She glanced out over the harbor, where Spoon Island was hidden through the snowflakes and mists.

He nodded, and sat back on the bench, gesturing to one side. She smiled again, less hesitant and sat next to him. “Emily said you were coming home for Christmas.”

“Mmmhmm...” She nodded and sipped her drink. “After growing up in Boulder and then spending all those years in Port Charles...” Elizabeth tilted her head back, and a few flakes were caught in her eyelashes and her long dark brown hair. “It didn't feel right not to have snow.”

“You...uh...” He rubbed the back of his neck and searched his memory for what Emily had told him about Elizabeth the last few months. His mouth felt sour, realizing far apart they were now. Once, he would have been aware of her movements, of her life. Even when he'd been gone, out of town, he'd kept in touch with Sonny and Emily about her. “Emily said you'd moved to California. Do-do you like it?”

“I do.” Elizabeth nodded again. “I'm living in San Francisco. I had family on my mother's side there, so it seemed like a good idea.” She glanced at him. “Have you been to San Francisco?”

“Yeah.” He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his thighs, clasping his hands between his knees. “Once. When I...left town that first time. I wanted to see Alcatraz.”

A full-fledged grin appeared now, and he smiled in response. She seemed so happy, so settled, so different than she'd been eight months earlier when she'd left her husband, left town. “You, on what most people would call a vacation, went to a prison?” A small chuckle emerged from her lips, and he saw the humor in it. His smile spread even further, and he knew he'd forgotten this about her. About sitting here, talking about nothing and feeling...light. Feeling unburdened.

He'd missed her.

“I saw you when I came home in July,” she said after a moment. Her fingers tapped restlessly against



the side of her cardboard cup. “I...wanted to go to you, to tell you how sorry I was, but...” Her bottom lip was pulled between her teeth and she shrugged a shoulder. “I didn’t know if I should.”

“I...” He cleared his throat and leaned back against the bench. “I saw you, too. With Ric.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Yeah. I—we were finalizing our divorce. He married Alexis in October, so I guess that explains why he was so amicable.” He glanced at her, but saw no unhappiness in her eyes at her ex-husband’s hasty remarriage. Instead, she was worrying her lip again. “Jason...I am sorry about Sam.”

His shoulders tensed, as they often did when someone offered their condolences for Sam. They thought he’d been in love with her, and he could understand that. She’d lived with him for her pregnancy—he’d claimed her child. He’d genuinely liked her, thought of her as a friend, and did grieve for her, but he didn’t want to accept comfort from Elizabeth over a loss he didn’t feel the way people thought he did.

Hadn’t *that* been the start of everything that had gone wrong in their friendship?

“Thanks,” Jason said finally.

She was quiet again, but almost contemplative. “Anyway, I was picking up Cameron. Emily wanted to baby-sit him, and I never turn down an opportunity to have some alone time. It’s a precious commodity for single parents.”

He knew that to be true. “She’s watching Evie now,” he told her. “She said almost the same thing to me.”

Elizabeth smiled. “When Emily told me last month you were naming her Evangeline, and calling her Evie, I thought it was such a pretty name.” She flicked her gaze out over the water. “That’s when I *knew* how much had really changed between us. It seems silly, because I should have known it long before then. I mean, when I found out both times I was having a child, you were not the first person I called, but I guess...” She hesitated. “To hear about your daughter from Emily, and to know that the only things you know about my son come from your sister as well, it makes me...” She sighed. “Sad.”

He knew what she meant. He could remember sitting here, on a park bench, on a sofa in her studio, or at a table at Jake’s, and telling her things about Michael, Robin, and Sonny that he’d never told anyone else.

“I know,” Jason said, because he wanted to acknowledge what she was saying, but he didn’t know *what* to say. How did they turn the clock back two years to stop their friendship from being sacrificed? Forget a relationship, their friendship had always been important, too.

“It’s mostly my fault,” she told, meeting his eyes again. “I was *so* angry. And I kept being angry, long past when it was of any use. By the time I stopped being angry...it was just...too late. Too much had changed. I thought...we had damaged too much to go back.” Elizabeth squared her shoulders. “But I’m working through all of that, you know?”

After a brief moment while she sipped her hot chocolate, she said, “I’m moving back. I stepped off the plane at the airport, came through the gate and I saw my grandmother. She looks...old.” She glanced down. “I want my son to know her. And I had been thinking about coming home for months, because it’d be easier...” Her lips curved into a half smile. “I sold some art in California, and I’m having a show at a gallery in New York in February.”

He grinned because he knew what this meant to her. For as long as he’d known her, she’d been an artist, but was always forced to put her passion on the back burner. “That’s...really great, Elizabeth. You must be excited.”

“I am. I’m terrified, too,” she admitted. “But it came at the right time, because Gram had almost talked me into enrolling into the nurse’s program so I could have a stable job and stop using alimony from Ric.” She grimaced. “I only agreed to accept it for a year, so the show in February will hopefully give me some breathing room.”

Her cup was empty, she set it on the bench between them. “Jason...you look so tired. I mean, I remember how I felt when Cam was...Evie’s age, but...is everything all right?”

Because he suddenly wanted to tell her everything for some reason and he knew what a mistake that would be, Jason cleared his throat. “Fine. Just adjusting to everything.” He tugged on his ear and looked away. “So you named your son Cameron.”

He saw Elizabeth draw back and felt guilty that he’d brushed her off that way, she deserved better from him. But then she pressed her lips together and nodded, as if accepting the limits he was putting on the conversation. “I thought about naming him Alexander,” she said. “But I don’t know that Zander would have wanted him to be saddled with that, so I named him for Zander’s father.” She smiled. “So I can tell him his grandfather was a kind and gentle man who gave his life during the fire to help others.”

He thought she might say her goodbyes then and head away, but instead, she leaned back against the arm of the bench and smiled, looking up at the gray skies with the snow still falling. “I wanted to thank you.”

His brows drew together, and he tilted his head. “For what?”

“For last winter.” Her purse was in her lap, and she was toying with the string. “Being a mother is everything I never knew I wanted, you know? I always thought maybe I’d have kids one day, but it was this abstract concept. Even though I only knew about the first baby for maybe a week, it made me think...this is something I *really* want.” Her smile was sad. “But having Cameron, being his mother, it’s made everything better. Brighter. Worth it. And you helped make it possible when you went to the PCPD last year with that statement.”

He shrugged and looked away. “You ended up not needing it—”

“But it meant a lot to me. It made me realize, that...” She leaned forward and placed a hand on his forearm, so he’d meet her eyes. “Despite everything, you’ve *always* been there when I needed you. I

know a lot of time has passed since we were really friends, but maybe..." She hesitated and licked her lips. "Maybe that doesn't need to matter. We've gone a year without speaking before, even had fights. But we were still friends. I'd like it if we could be friends again."

"We are..." He stopped, because it was almost a platitude to tell her that they were always friends, because he knew what she meant. And now he really wanted to tell her everything, because maybe Elizabeth could help him decide if he was making the right decisions, if keeping this promise was worth the destruction it was going to cause.

But she was happier now and she was away from the chaos of his life, of her life before Cameron. He didn't want to burden her with his secrets.

"I missed you," he said after a moment. "Just...this last...half hour...has been better than most of the last month. I don't feel as tired, or..." He hesitated, but wanted to offer her this at least. "It's been tough, but I don't feel that way right now."

"Good." She leaned back, and removed her hand. "It was always the reverse when we were...friends before. Especially the first time around." Her laugh was rueful, and her teeth bit into her lip again. "I used to drive you *crazy*, I'm sure, with talks about Lucky and my paintings, and my ridiculous life—"

"No." He shook his head, and this time and he reached for her hand. "You...you were the only person I could talk to about Michael."

He watched her eyes change, as sadness crept into them. She took a deep breath and seemed to come to some sort of inner decision. "Are you afraid it's going to happen again?"

His hand tightened reflexively around hers, as if he knew what she was asking. He cleared his throat. "What?"

"That you're going to fall in love with this child whose biological father will come for her later?" Elizabeth pressed, and tightened her own grip when he would have pulled away. "Jason, I'm not going to push you, but I can't..." She pursed her lips. "I *can't* sit by and watch you struggle like this. Emily has always suspected, and I did as well even before she told me her own thoughts. Who *else* would Emily talk to about you?"

He exhaled slowly, and realized he only felt...relief. His sister knew. Elizabeth already knew. He didn't have to lie to them anymore. "I'm surprised Emily didn't say anything."

"She loves you so much, Jason, and she just wants to support you." She released his hand. "You should let her. She offered to help you hire someone to help out. Let her. You cannot do this alone. I don't..." She closed her eyes. "I don't care if you don't talk to *me* about it, but you should talk to Emily."

"I'll...think about it." Jason hesitated. "Thank you, it's...a relief to know I don't have to..."

"Lie?" she offered with a wistful smile. "Well, I wasn't going to say anything, but you know me, I'm

pushy.” She stood. “I really have to pick up Cam now.” She stepped away from the bench. “Don’t be a stranger.”

“I won’t.”

She was almost at the launch when she turned back, a mischievous smile spread across her delicate features. “You know the best thing about being home for Christmas?”

“What?”

“The smell of snow.”

He laughed, remembering that conversation in her studio all those Decembers ago. “Snow doesn’t smell,” he teased.

She arched an eyebrow and stepped onto the waiting launch. “Yes, it does.”

He got to his feet, feeling lighter than he had in weeks as he watched launch disappear into the mists towards Spoon Island. “Welcome home,” he murmured.

## **Wyndemere: Family Room**

He thought about Elizabeth’s words for the rest of the day, as he struggled to get through the paperwork that seemed to be part of his job description now. He’d always balanced the books for their legitimate businesses, had always enjoyed the solid certainty of numbers.

Lately, however, he was somehow in charge of shipments of actual coffee and dealing with vendors as well. Sonny had let go of an assistant who had handled it in the past, and asked Jason to deal with it, since he liked numbers.

Not wanting to rock the boat, Jason had agreed but it was just one more sign that Sonny was dissatisfied with the agreement they’d made the month before. If Sonny wasn’t still protecting his marriage, wasn’t still keeping Carly in the dark about Evie’s paternity, he knew things would be different.

Jason had assumed things *would* be different in those first hours after Sam’s death. Until Diane Miller showed up at the hospital with Sam’s will and a sheaf of paperwork the redhead had filed on the mother’s behalf.

And part of Jason had admired the lengths Sam had gone to protect her daughter from Sonny—from his inability to walk away from Carly, from being just another possession.

Sam McCall had pulled one final con on the biological father of her child and tricked him into terminating his parental rights.

She’d left Jason a letter explaining that Sonny had thought he was setting up a trust for the baby, but Sam had substituted the other papers at the last moment, leaving Sonny without any leg to stand on in

regards to the baby.

And Diane informed him that Sam had left him guardianship. Legally, Evie was his.

Morally...*that* was something Jason still struggled with. But Sonny hadn't wanted to rock the boat, to contest the guardianship and termination in court. He knew Carly would walk out with the boys.

So the lie had stood.

He had not told Emily this. He had kept his sister in the dark for months, since the beginning of this disaster. He had lied to his ex-wife, and regretfully allowed Courtney to believe that he had broken their marriage vows before they'd ended it for good. Courtney had taken the news in silence, and then packed her foundation up to head for New York.

He had not told his grandmother, who'd been happy for him at the end of her life. He had not told Monica.

But he wondered if anyone of them had bought the con he and Sam had tried to pull. If Emily *had* always suspected, if she and Elizabeth had discussed it, he wondered why she hadn't asked him.

Emily smiled at him as he entered the family room of the mansion, a room she had decorated herself with bright colors and soft furniture. It looked different from the rest of the mausoleum, and he could see his sister being happy here.

"Hey, you!" She embraced him. "Elizabeth said she ran into you on the docks when she picked up Cam earlier this afternoon." She stepped back to gesture at the portable crib in the corner, near the window that overlooked a bare winter garden. "Evie's still napping."

Jason glanced at the little girl that he had tried very hard not to love, not to consider his own, but he had watched her be born, watched as her mother struggled to hold her just once...had seen her eyes open and latch onto his.

Sam had asked him to love and raise her as his own, to tell Evie about her, and he had agreed. For better or for worse, Evie *was* his daughter, which only made the situation that much more precarious.

Elizabeth was right. He couldn't do this alone.

"Did Elizabeth tell you what we talked about?"

"Mmm..." Emily picked up a stuffed animal and tossed it into the playpen Cameron must have used. "She said you guys caught up a little. Talked about San Francisco. Isn't it awesome she's moving home? I went to see her in August, but it's just not the same not having her here—"

"So she didn't tell you that she asked me about Evie and Sonny?" Jason interrupted, because he knew his sister's chatter was nervous.

"She...um..." Emily smiled weakly. "Mentioned it. But I told her I wouldn't say a word unless you

asked me, or said anything. Um..." She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "Are you mad at me?"

"Why?" Jason lowered himself onto the sofa and stripped his leather jacket off to place across his lap. Evie slept so fitfully at home, he wasn't going to wake her now.

"Because I didn't ask you." Emily sat down, curling one leg underneath her as she faced him on the sofa. "Because I talked to Elizabeth. I didn't tell her anything she wasn't already thinking. You know she's always known you pretty well. She thought you were trying to do something for Michael or Morgan."

"She said I should talk to you." Jason stared down at the floor. "That I should stop trying to do this on my own." He met his sister's concerned eyes. "She was right. No, Em, I'm not mad. You and Elizabeth are best friends, and you both...you're both in my life. I'm not surprised you looked to each other about this."

"It's true, isn't it?" Emily murmured. "Jason, if Evie is Sonny's daughter, then...why?" She glanced at the crib. "I love her anyway, you know it doesn't matter to me. But why do you *still* have her? Why did Sonny let her go?"

"Carly thinks she's my daughter," Jason admitted. "She told Sonny if the baby was his, she would take the boys and walk. He believed her. When I changed the results, I just...I couldn't let Jax raise her, because if he found out the truth..." He shook his head. "It just...I wasn't thinking it through."

"Clearly." Emily arched a brow. "Did Sonny know about this beforehand?"

"No." Jason shook his head. "He was angry. Really angry. But I told him that I was protecting Michael and Morgan. And he agreed to let it stand. Sam was angry, too, but she thought Sonny would change his mind. Would leave Carly for her."

"She really loved him," she murmured. "I could see it sometimes, but she tried to hide it, you know. Tried to sell you guys. I still don't understand—"

"They had another affair last summer," Jason cut in. "For almost two months. I didn't...know about it right away, but I guess I suspected. I didn't know what to do about it. If Sonny wanted to be with Sam, I would try to help him figure out the fall out with the kids—"

"Why does *that* need to be your job?" Emily muttered.

"But Sonny never intended to leave Carly. He offered to send Sam to the island, to anywhere and set her up...like a mistress. They could be a family."

"A secret family." Emily pressed her lips together and nodded. "That sounds like the man Sonny has become. I can't imagine Sam took that well."

"She told him okay," Jason said. "And then she went to a lawyer, pretended to draw up trust paperwork, only she tricked Sonny into terminating his parental rights. She was going to raise Evie herself, but I guess the lawyer suggested she make out a will to keep Sonny away in the event anything

happened.”

“And she left you guardianship.” Emily sighed. “Well, I can’t say I don’t understand Sam’s thinking, but did *you* know all of this then?”

“No. I-I didn’t know anything until Sam...was dying.” He swallowed. “She begged me to keep her daughter away from Sonny and Carly. They would never tell Evie about her, Em. You know what. You’ve seen what they did to Michael with AJ. They tell him AJ is a bad person who’ll hurt him.”

“I know.” Emily sighed. “AJ’s not perfect, but he wasn’t so bad at fatherhood. No one ever gave him a chance.” She met his eyes. “Including you. It’s ironic that Sonny was tricked into giving up his daughter, since he did the same to AJ when he hung him on a meat hook and threatened to leave him to die in a freezer.”

“I’m not proud of the things I did back then,” Jason said quietly. “Watching Sam’s fear that she’d be forgotten, or worse, talked about like she was trash to her own daughter, I could understand, for the first time, how AJ must have felt when Michael looked at him like a stranger.”

“So you promised Sam you’d raise her daughter, and she gave you the tools to do so.” Emily nodded. “Okay. Okay, Jase. I’m sorry you felt like you couldn’t trust me—”

“It wasn’t that,” Jason interrupted. “Never that. I know I can trust you. You and Elizabeth, I just didn’t want to lay my problems on you guys. I thought about telling her while we were talking, because I hate lying to her, but I just...you guys don’t need the chaos of my life.”

“She pushed you, she said, because you needed someone in your corner.” Emily leaned forward. “Well, that can be me, Jase. Or it can be Elizabeth. As long as it’s *someone*.” She hesitated. “Jason, I’m not saying you should...turn your back on Sam’s promise, but this is Michael’s paternity all over again, except this time it’s with Sonny’s permission. This is still going to blow up. Sonny might change his mind, or he might keep punishing you with all this extra work. Are you sure that you want to do this?”

He asked himself that every day when he woke up after an hour or so of restless sleep. Every morning, he went into Evie’s nursery, so carefully decorated by her mother, and saw her crying for food, or sometimes just looking up at him with those dark eyes like her mother’s.

He knew that he and Sonny would never be close again, that he would always have to hold Carly at arm’s length to preserve this secret. He knew that the moment he changed the results he had changed the way things would work, but when he’d looked Sonny in the eye after Sam’s death and told him that *he* had custody of the baby, that Sam had not wanted Sonny anywhere near their daughter...Jason knew he was making a choice.

He couldn’t take that moment back. Even if he relinquished custody of Evie to Sonny today, a month from now, a year, there would always be *that* moment in which he had had the chance to prove to the world he was loyal to Sonny more than himself and instead, Jason had chosen himself. He’d chosen a promise to a woman who’d become a friend to him, who trusted him.

“I can’t go back now,” Jason said, finally. “I promised Sam, Emily. As she lay dying, *begging* me to keep her daughter from a man who refused to claim her in life because it complicated his life. I promised her, and I promised myself I wouldn’t put another child through what Michael and Morgan go through every day. So, I guess I’m going to have to figure out what to do next.”

“Well, I don’t know about what to do next in the whole big picture, but we are hiring you a nanny so Evie can sleep and you are going to figure out a way to get Sonny to relax his demands.” Emily lifted his chin. “Use what Sonny Corinthos seems to understand best. Guilt. About what he did to Sam, what he’s doing to his family every day he lies to Carly that he’s still in their marriage one hundred percent. Carly doesn’t know about the paternity switch, and she sure as hell doesn’t know about the second affair because the world would have known.”

She paused and held his chin between her fingers so he was forced to look her in the eye. “So *use* that guilt, Jase. For once in your life, use the things Sonny and Carly use against you every day of the week and carve out time for yourself. Because all the nannies, friends and sisters in the world aren’t going to be able to help you if you can’t figure out how to do your job and be Evie’s father at the same time.”

### **Wyndemere: Study**

Emily perched on the edge of her fiancé’s desk and smiled down at him as he sorted through a stack of papers. “Guess what?”

“What?” He didn’t glance up from his work, and she would have pouted except she knew how much damage had been done doing those long months Nikolas had not known who he was. He had only regained his memories at the end of July, and he was still undoing the neglect.

So she crossed her legs and dangled her bare foot in the air, examining her purple toe polish. “Jason told me the truth today.”

She heard the rustle of papers behind him, indicating Nikolas had set aside what he was doing. “About time,” he grumbled. He stood and rounded the desk to stand in front of her. “Did you finally ask?”

“Nope.” Emily smiled. “Elizabeth did.”

“Elizabeth—” Nikolas frowned. “She’s been back two days. How did she manage to do what *you* couldn’t in six months?”

“Well, she actually asked him, which I decided I wouldn’t do because I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the truth.” Emily leaned back on her hands. “It’s better this way. Elizabeth told me she hadn’t intended to ask, but he looked so tired. You know what I mean. Sonny’s been dragging him out at all hours of the night, forcing Jason to leave Evie with them, and I knew he wasn’t telling Sonny no because of the situation.”

“If Jason pushes back too much, then Sonny will take custody.” He nodded and leaned against the



armchair. “Em, wouldn’t that be for the best?”

“You think putting a defenseless child with Sonny and Carly over my brother would be best?” Emily asked, raising her eyebrows. “Seriously, Nikolas? Your aunt won’t tell him the truth and you’re not suggesting she do it.”

He scowled. “Alexis almost had to when they thought Kristina was sick in October. It was the only reason she told me. She didn’t want her daughter to be treated the way Michael and Morgan have been. Ric promised her he could protect Kristina.”

“Hm...well, if it’s reason enough for Alexis not to want her daughter around him, then it’s good enough for *Sam*. Jason’s loyal to Sonny, but it goes so far. He loves Michael so much, Nikolas. It kills him to see Sonny and Carly destroying his childhood. He can’t fix that, but he can save Evie.”

“I’m not saying I think Sonny is the better father, but he *is* the biological father—”

“You know better than most that blood doesn’t matter.” She leaned towards him. “Why does his DNA make him better suited for Evie? My brother is a wonderful father. I wish he could have children of his own, but it hasn’t been in the cards. Sam recognized what we all saw—the better man. Sonny isn’t a good man. Not anymore.”

“Not ever,” he muttered. He sighed. “I don’t...I get it, Emily. I do, I just...you *know* this isn’t going to end well.”

“I do,” Emily admitted. “I know that Sonny and Jason are going to be at odds over this forever, but he made his choice.” Briefly she explained Sam’s termination trick and the fact Sonny had allowed it to stand. “He could have fought it, but it would have meant Carly learning the truth.”

“It doesn’t speak well of him.” Nikolas sighed. “Well, I’m glad he told you, Em. He looked like death warmed over when he dropped Evie off earlier today.”

“I’m going to make this better for him,” Emily told him. “I’m going help him find a nanny to live in, so Evie doesn’t have to go to the penthouse when he’s called away at night. And even better...” She grinned. “I’m going to find him a nice woman who will love him.”

“Oh...my head hurts already.” Nikolas was in the process of dragging his hand over his face, when he paused and let it slide away. “Emily, don’t—”

“Don’t you think it’s *wonderful* that five minutes after Elizabeth saw him again for the first time, she convinced him to tell me the truth and basically poured his heart out to her?”

“I doubt that’s how it happened—”

“And she’s a single mother, so you know she’d understand his struggles.” Her smile broadened as she pictured it. “She’s no fan of Sonny, not after the last few years. She’s just the woman for him.”

“So, what? You’re going to play matchmaker?” He closed his eyes. “Emily—”

“I’m *not* going to play matchmaker.” Emily wrinkled her nose. “I don’t need to, my friend, the match has been made. I’m going to be an opportunity creator.”

He frowned. “I fail to see the distinction.”

“A matchmaker picks two strangers or two acquaintances to be together,” Emily said. “I already know this is going to work. Jason needs someone strong on his side right now. Someone who gets him. She always has. And you know he’s always had a soft spot for her. He was in love with her once, he can be again—”

“Emily—”

“So I’ll just make sure they’re in the same room as often as possible. Believe me, Nikolas, if she can get him to open up to her, to get him to tell me what’s really going on, I won’t need to do any work. They just...need to be in each other’s spheres.” Emily hopped off the desk. “And I know he’d be good for her.”

“How so?” he asked, almost sourly.

“He’s always believed in her.” Emily pursed her lips. “We haven’t always been good friends to Elizabeth, Nikolas. And you know we discussed being better at it. Being there for her with Cameron, because we love her, and we know what we did to Zander. I want Cameron to know the *good* things about the man who created him. I want to make what we did right.”

“Em—”

“I can’t *ever* go back,” she said. She pressed her fist to her chest. “I can’t ever go back and not lead him on, not marry him and then have an affair with you. I would. I love you, I’m so happy we’re together and getting married, but I *wish* I didn’t destroy him to do it—”

“I know.” He sighed heavily and leaned his head back. “But Emily, pushing Elizabeth towards your brother doesn’t erase it—”

“I’m not pushing. That connection has always been there. Nikolas, he lied to the cops last winter to make sure she didn’t get in trouble for hitting Zander with that pipe. He hates the cops—”

“Which is why it’s not a surprise that he lied to them.”

“He did it for her.” Emily closed the short distance between them. “I think they’ve danced around each other for years, coming right to the edge of something incredible, but they keep getting in their own way. I don’t know if I can get them to take that final step, but you have to admit—there’s always been something there.”

“I cannot deny that as much as I would like to.” He scratched his chin. “You wouldn’t...push them hard, would you? They’re not the same people they were when he came home.”

“I just...want to make sure they have contact. Jason needs someone who loves him unconditionally. I

mean, I can do what I can as a sister, but it's not the same." She placed her hands on his thighs and leaned in to him. "You have Lucky, but you know the relationship you and I have is different. Is it so awful that I want that for them? I think they can find it together."

"What do you want from me?" he asked, resigned and she beamed.

"Well, as my co-opportunity creator, you just have to support me. I'll do the hard work." She pointed a finger at him. "No harassing Elizabeth about it. I know you didn't support her with Jason before—"

"That was different," he said swiftly. "She was mourning Lucky, and he took advantage—" Nikolas closed his mouth at her mutinous glare. "Okay. Well, I might have had a thing for her then that colored my perception. I do know that she was struggling with Lucky's...death...in a way that we couldn't help her with."

"She told me he was her safe place," Emily said softly. "And I think they can be that for each other again. So, you'll be supportive if it develops into something?"

"If that's all that's required of me." Nikolas nodded. "I like your brother most of the time, Em. I may...distrust his line of work, but hell, I'm a Cassadine. It's not like *that* hasn't almost killed Elizabeth a dozen or so times, so what right do I have to complain?"

"That's the best thing about you," she said, offering a quick peck to his lips. "You're always ready to admit when you're wrong."

"I never said that."

# Chapter Two

*Still waiting for the snow to fall  
It doesn't really feel like Christmas at all  
Those Christmas lights light up the street  
Down where the sea and city meet  
May all your troubles soon be gone  
Oh Christmas lights, keep shining on*  
- Christmas Lights, Coldplay

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*Friday, December 24, 2004*

## **General Hospital: Fifth Floor**

The elevator doors slid open to reveal the brightly decorated floor of the hospital, where the children would soon gather around Alan Quartermaine to listen to *'Twas the Night Before Christmas* and receive presents from Santa Claus.

Elizabeth could remember visiting her grandparents at Christmas and watching her grandfather read to the children stuck in the hospital over the holidays. Alan was a wonderful successor, but she would always miss Steve Hardy most this time of year.

Audrey placed a hand on her shoulder. "I miss him, too," she murmured.

Elizabeth adjusted Cameron in her arms and turned to smile at her grandmother. "He'll always be with us. And I'll tell Cameron all about the men he's named for." She looked down at her six month old son, with his dark hair and dark eyes like his father. "Cameron Steven Webber, grandson of doctors, and great-grandson of the best doctor and nurse team General Hospital ever saw."

"And nephew of the new pediatric oncologist," her brother teased from her side. "This kid is going to be quite helpful with ladies, Bits. They *cannot* resist a baby."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes with a smile and passed the baby to him. "Go. Flirt with the nurses. Be merry."

She watched as Steven, Cameron in tow, walked towards a trio of nurses—a blonde, a redhead and a pretty dark-haired girl she recognized from seeing with Lucky at Kelly's. "I don't think you're getting great-grandkids from *that* one anytime soon, Gram."

"Not likely," Audrey agreed with a sigh. "Why don't you go talk to Emily? She's gesturing at you, and I'll go talk to Monica and Alan." She kissed Elizabeth's cheek before heading away.

Emily stepped up to her and grabbed her hand. "I want you meet to meet someone!"

"Whoa!" Elizabeth said as Emily all but towed her across the reception room, around the nurse's hub

and towards the Christmas tree, where she saw Jason, holding an infant in a red velvet Christmas dress and a matching headband with a floppy bow.

She hadn't seen him in the last two weeks, but she knew from Emily that they had talked, and Evie now had a nanny that she appeared to love. The fatigue was gone from Jason's eyes, and he appeared less tense.

She was happy that she could help, even if it had just given him a small nudge to look to Emily for real support. She hadn't had any illusions that their moment of closeness on the docks would be repeated with further confidences.

"Jason, I thought Elizabeth might want to meet Evie." Emily almost skidded to a stop in front of her brother.

Jason arched a brow at his sister. "I figured that with the way you *dragged* her across the room, Em."

"Geez," Elizabeth said, rubbing her wrist. "You missed your calling as a linebacker. Seriously." She rolled her eyes and looked at Jason. "She's beautiful, Jason."

"Do-do you want to hold her?" He lifted the infant from his chest and she nodded, holding out her arms.

"Oh, I just love little girls," she murmured, smoothing her hand down Evie's velvet dress. She glanced up to ask Emily a question and frowned when she saw her friend had disappeared and was already across the room with Nikolas, Lucky and the dark-haired nurse. "How did she..."

"I don't know what's gotten into her," Jason murmured, squinting across the room as Emily studiously avoided looking at them.

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. "*I* do," she said under her breath, but looked down at Evie, whose dark brown eyes were open and looking up at her. "She looks like Sam." She vaguely remembered the woman she'd seen at Lila's funeral and around town once or twice before she moved.

"That's...what Emily tells me," Jason said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I guess. She has the dark hair and dark eyes."

"And you're so quiet and peaceful," Elizabeth said to Evie. "Cam's a fusser. Never thrilled with being right where he is. Always wants to be on to the next thing." She glanced up at Jason. "Please, make my day, and tell me *you* bought this dress."

"Ah..." Jason blinked. "Emily brought it over this morning. Why?"

Elizabeth sighed. "Oh, well. I suppose I just enjoyed the image of big, bad Jason Morgan picking out delicate lacy baby girl clothes." She smirked. "It's different than raising a little boy, isn't it?"

"You're not kidding." But he smiled at her words, so she was glad she hadn't offended him. "It gets easier, doesn't it?"

“Um...speaking as a former teen-aged girl...” Elizabeth winced. “Sorry. If she’s anything like *I* was...” She laughed when Evie wrapped her fist around Elizabeth’s pinky finger. “I stole my grandmother’s car, snuck into Sonny and Brenda’s wedding, framed my sister for cheating...”

Jason hesitated and his eyes were wide for a moment, because she supposed it was one thing to tell him those things when they were part of *her* past, but now she could see him looking at Evie and picturing her growing up and doing those same things.

“Oh, that’s not even the worst of it,” she teased. “One time, I went to a bar when I was only eighteen, and I picked up this guy.”

He scowled, but she continued. “Oh, yeah. He took me out on his bike all the time, and then I drove my grandmother crazy because I refused to stop seeing him.”

Jason laughed then and looked down. When he raised his head up, he was grinning. “You know, I’m starting to understand your grandmother a little more.”

“I know, right? It’s amazing how you figure your parents are overreacting until you think your kids will grow up to be just *like* you.” She bounced Evie lightly, and the baby smiled at her, and then gurgled. “I’d introduce you to Cam, but I think Steven’s using him right now.”

“*Using* him?” Jason echoed. He looked around until he found her brother at the nurse’s station, holding the infant and talking to a blonde. “Ah.”

“Men and babies, it’s supposed to be irresistible.” She rolled her eyes, and then bit her lip because hadn’t *she* felt that flutter in her stomach seeing Jason in his leather jacket, holding an infant girl with her pretty Christmas dress?

That was not a pleasant development, no matter what Emily was clearly trying to do.

She cleared her throat. “So, Emily said you hired someone to help.”

“Uh, yeah. Her name is Nora.” He slid his hands in the pockets of his jacket, as if restless. “Thanks... for pushing me to talk to Emily. I wish she felt like she could have asked on her own, but I know Evie’s better off with someone full-time, so when I can’t be there...”

“Well, Emily’s not nearly as pushy as I am.” Elizabeth frowned, and glanced at her friend who quickly looked away. She was going to have to talk to her about this. “You look better, though, so I guess you’re getting more sleep.”

“Yeah, ah, things have slowed down at work...” Jason trailed off and she turned to see what he was looking at. Until now, she hadn’t noticed the Corinthos family across the room by the elevators, and it hadn’t dawned on her that Jason was not standing with his best friends.

She wasn’t surprised—knowing that the custody situation must have made things difficult, but she was sad to see Jason’s shoulders tense at the sight of Sonny Corinthos crossing the room towards them. The teasing light in his eye had disappeared completely.

“Do...you want me to go?” Elizabeth asked softly. “I can—”

“No, I...” He exhaled in a rush a breath. “No, he won’t say anything in front of you or Evie.” But she could see he wasn’t as convinced of that as he’d liked to be.

“Elizabeth.” Sonny smiled at her, and she reflexively smiled back, but she saw that his expression didn’t reach his eyes. Those dark eyes were trained on the baby in her arms and she disliked the possessive way he was regarding Evie.

“Hey, Sonny. Merry Christmas,” she said, trying to keep the moment light but the tension was thick between these two and she felt like she was in the twilight zone. It was not so long ago that she had told Jason he would be loyal to Sonny above all else.

This wasn’t the way she wanted to be proved wrong.

“I saw you come in with your son,” Sonny said, but he still wasn’t looking at her. Now, he was looking at Jason, who was staring at his boss with an almost bland expression. “He’s beautiful.”

She cleared her throat and shifted her weight from one foot to the other, instinctively rocking Evie. She glanced down and saw that, despite the tension, the little girl was dozing in her arms. “Thank you, Sonny. Michael and Morgan...they’re getting so big.”

Elizabeth looked across the room where Carly and Courtney were talking to the young boys, who were laughing and pointing at something else. “Morgan just...turned one didn’t he?”

“Hmm...” Sonny nodded. “I can see your son is going to take after his father with his looks. What did you name him?”

Now he looked at her, and the hair on her arms stood up. This was *not* idle conversation. She tightened her arms around Evie, as if she thought Sonny might snatch her and run. “Cameron,” Elizabeth said. “I named him Cameron Steven, for my grandfather and for Zander’s father.”

“That’s nice. Cameron Lewis was a good man. Better to name your son for *him* than the bastard whose DNA he has in his veins.”

Elizabeth inhaled sharply and glanced at Jason, whose eyes were hard. “Sonny—” the enforcer began.

“But I suppose he’s better than the last piece of scum you picked as a father to your child.” Sonny tilted his head. “As sad as it was, Elizabeth, it was for the best you lost *that* child.”

The edges of her vision grayed, so she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I...I’m sure you didn’t mean that the way it sounded,” she began.

“Sonny—” Jason began again, his voice tight, the muscles in his neck bunching. “This isn’t—”

“You would have been tied to Ric forever, and it’s better that you’re not.” Sonny leaned forward, and

Elizabeth forced herself to remain still, to not take a large step back. “You really do have terrible taste in men.”

Part of her wanted to walk away from this, to hand Evie to Jason and just disappear. But she knew this wasn’t about her. This was about Jason.

“Knock it off,” Jason growled, stepping between them slightly. “You have a problem with me, that’s clear. You *don’t* bring Elizabeth into it. You don’t say anything to her. Just walk away, Sonny.”

Across the room, Courtney Matthews watched her brother saunter over to her ex-husband and Elizabeth. As the trio exchanged tense words, she saw the way Jason’s hands fisted at his sides, and then watched him step between Sonny and Elizabeth.

She looked to Carly. “I thought you said things were better between Jason and Sonny. Why didn’t you tell me it was *that* bad?”

Carly followed her gaze, and her mouth tightened at the scene. “Well, *you* made your choice when you fled to New York instead of staying here and fighting for Jason. I figured you didn’t want to hear about him anymore.”

Courtney hesitated, because it *was* true that she had hastily decided to pack up and leave for the city in the wake of Jason and Sam’s shocking announcement they were expecting a child together, but she didn’t expect Carly to phrase it that way.

“Sonny is *still* my brother,” Courtney said. She handed Morgan a cookie and then watched as the toddler joined his brother in another group of children.

“Well, maybe they’re still not past the fact they were screwing the same woman,” Carly muttered. “Bound to put a damper on any friendship.”

Courtney arched a brow. “Didn’t seem to slow them down when *you* were the woman in question.”

Her sister-in-law scowled. “That’s not...it’s not the same thing.”

Of course it was, but Courtney didn’t push it. After all, Carly was probably the *only* one left in Port Charles who didn’t see the truth.

Courtney had not left because she believed Jason cheated on her before they’d filed for divorce, but because she didn’t want to watch him sacrifice his life and future on the altar of Sonny and Carly Corinthos. She loved them, but time and space from their nonstop drama had allowed her to see them clearly.

“So, Jason and Elizabeth are close again?” Courtney asked, as her brother sauntered away from the two of them and, instead of returning to his family, wandered down a hallway. “I thought she was living in California.”

“Why do you think *I* would know?” Carly snipped. “I’m not a member of the Muffin Fan Club.”



Courtney sighed and wished she carried aspirin in her purse. More and more, her phone calls and visits with Carly were turning into obligations. Carly's life had been on a roller coaster for more than a year, since the day of Courtney and Jason's first failed wedding when Ric Lansing had kidnapped her.

At the thought of the smarmy attorney, she cast a dark glance at another spot in the room where Alexis and Ric stood with Kristina, talking to Ned Ashton and his daughter Brooke Lynn. How he still walked the Earth...

After escaping Ric and then Lorenzo Alcazar, Carly had been shoved out of her home when Sonny left her, and then shot in the head. After her coma, when she'd woken up, conflicted and lacking emotions to go with her memories, she and Sonny had continued to deteriorate until Carly turned to Alcazar and Sonny to Sam.

Their reconciliation the previous spring had not been for each other, but for their children. Not that Michael and Morgan seemed to be doing well. Michael threw tantrums and Morgan was sullen and withdrawn. She watched Michael take a toy from a smaller boy and sneer at him.

The way Sonny often sneered.

She had hoped things would improve with Carly believing Jason was the father of Sam's child, but there was an edge to her sister-in-law now. She wasn't just hard from a tough life, she was *brittle*, as if one more revelation would cause her to shatter.

And God knew, Carly Corinthos wasn't the type to shatter into a million pieces of cotton and collapse into sobs or fits of depression.

When Carly broke apart, it would be into a million little jagged shards of glass that would rain down on those she loved and destroy them.

So Courtney played along with the lie, swallowed the perceived humiliation of her husband's supposed affair because Evie was better off where she was. Jason was a good man who would love that little girl.

While Sonny and Carly were selfish creatures who were only mediocre parents at best—when they remembered they had children to begin with.

Courtney cleared her throat. "It would be nice if they were friends again," she said. "I remember when they were."

"If they're friends again, she's just going to sink her claws into him," Carly retorted, her hand braced against the small of her back. "He's barely recovering from Sam McCall, like I want him *anywhere* near Elizabeth Webber. He needs support from us, from his best friends, but Sonny's punishing him."

"It's been months," Courtney murmured, but maybe she shouldn't be surprised. As far as her brother was concerned, Jason had stolen something from him. It didn't matter that Sonny hadn't raised a hand

to get his daughter under his roof—that wouldn't be the point.

“Sonny holds a grudge.” Carly huffed. “We’re trying to get pregnant, you know.”

Courtney snapped back to her, startled. “What? Why?”

“I saw Sonny when Sam was pregnant,” the other woman almost growled. “He *wanted* that baby. So if he wants a baby, *I’ll* give it to him. And he’ll remember how much he loves me, our boys. It’ll be okay again.”

Courtney pursed her lips. Morgan was barely a year old. If he and Michael weren't enough for Sonny and Carly to get it together, then why would anyone think *another* baby would do it? But talking Carly out of something would be like trying to prevent the sun from rising.

“It *was* good that Sonny wasn't Evie's father,” Courtney said hesitantly, almost testing her. “It would...have been a complication no one needed. I mean, it would have been better if it had been Jax's child, but—”

“If Evie had been Sonny's,” Carly said slowly, and now there was something in Carly's expression Courtney just didn't trust, “it would have been even worse now. With Sam gone. Evie would be there. A *constant* reminder of his affair.”

“Sonny...it was a difficult time, Carly. With Lorenzo Alcazar—”

“I think Sonny was punishing me for waking up and not loving him,” Carly retorted. “And rather than give me time to sort things out, he kept pushing me to love him. As if the reason I was in that coma wasn't his fault. He pushed me out the door and then he brought Sam right in. So you're damn right it's good Evie's not his kid. Jason will raise her, and it'll be fine.”

“Besides,” Courtney said softly, “I'm sure Jason loves Evie, even before she was born. It would...be horrible if he lost custody of her.”

“Why would he?” Carly demanded, her dark brown eyes boring into Courtney's. “Sam's dead. Jason's her father. Sonny is *nothing* to her.”

“Exactly.” Courtney nodded and reached inside her purse for a stick of gum. “So you and Sonny...you'll work it out eventually. You always do.”

“That's right. I'm going to do whatever I have to do to save my marriage, Courtney.”

And the trouble about that the statement, Courtney thought, was that she believed Carly *meant* it.

When Sonny had finally disappeared down the hall, Jason gently steered Elizabeth away from everyone else and down a quiet corridor.

“I'm...sorry about that,” he told her. “I thought things were getting better with him.”

“It’s all right,” she murmured. She glanced down at Evie. “She slept through it so—”

“He had no right to say those things to you, especially about Cam or...” He hesitated. “Your first child.”

Because the thought of that tiny life that had been snuffed out after a few weeks still caused her stomach to turn, Elizabeth looked down. “It wasn’t about *me*, Jason. He just wanted to annoy you. And he knew which buttons to push.” She grimaced. “Though, I’m sure he actually thinks those things *are* true...about Ric and Zander. But I know they’re not.”

“Still.” He shook his head. “I can’t...he wasn’t like this before.”

“I know.” Elizabeth sighed. “I know, Jason. I used to think of Sonny as a friend, but that changed a *long* time ago. He’s not the man who was there the night Lucky died, who looked out for me when you were gone. It’s been a long time since I saw that man, but I know for you to be at odds with him, it’s difficult.”

“I don’t *know* when it started,” he said after a moment. “I just know I didn’t see it until this last year, until he and Carly made Michael’s life miserable. They kept dragging him into court, asking him who he should live with. He told the judge he wanted to live with me, so I’m sure Sam picking me over him for Evie must have reminded him of that.”

“I’m just...” She sighed. “I’m so sorry this is happening, and I can tell you don’t expect it to get better. Maybe less stressful, but you don’t see an exit for this.”

“Not one that doesn’t include Sonny taking custody of her,” Jason said quietly. “I-I know if he asked for her, I would have to give her up, but—”

“Why?” Elizabeth said, and then regretted it. She didn’t want to get between Jason and Sonny. If she encouraged Jason to go against Sonny now, any hopes for a friendship between them would be over when Jason did figure out how to fix this. “Never mind, it’s not my business—”

“He’s...her biological father,” Jason said slowly. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Blood.” Elizabeth pressed her lips together. “As if *blood* makes you a good parent. I haven’t seen my parents in seven years, Jason. You know that my grandmother isn’t my blood relative? That my father was Steve Hardy’s son by a woman he knew before he married Gram. But she has *never* let me feel like I’m not her granddaughter. My father says that she has always treated him as her own son. Blood doesn’t make a family. Why does it matter whose blood is in her veins? Does that make him the better man? When does *Evie’s* best interests come into it?”

When he just stared at her, she shook her head. “I’m sorry. I just...I *remember* you that day on the docks, watching AJ and Michael together. I don’t want you to have that look on your face again.” She stepped closer to him, only separated by the baby in her arms. “Jason, I don’t want you to live in nothing again. Because I remember what it’s like, and you deserve so much better.”

He dipped his head down and exhaled slowly. "I think about it every day," he confessed. "About what it would be like for him to come and take her away. I can't believe I'm in this situation again. I don't even *know* how I got here."

"Because you're a good person who tries so hard to protect the people important to him. You wanted to protect Michael and Morgan, and maybe even Carly. And now you want to keep your promise to Sam, who saw what most of us always knew." She lifted Evie and carefully handed the little girl back to her father. "That you were *always* the better man."

Their eyes met and held for a long moment before she looked away, her stomach rolling again. "I should...get back to my grandmother. And maybe find my son before Steven promises him to some willing nurse."

They started down the hallway, towards the reception area. "I'm going back to California for a few days after the holidays," she told him. "To pack up our apartment, tie up some loose ends. Maybe..."

She trailed off when they stepped back into the crowded room. Emily was standing there, blocking their further progress. "Hey, I was wondering where you two went!"

"Funny, I was thinking the same thing about *you*," Elizabeth replied, her brow arched. Emily raised hers in return.

"And look at your amazing placement." Emily jabbed a finger in the air, and Elizabeth glanced up, realizing why Emily had stopped them in this precise place.

The mistletoe hanging in the doorway between the reception and hallway.

She glared at her friend, sending her a mental message she knew the brunette understood. *You're about as subtle as a train wreck.*

Emily just quirked her lips, and Elizabeth could picture the words. *Suck it, Webber.*

She looked at Jason, who had also been giving his sister an annoyed look. "Just ignore her, I think she's had one too many batches of eggnog."

"It's fine." Jason leaned down and brushed his lips across her cheek, and then stepped back. "I'm glad you're home."

Hell. She really thought she had outgrown this.

Elizabeth smiled. "Thanks." She stabbed a finger at her friend. "We'll discuss this later, Quartermaine." She started across the room, but then turned back, feeling playful.

"You know, all in all, it's turning out to be better than the last Christmas party we were at together." He grinned at the reminder and she continued on her way.

When Elizabeth was across the room and taking her son from her brother, Jason just looked at his

sister. “Emily.”

“Opportunity creator,” she said, as if this was something that ought to mean something to him. “I’m so ecstatic she’s home, Jase. And just in time for Christmas and her art showing. She’s finally showing the world how awesome she is.” She wrapped her arm around his bicep and beamed up at him. “But *we* always knew, right?”

“Emily.”

“Let’s go take Evie to see Mom so she can stop sending you sad looks.”

Jason just sighed and followed his sister as she towed him closer to the Quartermaines. What did it say about his frame of mind when he preferred the blustering of his grandfather and the snide remarks of his aunt to the accusations of his best friend?

He glanced over his shoulder once more to find Elizabeth standing with Nikolas and Lucky, as the former was holding Cameron. Elizabeth laughed and punched Lucky in the shoulder.

It really *was* nice to have her home, to talk to her again.

But that didn’t mean his sister’s plans were going to work.

# Chapter Three

*If I could tell the world just one thing  
It would be that we're all okay  
And not to worry 'cause worry is wasteful  
And useless in times like these  
I won't be made useless  
I won't be idle with despair  
I will gather myself around my faith  
For light does the darkness most fear*  
- Hands, Jewel

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*Monday, December 27, 2004*

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Jason pulled open the door and frowned when he saw his sister with a stroller. “You find that on the street?” he asked.

Emily rolled her eyes and pushed the blue stroller into the room. “Steven and I are splitting Cameron this week to give Audrey a break. Not that she wanted one, but Liz insisted. So I get him until New Year’s, and then Steven gets him after that.”

“Elizabeth went back to California?” Jason closed the door and glanced inside the stroller to see the infant was asleep. “When did she leave?”

“Last night. She didn’t want to have to wait much longer. She wanted to be settled by the art show in February.” Emily looked around. “You’ve changed the place since I was here.”

“Nora suggested a few things to make it more...” Jason shrugged. “I don’t know, easier. So we moved my desk into the maid’s room and put the playpen and swing here.” He indicated to where the objects in question were. “There was some talk of getting rid of the pool table.”

“Hmm...” Emily looked towards middle of the downstairs where the pool table remained. “I see that talk went almost nowhere.”

“We’re fine in the kitchen,” Jason said. “There’s a table. She has a booster seat and a high chair for when she gets bigger. What am I going to do with *another* table?”

Emily frowned. “I should find an argument for that, but I just can’t.” She smiled at Evie in her swing. “She’s napping. That’s a nice change.”

“Yeah, Sundays and Mondays are Nora’s days off, so I’m on my own today.” He crouched in front of his daughter and adjusted her blanket. “What brings you by?”

“Well, I was taking Cam to Kelly’s for lunch with Lucky and his new girlfriend, Leyla, but he called when I got off the launch. He was called into the PCPD for work, so since I had already lugged this guy on the launch, I figure I’d bring him over to meet you.” She frowned down at the little boy. “And then he fell asleep. So.”

“You had nowhere else to go but *here*,” Jason said, almost resigned. “Emily—”

“What?” She planted her hands on her hips. “You don’t want to meet Liz’s kid? That’s *real* nice, Jason. After she put up with Sonny Corinthos because she’s your friend.”

He sighed and scrubbed his hand over his face. “She told you about that.”

“No, but I got eyes, don’t I?” Emily pursed her lips. “Should I take off his coat? He’ll roast. But what if he wakes up? Jase, I don’t know anything about babies. What if he gets sick?”

Jason resisted the urge to roll his eyes and knelt in front of the stroller. “I’m going to lean him up. You hold his shoulders, I’ll take off the coat. If he wakes up, he wakes up. You’re right. You can’t leave him in the coat. He’ll get used to it, and then it won’t protect him when he goes back outside.”

Emily held his shoulders and Jason gingerly stripped the bright blue parka from the little boy. Cameron opened his eyes once, fastened his dark eyes on Jason’s and then closed them again with a yawn. He couldn’t help a grin. “Not a fan of being woken from a nap. Just like his mother.”

His sister took the coat Jason handed her and put it in the diaper bag. “When have *you* seen Elizabeth wake up from a nap?” she demanded. “Is there information about the two of you Elizabeth has neglected to tell me? She *will* hear about this.”

“Emily—”

“What did Sonny say to Elizabeth anyway?” Emily flopped on the sofa. “She refused to tell me, saying it wasn’t about her. But I *saw* her. He said something that made her go all pale. You got pissed, stepped between them and then took Elizabeth into the hallway. Either to apologize or give her time to calm down.”

“He just...” Jason sat next to her, angling so he could keep Evie and Cam in his view. “He was pushing me by attacking her. She’s right. It wasn’t about her, but it was...” He hesitated. “I don’t know what made him think he could talk to her like that. After *everything* she’s been through because of knowing me, of knowing Sonny...”

“Amen. Not least of all knowing the two of you sent Ric in her direction.” Emily pursed her lips. “Of course, she was charmed by him like Alexis was, but you know, I bet she regrets the hell out of that.”

He scowled, because he knew Ric had started dating Elizabeth to annoy him. It had worked, but he hadn’t been able to convince Elizabeth to abandon him. “You know Elizabeth doesn’t listen to anyone when they try to tell her what to do.”

“Don’t I know it.” Emily leaned back. “Did Sonny say something to her about marrying Ric again?”

After what he did to Carly? I know Carly still holds a grudge against Liz, but *she* probably remembers the name of the kid from sixth grade who tripped her on the playground—”

“No, it wasn’t...” Jason paused. “He told her that Zander was a bastard and that it was a blessing she’d miscarried her child with Ric.”

Emily narrowed her eyes and shot to her feet. “Is he home?”

Jason grabbed her arm as she started past him. “Emily—”

“I’m not one for violence, Jase, but I think I can make an exception—”

He tugged her back down. “I took care of it at the party, and I’m going to make it clear I’m not going to put up with him using *her* to get at *me*.”

“Still.” Emily huffed. “Did he explain himself? Did he have a good reason why he attacked my best friend who has never done a *damn* thing to him? He likes to forget the people who are nice to him. Liz used to defend him, you know? All the time. Said he was her *friend*. Sonny Corinthos has no friends. He has people he *uses*.”

“Emily—” Jason dipped his head. Because he wanted to say that wasn’t true. That wasn’t the man he knew, but he couldn’t make the words form.

He couldn’t remember the last time he had felt like Sonny was his friend. Once, he took his problems to him, looked for advice. To find the way forward.

He had not done that since....the night he’d been shot and found Sonny with Carly.

“Seriously, Jase. When was the last time you had anything in your life completely separate from him?” Emily demanded. She jabbed a finger at him. “And you’re not allowed to say Courtney. You forget, Courtney and I are friends. She told me that Sonny made you guard her, that Carly was always pushing the two of you together. Carly told her that she could get you to propose and then you did. It barely matters that Sonny threw a tantrum about it. He only did that because you didn’t tell him. So Courtney does *not* count.”

He scowled at the idea that Carly had somehow forced him into proposing to Courtney, though he knew he hadn’t considered it until Carly brought it up. “Emily—”

“You can’t even answer the question. Before Sam, before Evie, when was the last time you went against Sonny in your personal life? Never, right? Not since you came home—”

And then Jason knew the answer to the question. Because he had gone against Sonny, at least initially, when Elizabeth had been kidnapped. Sonny had questioned the methods Jason was using to find her—going to Taggart, to Edward. Had that really been more than *two* years ago?

“You deserve so much, Jason. You deserve better friends than Sonny or Carly. You deserve what I have with Nikolas.”



At those words, Jason focused on his sister and narrowed his eyes. “What did you *just* say about Carly pushing me and Courtney together? How is *that* different than what you’re doing right now?”

“What?” Emily demanded. “Am I demanding you tell me how you feel about Elizabeth? Did I even insinuate anything about her specifically? I didn’t tell you to ask her out—”

“You dragged her across the room to meet Evie.” Jason pressed the heel of his hand to his eye. “Emily, Elizabeth doesn’t need the crap in my life—”

“Yes, I dragged her across the room to meet your daughter,” Emily said. “But I did *not* make her appear on the docks the day you two talked and she made you tell me the truth. If you remember, *I* stayed with you two for five seconds at the party, and the two of *you* were the ones standing there and talking for a half hour. I have done literally nothing except introduce your daughter to someone *you* tell me is your friend. *What* is my crime, Jase?”

He hesitated, because she had a point. The fact that he was thinking about Elizabeth again, remembering the way she had laughed at him buying baby clothes or her smile as she stood on the docks, snow catching in her eyelashes, resting on her cheeks...had little to do with the fact Emily had introduced Elizabeth and Evie.

“Exactly.” Emily nodded. “I did nothing. I don’t *plan* to do anything.” She leaned forward. “Jase, I love you guys. If you guys are going to be anything other than friends, it is not going to because I play matchmaker. You guys became friends without me. In fact, I didn’t even *know* you knew each other until that Christmas party.” She frowned. “Which you know, now that I think about it, seems like a massive omission on her part for which I have never held her accountable.”

“Emily—”

“Just don’t...” She pursed her lips. “Just *don’t* turn it away, Jason. That’s the only meddling I’m going to do. I feel guilty that Cameron doesn’t have a father in his life. I didn’t make Zander do the things he did, but I didn’t help, either. I could have done that so much better, you know? So I want Elizabeth to be happy. And I want you to be happy. So if you have the opportunity to be happy together, well... would that suck so much?”

He just sighed. “Emily—”

“And don’t give me crap about what Elizabeth does or does not need in her life. You *don’t* get to make that decision for her.” She pointed at him. “You used to let people decide what they wanted from their own life. Be that guy again, Jason. *He* went after what he wanted.”

He barely remembered that anymore, but he nodded. “Fine. I won’t decide what Elizabeth needs. I don’t think there’s anything to get...we’re friends, Emily. We weren’t even that for years. So, I’m not pushing anything. I’m not in a place in my life where I can think about that.”

“That’s what I thought when I got cancer.” Emily shrugged and looked over at the babies sleeping near one another. “Just because you’re not looking for it, doesn’t mean it won’t bite you in the butt.”

Wednesday, December 29, 2004

## General Hospital: Dr. Meadow's Office

Carly Corinthos believed in having a plan. Always have a plan. Commit to a plan, see it through. Whatever the consequences.

She would have another child, preferably a girl to keep Sonny from thinking of the child he might have had with Sam. After the Christmas party, when Sonny had put himself on display for the entire damn town, she knew it was time to get down to business.

Sonny Corinthos thought he was fooling her. Thought he had pulled the wool over her eyes.

No one deceived Caroline Benson. She was a master of deception. And Carly Corinthos remembered she'd been *that* woman once. She would channel her and devote herself to her family.

She believed Sonny had picked their marriage over his bastard daughter. He had allowed the arrangement with Jason to stand—an arrangement Carly had never believed in.

Jason would *never* have broken his promises to Courtney. Not after the way he thought he had hurt prissy Robin Scorpio all those years ago by crawling into bed with Carly. Even if he had been attracted to Sam McCall, he would have resisted or ended things with Courtney.

Jason was protecting Carly and her boys, so she would see that his devotion to her was rewarded. She would make sure Sonny never went for the whore's daughter. Jason could keep Evangeline. Carly would give Sonny another daughter. He would forget the baby across the hall and remember Michael and Morgan.

But watching Sonny badger Jason, overworking him to the point of exhaustion and using any excuse so that Carly was stuck watching the little bastard, she knew the guilt was choking him. She knew that if she didn't take drastic measures, the constant reminder of Sam McCall would live with them one day.

A baby would fix everything. A daughter would replace the ones Sonny wasn't raising—Evangeline and Kristina were *not* going to be part of Carly's family.

She had nearly sacrificed everything for Lorenzo Alcazar, but he had shown his true colors. When she hadn't snapped to, hadn't abandoned her dreams, her marriage, everything she had fought for all these years, he had gone after Sonny once again.

Jason had done something to him over the summer, Carly didn't particularly care. Either he was dead or elsewhere licking his wounds. He wasn't here to gaslight Sonny anymore or make Sonny think twice about her loyalty. He had been an *aberration*. A detour.

Everything in her life had been leading her to Sonny, even her relationship with Jason. And she would not let go without a fight.

Whatever it took, she had told Courtney. Whatever Carly had to do, whoever she had to break. She

would save her marriage.

Carly Corinthos believed in having a plan.

She sat across from her obstetrician, and pursed her lips. “I don’t understand. I was told I was healthy after the shooting.”

Lynn Meadows hesitated and then sighed. “You were. You are. But your body has been through a great deal of stress. With Morgan’s pregnancy, you fell in an icy lake, you were electrocuted, you were kidnapped and kept in close confinement, and *then* you were shot. Your blood pressure was all over the place.”

“That was a year ago,” Carly snapped. “What the hell does it have to do with today?”

“And sometimes, Carly, your body just doesn’t get pregnant,” Dr. Meadows replied, her voice remaining calm and steady. “Now, you’ve been actively trying for five months. Have you been monitoring your ovulation—”

“I *know* how to get pregnant.” Carly cracked her knuckles. How dare her body fail her in this? Hadn’t she *always* been fertile in the past? Hadn’t she been knocked up on both one-night stands? “I’ve been doing everything the books say.”

“Okay, well then, maybe it’s time we look at alternatives.” Dr. Meadows flipped a page in her file. “Let’s schedule you for an ultrasound. Let’s have a look at your uterus, the tubes. We’ll see if everything is in proper working order. I’d advise you to relax, but I highly doubt that’s going to be possible.”

Carly exhaled slowly. “All right. I’m sorry. I’m just...upset. I’ve never really had trouble getting pregnant before.”

“It happens to us all eventually,” the older woman murmured. “But you’re young still. Just barely in your thirties. If you can’t get pregnant naturally, there’s in vitro insemination. You’re a wealthy woman, perhaps a surrogate or adoption—”

“No.” Carly shook her head. “I want a *natural* child. One that’s biologically mine *and* Sonny’s.”

Dr. Meadows paused and looked at her. Carly tensed, because she didn’t like the judgmental bitch. So what if Carly didn’t want someone else’s bastard in her life? To remind Sonny that she couldn’t have children, that his biological child was across the hall? No.

Sonny loved Michael, but Carly didn’t know if she had the same capacity for generosity to love a child she hadn’t carried, hadn’t given birth to. She had barely latched onto Michael once he was born, and Morgan still seemed like a stranger sometimes. She loved them, but she didn’t think she would love a child who wasn’t hers.

She knew Kristina and Evangeline were Sonny’s biological daughters, but hell if she looked at them with any sign of softness. All she saw was Sonny’s betrayals.

“Money is no object,” Carly said. “If I need surgery or—”

“Let’s cross that bridge when we came to it.” Dr. Meadows reached for her appointment book. “Let’s schedule the ultrasound.”

Carly Corinthos had a plan. She would revise accordingly along the way, because really—a plan was about the goal. *Whatever* it took to achieve the goal was acceptable.

She would save her marriage.

Because if she wasn’t Carly Corinthos, who the hell was she?

*Monday, January 3, 2005*

### **Warehouse: Sonny’s Office**

Sonny Corinthos leaned back in his chair as he watched Jason stride in his office and stand in front of the desk, his hands in the pockets of his ubiquitous leather jacket. It was the first time he and Jason had been in the same room since the Christmas Party.

He looked at this man whom he had always looked upon as a brother, and tried to remember why he had gone to talk to him at the party when Carly had suggested he avoid him. Why he had spoken to Elizabeth, a woman of whom he was genuinely fond, in such a demeaning way.

That he could not remember why he had done those things—only that he had—was troubling.

Sonny cleared his throat. “I’m sorry if I...dragged you away from anything.”

“It’s fine,” Jason said shortly. “You said it was important.”

“Yeah, uh...” Sonny rubbed his forehead. He felt hot, like his skin was boiling and he had a sudden urge to sweep the various files and folders from his desk.

This violent urge had come once or twice a day for the past several weeks, but Sonny merely took a deep breath. He would not give into the blackness.

He *would* stay away from the abyss. This time would be different.

“I know we’re...having difficulties,” Sonny said slowly, “but at the end of the day, the safety of our...” the word was sour in his mouth, but he forced himself to continue, “our *families* comes first, I hope you agree.”

“I do.” And now Jason lowered himself into the chair, and Sonny’s chest felt less tight. He could do this. He had made the right decision in November, for his family, and for his daughter.

He knew this.

He just had to live with it.

“I also...” Reflexively, he fisted his hands in his lap and took another deep breath. This was important. He had to make this one thing right. “I wanted to apologize. About the party. I-I like Elizabeth. I shouldn’t have—” He paused. “I’d like to apologize to her personally, but—”

“I’d prefer it if you’d stayed away from Elizabeth,” Jason interjected, his voice firm. “I don’t care if you regret it or not, Sonny. What you said...you had no right to attack Elizabeth to get to me.” His mouth was pressed into a thin, angry line. “You went after her because you knew it would piss me off. How is that different than what Sorel or Roscoe did to her?”

Sonny exhaled slowly and nodded. “I-I know, Jason. I shouldn’t have...Elizabeth didn’t deserve what I said. Like I said, I *would* apologize to her, but I don’t know that she’d want to hear it from me. If at any point, you think it’s appropriate to pass it on, I would appreciate it.”

Jason offered a short nod. “You said there was business to deal with.”

“Yeah. Uh.” Sonny reached for a piece of paper on which he had jotted down some notes. He had resolved to write down what he wanted to say to Jason. If he planned it, if he stuck to what was written, he would be less likely to say something else.

To make this worse.

“Max reported in this morning. Cody contacted him to tell him he’d seen Johnny Zacchara at Luke’s.”

He let that news drop like the bombshell he believed it to be. For more than two months, they had had some minor troubles, nothing that couldn’t be resolved, but distractions and nuisances. A few shipments had been late, a bookie or two had refused to pay his percentage. There had been a whisper of a drug dealer that no one could find.

And now Sonny believed he knew what was behind it.

“Did you hear me?” Sonny asked, when Jason remained silent.

“Yeah. You told me that a guy who’s twenty-six years old was seen in a blues club.” Jason jerked a shoulder. “Luke’s is pretty popular for music. It’s always packed. Johnny lives an hour away. Not unlikely he would know about it. I mean, yeah, we should keep an eye on him, Sonny, but I don’t get the connection.”

Furious words rose in his throat, nearly spilled out of his mouth, but Sonny just closed his eyes. He hadn’t prepared for this. He had no words for this. He had assumed Jason would see his point, that he would not have to elaborate.

He was Sonny Corinthos. He could do *this*.

“The problems we’ve been having,” Sonny began.

“You’re worrying too much about them,” Jason interrupted, but his voice was only confident, not dismissive. “Shipments are late. Usually because the boats are avoiding the border authorities. They take other shipping lanes, slow down to avoid a patrol. Bookies are a pain in the ass, it’s why we prefer the casinos in Puerto Rico. And no one’s found anything other than rumor about this dealer. I don’t think Johnny Zacchara is a threat.”

He just didn’t get it. He didn’t see it. How could Jason just ignore the obvious? “His father is megalomaniac—”

“Who’s more content to annoy New York and Boston than he is to worry about us. Yeah, it’s been more tense since we learned about Ric’s connection to Trevor, but nothing more than some extra money in negotiations.” Jason shook his head. “I’m not saying we ignore his presence, but it’s probably nothing.”

There was sense in Jason’s words, and Sonny tried to focus on that. “I see what you’re saying,” he said slowly, “but I don’t think we should forget the problems we’ve been having.”

“No, it *might* be something,” Jason agreed, almost too easily and Sonny wondered if he was being patronized. Placated. The boiling in his gut sharpened and he forced it down. Jason didn’t placate or patronize. Not in business. His focus was why Sonny had made him partner. He trusted Jason to see what he couldn’t.

It had kept him alive until now, so just because there were...issues between them that had nothing to do with business...did not mean Sonny should ignore his words.

“So if it’s not Zacchara—”

“Maybe the Ruiz family out of Miami,” his partner offered. “They were aligned with Alcazar, and he’s been licking his wounds in South America. It might be his way of coming back after you.” Jason paused. “Maybe he didn’t like the parting bullet I put in his shoulder.”

“Should have been between the eyes,” Sonny growled.

“But you didn’t want that.”

He didn’t need a goddamn reminder. What did Jason think he was? A fucking child?”

No. Sonny took a deep breath. *No*. “It would have created problems we didn’t need. Carly had just stopped threatening to leave, I needed Alcazar neutralized but his death would have created more issues with the police, and God knows, Carly would have used it.” He cleared his throat. “She told me she didn’t want to be with him, that she was committed to our marriage, but I needed him gone.”

“I get it, Sonny.” Jason nodded. “I agreed with you then. And he’s been gone for months. I’m just saying—let’s not discount him aiming another family at us. We deal with Hector for Puerto Rico sometimes. Might be a good time to feel out the relationship between us—be sure it’s still amicable.”

“Might be.”

When Jason got to his feet, he paused for a moment. “How long is it gonna be like this?” the younger man asked quietly. “Are you going to *keep* punishing me?”

He had not expected that question.

He had no notes for that question.

Sonny was quiet for a long moment. “I don’t know,” he said, honestly. “I don’t...have a reason to. I...agreed to this situation. I am protecting my family. All of them. If I had contested Sam’s fraud, there’s no guarantee Carly wouldn’t have started to drag the boys into court.”

The sour taste was back in his mouth as he reflected on the difficult spring. “And you know that’s the type of divorce Carly and I would have. We would drag our kids in and out of a custody hearing once a year. She’d demand higher child support and alimony, and I would deny it just to needle her. We’d keep it going until we would not only destroy each other, but the boys as well.”

Jason exhaled slowly and nodded. “That’s probably true.”

“And even if Carly agreed to allow Evie into the family, how would she treat her?” Sonny rubbed his eyes, because he knew these reasons were right. He knew he had done the right thing. “She would *always* be Sam’s daughter. Always. She doesn’t know about the summer. If she did...”

“These were the reasons you listed in November when we agreed to let it stand,” Jason said. “But you don’t seem to accept them.”

“It’s...I saw Elizabeth standing there, holding my daughter...” Sonny swallowed the bile in his throat, because now he could remember why he’d gone after her. “And I knew *she* would love Evie the way you do. Regardless of blood. If you and her—”

“We were just talking, Sonny,” Jason said quietly. “But—”

“I *know* that,” Sonny snapped. “I got eyes. She’s been home five minutes. But it made me see red. Because you have that. You’ve always had Elizabeth and her unconditional support, even when you didn’t know it. And I have *Carly*.” He bit out those last words. “I got stuck with Carly because of a choice I made a thousand years ago, in another lifetime.”

What could Jason say to that? To this revelation that Sonny wanted out, that he barely loved his wife, that he couldn’t remember why he had loved her in the first place?

It was too late for regrets. He had children with her. The children must come first.

Evie came first in her own way. He removed her from the poison of his life and given her to a man who would love her as his own.

He *knew* he had made the right decision.

“I’m trying to do better,” Sonny said after a moment of silence. “I don’t know if it’s going to be like

this. I...I try not to be bitter. To be angry. To look at you and not want to rip out your throat, because *none* of this is your fault. Not really. You only tried to help. You knew Carly and I were destroying each other, that it would be worse with Evie in the mix. Evie doesn't deserve that. I can barely put Michael and Morgan first most of the time, but after what I did to Sam, I can do better by Evie."

Jason took that in and nodded. "All right. We'll get through this, I guess." He hesitated. "But Sonny, if seeing me and Elizabeth talking is going to be a problem—"

Sonny lifted his brow, waiting for him to say he'd refrain from a friendship with Elizabeth to give Sonny some peace of mind.

"—you're going to have to get over it. She and I are friends. I'm...I'm not going to walk away from that because it bothers you."

But he hadn't really expected any different, and for some reason this broke through the self-control he had managed to maintain for the majority of the meeting.

"I shouldn't be surprised," he all but growled. "I don't know why you bothered with Courtney. Barely divorced a year from my *sister*, Sam's not even cold in the ground, and you're already sniffing around Elizabeth."

Jason just stared at him, but there was no change in his bland expression, which told Sonny he'd crossed a line that he'd been trying to avoid this entire time. "Don't go near her, Sonny. You obviously think I've betrayed you in some way and you're not going to take it out on her. She's had enough to deal with this last year or so between Ric and Zander. She doesn't need you."

He turned and started for the door. Sonny rose from his seat. "When you gonna *stop* protecting her from her own mistakes? What did I say to her that was so *goddamn* wrong? That wasn't *true*?"

Jason was already gone by the time Sonny had finished yelling after him.

He collapsed back into his seat and stared down at the useless notes he had made.

He knew he had made the right decision.

He just wasn't sure he could live with it.



# Chapter Four

*And in the end, you're still my friend at least we did intend  
For us to work we didn't break, we didn't burn  
We had to learn how to bend without the world caving in  
I had to learn what I've got, and what I'm not, and who I am  
- I Won't Give Up, Jason Mraz*

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*Sunday, January 15, 2005*

## **Hardy House: Living Room**

“Gram, did you see Cameron’s other shoe?” Elizabeth called into the kitchen. She huffed and knelt down to peer under the couch. “For a kid who can barely crawl and certainly cannot walk, he knows how to throw far.”

Audrey emerged into the living room, a brightly wrapped box in her hands. “I thought I saw it under the planter. I had intended to grab it, but then Gatsby ran out the front door when the flower delivery arrived—”

Elizabeth did indeed spy the blue sneaker under the planter across the room and rose to her feet. “I know our things are everywhere, Gram.” She cast her eyes around the cluttered living room, as some of their boxes had not fit into either her bedroom, Cam’s nursery or the makeshift studio in the last guest room. The moving truck she had sent from California had arrived on Friday, and it seemed like they were never going to be settled.

“Darling, it’s the most excitement I’ve had since you and Sarah moved here in the first place.” Audrey pressed a kiss to her cheek as she passed by her to lift Cameron from the playpen. “Having a child in the house again is *so* wonderful. Other than short visits from you, Steven and Sarah over the years, Cameron is the first baby since Tommy.”

“Well, you’ll be sorry when he’s walking.” She grimaced, and planted her hands on her hips. “Now where are *my* shoes?”

“It was nice of Nikolas to invite me to Emily’s party today.” Audrey said as she set Cameron the sofa and put his shoes on. “I would not have thought they would want an old lady at a young woman’s birthday party.”

“It’s not that type of party,” Elizabeth murmured. “I know I had those sandals somewhere...” She looked at her grandmother. “Emily wants to...she’s got this idea about keeping her family united. It’s been rocky since Lila passed this summer, you know? She’s worried her grandfather and her parents aren’t arguing enough.”

“I would think that was odd, but I know the Quartermaines. It *is* truly troubling when they lay down arms.” Audrey lifted a sketch pad from the table under the bay window. “Are they blue sandals,

Elizabeth?”

“No, coral.” Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. “How did *those* get over there?”

“Possibly Cameron. I do believe we have an outfielder on our hands here.” Audrey nuzzled Cameron’s cheek. “His great-grandfather played a mean third base, so he’s carrying on the tradition.”

“Anyway, so Emily invited you, she invited her parents and her grandfather, but when Edward sent his regrets, she convinced Jason to bring Evie, so she told *me* to bring Cameron, because Alexis is bringing Kristina. Why she thinks a two month old, a seven month old and a two year old constitutes a children’s section, I don’t know, but Emily has her—” she trailed off when she saw Audrey’s look. “What?”

“Don’t think I did not see Emily dragging you across the room at the Christmas party or that you stayed with Jason and his daughter for nearly a half hour.”

“Oh, is living at home going to be like *really* living at home again?” Elizabeth grimaced. “Gram—”

“I don’t know why you think I’m about to say something unkind,” Audrey murmured, lifting her chin. “I was *merely* inquiring if you and Jason are friends again.”

“We are, of a sort, I suppose.” Elizabeth pursed her lips. “I know I brought those shoes down here.”

“Well, I want you to know that while I don’t particularly understand it, I will respect any decision you choose to make regarding Jason.”

Elizabeth turned away from the pile of newspapers and blinked. “Gram, that...are you sick?”

“No,” Audrey said with a sniff. “I just...there are battles that are not worth fighting, and you know...I have eyes, Elizabeth. I saw Jason with that beautiful little girl. I’m sure it’s very tempting image—the same reason your brother abducts Cameron every five minutes to impress a nurse. A man with a baby, particularly someone like Jason Morgan, is somewhat...attractive.”

Elizabeth cleared her throat. “Gram, are you telling me you think Jason is hot? Because I want this on tape.”

Now her grandmother scowled. “You are deliberating baiting me now, Elizabeth. I am *only* saying that I understand it. I also...” She sighed and pulled out a chair to look behind it for Elizabeth’s elusive sandals. “I find him almost admirable in some respects.”

“Hold on. Hold *on*.” Elizabeth held out one hand, pressing the other to her forehead. “I know I’m hearing things now.”

“I do wish he had picked better friends to care about,” Audrey mused. “But I suppose one cannot quibble at his loyalty. He loves those boys, and I do remember seeing him around town when we thought Michael was his son. So Lila was concerned about him—”

“I...” Elizabeth hesitated, knowing that Audrey and Lila had been frequent tea partners. “He’s doing better, now, you know. He...didn’t expect to be a single parent—”

“He shouldn’t have had to clean up Sonny’s mess at all. Why he still has that delightful little girl, I do not *understand*. Lila always worried about him, you know. She said that for all his fuss about not being Jason Quartermaine anymore, he had retained the *worst* of that boy’s qualities.”

Elizabeth sank onto the sofa and handed Cameron his stuffed dog which had fallen to the floor. Her grandmother wasn’t making any sense. “Gram—”

“Jason Quartermaine was in that accident because he loved his brother and never knew to let well enough alone,” Audrey huffed. She unearthed the coral sandals from underneath the playpen. “And Lila always knew that Sam McCall was not having Jason’s child.”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together and took the shoes from her grandmother. “I have no idea what you’re talking about—”

“She told me that she felt Jason had replaced AJ with Sonny. That boy will always take care of Sonny Corinthos, and by extension, his family, to his own detriment. Last time, it cost him his memories. What will such blind devotion cost him this time?” Audrey scowled. “He’s a good father. He should have children of his own.”

“Does *anyone* in Port Charles believe Jason is Evie’s father?” Elizabeth asked, strapping her shoes on. “Emily and I both suspected, but he just confirmed it to us last month.”

“If they do, it’s willful ignorance.” Audrey straightened a stack of newspapers. “You were there when Sonny Corinthos sauntered over to him and picked a fight. The man is supposed to be with his wife, but he’s still harping on Jason Morgan. Now, one could suppose it’s related to the affair Jason *supposedly* had with his mistress, but Lila never bought that. Her boy is too honorable for that.”

Her throat was closed. Emily had told her she felt so guilty that Lila had died believing Jason was going to be a father again, and now *her* grandmother was telling her that wasn’t true. “He’s made his choice, Gram. And Evie’s better off for it.”

“Well, that’s difficult to argue with.” Audrey peered at her. “*Are* you thinking of getting involved with him, darling?”

Elizabeth hesitated a shade longer than she should have. “No, of course not. Gram, when would I find time for that? When would *he*? We have small children. We both have time-consuming...jobs. I run into him sometimes and we talk. That’s it.”

“All right. I just...I wanted you to know that I know the situation he’s in and I do not begrudge him your support. Or your friendship. Or anything else.” Audrey sat next to her on the sofa. “I encouraged you to keep trying with Lucky. I encouraged you to go back to Ric. And what do you have to show for listening to *me*, my dear?”

“Well...” Elizabeth glanced at her son. “Cameron for one.”

“What I’m trying to say is that I am aware that I do not always know best, and in fact, I rarely do.” Audrey touched her cheek. “I want you to do what makes you happy. At the end of the day, that’s all I have ever wanted. I am finished believing that anyone but *you* knows what that it is.”

“I love you so much, Gram.” Elizabeth leaned forward and hugged her.

### **Wyndemere: Entryway**

Emily hurried out of the large ball room to greet Elizabeth, Steve and Audrey. “I’m so glad you guys could make it!”

“Sorry we’re late,” Steven said, leaning past his sister to kiss her cheek. “Bits and Gram waited for me to finish my shift.”

“No problem.” Emily turned to her best friend and hugged her. “I’m just so *glad* you’re here.”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes and shifted Cameron from hip to the other. “What are you up to, Quartermaine?”

“Um...” Emily glanced at Audrey and Steven who were following Nikolas into the ball room. “So I did a *very* bad thing.”

With Emily, a very bad thing could range from chipping a nail to waking up next to a dead man, so Elizabeth merely sighed. “Are we going to need the freezers again?”

“What? Oh, no.” Emily flushed. “No, I guess it’s not a ten on the scale, since Ted would be the ten. It’s more like a...” She pursed her lips. “More like a six. Remember I told you that I only convinced Jason to come and bring Evie because my grandfather couldn’t come?”

“Oh, you *didn’t*...” Elizabeth’s mouth dropped open. “You deliberately manipulated the two of them into a room and didn’t tell Jason? He’s going to roast you alive.”

“This is entirely true,” Emily nodded. “I am in such bad trouble, but you know, Jason, he’s not giving Grandfather the satisfaction, so he’s just standing there with Evie and—”

“The day is going to come, Emily, when I abandon you to fix your own problems.” Elizabeth handed Cameron to Emily long enough to shed her pea coat and scarf. She tossed these at Emily and took back her son.

“Luckily for me, *this* is not that day.” Emily smiled brightly. “So what do you suggest? Smoke alarm? I could pretend Ned is singing somewhere, I think he might help. Grandfather is always distracted when he think Eddie Maine is making a resurgence. But I don’t want Jason to leave, not until the cake \_\_\_”

“I’ll take care of this, you’ll just make it worse. Has Edward cornered him yet?” Elizabeth started for

the ball room, Emily on her heels.

The room was filled with Emily's friends and family, including half the hospital. Jason stood near the doorway to the conservatory, Evie in his arms and a blank expression on his face. "Oh, Em, he is pissed."

"What? How can you tell?" Emily craned around her. "He looks fine."

Elizabeth snorted. "Nope, I've seen him give that look to Taggart. Has he gotten you alone yet?"

"Um. I've been hiding or sticking close to Dad."

Elizabeth eyed her. "What *exactly* did you think was going to happen when Jason realized you'd tricked him?"

"I may not have thought that far ahead." Emily pressed her lips together. "I'm just...tired of my family not getting along. If Jason would just give Grandfather a chance—"

"Em—"

"And if Jason would just try to understand that Grandfather comes from a place of love, and he's been wrecked since he lost Grandmother—" She sighed. "Okay. Okay. I was wrong. I know it, and I'll let Jason yell at me all he wants. How are we going to fix this?"

"*We're* not going to do anything." Elizabeth looked at her friend. "If I find out you did this deliberately as part of your asinine matchmaking plot, Jason won't be the only one you have to worry about."

Emily rolled her eyes. "Pfft. Like I don't have better things to do than worry about your sad love life. Oh crap, Grandfather is heading for Jason—"

"I'll take care of this."

## **Wyndemere: Ball Room**

Jason was going to murder his sister. Slowly. And he was going to enjoy it. She knew he hated parties, but she said that their grandfather would not be there and he wanted to show her that he was sorry he had kept her in the dark all along.

He should have known.

He hadn't turned around and left immediately because Evie had been sick on the launch ride and he wanted to give her some time, even a nap before he put her through this again.

When Edward separated himself from Audrey and Monica, Jason wanted to hit something because the old man was heading straight for them.

His sister was going to pay for this.

“Jason.” Edward slid his hands into the pockets of his trousers, his chin lifted in the air. “I wanted to say hello to you.” He paused and his eyes locked on the infant in Jason’s arms. “And...maybe say hello to my...” He coughed. “To Evangeline.”

They both knew he had been about to call her his great-granddaughter, a term that would have annoyed Jason. That he had stopped made Jason frown.

“Hello,” Jason said, because it was simpler than walking away.

“I—” Edward paused, as if he had been expecting something else. “It was good of you to come to the Christmas party. We...weren’t expecting you.”

“Emily asked me.” He cast his eyes around the room, looking for his sister who had managed never to be alone since the moment he had set eyes on Edward.

“Well, Evangeline looked as though she was having a good time.” Edward was quiet for a moment, as this was the most they had spoken to one another in some time. “She’ll enjoy it more next year, I’m sure.” His eyes softened. “Lila would have enjoyed her.”

The only thing he had in common with this man who was technically his grandfather was their adoration for Lila Quartermaine, so in her memory, he would attempt to keep this conversation civil.

“I-I know she would have.”

Edward dipped his head, as if searching for something else to say. “I noticed you were speaking to Elizabeth Webber at the party. And that Sonny Corinthos upset her.”

Well, that was almost two minutes longer than Jason would have expected. “*And?*”

“Mr. Quartermaine!”

The woman in question stepped up to them with a bright smile and her son in her arms. “I was *hoping* to see you here today!”

Edward turned to Elizabeth, his mouth breaking into a grin. “Elizabeth! Let me get a look at this boy. Emily kept saying she’d bring him by the house while you were in California, but it never seemed to work out with her schedule.”

“Yes, Emily and Steven were my lifesavers while I packed everything up.” Elizabeth smiled at Jason. “Hey, Jason. Emily told me she brought Cam by while I was gone, so I know you’ve met him.” She turned her attention back to Edward. “Did Gram tell you what I named him?”

“Lila did.” Edward’s eyes dimmed for a moment, but his smile remained. “Cameron Steven. Your grandfather would have approved. We still miss him very much, Elizabeth. Board meetings are not the same without him.”

“I know he enjoyed butting heads with you.” Elizabeth’s smile deepened. “And Gram tells me you and he used to play baseball against one another back in the sixties.”

Edward chuckled and glanced at Jason. “ELQ used to sponsor a Fourth of July game against the hospital staff. We stopped that...oh...maybe a decade or so ago, but Steve Hardy and I were fierce competitors.” He hesitated. “AJ and...well, it was a family event.”

“I’m so glad you and my grandmother will be here to tell Cam all about his great-grandfather,” Elizabeth said. “Would you like to hold him?”

“Of course, my dear.” Elizabeth handed the little boy over, and Edward happily bounced the infant in his arms. “Lila showed me all the pictures Audrey gave her.”

“Really?” Elizabeth lifted her brow. “I didn’t know Lila took such an interest.”

“Oh, yes, she loved babies.” Edward looked at Jason. “I was telling Jason how much she would have enjoyed Evangeline.”

“Oh, she would have spoiled her just the way you guys spoil Emily. Why, look at the two of you, having a civil conversation and everything!” Elizabeth put a hand on Edward’s shoulder but looked at Jason. “Would you mind if I stole your grandfather for a while? Gram was telling me about the time the Quartermaines threatened to shut down the hospital if my grandfather didn’t authorize an operation —”

Edward scowled. “Steve always embellished that story. You come sit with me, Elizabeth, and I will tell you how it *really* happened.”

Jason watched as Elizabeth led Edward towards a cluster of chairs and sofas. She glanced over her shoulder and widened her eyes at him, as if to say *you owe me*.

He grinned at her, and mouthed *thanks*. They’d been getting along when she came their way, but it had been a close thing.

Now to find his sister.

## **Wyndemere: Across the Ball Room**

“I am the master of opportunity creating.” Emily sipped her tea and smiled at her fiancé. “Admit it. No one is better than me.”

Nikolas eyed her with skepticism. “What do you think your brother is going to do to you when he gets you alone?”

“Well, now that Elizabeth saved him from Grandfather, I’m hoping he’ll be less annoyed. They were having a *civil* conversation, Nikolas.” Emily touched his forearm. “Grandmother would have loved every inch of it. She hated how at odds they were.”

“Hmm...” Nikolas sipped his wine and shook his head. “It’s not going to change the fact that you lied to your brother. You know he hates that. I thought you were not going to do any actual meddling. Setting Elizabeth up to save your brother from your family seems like *physical* meddling.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Emily jabbed a finger at him. “Setting Jason up to be in the same room as my grandfather was *completely* separate from my opportunity creating. That was my meddling in my family life. But then you know...they were *actually* in the same room—”

“And you realized you were in trouble.”

“So I was asking Elizabeth for suggestions on how to distract Grandfather long enough to get Jason out of here, but she suggested rescuing him all on her own.” Emily sniffed. “Perfect for each other, what did I say? And you saw him smile at her once Elizabeth got Grandfather to go away. Besotted, and they don’t even know it.”

She peered at the room over the rim of her glass. “I am a master opportunity creator,” she repeated. “I got Lucky and Leyla together, didn’t I?”

“How do you figure?” Nikolas asked. “Lucky met her in the emergency room when he got sliced in the leg. He asked her out. You were *barely* involved.”

“I knew he was interested,” Emily said. “I brought Leyla to Kelly’s when I knew Lucky would be there. Opportunity created.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t take credit for that.” Nikolas paused. “You’re going to retire your *creating* after your brother right?”

“No!” Emily widened her eyes. “I’m barely at the top of my game, Nikolas. I’m onto tougher targets after him.”

“There’s someone *tougher* than Jason Morgan in the romance department? I have to hear this.”

“Elizabeth’s brother, Steven. He’s a bit of a player,” Emily said, considering the man in question who was laughing with one of the residents from the neurology department. “So it will have to be the right woman. I can’t just match make with him or create opportunities. I need to do research.”

Nikolas sighed, but a reluctantly smile spread across his face. “You know the best thing about you, Em? You’re not content to be happy alone. You have to annoy others into being happy, too.”

She sniffed. “I’m choosing to take that as a compliment.”

“Emily.”

They turned to find Alexis standing there with a smile on her face. “Alexis!” Emily stepped forward to embrace her future aunt-in-law. “I’m glad you and Kristina could make it.”

Nikolas looked around her. “And that Ric *couldn’t*.” Emily elbowed him sharply. “Ugh.”



“Ric understood why he was left out of the invitation.” Alexis hesitated. “I knew Elizabeth would be here, and they haven’t spoken since they finalized the divorce and she moved back home. He...was hoping she wasn’t hurt by our marriage.”

Emily gestured towards the sofa where Elizabeth and Edward had been joined by Audrey. “She’s looking good to me, so I wouldn’t worry.” She hesitated. “Alexis, if you’re serious about Ric, we’ll make it work. I don’t want you to feel like you can’t...share your family with ours.”

“Does it *have* to be Ric?” Nikolas asked with a grimace.

“I know Ric...is not a perfect man,” Alexis said slowly. “That he’s done some things that seem unspeakable, but I’m a Cassadine, Nikolas, with my own dark deeds. What right do I have to hold his past against him when no one does the same to me?”

“I don’t think it’s on the same scale,” Nikolas began. He paused and cleared his throat. “Hey, Jason.”

Emily whirled around to find her brother at her shoulder. “Um. Jason. Hey. Hi. Are-are you having a good time?”

Jason glanced briefly at his sister before at his former lawyer. “Alexis.”

“Jason, good to see you.” She hesitated and looked at the little girl in his arms. “The baby looks beautiful.”

“I need to put her down for a nap.” Jason frowned at his sister. “And talk to you.”

“Well, you knew it was coming,” Nikolas murmured to Emily as she started to lead her brother out of the room.

“Traitor,” she hissed.

## **Wyndemere: Hallway**

Emily was just descending the stairs when Elizabeth emerged from the ball room. “Em, great. I need to put Cam down for his nap. He nearly passed out on your grandfather.”

“Great, I’ll put him in the nursery with Evie. I just put her down.” Emily took the baby. “Thanks for helping with Grandfather. I think it made Jason less annoyed.”

“I saw that he finally got you alone.” Elizabeth frowned. “Emily, why do *you* have a nursery?”

“Uh, because I want babies. You have a baby. Jason has a baby. Alexis has a kid.” Emily shrugged. “It’s a large house with lots of rooms. Made sense. I’ll bring you one of the monitors.”

“Thanks.” Elizabeth hesitated. “Is he still mad at you?”

“I don’t think so. He told me in that tone he has—you know the one—not to do it again, but we both

know *that* promise will last five seconds.” Emily shrugged. “Again, you saved my butt, Webber.”

“What else is new?” Elizabeth hesitated as Emily started back up the stairs. “Hey, Em...did you see where Jason went?”

“To the conservatory, I think. It’s pretty empty right now, with all the glass. It makes it kind of chilly.” Emily watched as Elizabeth wandered away from the ball room and towards the entrance to the conservatory. “Besotted, and they don’t even know it,” she sighed.

## **Wyndemere: Conservatory**

Jason glanced up when Elizabeth rounded one of paths. “Hey.” He got to his feet. “Thanks...for earlier.”

She smiled and sat on the bench he had just vacated. “No problem. Emily sent up the smoke signal the second I walked through the door. She’ll never learn.”

He lowered himself down next to her. “I would have come if she’d told me about Edward.” She looked at him skeptically and he relented. “I *might* have come.”

“She just wants...you guys to get along. You know, she and Nikolas are planning this wedding and she wants all her loved ones there.” Elizabeth shifted slightly, crossing one leg over the other. “After Lila...”

“Yeah, I’m trying to make more of an effort since Grandmother passed away,” Jason admitted, and felt the tightness in his chest at the thought of her. “But you know, they *don’t* make it easy.”

She laughed. “No, but luckily, with Edward, it’s easier than you think to distract him.” She hesitated. “I don’t know if I should say anything, but I don’t know...maybe you might feel better about it.” She bit her lip. “My grandmother and I were talking about the Christmas party, and she told me that your grandmother...” She leaned forward a little, lowering her voice. “She knew the truth.”

Jason blinked. “The truth,” he repeated. “About-about Evie?” When she nodded, he exhaled slowly. “How?”

“Gram said Lila thought you were too honorable—to sleep with Sonny’s girlfriend or cheat on Courtney, I guess.” Elizabeth’s eyes met his. “Is...it good that she knew?”

“If I had thought for one minute that I would *never* be able to tell her the truth, I wouldn’t have lied.” Still, all these months later, the shock of her loss numbed him. “I know she was...getting older, but I thought she would always be there.”

“Like she was immortal.” Elizabeth nodded. “I felt that way about my grandmother until I stepped off the plane. After watching Emily struggle with losing Lila, I realized my gram could go any time. I didn’t want to waste any more time.” She reached out for his hand. “It sounds like Lila understood.”

“She always did,” he replied softly, his eyes on their intertwined hands. “Your...art show is coming

up soon, isn't it?"

"Mmm...in another month." Elizabeth disengaged her hand from his and tucked her hair behind her ears. "I stayed in California an extra week to pick out the last pieces so they could be sent across the country." She hesitated. "I'm nervous, because some of the pieces are really personal, so maybe they won't sell. The agent seemed to love them."

She was quiet for a moment after that. He waited a moment before reluctantly saying, "Sonny...told me that he was sorry about the Christmas party. He wanted to apologize in person, but..."

"I'd rather he didn't," she admitted. She worried her lip again. "But...if you think it would help with any tension between you two, I would. I don't want to make it more difficult for you."

He appreciated the fact she would put herself in an uncomfortable position in order to help him, but he didn't think it would. "I doubt it would help." He waited a moment, because he wanted to talk to her about the strange meeting with Sonny, his concerns that Sonny was starting to slide towards the edge, but only Carly knew about Sonny's issues.

And Carly was the *last* person he could talk to about this.

"Jason?" Elizabeth murmured. "Is everything all right?"

"Sonny...gets in these moods," he admitted. "He starts...getting erratic. Depressed. Irrational. He'll...bounce back and forth between them sometimes, and it'll happen in a blink of an eye. He was like that the last time we met in person. He started...by apologizing about the party, and then finished by accusing me of never loving Courtney because..." He dipped his chest towards his chest. "Because we were talking at the party."

"And I suppose he's done this before," Elizabeth murmured.

"I can usually stave off the worst of it," Jason told her. "I can be calm and patient with him, wait for him to work out whatever started it." He was quiet for a moment, but decided to go ahead and tell her what he should have told her years ago. "When...we faked Sonny's death and I couldn't tell you..."

"Jason—" Elizabeth started with a shake of her head.

"He was heading towards that edge," Jason finished. "He'd been...questioning me for weeks, second-guessing me. When Alexis lost her sister in that warehouse explosion, you know? It didn't help. And it was getting worse, because we couldn't get ahead of Alcazar. I...asked him to let you in on the plan, but he refused. And I played along because I...couldn't chance a breakdown."

Her eyes were sad now and she broke eye contact to look away, sighing. "Well, I suppose I'm not surprised. I was angry for a long time, but I've...moved past it." She looked back at him. "I'm not surprised you picked Sonny over me. Like you said...it was a tense time, and you needed Sonny focused."

"I didn't..." He exhaled a short breath. "I didn't see it that way then. As choosing Sonny over you. I

wouldn't...But I can see why it looks that way.”

“Well, whatever happened, it seemed to work because Sonny came out of it.” She cleared her throat. “Maybe he can again.”

He remembered the brief flashes of anger in Sonny’s eyes that he would quickly tamp down or even mask. “I don’t know. He’s trying to control it, which sometimes works. He’s not always aware it’s happening, but...” He scratched his brow. “I brought up...the situation. Asked if it was always going to be like this. Even if he had sat there and told me he wanted custody, at least we could have...done something.”

“But he’s still sticking by the original decision?” Elizabeth asked.

“For now. But the guilt is choking him.” Jason sighed and tilted his head back. “I don’t see Michael or Morgan much now, which seems....they were the reason I started this, but I avoid them and Carly, because I don’t want her to see the truth. I’m trying to create distance between Sonny and Evie, to make it easier. I’m thinking of moving out of the penthouse.”

“Well,” Elizabeth said after a long moment. “You’ve chosen a difficult path, Jason. It’s probably going to get worse before it gets better. But I guess...” She paused. “I guess you just have to take it one day at a time.”

“Yeah.” He sighed. Easier said than done.

# Chapter Five

*I still feel the same  
Though everything has changed  
The pain it cost now  
I feel lost inside of my own name  
But I keep running  
I am running  
I keep living for the day that I'm with you*  
- Out of Breath, Lifehouse

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*Thursday, January 20, 2005*

## Kelly's: Diner

Emily dumped her books on the table and collapsed. "I am so ready to be done with lab reports. My last semester as a med student is going to be a bitch."

"Hmm..." Elizabeth barely glanced up from her list and Emily rolled her eyes, turning her attention to the little boy in the booster seat beside her.

"Hey, Cam. Is Mama ignoring you? How dare she?"

Elizabeth set down her pen. "What do you want, Quartermaine? I'm busy."

Emily stuck her tongue out. "What are you working on?"

"The guest list for my opening." Elizabeth tapped her pen against the sheet of paper and leaned back as Georgie Jones approached them to take Emily's order. When the teen had stepped back, she sighed. "I have to get it back to my agent by the end of the day."

"Well, it can't be that hard." Emily shrugged off her jacket. "Your grandmother, your brother, me, Nikolas, Lucky, Jason, maybe my family, if you want. They'll definitely buy something—"

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "I can't invite Jason."

"Why not?" Emily demanded. She flipped open a folder and removed the cursed lab report due in the morning. "What's wrong with *him*? You looked pretty cozy with him at my party."

"He's not going to want to go to New York City to an art show." Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. "Don't start, Em. I told you *not* to match make."

"I am not matchmaking," Emily huffed. She was merely going to create an opportunity, but left *that* unsaid. "This has nothing to do with any of that. Jason is your friend. Even if he decides not to go, you should invite him. Or are you going to let him think you've just been pitying him this last month?"

“Em, he wouldn’t think that.” Elizabeth sipped her tea. “Jason knows better. Anyway, it’s not his scene, and I don’t want him to feel obligated to go—”

“Obligated.” Emily snorted. “Five years ago, *no* one would have used that word in conjunction with my brother. He used to go to the Nurse’s Ball for Robin, you know. Every year. He went when they weren’t dating, and if he’d been in town the last two times they had it, he would have gone. Because it was important to her.”

Elizabeth arched a brow. “I *know* you’re not comparing the things Jason used to do for his girlfriend with coming to my art show. Because I don’t need to explain that it’s different.”

“Not the concept. Jason does things for people he cares about. He came to my birthday party. He used to go to Carly’s stupid parties at The Cellar.”

“Exactly my point. Jason has a lot of people who expect things from him, and I used to be one of them. I’m not going to do that again.” Elizabeth picked up her pen.

“So you’d rather hurt his feeling by leaving him out of a major milestone in your life?”

Elizabeth eyed her. “Are you trying to guilt me into inviting him? Because...it’s not gonna work.”

Oh, it was *totally* working. Emily wanted to burst into song. These bastards made her life so easy sometimes. “I mean, you guys have already left each other out of your kid’s lives. You didn’t even know about Evie until I told you, and I’m sure he didn’t know about Cameron until someone else told him. I guess if you *wanted* to prove you weren’t friends, *not* inviting him—”

“Oh, my God, just *shut* up already. Fine.” Elizabeth scrawled his name at the bottom of the list. “Right now, Emily, promise me something.”

“Um. Do I get to hear the terms first?”

“Do not twist Jason’s arm into going,” her friend ordered and Emily grimaced. Shoot. “I’m serious. If he decides not to go, then it’s fine. I don’t expect him to go. But so help me God, if you force him—”

“Do you think after the stunt I pulled with Grandfather he’s likely to listen to me at all?” Emily demanded.

“You’re not distracting me out of this. Promise me.”

Diabolical woman. Emily sighed. “Fine, I will in no way *make* Jason go to your art show. What do I say if he asks if he should go?”

“You refrain from speaking. You run screaming from the room, I don’t care.” Elizabeth sighed and leaned back in her chair, casting her eyes at her son who was studiously banging a spoon against the table. “Emily, setting me up with your brother isn’t going to change the fact I’m a single mother. And you have to stop feeling guilty about it. *I* didn’t make things easy on Zander, either.”

“It’s not entirely...” Emily sighed. “Okay, it’s a little about the guilt. I do want you to be happy. After everything that’s happened in the last few years, I just want to see you light up, you know. Like you used to. And you do, around Cameron. I love Nikolas so much, I just want the same thing for you. I want you to find love. Real, lasting love.”

“I know, and I appreciate it. But I cannot worry every time I turn around that you’re annoying Jason about me. He and I are just settling back into being friends. I really want that back, okay?”

“Okay.” Emily bit her lip. “But...would you turn down a chance to be with him?”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “Em—”

“This is just between us. I won’t even tell Nikolas. I just...I see you guys sometimes, and I wonder if you guys know what you look like when you’re talking. It’s like you shut out the rest of the world, and you only see each other.”

Elizabeth dipped her head and exhaled slowly. “Which is why we don’t work in the real world,” she said softly. “We were always good at shutting out the world. People didn’t even know we were friends until the Christmas Party, you know? Because we kept each other so separate from our own lives. We don’t fit otherwise. I don’t—”

“I get what you’re saying, but honey, it’s *such* a cop out.” Emily leaned forward. “Look, I won’t...I won’t pressure, and I’m sorry if I was. I don’t want to do anything to make you or Jason unhappy. I just...I see a spark. Maybe you weren’t ready for it all those years ago. Or even two years ago. But you guys aren’t those people anymore.”

“No, we’re not. Which is why what is between us is just...” Elizabeth hesitated, her eyes darting back and forth as if she were looking for the right word. “It’s *residual*. Because we never...had much of a romance. We just...stopped being friends. No closure. So, yeah, sometimes, there’s still...but it’s just leftover. It’s not part of our future.”

Residual her ass, but Emily nodded. “Fair enough. But you know his life has changed. Sonny and Carly? Not his priority anymore—”

“Right now. But Jason and Sonny are never at odds for long,” Elizabeth said. “Carly doesn’t...know. And Sonny will get past this...part of his life. Whether Jason ends up raising Evie or not, he and Sonny are going to reconcile. They did after Carly, after Courtney. And that would put us right back where we were—”

“Elizabeth—”

“Emily, just...look, I’m inviting him. If he asks you whether he should go, give your honest opinion. Just don’t change his mind. Other than that, I really don’t want to discuss it.”

“A girl knows when she’s beat.” Georgie set down Emily’s burger and fries. “I’ll just sit here, eat my food and do my lab report.”

Tuesday, January 25, 2005

## Warehouse: Sonny's Office

Jason gingerly settled in the chair in front of Sonny's desk. "I haven't been able to get in contact with driver," he admitted. "I've got Cody and Max on it, but it's looking like it might have been hijacked." He had waited an extra day, hoping for some good news. Sonny was going to see this as a sign that the Zaccharas were moving in on their territory.

But he had a job to do, and a missing truck with a shipment of cigarettes they were intending to get across the border to Canada was not something he could keep from Sonny.

His partner slapped his hand on the desk. "I knew it," he growled. "You wanted to think the Zacchara bastard wasn't up to something, but—"

Jason wanted to close his eyes and sigh, but that would be a sign of exasperation. "We don't know who it was. We put Milo on Johnny, and he hasn't done more than hang out at Luke's or taking dinner at the Outback. I think he's seeing someone who lives here, but we're not positive on that. Sonny, maybe it's—"

"Don't tell me it's the fucking Ruiz family." Sonny leaned forward, his eyes dark with anger. "They're not ones to sit back and cause minor troubles—"

"Yeah, that's true, but either are the Zaccharas. Anthony shot his own wife, remember? Shipped his daughter to Italy ten years ago, never has any contact with her. He's not sending his *only* son to screw with your head."

"What makes you so sure?" Sonny rose his feet. "How the hell can you sit there and act like you got all the answers?" He pounded a fist against his chest. "I've been in this business for a hell of a lot longer than you, Jason. Why do *you* always think you're right?"

Because he was ninety-nine percent of the time, but today was not a good day to bring that up. Rather than being conciliatory as he had been most of the month, today Sonny was combative. This going to be a problem.

Jason took a deep breath. "Look, right now it's just one shipment. We go to Anthony, demand answers or we take action against them, and it's not them? They're gonna look at us and think we're weak. Think that we don't know what the hell's going on. Give me a few days. I'll find out what happened to the shipment. Stan is tracing the GPS—"

"Why the hell don't I *already* have these answers?" Sonny cut in. He headed for the mini bar and poured himself a tumbler of bourbon. He tossed it back like it was a shot, and Jason took another deep breath. Alcohol in these moods was dangerous, and Jason would have to tread lightly.

"We didn't know it was missing until yesterday afternoon. We don't have specific schedules for the trucks—they gotta be careful with the patrols, with the weighing stations." As if Sonny didn't damn



well sign off for this change in business shortly before Jason left town in 2000. “We put together a sketchy timeline, and we know it disappeared somewhere between Rochester and here. Stan’s working on highway cameras, Cody and Max have taking care of searching the route. I don’t want to leave a stone unturned.” He, too, stood but did not approach his partner.

“Sonny, I’m not say it’s not the Zaccharas, or that Anthony is finally done screwing with you and ready to move on you for real. I’m just...we don’t know. And we both...” He hesitated. “We have people to depend on us to keep them safe. A war when we *don’t* have the answers doesn’t do that.”

He saw Sonny’s shoulders slump. Maybe. Maybe this would work. Maybe he could still talk Sonny down in these moods.

“You’re right,” the older man murmured after a long moment. He poured himself another bourbon. “I don’t know why I need you to explain this to me, Jase. I know all of that. I just...” He rolled his shoulders, keeping his back to Jason. “I get tired of constantly having to fight for what’s mine. Why can’t these bastards just sit back and make a profit? No one’s *ever* taken me down.”

He turned to Jason. “You’ve been with me almost as long as I’ve controlled Port Charles, you know. I took over for Frank Smith, in what? ‘94, ‘95?”

“A year before I came to work for you,” Jason answered, almost unnerved at the stillness in Sonny’s demeanor. He’d talked Sonny down before, but the sudden switch did not bode well for the future of his erratic moods. “But—”

“Don’t think I’m not aware that I’ve kept this going because you...balance me.” Sonny turned to him. “I’m a hothead, and you’re stone cold. You talk me down when you need to.” He tossed back this drink, too, as if it were a shot. “Do you ever get tired of it?”

Jason’s breath caught, and tried not to hesitate. “It’s my job. It’s what I do.”

Sonny chuckled, a low bitter and dark sound that might have sent a chill down anyone else’s spine. “*That’s* how you learned to lie, you know. You learned that talking around a question meant you didn’t have to answer it...” He nodded, his fingers wrapped tightly around the empty tumbler. “And from there, you leapt straight into full-on lies. Did I teach you that?”

“No, I—” But there it was. Another lie. Jason paused. “Maybe. You taught me a lot, Sonny. You and Robin.”

“True enough.” Sonny ambled towards him, towards the desk and resumed his seat behind it. “But we didn’t do it alone. I figure Carly taught you a few things about lying. Maybe even Courtney did, too. When you were lying to me about your relationship.”

Bringing up that difficult time was not a good thing. “I didn’t lie—”

“You omitted,” Sonny cut in. “Not much difference, Jason. You know that.” He tapped his chin and leaned back. “I told you once there was no damn difference between the two, do you remember?”

“Yeah.” His throat was dry. “When you faked your death, and told me I had to lie to Elizabeth about it. I told you I just wouldn’t say anything to her.”

“And I told you she wouldn’t be able to handle the lies, omissions or the ones to her face.” He shrugged. “I was right. Courtney couldn’t either. Women rarely can handle this life, Jase.” His face changed, became contemplative as he looked at something over Jason’s shoulder. “Carly’s... different.”

“And I told you we could have trusted Elizabeth,” Jason said, ignoring his remark about Courtney, because that was true—she’d stopped his execution of Lorenzo Alcazar the year before as if the man wouldn’t have deserved it. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“I just thought...we should discuss your sudden predilection for lying, and that was the only other time we’d brought it up.” Sonny pressed his hands together and steeped his fingers.

These circular conversations were always dangerous because he had to be very careful about what he was saying and the tone of his voice, lest Sonny use something against him later. “That was a long time ago, Sonny. And I prefer not to lie, but sometimes there’s no other choice.”

“That’s very true.” Sonny nodded. There was nothing in his eyes now—they were completely unreadable. “Do you ever get tired of lying?”

Every day. All the time. But Jason was so far into this now, he wasn’t sure how to dig himself out. “Don’t you?” he replied. “Are you ready to be done lying?”

Sonny closed his eyes, and again his shoulders slumped. “No. Nothing’s changed, Jason. Carly is still...not going to accept this turn of events, even with Sam gone. We have to...keep this up.”

“All right.” Jason took a deep breath. “I’ll keep the guys on the shipment and let you know if we hear anything, and Milo will stay on Johnny. He’ll know if he does anything out of the ordinary while he’s in Port Charles—if he meets with anyone.”

“Good.” Sonny nodded. “Good. Keep me posted.” He paused. “Do you wonder, sometimes, who’s really in charge here?”

“No,” Jason said immediately. “It’s you. I never wanted it.”

And on that note, he turned and left the room, eager to be away from Sonny’s erratic mood swings. He’d talked him down for now, but there was no telling how long this would last.

*Wednesday, January 26, 2005*

## **The Cellar: Office**

Carly tapped her fingers restlessly against the blotter on her desk, ignoring the pile of messages from vendors and people interested in holding parties in the club.

She had more important business to deal with right now.

Another unsuccessful visit with Dr. Meadows. Carly had had tests done earlier in the month, and they had come back normal today, which meant the useless woman had no way to explain why, after five months, Carly still had not conceived a child.

She had tried not to laugh hysterically when Dr. Meadows suggested Sonny come in for tests—Sonny was nothing if not fertile.

The child living across the hall from them was living goddamn *proof* of that. The little girl following Alexis around was more ridiculous proof. God only knew how many bastards he had sired.

She reached for her purse and the cell phone contained within. After a few rings, her sister-in-law picked up. “*Hey, Carly.*”

Did she sound annoyed? Carly couldn’t be bothered wondering further. “Courtney. Hey. I was hoping up you could come up with this weekend. I really miss you.”

“Oh.” There was a pause. “I have an event this Friday night, but maybe I could take a flight up on Saturday, and stay over. I have to double check my schedule.” Courtney paused again. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes.” Carly huffed. “No. I went to the doctor to find out why I’m not pregnant yet, and I may need to find someone else because she can’t figure out why. All my tests came back normal.”

“Maybe it’s...it’s a sign that this isn’t a good time,” her friend remarked in a soft voice. “You know things have been difficult between you and Sonny since you came home from South America, before Morgan was born. It’s been a rollercoaster since—”

“I need to fix things between us,” Carly interrupted, annoyed. Hadn’t she explained this in great detail at the Christmas party? “A baby will make Sonny focus on his family—”

“Morgan is barely one years old, Carly. Why isn’t he enough? What about Michael? You told me he’s been having behavioral issues. Maybe if you talk to Sonny about the boys—”

“He needs a daughter,” Carly said, her teeth clenched. “I need to give him one.”

There was a long pause. “Carly, I love you both. I really do, but I’m just...I’m worried that you’re not seeing this for what it is. You and Sonny were divorcing last year because you were having really bad problems. You had both slept with other people. You got back together because Sonny made a promise to God if He saved Michael—”

“We love each other,” Carly all but growled. “Do you think we don’t?”

“I loved Jason, but that didn’t mean I could accept him for he really was,” Courtney said. “We didn’t work because of who we are. Maybe you and Sonny—”

“You don’t understand, Courtney. Why can’t you get this? You used to support me.”

“I do. I support you being happy. I support the boys being in a happy home. I love my brother, I want him to be happy, too. I don’t think bringing another child—”

Her throat was closing, because this was supposed to be her best friend and if she didn’t understand the plan, how could Carly get her to help? “I know a baby will fix things. It’s how we fell in love in the first place.”

There was quiet on the other line. “Carly, I do...I do see why you think having another child would recreate that...time, but...I just...”

“What?” Carly demanded. “Are you doubting me again? My plans *work*, Courtney. I planned to get revenge on my mother and it worked. I planned to keep Michael at any cost and it worked. I planned for you to marry Jason and you did. I am planning to keep my family intact—”

“Your plans come at a price, Carly,” Courtney said, her voice becoming more firm. “You destroyed your mother. You destroyed Jason and AJ to keep Michael. I married Jason, a man I did love but never really understood or saw the truth about. He has a child with another woman, conceived while we were supposed to be working on things—”

“You’re just concentrating on the minor problems. It’s not my fault if you and Jason didn’t work out. You were both supposed to do the hard work, and I *wanted* to destroy my mother. That was the goddamn point. Jason and AJ are fine. Well, Jason is. He will be. He has a daughter now, doesn’t he? Who cares about AJ, anyway?”

“That’s the problem with your plans, Carly. You don’t get it. They’re not minor problems. It’s called collateral damage and you don’t care about it.”

Her stomach rolled and her eyes burned. “If I have a baby, Courtney, everyone wins—”

“And if it doesn’t work the way you want it to? If you have a child and you and Sonny implode anyway? That’s three children in the middle instead of just two. And you’ll put Michael through it all over again with the hearings. Carly, I love you too much not to tell you the truth. Please—”

“You’re supposed to love me, Courtney. You’re my friend, my sister. Why don’t you understand? Why are you betraying me?”

“I’m not—”

Carly yanked the phone from her ear and hit the end button. It wasn’t as satisfying as slamming a landline down, but it would do.

Courtney didn’t see how it would work, but she would.

Everyone would see when Carly gave Sonny a daughter. It would all be right again.

It *had* to be.

*Thursday, February 1, 2005*

## **Kelly's: Dining Room**

Jason set Evie's car seat on the chair between himself and his sister, removed his jacket and then sat across from her. From his jacket pocket, he removed an envelope and set it between them. "Emily, this has to stop."

Emily paused as she sipped her soda and peered at the envelope in question. "Oh, cool, you got yours today. I got mine yesterday, even though Nikolas and I have been ready to go since Liz told us about it." She set the glass on the table and reached for a fry. Her hand stilled and her dark eyes flashed to him. "*What* has to stop?"

"You told Elizabeth to invite me."

Emily pursed her lips and set the fry down. "You don't think she can put two and two together by herself? It's a major milestone in her life. *You're* supposed to be her friend." She shrugged and popped the fry in her mouth. "How's Evie today? I can't believe she's almost three months old. I think she recognizes my voice, Jase. She's looking at me."

Jason narrowed his eyes. He was not going to let Emily get away with this so easily, but he cast his eyes at his daughter. "Yeah. She's been doing that more this week—looking at people whose voices she's heard before. Emily—"

"I did not tell her to do anything," Emily said, annoyed. "No one *tells* Elizabeth to do something. Geesh, and you *say* you're her friend? Yes, she was on the fence about inviting you because it's not your scene, and she did not want you to feel obligated. I told her that you should get decide whether you want to go or not. So clearly, you don't want to go—"

"It's not—" Jason huffed, wondering how she had turned this around on him. Quartermaine tricks probably. His sister had Lila's pure heart, but Edward's deviousness, despite being adopted. "I didn't say that."

"So you'll go." Emily wiped her hands on a napkin, then bounced in happiness as she touched Evie's nose and the infant made a babbling noise. "She's the light of my life, you know that, Jase? I mean, I cannot wait to get married and give her a cousin."

"I didn't *say* I'd go either."

Emily rolled her eyes. "God, Jase. It's a weekend in New York in support of our mutual friend who has dreamed her entire life of being an artist with a real opening—" She closed her mouth. "Nope, Elizabeth made me swear not to talk you into going. She wanted it to be *your* decision."

There was truth in these words, but he still detected Emily manipulating the situation. Somehow. "I'm glad Elizabeth and I are...reconnecting, but she's right. It's not my scene."

“That’s exactly what she said. She told me that people always expect things from you, and she didn’t want to be like that anymore. I think it’s kind of admirable,” Emily said with a firm nod.

But Jason frowned, because he would never put Elizabeth in the same category as Sonny and Carly, who always wanted something from him, always needed him to fix something. “She was never like that.”

Emily just shrugged. “It’s not like people won’t be there with her. Her grandmother and Steven will be there. I’m going, Nikolas is with me. Lucky is dragging his new girlfriend. She won’t lack for support.”

Jason leaned back. “So I won’t go.”

“Yeah, I figured. Besides, you’ve always had trouble with images since the accident, haven’t you?” Emily said. She reached for her soda and sipped it. “So it’s not like you’d even *understand* the art.”

“I—” He closed his mouth, because that was true but he could still remember Elizabeth not taking offense to his not understanding her painting of the wind, merely explaining it to him until the image came together for him. She could do that again, couldn’t she?

And why *shouldn’t* he go? Elizabeth was his friend, and he wanted her to know how much he appreciated her support the few times they had spoken. He always felt better afterward, and going to her opening would go a long way towards doing that. So it wasn’t his scene. He had gone to the Nurse’s Ball every year for Robin and he would go to Carly’s ridiculous parties at her club when she whined enough.

He eyed his sister. She had technically kept her promise and not said one word about convincing him to go, and yet...

“I don’t know if I want to leave Evie here, even with Nora,” Jason said. Emily arched her brow. “I just...it’s better if I don’t go out of town overnight and leave her here.” Across the hall from Sonny.

“Oh, that would make everything so much easier.” Emily leaned forward. “Maybe you could ask Nora to look after Cam? Because Audrey and Steven are doing it, but that means they can’t go to the opening together—they’re splitting the night.”

“She’s not leaving him here?” Jason said, surprised.

“With who?” Emily said. “Everyone is going to New York. I mean, if you’re not going to go, maybe *you* could look after Cam for her. She should have her family around her the entire night, and Audrey and Steven should get to see the whole thing—really get to watch Liz shine.” She pursed her lips. “I could hire a nanny or something for the night. I didn’t think of that before. Thanks for the idea.”

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “I’m going, Emily. You talked me into it.”

“I did *not*. That is a filthy lie, Jason Morgan.” She stabbed a finger in his direction. “And don’t you dare tell Elizabeth any differently. I never once told you to go. In fact, I gave you eight reasons not to

go—”

“You think after being friends with Carly all these years, I don’t recognize reverse psychology?” Jason asked, almost amused. “I won’t tell Elizabeth that you did not violate the letter of your promise, merely the spirit.”

She scowled. “Well, frick, Jason. Excuse *me* for breathing. It’s a major thing for her. I mean, the Harris Gallery is so well-respected, and it’s a coup for a brand-new artist to secure an exclusive showing. I mean, it’s like unheard of. Which means Elizabeth will *finally* start believing how brilliant she is.” She folded her arms against her chest. “Don’t you think Elizabeth deserves that? And I want everyone who loves her to be there and to watch her shine.”

“I—I know how important her art is to her,” Jason said. He cleared his throat, because he was glad to see Emily so fiercely dedicated to Elizabeth.

“These last few years have sucked, you know that. First, Lucky pretended to love her and marry her out of obligation, then she was kidnapped and you dumped her for Courtney, and between Ric and Zander last year, she was feeling pretty down on herself—”

“I didn’t—” Jason opened his mouth to defend himself, but Emily was on a roll.

“She’s an *amazing* woman, Jason, who keeps picking herself up and rebuilding when her life falls apart. This time, she is finally getting rewarded for constantly standing by men who don’t deserve to be in the same *atmosphere* as her—”

He frowned, because did that mean Emily was lumping *him* in with Lucky, Ric and Zander? “Em—”

“And damn it, if I thought I could invite the entire world to this opening to watch everyone fawn over her talent and her awesomeness, I *would*.” She huffed. “So I am so *sorry* I had to convince you to do what friends should do naturally. You were so quick to think I was trying to set you up, but maybe I don’t just get how you can say you guys are *friends*, and yet she’s convinced you won’t go to the most important event of her life and career because it’s not your *thing*.” These last words were laced with heavy sarcasm.

He hesitated. “Are...you *mad* at me?”

“No.” Emily scowled. “Well, maybe I am. You’re right. I tricked you. And I tricked her into inviting you, because I knew she wanted to. And she wasn’t going to because it would have hurt her to put herself out there and have you reject her. But I knew it was gonna hurt her not to invite you either. So you should ask yourself what kind of friend *that* makes you that I had to *convince* you—”

He held up a hand, feeling a rare spiral of shame wind through his chest. “You’re right, Emily. I’m sorry. Elizabeth and I *are* friends, and I know how important her art is to her. I remember when she started at PCU and struggled with her classes. She should have felt comfortable inviting me, and I should have just decided to go without you being involved.”

She closed her mouth and stared at him. “There’s a trick here I’m not seeing.”

“And she should have her brother and grandmother with her to enjoy the whole night, so if Elizabeth is okay with it, I’ll ask Nora to look after Cam.”

“I think I feel dizzy.” She looked at Evie, who had been looking at her father with her dark eyes. “So...you’ll go.”

“I’ll go.”

“And maybe you don’t mention this to Elizabeth, because I *totally* violated the spirit of my promise.”

“Because you love her,” Jason said simply. “And I’m going to tell her because she should know how much you’re in her corner, and to apologize to her if I’ve ever given her any sense that I wouldn’t go to this. We are friends, and I should show her that. You will *not* get in trouble with Elizabeth.”

“Okay.” Emily hesitated. “So you know Nikolas rented the entire floor at the Waldorf for this, so that he and I have a suite, Elizabeth is sharing one with her grandmother and Cam. Lucky and Leyla have a room, Steven has one, too. I can ask him if he’s got another suite available on the floor.” Before Jason could refuse, she continued, “If Nora is going to watch Cam, it would make sense for her to be on the same floor.”

Again, his sister had a point. “All right. Let me know what he says.” He hesitated. “Thank you, Emily.”

“This was not how I thought this conversation would go.” She grinned. “You’re back to being logical and unpredictable. I like it.”



# Chapter Six

*All this time we were waiting for each other  
All this time I was waiting for you  
We got all these words, can't waste them on another  
So I'm straight in a straight line running back to you*  
- All This Time, OneRepublic

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*Friday, February 12, 2005*

## **New York City, Waldorf Astoria Hotel: Jason's Suite**

When Elizabeth had seen Jason's name on the RVSP list the gallery had sent her earlier that week, her first thought had been to murder her best friend.

Emily staunchly told her that she had honestly not convinced Jason to go. He had decided on his own. Elizabeth wanted to believe that, but she knew her best friend better.

She raised her hand to knock on the suite door and hesitated when a bright, bouncy young blonde woman pulled open the door. "Hi!"

"Uh." She blinked. Why was it always blondes? "Hello. I..." She couldn't have the wrong room. Nikolas had rented the entire floor. "I'm looking for Jason."

"Oh. He's just giving Evie her breakfast." The woman stuck out her hand. "I'm Nora Rogers."

Nora. The nanny. Right. "Elizabeth Webber," she replied, gingerly shaking it.

Nora's green eyes widened, and her smile deepened. "The artist Mr. Morgan is here to see! Oh, it's so awesome! I'm from New York, you know, but I have never stayed a hotel so amazing!" She stepped away from the door and waved Elizabeth in. "Come in, I'll go get Mr. Morgan."

Nora had disappeared into another room before Elizabeth could protest. How did *Jason* put up with such cheerfulness? She could practically see the exclamation points over the woman's head.

A few seconds later, Jason emerged from the room. "Hey."

"Hey." Elizabeth hesitated, because now she couldn't quite remember why she had stopped by. She should have talked to him in Port Charles, thanked him there instead of coming to his room, but everything had been so hectic these last two weeks. "I...stopped by to thank you for coming. I...didn't think you would."

"Yeah." Jason looked slightly uncomfortably. He glanced over her shoulder at the still open door, where they could hear Nora's voice wafting through. He took her by the elbow across the room and through another doorway. Into what looked like his bedroom. He closed the door. "I talked to Emily."

Elizabeth huffed. “I knew it. She swore she had *nothing* to do with it, but she’s a Quartermaine. They somehow lie and tell the truth at the same time—”

He held up a hand. “No. I mean, yeah, she did kind of...she made me realize that...” He dipped his head and looked at the floor for a moment before raising it back and meeting her eyes. “We *say* we’re friends again. We talk. But you didn’t think you could even invite me tonight because I might feel *obligated* to show up.”

“I...” Elizabeth bit her lip. “It’s just...it’s not your thing, you know? And I know you...might come just to...” She shrugged and looked away, over his shoulder. “I don’t know. I guess...I’m out of practice being part of your life.”

“And *my* first instinct was not to come,” Jason admitted. “But I really am happy for you. About tonight. And not that long ago, I wouldn’t have hesitated to accept. This is important to you, and you...” He paused, and his voice changed a little. “*You* are important to me.”

Oh, hell. She was really going to murder Emily now. Making her admit that there was still...*something* here—even though Elizabeth was convinced it was residual and would go away if she just ignored it—made her more aware of it when it happened.

But that stupid, ridiculous flutter *had* been ignored for years and yet, there it was. It had survived despite her repeated attempts to drown it.

Nervous, she licked her lips. “I wanted you to come,” she admitted. “Because I...you were one of the first people to believe in me. Apart from Lucky. Even when you didn’t understand the paintings. So...I’m glad you came.”

She broke eye contact, because her stomach was rolling and almost doing somersaults. “Anyway...that’s why I’m here.”

“Okay.” He looked slightly relieved that she had changed the topic, which confused her because hadn’t *he* drowned out those feelings, too?

Bad road. Stay off that road. She cleared her throat. “So...I’ll just go—”

“Did Emily talk to you about Nora?” Jason stepped in front her as she headed toward the door. “She told me your grandmother and brother were going to split baby-sitting Cameron, and she thought if...you were okay with it, Nora could look after him.”

“Oh.” Surprised, Elizabeth rocked back on her heels. “I, ah, that would be...if she doesn’t mind. And if Cam likes her, though he likes almost everyone. He even liked Tracy—” *Stop rambling.* “I have to be at the gallery at six, but the opening doesn’t start until seven, so maybe Em or Steve could drop him off before they leave...” She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “If she’s really okay with it.”

“She said it was fine. She was going to be here anyway with Evie because I didn’t want to leave her overnight.”

They just stared at one another for a minute before she offered a nervous smile. “So. Okay. I’ll go now—I have some things to do—”

He nodded and pulled open the door, stepping back to allow her to leave the bedroom. “I-I’ll see you tonight.”

She nodded and escaped the suite before this became even worse. Stupid flutters. Stupid change in his voice. His stupid eyes and the way he always looked at her.

Stupid girl for letting Emily open this door and then walking right on through it. This was only going to end in disaster, as it had the other eight thousand times they had walked down this road.

Why should this time be any different?

### **Harris Gallery: Front Room**

She had once been a brilliant actress, able to paste a genuine smile on her face at the drop of hat. It had come in handy during her brief modeling career, though the camera had pretty much loathed her.

As another person came up to her to admire her brilliant work and then ask for more details behind the painting with the red shoe, or how about the one with the flames, she thought the smile might crack.

The door opened and she almost groaned in relief as she saw her grandmother’s silver hair and her brother’s curls stepping into the lobby. “Excuse me,” she murmured to someone waxing poetic about the hidden subtexts in one of her San Francisco landscapes.

“Gram!” She embraced Audrey fiercely. “Thank God you’re finally here.”

“What’s wrong, Bits?” Steven asked as Elizabeth turned to hug him. “Not enjoying your fame?”

She wrinkled her nose. “I’d rather no one knew who I was, but so far everyone has been nice.” She grinned when she saw Lucky and his girlfriend, Leyla Mir. “Hey, good lookin’.”

“Hey, you.” Lucky wrapped his arms around her tightly, and into her ear, he whispered, “This is everything I ever dreamed for you, you know? I am so goddamn *proud* of you, Elizabeth.” He drew back, and for just a moment, Elizabeth let herself be that girl again.

“It’s so exciting,” Leyla murmured in her delicate British accent. She wrapped her arm through Lucky’s. “Shall we look around?”

“Yes, yes.” Elizabeth waved her hand. “Mingle. Don’t crowd me or people will think *I’m* someone worth talking to.”

Emily and Nikolas entered next, with Jason just behind them. Emily’s eyes took in the high ceilings of the room and the canvases on the wall. “Holy crap, Elizabeth. You’re a *real* artist now.”

Elizabeth laughed and hugged her tightly. “I know. People are calling me brilliant and saying I’m the next fill in a name of an artist I can never possibly hope to emulate.” She turned to Nikolas. “Thank you so much for coming, and for the hotel—Nikolas—”

“Only the best for the next most famous artist.” He kissed her cheek. “I’m going to take Emily and we’re going to buy something for my office so *everyone* will envy my Webber original.”

“Oh, no...you don’t have to—” Elizabeth sighed as the two just smiled and started down towards one of the displays. “Bastards,” she muttered under her breath.

She turned to her last visitor and that freaking flutter started *again*. Jason Morgan in a leather jacket and t-shirt was hot enough, but in a suit? There was no equal.

She took in his hesitant stance and stepped forward. “You clean up nice.” She leaned up on her toes to press a kiss to his cheek. “Thanks for dressing up. I *know* you hate it.”

“It’s...only for a few hours.” He smiled. “You look...” He glanced at her strapless black dress that fell to her knees and her silver sandal heels. “You look beautiful, Elizabeth.”

Hell. The way he always said her name. She was fighting a losing battle and she knew it. “Thank you.” She reached, out of habit, to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear but none had escaped the knot of curls at the base of her neck. “Um. So I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Anything.”

She looped her arm through his and steered him deeper in the room. “So people are coming up to me, you know, because they know I’m the artist, but they’re asking all these deep, personal questions about why I painted some of the things I did...a-and I *don’t* want to answer them.”

“I can tell them to go away if you want,” Jason said in a tone so serious that she knew he was telling the truth.

She laughed. “No, I think...if I just stick with you, people won’t even bother coming near me.” She arched her brow at him. “You’re pretty intimidating, you know.”

“I’ve heard that before,” he said with a nod. “So you just want to use me?”

“Would you mind?” She asked with a bright smile. “I’m glad people like the paintings, but like I told my brother, I’d rather people didn’t know who I was. It’s not about me. It’s about the work.”

“I don’t mind.” He hesitated. “But you have to do something for me.”

Just this once, she wanted him to be the kind of guy who might ask for something completely indecent in return, because with the way he was looking her, she would definitely agree.

“You know...I have trouble with the paintings, so if you could...” He gestured towards the walls. “Tell me some of them. So I could understand them. Like you did with the *Wind*, remember?”

And just like that, Elizabeth stopped fighting the battle.

Maybe she wasn't still in love with Jason Morgan, but she could see it happening again. And for some reason, in this moment, it didn't seem so terrifying.

"Absolutely." She nodded. "Where do you want to start?"

"How about with one of your favorites?" he asked.

"Sure." She steered him into the next room and stopped in front of a canvas that still made her chest tighten when she saw it. "So this one...It's called *Anticipation*. Do you see the peach and grays? They come out of the lower left corner and reach into the middle of the painting."

He nodded, and squinted "Yeah." He hesitated and looked at her. "Are...they hands?"

She beamed. "Yes! There's a shadow in the upper right, coming towards them. It's my hands reaching out for Cameron right after he was born, but just before I held him."

She closed her eyes remembering that moment. "Everything just...bubbled up inside of me. I was so *ready*, so incredibly focused on being a mother. I was ecstatic *and* I was terrified because this little boy was going to depend on me for so much. I was sad because I was alone, but then I realized I would never *be* alone again."

She opened her eyes and looked up at him to find him staring at her intently. "It's the moment I think I really grew up and realized that absolutely *everything* in my life that led me to this point was so worth it. The pain, the trauma, the good times, the bad. If it brought me to my beautiful little boy, there isn't a single thing I would take back. I had no more regrets, because if I regretted something, it meant I regretted him." She cleared her throat, feeling her eyes almost burning with the memory. "I have *never* loved anyone in my entire life the way I love my son, Jason. I know *you* know what I mean."

"I-I do." He hesitated and glanced back at the canvas, as if seeing it for the first time. "I didn't...consider Michael my son the first time I held him, but I knew he was dependent on me and I...didn't know what came next. But it..." He paused. "It also reminds me of Sam."

"Yeah?" She reached down and twined their fingers together. "When Evie was born?"

"Yeah." He took a deep breath, and his voice faltered a bit before he could begin again. "She held her just once, you know? I had-I had to help because she was so weak, but she wanted to hold her. So one day, I can tell Evie that her mother loved her so much that she used what was left of her strength to touch her, to kiss her and promise her she would always be with her."

Elizabeth closed her eyes, grateful for tear-proof mascara. "I can't *imagine* the pain Sam must have been feeling, knowing...she would *never* have more than that one moment."

"People...I know they think Sam and I...that we were...we weren't, but we *were* friends. And that moment...it's why I promised her. Sonny and Carly...would not bring Evie up to remember Sam. Not...the way she should know her. They tell Michael AJ is someone to be scared of, to run from."

He hesitated. “AJ’s...he’s not...he would never hurt Michael. He might not...be a good person most of the time, but I *know* he’s not cruel or malicious, but that’s how Michael thinks of him. As a monster.” He shook his head. “I can’t let Evie think that after everything Sam did to protect her.”

“Even though it created more problems with Sonny?” Elizabeth asked softly. “Even if it means you might...lose her one day?”

“I’m not...blind. I know Sonny might...come for her. That it’s more likely than not,” Jason admitted. “But *what* am I supposed to do, Elizabeth? Not love her? Not honor my promise to Sam? I promised Carly to take care of Michael, and I kept it until they wouldn’t let me.” He dipped his head down. “Sonny...he’s important to me, but I can’t...I can’t ignore why Sam did what she did.”

“He must have hurt her so much,” Elizabeth murmured. “Made her feel like she could never measure up.”

“Yeah.” His voice nearly hoarse. “He’s not...he’s not a good father, Elizabeth. Not...lately. And not for a long time. He sees Michael and Morgan as possessions, not as people. I wanted better for Michael once, because that’s how the Quartermaines would have seen him, but now...”

“You can protect Evie from that for as long as you’re able.” She pressed her forehead to the sleeve of his dark jacket. “She’s in the best place possible, and it’s going to make all the difference, Jason.”

She cleared her throat and stepped back a little. “Let’s...go look at some of the landscapes from San Francisco. They’re...boring. Which means they’re less depressing.”

“It’s...” Jason stopped her as she would have pulled him away. “I didn’t mean to make you think...this is your favorite and—”

“It still *is*. It just...it means something happy for me, but it means something sad for you. That’s art.” She tightened her grip on his hand as if to reassure him. “The same painting can have different meanings depending on who looks at it. So...let me show you a painting I did of Alcatraz and you can tell me what it was like to visit it.”

## **Harris Gallery: Front Room**

Emily tried to crane her head around the corner to see Jason and Elizabeth talking, but she just couldn’t manage it. They had disappeared into the back room of the gallery nearly twenty minutes ago and she was peeved she couldn’t watch their progress.

But maybe it was for the best. She had gone to great lengths to create this opportunity, risked both their wraths and it seemed to have paid off. If they didn’t see the scorching hot sparks they set off when they saw each other tonight, well...God, Emily didn’t even *want* to know them. Idiots.

“You know,” Nikolas said, with a deep sigh, “I think I always knew Elizabeth must be amazing, but I never...really saw anything she did, beyond sketches for the Nurse’s Ball or for fun. These are...”

“Breathtaking.” Emily turned her attention to the canvases in front of her. “I would have pretended to

like them even if I didn't because I love her, but I don't have to. These are *incredible*."

"I don't know which one to pick." He gestured toward the one in front of them. It was a woman in a bed, the shadows keeping her features vague and her setting undefined, but the woman, with her head in her hands, emitted a stark sense of isolation and loss. "When...do we know which moment this is?"

"I was in San Francisco when she was finishing it. She was in therapy for a while this summer," Emily admitted. "After a session, she came home and did this one—she's waking up from her pulmonary embolism and she's telling Capelli about Carly and the panic room."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Right. Well, I don't want *that* one on my wall." He turned, his arm around Emily's waist and on the wall directly behind him...

Nikolas stopped, and she watched the muscles in his throat shift as he swallowed hard. "What?" she began, as she focused on the winter scene. It was the stone fountain and benches of the park.

And a lone red shoe, with its heel snapped off and lying next to it, carelessly strewn between the fountain and the dark vastness of the greenery behind the bench.

And somehow, Emily felt like she was the painting. She *knew* this moment. Had been present for parts of Elizabeth's recovery. "Nikolas—"

"I told...Lucky the truth about Luke and Laura right *there*," he murmured. "I didn't—I didn't know about Elizabeth then, you know. I wouldn't have told him at all if I had known why he was so angry. Or maybe I would. It's hard...to remember those days before we were really brothers. Before we were friends. But I told him right near the spot he had found her crawling out of the bushes...that his father had done that to Laura once. Just to get back at him for throwing my father's abuse in my face."

"Nikolas..." She sighed. "He doesn't...it's past us now. Luke and Lucky are close, sort of."

"I can't...How can she *stand* to paint these moments? Of the worst moments in her life? How can she stand in this room, looking excited and smile while evidence of her tragedies surround her?" He looked at her, his eyes dark with pain. "How can she be so goddamn strong, Emily, when just *one* of these memories would break anyone else?"

"Because she's amazing," Emily answered softly. "And this is her way of letting those moments go. Of putting them in her past and moving forward." She saw out of the corner of her eye her brother and Elizabeth walk out of the back room, toward the row of landscapes. Her arm was looped through his, and they were talking, even smiling.

"Look at her, Nikolas. She's picked herself up again after last year, and she's going to be happy again. Look at them and tell me I'm insane for thinking they work."

Nikolas reluctantly followed her gaze, and sighed. His eyes softened. "I know you're not. And...being surrounded by all the horrors she's emerged from...I want her to be happy again. If it's with your brother, then...that's the way it'll be. I just...don't want her to have another reason to cry."

“I love you.” She leaned up and pressed her lips to his cheek. “So...you want to check out some of the views she did from Vista Point? There’s one or two of Spoon Island somewhere, I think—”

“No...” Nikolas pulled her toward another canvas, on the far side of the wall. “I think I know this one a bit.” This scene depicted burning candles in the foreground on an altar, and church pews in the shadowy background, with two people comforting one another in the front row. “It’s the hospital chapel.”

“It’s the night I almost died,” Emily told him. Elizabeth had had the preliminary sketches in her studio in San Francisco, but this was the first time she’d seen the finished product. “It’s Jason and Elizabeth in the chapel. She told me it was first time they’d been...friends again after everything that had happened since they broke up.”

“I thought it was from your cancer...” He hesitated, unsure how to finish it. “And...even knowing it’s them, I think I want it anyway. Because I see *us* in it. I see me lying on a hospital bed in the next room, praying for the chance to see you again. Even if you wouldn’t be with me...just to have you in the world would be enough.”

She just pressed her forehead to his shoulder and was quiet for a moment. “God, it seems so far away right now, after everything that’s happened this last year.”

Clearing her throat, Emily glanced over her shoulder and saw Elizabeth laugh, lightly punching Jason in the shoulder. He grinned back at her. “I...didn’t meddle too much with them, did I?”

Nikolas frowned. “No. I don’t...I mean what did you *really* even do? You introduced Liz to Evie. You brought Cam to Jason’s. You were always going to invite them both to the birthday party. You talked her into inviting him tonight, and him into coming. You just...” He chuckled. “You created opportunities.”

“I just...they were so far apart. I wasn’t sure if they would seek one another out.” She rolled her shoulders. “I think...maybe I’ve done what I needed to do for now.”

“Good. If you try too hard, it might...feel like too much pressure.” Nikolas patted her hip. “I’d like to see Elizabeth have less of these kinds of moments to paints, so if Jason can help with that...I’m not opposed.”

## **Harris Gallery: Across the Room**

“I do miss living in a city on the ocean,” Elizabeth admitted as she finished described a painting of Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco. “I know...we have the lake and the river that flows to the ocean, but it’s not even remotely the same thing.”

“The beach on the island is nice,” Jason admitted. “But you said you came back for the snow. You don’t get that living on the ocean.”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. “I would if I lived in Maine, but yeah.” She sighed. “Well, maybe I’ll go



back to San Francisco for a few weeks this summer, though..." She hesitated. "If I make enough money from this showing, maybe I'll...take Cameron to Italy. He won't be old enough to appreciate it, but..."

"You should take him. He won't remember it, but he'll know *you're* happy." Jason's shoulder brushed her bare skin as he turned his attention from the painting to her. "That makes a difference."

"You told me once that babies can sense everything around them." She tapped his chest lightly. "I'm glad I paid so much attention to you in those days, because I feel like I learned a lot about being a parent."

He grabbed her finger in his hand before she could tap him again. "You didn't need my help. I *knew* you were going to be an amazing mother."

Her cheeks burning, Elizabeth smiled and looked away. She hesitated when she saw a dark-haired man walking towards them, his arm around the waist of a blonde woman she recognized from the hospital. A nurse who looked apprehensive. They were the first people to approach her in nearly an hour.

She sighed. "I guess you're not as intimidating as I hoped."

Jason frowned. "What—" He stopped suddenly as he saw the couple. His body tensed. "I know him."

"And I know her. She works at the hospital."

The couple stepped up to them, and the man angled himself slightly in front of the woman. "Jason, I...thought it would be for the best if I didn't pretend I didn't see you." He cleared his throat. "I mean...since you know the artist..." He glanced at Elizabeth and hesitantly held out his hand. "Johnny Zacchara. I...sometimes work with Jason. Or at least, my father does."

Ah. Elizabeth bit her lip but accepted the hand. "It's nice to meet you. Thank you for coming." She looked at the blonde. "I know you from General Hospital. I think I saw you at the Christmas Party."

"This is Nadine Crowell. Nadine, Jason Morgan," Johnny said.

"Hi," Nadine said, and for a moment it looked like she wanted to say something else, but closed her mouth.

"I didn't..." Johnny used his hand to rub the back of his neck, looking nervous. Jason still hadn't said a word. "Things are...look, it doesn't *need* to be a thing. I like art. I go to a lot of showings—this was a coincidence—"

"It's fine," Jason said, his voice firm. "It...happens. Thank you for...letting me know you were here."

"Right." Johnny hesitated and looked back at Elizabeth. "Your work is really great. We're having a good time."

“I like the landscapes,” Nadine said, her voice overly bright because she was clearly nervous. “The...one of the Golden Gate Bridge is really pretty.” She winced. “I mean, impressive. Or some other art word I don’t...” She looked to Johnny, looking out of her depth. “What *do* I mean?”

“You mean it’s pretty,” Elizabeth said with assuring smile. “I’m not particularly attached to those, but landscapes tend to sell well. It’s a nice area to see.” Unsure if she was supposed to continue to make small talk, she cleared her throat. “Have-have you been?”

“Nope. Born and raised in Ohio until I moved to New York for nursing school. I just moved to Port Charles because I wanted to live—” Nadine closed her mouth and flushed. “I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t...” She sighed and looked at her companion. “Johnny, you *never* told me what I’m supposed to say.”

Elizabeth nudged Jason as if to somehow make this go away. The poor girl was clearly unused to meeting Johnny’s associates and was trying to do what was right by him.

Jason looked as if he wanted to roll his eyes, but refrained. He merely let out a small breath of exasperation. “Johnny, it’s really fine. You’re known for hanging out in New York.” He looked at Nadine. “You’re doing fine. Just next time, don’t volunteer personal information to people he hasn’t briefed you on.” Then he looked at Johnny. “And don’t let her walk into a situation cold like this again. *You* came up to *me*.”

Johnny blinked, but nodded. “Fair enough.” He looked at to Nadine. “Sorry.”

“I told you,” she was telling him as he led her away.

“That was very nice of you to give them relationship advice,” Elizabeth said with a wicked smile. “Jason Morgan, couples counselor.”

He huffed. “He had no business bringing her over here without...” He rubbed his forehead. “I mean, he *was* right to come over. If I...knew he was here and hadn’t say anything, it’s... just the stupid kind of thing people would point to later as...” He shook his head.

“I know you can’t really tell me much, but maybe...is he friend or foe?” Elizabeth asked, steering him towards a corner where their words wouldn’t be overheard.

“Somewhere...in the middle. His father’s lawyer is Trevor Lansing.”

Elizabeth blinked. “As in...Ric Lansing?” She wrinkled her nose. “That’s probably not good.”

“It doesn’t help,” he admitted. “I guess...I know why Johnny’s been hanging around Port Charles lately. We...thought it might be a girlfriend.” He looked pained. “I’m sorry...he came over to me while you were there—”

She shrugged. “He seemed harmless, and Nadine was nice. No harm, no foul.”

“I just...” He rolled his shoulders and looked away, toward the other side of the room where Johnny

Zacchara and his date were standing, looking at another painting. They were whispering furiously to one another, and she could see the blonde looked annoyed. “I *hate* when this...kind of thing touches you.”

Story of her life. Five seconds after she admitted to herself the feelings she had for him were something a *bit* more than residual, he had to start this nonsense.

“You’ve been singing that tune almost since the day we met.” She folded her arms underneath her breast and scowled up at him. “We’re not *really* going to do this again, are we?”

“I—”

“Because if we’re going to be in each other’s lives again, I do not want to be constantly waiting for the second shoe to drop, to find out you think it’s too dangerous—”

He held up a hand. “I wasn’t...” Jason hesitated. “I know...*why* you think I’d say that, but I...I don’t...I’m raising an infant on my own, Elizabeth. Do you think I’d have a leg to stand on?”

“Exactly.” She arched her brow. “I didn’t let you get away with it when I was eighteen, so *don’t* think it’ll work any better now. I’m even more annoying.” She jabbed a finger at him. “So just remember that.”

A reluctant smile spread across his lips, and he offered a light chuckle. “Yeah, I don’t think I’m likely to forget it.”

“Good.” She looked over to see her grandmother beckoning her close, a few strangers at her side. “I’m going to need your intimidation skills again. Looks like Gram wants to introduce me to people.” She sighed. “I hate people.”

“No, you don’t,” Jason said, even as they started across the room. “You just don’t like answering their questions.”

“Not much of a difference tonight,” she grumbled, but kept her arm firmly wrapped around his bicep. “I just have to remember...they’re here to fund my future. If they like enough of my work, I can start a house fund for me and Cameron.”

When they arrived in front of her grandmother, Audrey barely batted an eye at her escort, though the couple looked a bit flustered. “And this is my brilliant granddaughter...”

Elizabeth pasted a smile on her face as Audrey continued. This was everything she ever wanted, but she would have preferred to stay anonymous.

She glanced up at Jason, who was doing an excellent job of looking menacing without being dangerous. She was so glad to have him back in her life.

Anyway she could have him.

# Chapter Seven

*But I swear there's still some good in me  
And I think if you stuck around you'd see  
All the honest attempts at integrity, I was had  
Maybe if you helped me, I'd get it right*  
- Missy, The Airborne Toxic Event

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*Monday, February 14, 2005*

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Jason dropped his duffel bag on the floor next to the playpen, set a wrapped canvas carefully against the wall, and glanced over his shoulder at Nora. “Why don’t you go put her in the nursery and let her finish her nap? You can take the rest of the day off. And tomorrow, too. To make up for Sunday.”

“Sure,” the blonde responded, keeping her voice level for once. With the carrier in one hand, she swung her own bag over her shoulder. “And if you think spending the weekend in one of the most amazing hotels in New York with practically the entire day to myself was work...” Nora snorted as she started up the stairs. “I am one lucky girl.”

Jason just shook his head when his nanny disappeared past the first landing. She accepted the strange hours of his job without a fuss and Evie’s last two months *had* been much better than the first, but...

Sometimes her voice hurt.

And he missed his desk.

He dropped his keys on the coffee table, looking back at the canvas leaning against the wall by the playpen. He’d have Emily help him hang it in Evie’s nursery. He hadn’t mentioned to Elizabeth he had bought one of her paintings, but he supposed it would come up at some point. She’d already read Nikolas the riot act for paying full price without telling her, and then found out Steven had bought one of her landscapes as well.

He wasn’t sure how Elizabeth expected to buy a house and take Cameron on trips without people actually paying money for her work, but he was in no hurry to be on the other end of her annoyance.

He felt the corner of his mouth quirk up as he pictured it. Even if she did look pretty when she was fired up.

Nora stepped off the bottom stair. “I’m heading out now, Mr. Morgan. If you were serious about having tomorrow off—”

“Yeah, yeah.” He straightened. “You were a big help in New York this weekend. Elizabeth...told me you wouldn’t let her pay for taking care of Cameron.”

Nora smiled and shrugged. “He was sleeping when his uncle dropped him off, and sleeping when she picked him later that night.” She lifted a blonde eyebrow. “You *already* pay me twice as much as I asked for. At some point, it’s just overkill.” She offered him a wave and then closed the door behind her.

Nora was great, but he was looking forward to having the next two days to himself in the penthouse. Without her music playing and her bright laughter occasionally broken up by snorts.

There was a light knock on the door and Jason rubbed his hands over his face. “Yeah?”

The door opened and Sonny stepped in. Jason immediately tensed and rose to his feet. His partner looked calm at the moment, but Jason hadn’t told him much about this weekend beyond his leaving town. “Sonny.”

“You’re back.” Sonny stepped forward and closed the door behind him, sliding his hands into his pockets. He nodded. “Where did you go?”

Though he chaffed at having to report in like this, it wasn’t a state secret either. “I-I took Evie to New York City. Elizabeth had a gallery opening on Friday night. Her family went, Emily and Nikolas—”

“Ah. Elizabeth again.” Sonny glanced around, not having been in the room since Jason had made some changes. He looked at the pink and purple playpen. “You spending a lot of time with her?”

“Not...a lot,” Jason said, keeping his voice light, as if the last time they had discussed Elizabeth Sonny *hadn’t* accused him of settling for Courtney because of her. “She was at Emily’s birthday party last month. You...know how hard she always worked on her art.”

“Yeah,” Sonny replied. The stillness in his posture radiated danger to Jason, but he just...didn’t *know* what was going to happen here. He couldn’t read him, couldn’t see the point of this conversation. “Yeah. Her studio was always littered with...” He waved his hand, almost dismissively. “Canvases and paints. Never thought she’d do anything with it.”

“I guess...” Jason hesitated. “She didn’t have a chance before now.” He cleared his throat. “Is...there something you need? I...took Nora with me to New York, so she’s off. But I can....do...something from here. Or I could call Emily, maybe.”

“Nah.” Sonny wrinkled his nose, as if the thought was ludicrous, as if they were still friends and Sonny was merely welcoming him home after a weekend away. “Just...wanted to see where you took Evie.”

Jason squinted at that, because there was something in the wording of that. Something in the question itself. “Okay. Well.”

“Because you know, you didn’t tell me you were taking her,” Sonny continued. He took another step into the room and then raised his chin, looking around. “Where is she, anyway?”

“Upstairs, taking a nap.” Jason took a deep breath. He was used to this, used to Sonny demanding

information about Evie as if...he had a right. Didn't he? Evie *was* his daughter.

*Why does it matter whose blood is in her veins? Does that make him the better man?*

He shook his head, clearing Elizabeth's words from his thoughts. Sonny was going through a bad time right now. He would come around. They would work this out.

Even though Jason knew this would end the way his relationship with Michael had once. A year maybe, at best, to be her father, and then watching another man raise her while Jason played the role of uncle.

How else could it end? Sonny was going to give in to his guilt eventually, and he'd ask for Evie. He'd cajole Carly into coming around, and then Jason would have to give Evie to him.

Wouldn't he?

*When does Evie's best interests come into it?*

"I guess I'm just concerned about you and Elizabeth." Sonny stepped back from the steps, where he had been looking up, as if toying with the idea of going up them. "Has she seen Evie since the Christmas party?"

"Ah." Jason frowned now. "Yeah. I guess. At Emily's party. And we...had lunch with her, Cam and Emily at the hotel yesterday."

"What does Elizabeth know about this situation?" Sonny pressed.

He rolled his shoulders, getting annoyed now. He hated answering questions like this—he'd felt more comfortable in an interrogation room with Taggart or Capelli than he did right now. "Sonny, is there a point?"

"Because I saw her last week at Kelly's," Sonny said, and Jason tensed. His partner held up a hand as if to ward off any complaints. "I said nothing to her. You told me not to, so I didn't. But she looked at me, and I wondered what she knew."

"She's not going to tell Carly anything," Jason said after a moment. "She doesn't like Carly."

"What *does* she think about it?" The older man narrowed his eyes. "I bet she hates it."

Jason turned his head slightly, still trying to gauge where this was going. "Sonny—"

"She always hated your loyalty to me and Carly. If you're thinking of getting involved her again, I'd be careful," Sonny cautioned. "I'd hate to see her getting attached to Evie, and then..." He shrugged as he trailed off.

"*Attached*," Jason said, the word like dust in his mouth. "Like me, you mean. Sonny, I don't...know what you want from me. You didn't want to tell Carly the truth, didn't want to contest the guardianship

or termination. Evie didn't ask for this. Sam wanted me to raise her—"

"You do not have to remind me that the *whore* picked you," Sonny snarled, and Jason closed his eyes. Because it was that attitude that reminded him why he was doing this.

Sam did what was necessary to protect her daughter from this man—she had never planned on dying and leaving Jason alone in this mess. He knew that. If she were here right now, the situation would be exactly like this. Sonny on the outside, looking in. Except *Jason* wouldn't be the one making the decisions anymore.

He took a deep breath. "Sonny, yes, Elizabeth knows the truth. No, I guess she's not thrilled about it. But it has nothing to do with you or Carly. She just..." Hated to see him in this situation again, he supposed. Because she had been there through the aftermath with Michael. "She just worries. It's fine. Like I said, she's not talking to Carly."

"No, I guess she wouldn't do that to you." Sonny dipped his head. "You know, take a kid away like Robin and Carly did. She'll just...go find a man to sleep with or something."

His hands fisted at his sides and Jason found himself taking a step forward before he caught himself. "Do *not* talk about her like that. You can be pissed at me, you can do what you want to me. But I swear, Sonny, if you *keep* going after Elizabeth..."

"What?" Sonny lifted his chin in the air, his dark eyes boring into Jason. "What're you gonna do, Jase? You *know* I'm right. You always circle around her, she gets spooked and runs to the nearest waste of space she can find. First, it was Lucky, then it was Zander, and then it was Ric. I wonder who it'll be this—"

"Shut up." Not because it was true, because it *wasn't*. Sonny was boiling it down, making something sound simple when it just wasn't. It had always been more complicated than that.

And besides, this time it was different.

He took a deep breath. There wasn't a this time. Not...yet. And maybe there wouldn't be.

But he was not going to stand by and let this man tear her apart like that.

"I don't know what you want me to say, Sonny," Jason said when Sonny said nothing to him, only looked at him. "You had a chance to make this different months ago. When I changed those results, you could have spoken up. When Sam died, you could have said something. You *chose* to keep it this way. I'm just doing what Sam wanted me to do. I get that it's going to make things difficult between us, but you *made* it this way, Sonny."

He stepped forward. "I take your abuse, I take your calls in the middle of the night for things that can wait a few more hours, I do that because it's price I'm willing to pay to keep my promises."

"But..." Jason stepped even closer to him, and first the time in their friendship, he intended to remind the older man why Jason was his enforcer. "You go after Elizabeth—either to my face or to hers—

maybe I'll go across the hall to Carly and tell her about the affair last summer."

Sonny pressed his lips together. "You'd betray me for her? You'd destroy my marriage for *her*?" His voice was a low hiss.

"At the end of the day, Sonny, I didn't steal your daughter," Jason said, ignoring his pointed remarks. "I have *legal* custody of her. You terminated your rights, and Sam left her guardianship to me. Keep pushing me. Keeping demanding things I'm not willing to give. I gave Elizabeth up for you once. I'm *not* doing it again."

"So it's like that, is it?" Sonny pursed her lips. "That's where you're drawing the line? Over some bitch—"

Jason had to physically stop himself from striding forward, grabbing his former friend by the collar and shoving him against a wall. Sonny was in one of those moods, and a week or a month from now, he'd be sorry he said these things. Sorry he pushed the boundaries of this situation.

"Get out, Sonny. Before I *throw* you out. We're done here."

"Just remember when you're picking out a new mother for my daughter," Sonny snarled, "that you're picking a little girl who can't handle your world. But that seems to be your type. First Robin, then Courtney, and now Elizabeth for the thousandth time. *When* are you gonna learn?"

He stormed out, slamming the door behind him. Evie's startled cries came over the monitor, and Jason just lowered his head, resting his hands at his waist.

*...you were always the better man.*

He'd felt good walking through that door this morning. His weekend had been peaceful, even enjoyable. He liked spending time with his sister, seeing her happy and glowing in her relationship with the man she planned to marry. He didn't even mind that he'd been stuck with Lucky Spencer, as the other man was less annoying than he'd been once.

And it went without saying that he'd liked spending time with Elizabeth.

But after a ten minute battle with Sonny, he just felt hollow inside. He knew he was reaching a point where he'd have to make a decision. Most of the time, he accepted that he wouldn't raise Evie forever, but days like these, watching Sonny's rage boiling over at a woman who had never done anything to him...

How could he send Evie back to that? Forget his promises to Sam, how could he watch that happen to a little girl who trusted him?

But if he kept her, if he fought a custody battle over her, and won...what would that do to Sonny?

Could he live with himself if he chose to keep her?



## Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

Sonny slammed the door behind him and stalked across the room, reaching for a tumbler of bourbon. What the fuck did he care if it was barely eleven in the morning?

He *needed* the burning of liquor sliding down his throat.

He downed two tumblers in less than a minute and then pressed the glass to his forehead.

The rage was climbing up from his gut, up through his throat and it would spill over again if he had to talk to one person. It had already spilled over once this morning, and Sonny just knew...

He just knew the next person he went after wouldn't walk away.

His stomach rolled, and now he felt shaky. He set the glass down and lowered himself gingerly into the armchair, leaning forward with his elbows propped on his knees.

God. Had he just...had he really done that? Stormed across the hall? Demanded to know where Jason was with Evie all weekend?

Had he attacked Elizabeth again?

*Had* he, though? Because now it felt fuzzy. Like it had happened to someone else. He wouldn't have said those things about her. He liked her. She'd been good to him once. Had always been good to Jason, and Sonny knew she'd saved his life more than once.

He *liked* Elizabeth, didn't he?

No. Sonny shook his head. He didn't say those things. He must...he must have *imagined* it. He just...the idea of Jason hooking up with her again. She was a good woman, and she'd make him happy if they would let each other be together. But she would bring her son to Jason and Jason would bring Sonny's daughter to her.

And the more Jason built a life for Evie that had nothing to do with Sonny, the more Sonny realized how *much* he was losing.

He wanted his daughter. He was coming out of his skin knowing she was across the hall and didn't see him as her father. That she looked to Jason with her smiles and her laughter.

It should be him.

It would have been him, but Sam stole that chance from him. Because he wouldn't be with her, wouldn't give in to her ultimatums. The little god damn con artist had probably been playing him all along, but maybe she'd seen Jason across the hall and went for a bigger mark. He was lonely. Liked kids. Dealing with a divorce.

It was Sam's fault. She'd played them both, and then she had destroyed their friendship by making Jason feel guilty, making him take Sonny's daughter.

*None* of this was Jason's fault. He had to remember that. Sonny had walked away from his family, started up with Sam, and shoved her back out in favor of Carly. Jason had been trying to protect the boys. He was trying to protect Evie.

Because that's what Jason did. He protected Sonny's family, even from Sonny himself.

He *had* to remember that. Had to remember Jason wasn't the enemy. That he had a right to be with someone else. Even if it meant Evie had another parental figure in her life.

Sonny closed his eyes and took a deep breath. That...fight earlier had been...it had just been a gigantic mistake. He'd only gone to say hello, to put them on a normal path. But he'd heard Elizabeth's name and a red haze had come over him.

Why did it bother him so much?

"Sonny?"

He glanced over to find Carly stepping off the bottom stair, her dark eyes questioning. "Morgan's napping—you woke him up with the door slamming."

"Sorry." His voice sounded rusty, as if he hadn't just been arguing with Jason. "I...was with Jason."

"Oh, then he's back." Carly stepped forward, and he looked at this woman for whom he had given up his daughter.

God, he couldn't remember why anymore. He had trashed his friendship with Jason over this woman years ago. He'd fallen in love with her, hadn't he?

He was almost sure of it.

"Where was he?" Carly lowered herself onto the sofa adjacent to him. "He's not one for going out of town."

He had been once. When he'd had his own life. He'd gone out of town with Robin more than once. Sonny shook his head. "I, ah, he went to New York City. Elizabeth Webber's...I think he said she had a show at a gallery."

"Oh, he's not getting wrapped up in her again is he?" Carly demanded, her voice like daggers in his brain. "He can do so much better. Now that the whore is dead, I think Courtney should move back home. She'll love Evie, and they can fall in love again over her—"

"No." Sonny snapped his head around to glare at her. "No. Courtney and Jason are done. He doesn't love her."

“Well he doesn’t love the twit either,” Carly retorted. “I’m going to have to keep him—” She closed her eyes. “No. No, It’s not my business.”

Sonny frowned. It wasn’t, but it wasn’t like Carly to *admit* something like that. “When has that stopped you before?”

“Jason has done enough for me.” Carly blew out a huff. “He’s devoted himself to me and my boys.” Her mouth twisted into something he might have called a sneer. “To you. He has a daughter now, Sonny. He should...be happy. Even if it’s with some little girl who doesn’t deserve him. He has his own family, Sonny. We should worry about our family. The boys.”

“Right.” God, she was right. Hadn’t Jason sacrificed *enough* for him? Hadn’t he given up his son, allowed him to be raised by Sonny when he could have just taken custody back after they’d blackmailed AJ?

There was a sweet justice in this. They had traded children. It was *fair*.

Carly leaned forward, and he should have been suspicious of the light in her eyes. He was too tired to care. “Sonny, I saw Dr. Meadows a few weeks ago-”

He exhaled slowly. “Carly, I know...you think another baby...and I agreed if it happened naturally, we’d...do it, but I’m thinking it’s not a good time.” He hesitated. “Unless you’re already pregnant.”

“No.” Her back snapped straight. “No,” she all but snarled. “Dr. Meadows says she doesn’t know what’s wrong with me. If I want a baby, I might...have to do in vitro. Or something.”

“No.” Sonny shook his head. “No. There’s...no rush, Carly. We...have enough going on as it is.” He didn’t want another child with this woman. He’d only agreed to keep her here to keep the boys with him. It was about the boys. They were his boys.

She had betrayed him too often, and he could never be sure if she would betray him again. And every time they split up, he had an affair with another woman that just seemed to make it worse. He couldn’t do that again. Something in him called to Carly, called to this selfish, destructive woman.

Because she was just like him. He’d seen that in her once, and it had repelled him. Had excited him.

And now it just *exhausted* him.

“We’ll...just let nature take its course.” Sonny rubbed his mouth.

He did not want any more children. He was destroying the ones he had as it was.

He knew that leaving Evie with Jason was the best thing he could do for her, the least selfish thing he had ever done in his life.

But he was beginning to accept that the decision was going to destroy their friendship, and maybe even him in the end.

Thursday, February 25, 2005

## Elm Street Pier

At the end of a long day at the warehouse, Jason paused before going up the stairs and walking the short distance to Harborview Towers and everything that waited for him there.

Sonny and his tense silences. Since the blow up the week before, his partner had gone out of his way to avoid him but Jason knew it was just another lull in the storm.

Carly and her suspicious looks. He wasn't spending time with her or the boys, and that alone should make her wonder, but he couldn't bring himself to look Carly in the eye without being swamped by his lies.

Evie and her smiles. Because she wasn't his to keep, and he knew that. It was Michael all over again, except maybe this was worse because he had gone into this with his eyes open, knowing he loved her, knowing he wanted to raise her, and knowing that it could only end in devastation.

So instead, he stood here at the end of the pier, avoiding everything waiting for him at home. He was tired. Down to the bone exhausted, as if the fatigue had seeped inside and taken up permanent residence. He was sleeping, but every morning he woke up and it was always the same.

He heard footsteps behind him and turned, relieved to see that it was Elizabeth who had just stepped off the stairs with a smile on her face.

Not just relieved. Something a bit more that he wasn't comfortable examining at the moment.

"Hey."

"Hey." Her smile was easy as she approached him. "I just got back from New York and I was hoping to run into you here." He remembered now that she and Cam had intended to remain in the city for paperwork, some press maybe. "How...are things?"

"They're..." He hesitated, almost ready to tell her that they were fine. But they weren't. And he knew she would see that in his eyes, hear it in his voice. "They're mostly the same."

"Hmm..." She nodded. "Well, I suppose there's some good in that—they're not worse, at least." She tipped her head to the side, as if considering him. "But you look like *something* happened."

"Just...another argument with Sonny." Jason stepped towards her and gestured towards the bench. "Do...you have to be somewhere? Is it too cold to sit for a minute?"

"Nope. I'm immune to these winters." She waited until he was seated beside her on the bench. "I won't bug you about Sonny. I just wanted...to thank you for coming to New York again. To have all the people who matter so much to me in the same place, supporting me...it meant so much."

"I had a good time," he told her, and he wasn't exaggerating that. Emily had been right—getting out of

Port Charles even for a few days had been a good idea. “Did...the show go well?”

“It went...” Her smile bloomed again. “It went really well. I had about thirty paintings hung and the gallery sold fifteen of them before the end of the night, and then another five since. It’s...my agent told me I’m a smashing success.” She bit her lip. “I made a *lot* of money, Jason. I don’t...know what I’m going to do with it all.”

But behind that broad smile, there was something in her eyes. He leaned towards her. “Is...is it the money? Is that what’s bothering you?”

Elizabeth huffed, a small chuckle escaping her lips as she leaned back against the bench and stared ahead, out over the gray waters. “God, you always know. How...?” She shook her head. “No...it’s not the money. The paintings that were sold...”

“Is it hard to part with them?” he asked. “I...based on the ones you showed me, I know they were personal.”

“It’s...part of it.” She drew her bottom lip into her mouth and hesitated. “There was a painting of the fountain in the park. And the bench. And a broken red shoe.” She glanced at him. “From...the night I was attacked.”

“I...” He nodded, because he hated talking about that. He had known for years that she’d been raped in the park when she was a teenager, had felt sorrow when Emily had told him about it, but once he begun to spend time with Elizabeth himself, it was more difficult to know it. To know she’d been violated and hurt like that. “Okay.”

“It felt great to paint that night, it really did. I’d always been scared before, but...” She hesitated. “When I was in California, at first, I stayed with my mother’s sister. My aunt Wendy. We were...kind of close before she and her husband moved to San Francisco when I was eleven. So one night, not long after I got there, she found me...” Elizabeth shifted on the bench. “She found me crying in my room.”

He said nothing, because there was nothing to say. Just waited for her to continue. “And she put her arms around me, and just...let me finish crying. She asked me what was wrong and I couldn’t tell her.” Elizabeth tilted her head up, the white skin of her neck stretching taut. “Because there was so *much* wrong. I had...made so many mistakes, walked down so many paths that I just...I didn’t know who I was anymore. I was going to be a mother soon, and I felt like such a failure.”

“Elizabeth—”

“I know I wasn’t.” She said this quickly, as it stave off his words. “I know...I was doing the best I could, but I still...” She hesitated. “Anyway, Aunt Wendy suggested I talk to someone. I started with someone at a local shelter, but then Ric’s alimony came through and I decided the least he owed me was a good therapist.”

And this did make him smile just a little, because as always she was finding the silver lining in

situations that had none. “The *very* least.”

“I saw her a few times before Cameron was born and then...God, all the time during the summer.” She shifted on the bench, turning slightly to face him, looking at him. “And she’s the one that encouraged me to stop holding back. I had never painted that night. I had stopped myself from painting the worse moments, from letting those go on paper. She told me that I was an artist. And artists used their emotions in the work. Writers, singers, poets—they all drew on their experiences. Why shouldn’t I? So I did. And I went home, and I sketched that night in the park, because it’s where it started.”

“What started?” Jason leaned in.

She hesitated, and he shook his head. “Never mind. You don’t have to tell me anything—”

“Feeling broken,” she murmured. “Feeling damaged. I used to think Lucky put me back together, only to die and shatter the pieces again. And then I started to think maybe I had never been put back together. Or like I had glued them together wrong. Or...messed up the puzzle. I kept trying to go back to Lucky when he came home, like I was jamming in a piece that just didn’t fit in anymore.”

She sighed and looked away. “That’s what I realized last year...that I had put it all away. Locked it up in a box inside my head, but I had never done anything with it. I stopped trying to heal when Lucky died, and when he came home, I was too busy trying to fix him to fix myself.”

“You didn’t need fixing,” Jason said, stubbornly, not liking the way she was talking about herself. “You were not broken—”

“Maybe not,” Elizabeth allowed. “But I felt that way. I felt broken and damaged and *dirty*. And it never went away. It’s why I kept going back to Lucky, because I wanted him to finish the job we’d started when we were teenagers. Because being with him, before the fire, was the most normal I had felt.” She hesitated. “It’s why I couldn’t...let go of you because being friends with you had also made me feel normal. But I didn’t know how to balance it out. How...” She shook her head. “But I kept sabotaging both relationships. I never really committed to Lucky or the thought of being with you because I knew I didn’t *deserve* either of you—”

“Deserve—” Jason straightened his shoulders, taken aback. “Elizabeth—”

“And I thought I deserved Ric.”

Her voice was low, so low he almost didn’t hear the words. “You did *not* deserve Ric Lansing,” he said fervently. “Not even a little bit—”

“He was damaged, too, you know. And I thought...I had done nothing but bring pain to the people I cared about. I should be with him. He needs me. I can save him, and if I can save him, I can save myself. I can be whole again, if I can put him back together.” She eyed him. “I know it sounds ridiculous. I know that, now. And I’m glad I walked away before Cam became part of that. I know I —” She hesitated. “I know I’m not broken. Not even a little bit. But I had to work that out for myself.”

“And you did.” He nodded, because he could see that in her eyes. The sense of resilience that had been missing for so long, since the first time they’d been friends. “Good.”

“So that painting was special to me in a way I didn’t realize,” Elizabeth continued. “I was working on a sketch of it, sitting at Fisherman’s Wharf when my agent found me. He was on vacation, and just wandering past my bench, when he saw it. And he offered me ten thousand dollars for the finished painting.”

The embarrassment in her voice confused him. “You didn’t think it was worth it?”

“I don’t know.” She sighed. “But I told him I wasn’t sure I wanted to sell that. He told me that I should be on the walls of galleries. I was nervous, because he was a stranger so he gave me his card and told me to call the number on it to verify him. It was a gallery in New York I’d heard of—the one I had my showing at. He was the real deal, Jason, and he told me I was good.”

She bit her lip again. “So I signed a contract and he advanced me some money to rent a real studio, to buy real supplies. And I just...I let myself go. I painted *all* the moments that I thought broke me. And every time I finished another one, I realized I wasn’t damaged after all. I wasn’t dirty. I was... someone who deserved a good life. A happy one. With my son.” She stretched her gloved hands in front of her, as if considering them. “I used to think Lucky put me back together after I was raped. But he didn’t. *I* did it. I did it one day at a time, one painting at a time...” She hesitated. “And now other people own those memories.”

She looked at him. “Jason, the painting in the park? It sold for three hundred thousand dollars. There was a bidding war on it. I...profited off that night—”

“No.” He shook his head. “You just painted it. You didn’t decide its worth. Other people did that.”

Elizabeth blinked at him, and her broad smile came back. “Of course. It’s so simple, isn’t it?” She sighed. “You *always* put it into words I just can’t and it makes so much sense when you do.” She pursed her lips. “But still, someone chose that painting. What does say about them?”

“You told me art means different things to different people,” Jason said. He reached for her gloved hand and intertwined their fingers. “So maybe it something to them that was different. I...bought one of your paintings.”

Elizabeth furrowed her brow. “Jason, you didn’t have to buy—”

“I bought the one you painted with the hands. The one that reminded me of Sam and Evie.” He cleared his throat, feeling almost embarrassed about it now. “I want to tell Evie one day how much her mother loved her, because she should know that. But I didn’t...have the words. But when you talked about your painting, I could picture that moment in my head, and I thought...maybe if Evie looks at that painting, she’ll be able...” He hesitated. “I can tell her what you were thinking, and she’ll...I don’t know. Be able to feel it.”

Her cheeks were read, her eyes were shining. “Jason, that’s...God. I don’t...even....You, Nikolas and

Steven, I would have given them to you. I was sad when I found out that one had sold, but knowing it's with you, and it's for Evie, that makes *such* a difference. I would have given it to you, you know that—”

“You deserve to make a life from your art,” Jason told her. “Nikolas and Steven felt the same way.”

“Nikolas bought a painting I did the night Emily almost died. I painted...” Elizabeth hesitated and he watched her eyes drop to their hands. “I painted that night in the chapel. It's just...some candles in the foreground, they're the focus, and there's...two shadows in the back. It's...you and me. I wanted to keep that one, too. Nikolas bought it because it reminds him he and Emily are strong together, but I...liked the memory of that. That despite everything we'd been through, we could still be there for each other.”

“I like that memory, too,” he confessed, feeling the slight weight of her against him. She had continued to shift towards him during the conversation until the empty space had disappeared and one of her knees was pressed against his own.

“And you're right,” Elizabeth said, with a firm nod. “Maybe the red shoe painting holds a special meaning for the owner. I'm...not that broken girl in the snow anymore, and I don't need the painting to remind myself of that.”

He got to his feet. “Do you need a ride home?”

Elizabeth arched a brow as she, too, stood, their hands still clasped together. “Do you have your bike?”

He laughed now, realizing that the fatigue and sadness he'd been feeling before she had shown up had disappeared. “It's at the Towers. We can go get it.” He shook his head. “Some things never change.”

Her smile was even brighter now, probably by the thought of a ride for the first time in nearly four years. “The best things never do.”



# Part Two: Redemption

*“Bipolar illness, manic depression, manic-depressive illness, manic-depressive psychosis. That’s a nice way of saying you will feel so high that no street drug can compete and you will feel so low that you wish you had been hit by a Mack truck instead.”*

— Christine F. Anderson, *Forever Different: A Memoir of One Woman's Journey Living with Bipolar Disorder*

# Chapter Eight

*What have I done?  
I wish I could run  
Away from this ship going under  
Just trying to help  
Hurt everyone else  
Now I feel the weight of the world is on my shoulders*  
- Get it Right, Glee Cast

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*Saturday, March 5, 2005*

## **The Cellar: Carly's Office**

When Courtney had moved to New York City in the wake of her divorce, she had promised herself and Michael that she would not drift away—she would remain a strong presence in his life, as he and Morgan had already had enough upheaval.

For the first six months—until Christmas—she had broken that promise. She rarely called and visited only a handful of times, but after seeing the slow disintegration of her brother's marriage and Carly's behavior, she knew she had a responsibility to her nephews that superseded her own peace of mind.

So here she was again—she now came to Port Charles every other weekend and called Michael three times a week to check up on him.

And nothing had improved. In fact, she knew it was just getting worse, but she still felt powerless to stop it.

Today felt different. Today, as she sat in Carly's office and watched her sister-in-law pace the small confines of the room, her movements jerky and exuding anxiety and nerves, Courtney wondered if the breaking point had finally arrived.

"Has something happened? I mean, since I talked to you on Wednesday?" Courtney clasped her hands loosely in her lap, trying to exude calmness, but her foot tapped restlessly against the carpeted floor.

"I heard back from the last specialist yesterday." Carly rested her hands on her hips and scowled down at Courtney. "And there's nothing wrong with me."

"Oh." Carly's quest for another child continued unabated. When Dr. Meadows had had no answers, she traveled to New York City, Boston and Philadelphia for the best specialists in the area. "Are... you going to get another opinion?"

"What would the point be?" Carly huffed. "Five doctors concurred. I'm not the problem."

"Maybe Sonny is," Courtney said tentatively. But she didn't believe that.

And neither did Carly, from the way she snorted. “Please. The man looks at a woman, she gets knocked up.” But then she pressed her lips together, as if she hadn’t meant to say that. “Anyway. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m sure it’s just stress.” Courtney took a deep breath. “Carly—”

“Sonny is Evie’s father.”

The words tumbled from Carly’s mouth in a rush, and then both women blinked at one another. Courtney’s palms were clammy. Of course she told herself she had *always* known, because nothing else made sense.

But to hear the actual words...

To hear them from *Carly*...

Courtney closed her eyes. “Carly,” she began again.

“And he’s driving himself to the edge over his guilt,” Carly continued. “That’s the real problem. I’ve been ignoring it because I thought I could fix it—”

Courtney leaned forward. “Carly, why...” She hesitated. “How did this happen? Sonny and Jason clearly know the truth, as do you. Why is Jason...”

“I should have said something sooner, I know.” Carly collapsed into her chair, her eyes dark with misery. “I just...I couldn’t. I know it might have saved your marriage, but—”

“Nothing would have saved my marriage.” Courtney bit her lip. “I never really believed it, Carly, but I thought...it was for the best. That Evie would be better off this way.”

“I thought she would be, too.” Carly crossed her arms beneath her breasts. “I thought we’d all be better off with that whore and her bastard away from my family. Jason’s a good man. He’s a good father. But, with Sam gone...”

“Sonny feels like he’s abandoned his daughter,” Courtney murmured. “Carly—”

“I don’t know all the details,” Carly interrupted, “because I’m not supposed to know the truth. Sonny took me at my word that if the kid turned out to be his, I would take the boys and leave. So whatever happened when Evie was born and Sam died, I don’t know. But somehow, it continued.” She pursed her lips. “And I was okay with it. I don’t want her in my home.”

Courtney was quiet for a moment, because she didn’t know what to do with that information. As a woman who would never have her own biological child without an operation or a surrogate, the idea of rejecting a little girl because she was not related by blood, or because her mother was someone Courtney didn’t like...

But this was Carly, and for some reason, this rejection did not surprise her.

“Then it’s for the best that she stays with Jason. Evie should be with someone who loves her.”

“I thought that as well, and when I thought I could fix it by giving Sonny a daughter of our own, that was fine, but...” Carly sighed.

“No, Carly...” Courtney gripped the sides of her chair, leaning forward. “You *cannot* do this to Jason. Not to bring Evie into a home where she’s just there to keep Sonny sane. She deserves love—”

“I know that.” Carly’s dark eyes bore into hers. “I’m selfish but I’m *not* cruel. I know Evie’s better off with Jason, but how do I let Sonny continue on this way? Can I let him slide towards the edge, maybe even crack so I can do what’s best for some kid I don’t really care about?” She rubbed her temple. “If it were *anyone* else but Jason...”

“Carly, he’s your best friend—”

“Damn it, Courtney, I get that,” Carly snapped. “This is killing me, you know. I can’t do anything to fix it. I can’t even get pregnant.”

“Why even tell me the truth?” Courtney asked. “Did you think I might agree to help you with Jason? To take Evie away?” She got to her feet. “Please don’t ask me to do that. *Don’t* ask me to choose between my brother and Jason.”

“It shouldn’t be a contest.” Carly’s hands were fisted at her sides. “He’s your brother, Courtney.”

“I don’t care if Jason is my ex-husband. We’re not like you and Sonny. We got divorced because it was best for us, and I want him to be happy. I know he wants the same for me. You can’t ask me to tear out his heart.” She shook her head. “I won’t do it—”

“You never gave a damn about Sonny,” Carly accused. “You used him to get to Jason—”

“No, I didn’t, but I’m surprised you of all people think so.” Courtney sighed. “I’m not going to help you, Carly, and I’m doing that for Sonny as well. At the end of the day, my loyalty is to my family. Evie is part of that, and she’s better off away from both of you.”

At that, Carly’s eyes narrowed. “Get out,” she said through clenched teeth.

Courtney did so without a backward glance, only feeling slightly guilty for having taken a stand finally.

## **Kelly’s: Dining Room**

Nikolas suppressed an exasperated sigh when his brother slurped the last of his milkshake and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Some things would never change.

“I’m telling you, Nikolas. It doesn’t bother me about Elizabeth being maid of honor.” Lucky shrugged

and reached for another fry. “We’re friends. And it’s not like we have to do much. I throw the bachelor’s party, she throws the bachelorette. We stand fifteen feet apart at the altar, smile for some pictures.” He snapped his fingers. “Done. You and Emily are giving yourselves ulcers for no good reason.”

“I’m not worried.” Nikolas said. “Emily wants this day to be perfect, so I’m going to make it perfect.” He narrowed his eyes. “Understood?”

“Perfectly.” Lucky leaned back in his chair, his expression sobering. “Listen, I’m sure Elizabeth is telling Emily the same thing right now. It’s not going to be an issue. She and I are friends of a sort. It’s been more than three years since we were close, since we were together. I went to her showing didn’t I?”

“Yes, you hugged her and then barely spoke with her the rest of the weekend.” Nikolas’s restless fingers tapped the table. “Lucky—”

“She’s hanging around Jason again.” He shrugged a shoulder. “And I’m sure seeing me is just a reminder that she chose me once and probably still regrets it.” A shadow flickered over his face and he looked away. “Seeing that painting...the one with the red shoe? I remember that moment like it happened yesterday. Sometimes, it feels like I live it over and over again. I’m freezing, thinking about how annoyed I am that Lizzie the Terror has pulled another trick, another scam, probably trying to make her sister worry. I’m annoyed I finally get Sarah out of the house with me, and she’s only concerned with you...” He wiped his hands on a napkin and looked down at the table.

“And I turn that corner by the fountain, and I hear the rustling. And she crawls out, looking at me like...” Lucky expressed a quick annoyed breath. “Before she was my girlfriend, before we were Lucky and Liz, Liz and Lucky, we were best friends. She knew me inside and out, and I knew her. So I’m not gonna lie. It bothers me that we took any chance of being those people again, of being that close, and ground it into the nothing. We both did that. I guilted her into staying with me, and she listened instead of throwing me into the harbor. So I’m doing her a favor and staying out of her life, and I’m not going to remind her of why she and Jason didn’t work out once. I knew she was in love with him, and I knew how to make her stay with me, so I did it. And I put her on a path that led to Zander and Ric—”

“Lucky, you did not make her do any of those things—”

“The summer she was kidnapped?” Lucky said. “You know why she and Jason weren’t dating yet? Why she was still dancing around him, afraid to really commit to him, letting Zander into her head? It wasn’t because of the danger or Courtney. Not then. It was because I broke her heart that winter, and then I took her trust and ground it into dust. So by the time she *was* ready to trust, Jason was gone and Ric was there. It’s a little bit my fault, Nikolas. And the only way I can make it right is to stay out of her life the best I can, so maybe she and Jason can get it right this time.”

“All right.” Nikolas hesitated. “But Lucky—”

“Your wedding is going to be perfect,” Lucky told him. “Because Elizabeth and I love you and Emily

more than we care about being awkward around each other. I have Leyla, who's fantastic. We're different people, Nikolas. It's going to be fine. We will never be Liz and Lucky again, and that's a good thing. We're Lucky and Elizabeth, two separate people with separate lives."

He cleared his throat. "Now, about the bachelor's party. How do you feel about strippers?"

### **Warehouse: Sonny's Office**

There were moments Sonny felt outside of himself, as if he were standing next to his desk and watching his body clench its fists, crumple paper and snap at long-time employees whose loyalties had never been in question.

Today was not the first time he had this eerie feeling, but somewhere inside, he knew these moments were happening too often. That they were coming too close together, almost on top of one on another. He was rapidly reaching the point where he could no longer point to a moment when he could say he had been one hundred percent in control.

When Jason stepped into the room, Sonny took a deep breath and looked down at his customary page of notes. *Truck. Rumors. Michael's behavior. Zacchara.* It was an innocuous list of words that would not raise any suspicions should someone discover the pieces once he shred them, but these lists had preserved the peace for the last month.

Since that morning in Jason's penthouse where he had once again attacked Elizabeth to Jason's face. Another moment he had not been in control of his own mind.

"Jason." He cleared his throat, forced his fist to relax and reach for a glass of water. He would keep himself under control. He would not attack Jason for his choices, would not say a word against Elizabeth. He *would* put his life back on a normal footing, beginning with this moment. "How are things?"

"Fine." His partner and former friend lowered himself gingerly into the chair across the desk, his shoulders tense. "I wanted to update you on the truck shipment from January."

"Still no word?" Sonny asked, reaching for a pen to cross the word from his list. "Two months and no trace. Not a good sign."

"No," Jason agreed, releasing a short breath. "We've combed all the roads from here to Rochester, looked into all of Mickey's activities. He pulled off in a rest area about fifteen miles away from Port Charles, and then just disappears. No activity on his accounts." He shook his head.

"Are..." Sonny stopped, because he was about to demand that Jason admit he was right all along and had wasted time dicking around for proof. No. No. That was not the way. Jason had been right to be cautious, had been right to advise patience. He knew that. He did. "I spoke to Hector Ruiz, and the relationship there seems to be unchanged. He does not hold us responsible for Alcazar's misfortunes."

Jason nodded. "I got that sense, too. But he's got two sons who are not so trustworthy."

Javier and Manny, Sonny knew, were ruthless and would become problematic one day. "I think Hector still has them under some sort of control for now," Sonny continued. "Feelers to Zacchara's people were not returned."

He saw Jason hesitate and that familiar rolling nausea rolled in his abdomen. Jason knew something. Had kept something from him.

Was lying to him—

No. Sonny exhaled on a short breath. No. *No*. That wasn't Jason's style. "You know something about Zacchara?" he asked, trying for a casual tone. When Jason did not tense, did not change his expression, he thought he might have been successful.

"Not exactly. I would have mentioned it earlier, but it didn't seem important." Jason leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his denim-clad thighs. "Johnny Zacchara was at Elizabeth's showing last month."

All other thoughts flew from Sonny's brain. "I knew it." He lunged to his feet. "That slimy little bastard was *taunting* you, letting you know he knows about her—"

"I didn't get that impression, Sonny." Jason's voice remained calm. Placating. Fucking bastard. Why didn't he *ever* see it Sonny's way? Didn't Elizabeth's safety mean anything to him? He was picking the little bitch over Sonny—

God. No. *Stop* it. Sonny closed his eyes and tried to concentrate again. "Why the hell not?"

"Because Johnny's known for going to art showings," Jason said, his voice shifting into wariness. He, too, rose to his feet. "For the last two years or so, since he graduated from Oxford and came back to New York. He's usually at galleries on the weekends, except when he's been in Port Charles. I didn't just take his word for it, Sonny. I looked into it after I saw him there. Her showing was heavily promoted. Maybe he remembered her name being linked to mine, but he went out of his way to introduce me to his girlfriend."

That got Sonny's attention, and the red haze cleared. "Girlfriend."

"Yeah." Jason nodded. "Nadine Crowell. Works at General Hospital. I figure it's why he's been hanging around a lot. She goes to Luke's with some of the other nurses. I had her looked at. Her sister is an issue, maybe. She's suspected of some Angel of Mercy killings back in Ohio, but is in some sort of vegetative state in a New York hospital. Nadine is clean."

"He deliberately showed you his vulnerable spot." Sonny lowered himself back into his seat. "That's...that's a good sign."

"That's what I thought. And he's green. He didn't know how to introduce her, didn't know how to prep her for meeting his associates. If he's working an angle, Sonny, I'm not seeing it." Jason leaned

forward. “I’m not taking chances. I agree with you that Anthony Zacchara is a prime suspect for the problems we’ve been having, just like Ruiz is to an extent. But I don’t think he’d use his son to come at us. Johnny’s not in the business all the way.”

“I get it.” Sonny picked up his pen and struck a line through Zaccharas. “And you wouldn’t put Elizabeth in danger.”

“No.” Jason eyed him. “No, I’m not taking chances with her safety. Even though I don’t think Johnny’s an issue, I can’t say his father wouldn’t find out about Elizabeth. Anthony is crazy and known for having his son under his thumb. I think Johnny’s keeping his relationship away from his father as much as he can, but it wouldn’t surprise me if Anthony had him tailed.”

“And would have had eyes on you at the gallery.” Sonny nodded. He felt good in this moment. There had been a brief loss there, but he could feel that cool certainty filling his veins. He was in control at the moment. He could even see the way forward. A way to maybe heal the breach. “Have you...talked to Elizabeth about the possibility?”

“Not...” Jason paused. “Not in so many words. I told her that I...” He hesitated again. “I put someone on her. Not...to follow her, to drive her around like Carly. But just...to keep an eye on her. I put Milo on her, because she knows Max from before.”

“Good, good.” Sonny nodded. “You guys aren’t...particularly public, but there’s no reason to take chances. And the security at the Towers is still good? We had the annual inspection, but—”

“I doubled the guards on the lobby,” Jason said. “And the guards at Michael’s school, as well as Carly’s club. I thought you might want to put an additional guard on her, but that’s up to you.”

“Right. I’ll talk to her.” This was good. This felt right. God, it felt *good* to be Sonny fucking Corinthos again. “I think you should consider your own security. At the penthouse. I have Max on my door, and I know it’s just right around the corner, but with Evie there, I—”

“I agree. I talked to Nora, and her guards were also doubled,” Jason told him. “And I’m looking into the available guys to find the right door guards.” He hesitated. “I’m not taking chances with the people that matter, Sonny. I would never do that. Maybe you and I don’t really agree on who the danger is coming from, but we know it’s out there.”

“We do.” Sonny nodded. “And maybe it’s good we don’t know just yet who the bastard behind it is. Reminds us, at the end of the day, we can only trust each other.” He paused. “Right?”

“Right.”

But Jason hesitated a shade too long, and Sonny knew that this moment of control, of understanding, was just that. A moment. They would trust each other to keep the people they loved alive, but that’s where it ended.

And maybe this was part of the new order Sonny would have to accept to retain control and keep the



darkness from closing in.

## **Wyndemere: Sitting Room**

Elizabeth knew what the conversation was going to be about as soon as she entered Emily's sitting room and found her best friend surrounded by magazines and making notes in a notebook.

"Wedding stuff?"

"Yup." Emily's smile was bright as Elizabeth joined her on the sofa. "Nikolas and I set the date for the end of May. We have less than three months to pull it all together so I'm hitting the ground running. May 27 will be here before we know it and there's so much to do."

"What can I do to help?" Elizabeth reached for a magazine. "I have time on my hands."

"Oh..." Emily hesitated. "Well, obviously you're going to be my maid of honor. But um, you know..." She fidgeted a bit. "You know Lucky is going to be..."

"Oh..." Elizabeth shook her head. "You know that's fine. I don't even...there's no awkwardness there anymore. We're friends now."

"*Are you?*" Emily leaned forward, a magazine spilling from her lap to the floor. "I know he went to your opening, and it was all okay, but—"

"But nothing. Lucky and I are friends. Barely that." Elizabeth reached over to squeeze her friend's hand. "I promise it won't be weird—"

"I just..." Emily sighed and looked down at a photo of a bride and groom on a beach. "I just wish sometimes it was like it used to be, you know? The four of us were best friends—"

"For ten minutes." Elizabeth hesitated. "Em, I spent too many years trying to get back to that point, trying to be that girl again, but I just can't. Lucky and I...we destroyed any chance of really being friends a long time ago. We're in each other's lives now, on the fringes. I'm happy he's moved on, honestly I am but—"

"I'm not hoping you guys could get back together. I just..." Emily stopped and shook her head. "No. I guess, I just wonder why you guys couldn't be friends the way you were before you were a couple."

Elizabeth set a magazine on the table and leaned back against the sofa, pondering the question. Why *did* she find it so difficult to recapture the camaraderie they'd once had? Forget the romantic entanglements—Lucky really had been one of her best friends.

"Maybe we will one day," she said finally. "I just know that it's easier for me to...leave certain things in the past. I'm building a new life for myself, Em, and I just...don't think there's space for things like that." She shifted on the sofa. "I go out of my way to avoid Ric, you know, and he's doing the same. I was on the elevator to meet my grandmother at the Grille last week, and he was getting in as I left. He just...never looked at me. I prefer it that way, Em."

Emily frowned. “Let me get this straight. You’d rather Ric and Lucky stay out of your life for the most part, so really what you’re telling me is that romantic reminders are not welcome right now.”

“I guess.” Elizabeth blinked and looked at her oddly. “Yeah, maybe. Ric and Lucky...they represent some of the worst mistakes in my life, some of the really bad decisions I wish I hadn’t made so not having them around right now makes it easier. I know it can’t be that way forever, but—”

“Why doesn’t that apply to my brother?” Emily asked. “*He’s* a romantic reminder of bad decisions. Why is he different?”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “It’s not even remotely the same. I never...we were never like that. Yes, we briefly...considered going further but we never did. We used to sit and talk or just...take rides. It’s not like that now. We’re not...going down that path, Em. I *wish* you’d get that.”

“I’m not pushing you,” Emily responded after a moment. “I just...you’re not even listening to yourself. What are you and Jason doing now if not the same exact thing? You talk, and I know sometimes he drives you home on his bike.”

Elizabeth just stared at her. “I—”

“So, it’s exactly how it used to be. You told me that what was going on now...it was just residual.” Emily reached for her notebook. “I’m not saying it’s not, but I think you’re just fooling yourself if you think you and my brother are not heading down the same path. The only thing that is different is where you’ll end up.”

Thankfully, Emily dropped the subject and they moved on to planning a day for Elizabeth to meet with the dress designer, but Emily’s words stayed in the back of her head because they were true. And as much as she had tried to deny what was happening, she knew her feelings for Jason were building again, that she had reopened that part of her heart.

And she thought maybe...just maybe...he felt the same way. She recognized the look in his eyes sometimes, the way he said her name, but she didn’t know for sure. And there was no ignoring the complications in his life. The presence of Sonny and Carly. The situation with Evie.

She was falling in love with Jason all over again, but she had this sinking feeling this time might not be different at all. That his loyalties to Sonny Corinthos might again leave her out in the cold.

# Chapter Nine

*All my senses come to life  
While I'm stumbling home as drunk as I  
Have ever been and I'll never leave again  
'Cause you are the only one  
And all my friends have gone to find  
Another place to let their hearts collide  
Just promise me, you'll always be a friend  
'Cause you are the only one*  
- One, Ed Sheeran

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*Saturday, April 9, 2005*

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

When Jason pulled open the door that morning, he grimaced without thinking. When Carly scowled at him, he shook his head. “Sorry. I thought you might be—”

“Someone you like?” she all but snarled as she pushed past him into the penthouse. At the sofa, she whirled around to face him, planting a hand on her hip. “Like that twit Elizabeth?”

Behind his eyes, Jason felt a dull throb begin, but took a deep breath. Once, Carly had been his best friend. He had done a lot to protect her, to take care of her.

In this moment, with the mixture of misery and annoyance flashing in her dark eyes, he wondered if he had just let her crash and burn just once, she’d be a different person. If he hadn’t stood by her when Tony and AJ were on her heels, if he hadn’t blackmailed AJ into giving her custody of Michael, if he had just let her fall flat on her face...

Would she be looking at him this way? As if he was the only one who could fix her problems? As if it were his job, his *obligation* to fix her life?

He had no one to blame but himself.

“Is there something you need?” Jason asked, glancing towards the stairs, wondering if Nora would remember his instructions. If she heard Carly downstairs, she should keep herself and Evie out of the line of fire. Carly had a way of turning most situations around to Sam when she found herself riled up. She never used the other woman’s names, just a series of colorful epithets most in Port Charles had once—and still might—direct Carly’s way.

She huffed. “Sorry. I don’t...mean to insult her,” she began. The back of Jason’s neck prickled because she was using that conciliatory tone he knew all too well. She had annoyed him and needed to sweeten him up for the kill. “I just...wish you had different taste in women, but I suppose I should learn to fight the battles I can win.”

That would be a cold day in hell, and they both knew it. Forcing his fists to unclench at his sides, he nodded. “Fine. What’s up, Carly?”

“I never see you anymore,” she complained, leaning against the arm of the sofa and pursing her lips into a pout. “God. I thought with Courtney abandoning me for New York, you wouldn’t pick sides. I know you blame me—”

“I don’t blame you. I don’t...” He tilted his head to the ceiling and took another deep breath. Patience. Eventually he would discover why Carly was here. “I’m not avoiding you, Carly. I just...have my own stuff.”

She narrowed her eyes, and he could see the calculation in her eyes. His blood chilled. If Carly was holding herself back from making a nasty comment about the mother of his child, if she had controlled her impulses, then she had a plan.

God help the world if *Carly* had a plan.

“I know.” She sighed and looked away. Towards the stairs. “I-I’m glad you let Emily find you someone to help. You...were looking tired. I told Sonny to knock it off, that punishing you wasn’t making anything better, but you know when he gets in a mood...” She rolled her shoulders. “And...you know he’s been in that mood for a while.”

“I know.” Jason folded his arms across his chest. “It comes and goes, but it’s not staying away.”

“No. I mean, he’s trying hard to control it, but I don’t think it’s really something that he can...you know...control.” She twisted her fingers together. “I’ve been trying *so* hard to keep him steady. Concentrating on the boys, you know. So he’s not thinking about you. Here. With Evie.” Carly blinked. “So he doesn’t remember Sam.”

And for the first time, Jason saw something odd flash in her eyes when she spoke of Evie and Sam. Did she suspect? *Could* she know? “I don’t think you’re going to get him to forget her entirely,” he said carefully. “Like you don’t forget Alcazar.”

“Well the difference with that is I *want* to.” She straightened. “I’m trying like hell to look forward, Jason. To make Sonny remember that he left her and came back to me. To the boys. I put Alcazar behind me. Why the hell can’t he?”

“I-I don’t know the answer to that.” His mouth felt dry, almost sour. He had never told her of the second affair, had known it would blow the boys’ world apart when it was just being pieced back together. But he knew Sonny had still been drawn to Sam. Had led the other woman on. Had broken her heart all over again.

And Sonny felt betrayed by her. By Jason.

Nothing ate at the core of Sonny Corinthos like betrayal, even if it had been accidental. Even if, in Sam’s case, it had been deserved.

“I really hoped that time would do it, you know.” She shook her head. “I thought that with Sam dead, it would just fade away. Like it never happened. But it’s not. And I’m at the end of my rope, Jason. Sonny is teetering out of control. Maybe he’s okay today. And he’ll be all right next week. But you understand that it’s *not* going to last.”

“Yeah.” And in the hollow pit of his stomach, he knew this brief moment of calm would end. At the moment Sonny was in control. He knew why they were embarking on this deception, that to preserve the sanity and peace of Michael and Morgan, Evie would remain with Jason. But would Sonny *always* know that? Always believe things were better this way?

“I have to protect my boys, Jason. They are everything to me. And protecting them means doing what’s best for Sonny.” She looked at him, met his eyes dead on. “And sometimes what’s best for Sonny isn’t what’s best for everyone else.”

And that something odd flashed again. Was Carly telling him she knew? That she had allowed the lie to stand because it was best for *her* family?

That she no longer believed that?

If Carly knew, then would Sonny come for Evie?

“I suppose you have to do what’s right for you, Carly.” In his ear, he heard Elizabeth’s voice again. *When does Evie’s best interests come into it?* “And I’ll do what’s right for me and my daughter.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly and then her features smoothed out. “You and Evie are part of my family, Jason. I love you and I want to do what’s best for all of us. I know we can make it happen if we *both* want it enough.”

He stepped aside then, as if to tell her to it was time to leave. “I’ll see you later, Carly.”

She opened her mouth, but apparently changed her mind. “Don’t be a stranger, Jase.” She pulled open the door and turned back to him. “It’s in our best interests if we keep communication open between us. I’m sure you know what I mean.”

Jason closed the door behind her and leaned his forehead against it. Unfortunately, he had a feeling he knew exactly what she meant.

## **Hardy Home: Living Room**

Elizabeth planted one hand on her hip and eyed the disaster scene of her grandmother’s living room. Despite her efforts in the last three months or so since their things had arrived from California, the house still felt cramped. Overcrowded.

At her side, Audrey sighed and shifted Cameron higher on her hip. “I’m sure his sneakers are here.” She bit her lip. “Somewhere.”

“We need our own space,” Elizabeth murmured. “There’s...just not enough room in my old room or

his room for what used to be in our apartment.” She glanced at her grandmother. “Not that I don’t really appreciate your generosity—”

“But you were setting up a life there,” Audrey finished, handing Cameron his pacifier. “I suppose I could try to pack up a few of my things—”

“Gram...” Elizabeth shook her head and moved forward, reaching for a stack of Cameron’s winter clothing that she had intended to store in the basement now that the weather was starting to turn. “I’ve looked at a few apartments. Lofts. Even houses. Nothing...*feels* right.”

“Perhaps because you know it may be temporary,” her grandmother responded. Cameron giggled as she lightly danced her fingers of his belly.

Elizabeth turned, one of Cameron’s old onesies in her hands. “Why would it be temporary?”

“Well, unless you find something large enough for all of you...” Audrey trailed off with an impish smile and sparkle in her eye. “Unless you intend Cam and Evie to share a room for a while.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and turned back to her search for the elusive sneakers. “Is there some sort of club I don’t know about? Emily promised she would lay off, but still manages to sneak some comments every time we have lunch, Nikolas gives me these smiles as if to say he approves and totally wouldn’t embarrass me in front of a crowd, Steven wants to know when he gets to interrogate Jason...” She huffed and tugged the sneakers from underneath a laundry basket. “Honestly, Gram. It’s...not like that.”

“I’m not suggesting the two of you plan to move in together next week or even the next few months.” Audrey lowered herself onto the sofa and set Cameron in front of her, watching him with a bright smile as he pulled himself up using the coffee table, wobbling on his chubby legs. “But the people who love you are not blind.”

Elizabeth knelt in front of Cameron, holding her hands out to tempt him to take a few steps towards her. “Gram, even if...things are changing between us, I just don’t think...” She met her grandmother’s eyes. “Yes...there are...indications we’re going down a certain path, but we’re both...” She lifted her shoulders. “Apprehensive.”

“And it’s natural, my darling.” Audrey picked up a discarded stuffed animal and smoothed her fingers over the soft fur. “You are both newly divorced, single parents to children you never expected to have...you’re both wise to be cautious. Even to take it slow.”

Elizabeth lifted an eyebrow, knowing her grandmother wasn’t done. “But?”

“But life is short, Elizabeth.” Audrey looked at the mantel, at the wedding photo of herself and Steve more than twenty years ago. “The time your grandfather and I wasted...we never had a child of our own. He took Tommy into his heart and I accepted your father though he was already an adult.”

“But you wish things had been different,” Elizabeth said with a sigh. “That you had had more

children.”

“I do, though bless your father, he allowed me the gift of raising you.”

Elizabeth smirked and held up her cell phone, knowing Cameron had a penchant for electronics. “You didn’t always think that way.” Audrey chuckled as Elizabeth continued. “Gram, I do...see what you’re saying. I promised myself during therapy that I wouldn’t lie to myself anymore, even if it made things easier in the moment. It always had bad consequences, and I’m not going to do it. So yes, I care very much for Jason. Yes, he and I have taken rides. We’ve talked. I do see that things are changing, and I’m...not adverse to it. It’s just...there are complications.”

“You’re referring to Sonny and Carly.” Cameron plopped to ground, uninterested in taking his first step this day and chewed on the ear of a stuffed rabbit. “And the situation with Evie.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth admitted. “Though I guess it’s ridiculous to pretend that would weigh on my decision to move forward. She’s a gorgeous little girl that I love spending time with. Even if Jason and I aren’t...seeing one another, his situation would *still* affect me. Because we’re friends. Because it would affect Emily. I just...wonder...”

“What?” Audrey prompted when she fell silent.

“I know Sonny is...having these odd mood swings,” Elizabeth admitted. “And I can’t say much else because it would betray a confidence, but I also know that *I* tend to set him off sometimes. When he sees me with Jason and Evie. As if...it bothers him. If I become more involved, if Jason and I...do start really seeing one another...what if it that’s the reason Sonny decides to go after Evie?”

“What would Jason do if Sonny did?” Audrey asked. “Would he sign over custody?”

“I...” Elizabeth hesitated. “I’d like to think no. That he sees what the rest of the world see—there’s a reason Sam went through all those hoops to protect her daughter. I can even relate in a way. I tried to keep Zander away from Cameron because I was so...scared of how his life was falling apart, the violence in him.” Troubled, she dangled a plastic set of car keys at Cameron who giggled and reached for them. “At least Zander didn’t have this other family, didn’t try to make me feel like trash.”

“Do you think Jason’s loyalty will win out?” her grandmother asked.

“I honestly don’t know what Jason would do if he were forced to make a choice.” Elizabeth sighed. “And I don’t think he knows either.”

*Monday, April 18, 2005*

### **Kelly’s Diner: Dining Room**

Emily slumped into her chair and sighed. “That’s the fourth house we’ve looked at this week, Jase. Why do you even bring me along? It’s not like you’ll suddenly start liking anything I suggest.”

Jason ignored her rant as he settled Evie into the high chair. “I have to take our security seriously,

Em.”

“I get that, but I really think you’re asking the wrong person. I thought the house this morning was nice.” She ordered a burger, fries and milk shake from Georgie and considered her brother as he put in his own order. “It had four bedrooms, a nice large room in the back, and a garage for the bike. What else do you need?”

Jason narrowed his eyes. “Why do I need four bedrooms and...” He dipped his head for a moment before meeting her eyes, his exasperation clear. “Emily.”

“Jason.” Emily leaned forward, barely noticing as Georgie set her milkshake and his black coffee on the table. “I’m friends with Elizabeth. There are things I can pry out of her that you will *not* tell me.”

He hesitated, and Emily knew she had peaked his interest. Jason cleared his throat and looked to Evie, who gurgled and smushed a cereal puff in her mouth. “Emily—”

“I shouldn’t tell you anything.” She leaned back and sipped the milkshake. “I should let you flounder in darkness, but I figure I should cut you a break. And honestly, it’s not much. She mentioned running into you last month after she sold that one painting. You drove her home after a long talk.” When her brother just stared at her, Emily continued. “And that said drive has been repeated on more than one occasion. Like...six occasions.”

The muscles around his mouth tightened. “Emily,” he said again.

“I mean that’s like seven dates.” Emily opened her eyes wide. “In a *month*. An average of almost two a week. I’d say that’s something—”

“Emily—”

“And really, she looked so happy when we talked about it—”

“I don’t think—”

“I like Elizabeth being happy,” Emily mused as if her brother wasn’t speaking at all. “She’s finally making a living with her art, she has this fantastic son, her family is around her, and now her love life is picking up—”

Jason pinched the bridge of his nose, looking pained. “Emily—”

“I know you’re holding back because of your situation,” she said. “Caution is good, especially since Sonny all but foams at the mouth when he sees Elizabeth—”

Jason frowned and held up a hand. “Wait...have you seen Sonny around Elizabeth without me?” he asked.

“Um...” *Shoot. Big mouth.* “Just...like twice. We were in the courtyard about two weeks ago, and he was coming in with Michael. He just...gave us this weird, dirty look. We ignored him. And over the



weekend, Elizabeth brought Cam in for a doctor's appointment and I guess Sonny was there with Carly and Morgan. Carly may have said something about children of bastards, to which I *may* replied something about whores and glasses houses—"

Her brother just sighed and leaned back. "I wish you wouldn't—"

"No one is going to talk about my godson that way." Emily jabbed a finger at him. "Anyway. It looked like Sonny was going to shut Carly up, but then...I don't know, Jase, he just...flipped." She snapped her fingers. "Like that. He accused Elizabeth of scamming you. Of knowing you were vulnerable because of Evie and moving in on you, just like she did when you got shot a few years ago—"

"Christ." He tilted his head back and took a deep breath. "He...he's been better lately. Almost in control. I'd hoped...that's why I started looking for another place. I thought Sonny would be ready to accept things, and that it would better for Evie to be away from...all of it."

"Well..." Emily drawled. "I don't know, Jase. Maybe he really *can't* control it. Have you ever talked to him about getting help?"

Jason shook his head. "No. He wouldn't go, so it's a waste of time. It's a weakness he doesn't think he can afford." He grimaced. "I just don't want Elizabeth to deal with it."

"She mostly ignored him. If that's why you're holding back," Emily said, "then that's just dumb. It has nothing to do with either one of you. Not really." She leaned forward. "Listen. This stuff with Sonny cannot go on forever. It'll have to be resolved one way or another. I'd hate to see you pass on a chance at real happiness because you're trying to save Elizabeth grief in the moment."

Her brother looked down and took a deep breath. "Emily—"

"I don't want to be bossy and opinionated, or God, even a nag. I don't want to push you into anything that isn't right for you. Please believe me, Jason, when I say that all I want is for you to be happy." Emily bit her lip. "And I don't know if you even think you have a right to be happy. Are you trying to punish yourself for Evie?"

"No." Jason shook his head. "No." He looked away. "My life...isn't...relationships don't work—"

Emily snorted. "Pfft. You just haven't been with the right woman at the right time. Two years ago? You and Elizabeth were clearly not ready to make the sacrifices needed. She is now. She wasn't ready for anything strong then. You know that—she was all up in her head about not deserving things and then running around trying to find someone she could save. She'd be the *first* person to tell you that it wasn't the right time."

She blew out a breath, but realized Jason was actually listening to her this time. "And Jase? Two years ago *you* didn't trust her to stay. So you went away first. You went and found someone who loved and adored you like a puppy. But Courtney wasn't right either. You *know* it's different this time. I can see it. Every time you're in a room together, the whole world goes away and you could practically power the city's electrical grid with the sparks that fly." She leaned forward. "Maybe it

won't be easy. Maybe it won't be forever, but God, Jason, you *owe* it to yourself to find out. You owe it to Evie, because she deserves a happy father who just doesn't live for her."

She hesitated again. "And maybe you even owe it to the people who love you. Grandmother watched you beat yourself against the wall every day since your accident, hoping you would find something, someone, that was worthy of you. She remembered when Grandfather blackmailed you when Elizabeth had been kidnapped. She wanted you to be happy. Don't let her down."

"I..." He glanced down at his watch. "I'm meeting Elizabeth and Cameron in the park," he said after a moment. "I'm not going to lie to you, Emily, or insult your intelligence. I have..." He stopped, and she just waited, knowing he hated to open up, hated to reveal anything inside of him. "I have cared for Elizabeth for years, and yeah, maybe it's different this time. I just...our friendship was sacrificed once before—"

"No, it wasn't, but I know what you mean." Emily nodded. "I get it. You'll do it in your own time, but just don't look away from it. Love is worth fighting for."

Jason tossed some cash on the table and unlocked Evie from the high chair. "I'll think about it, Emily."

## **Port Charles Park**

Elizabeth had just settled Cameron on a blanket filled with his toys when Jason turned the corner with Evie in a coach. She grinned—the sight of the mob's toughest enforcer pushing a candy pink baby carriage would never get old. She'd asked him why he didn't replace with it a different color and he'd just stared at her.

What does the color have to do with anything?

Jason was nothing if not literal. What would she do without him and his deadpan, logic in her life?

She never wanted to find out again.

"Hey, you." Elizabeth stood, and taking a chance, pressed a kiss to his cheek. He blinked at her for a second and then looked away. If she didn't know him better, she'd think he was blushing.

He turned to the guard that had accompanied him, instructing him to stand by the entrance to the path. Once he was gone, Jason turned back to her while lifting Evie from the carriage. "Sorry, I just—"

"I've noticed since becoming a parent," Elizabeth began casually, "that I distrust *most* of the known world. I think *everyone* is a suspect, a criminal just waiting to snatch up my little boy." She arched an eyebrow. "You think it bothers me that you've got a guard on Evie? I'm not sure I wouldn't hire a bodyguard for my kid if given the chance."

Jason released a surprised chuckle as he set Evie on the blanket. The two children blinked at one another, Cameron smiled before offering a block. Evie took it and immediately shoved it in her mouth.

“Ah, friendship,” Elizabeth said, satisfied. She tugged on Jason’s leather jacket sleeve to draw him back several feet to the picnic bench. “They’ll be fine, though I’ll occasionally have to discourage Cameron from wandering too far from the blanket.”

“Evie’s trying to crawl,” Jason told her. “But it’s not going well. She gets on her stomach, even lifts herself up. Sometimes she goes backwards, but it’s going forward that’s taking a while.” His mouth stretched into a smile. “But mostly she ends up on her back, frustrated.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I know *exactly* what you mean—Cameron did that for almost two weeks before I must have blinked and zoom he was off and, well...” She pursed her lips. “Not running exactly, but he might have if he could figure it out.” She drew her leg up on the bench so she could turn to face him, propping her elbow on the table and resting her chin in her palm. “So, you were meeting with Em and the realtor today?”

Jason sighed and leaned back, his eyes on the kids. “Yeah. But we didn’t see anything that worked.”

“I know what you mean,” Elizabeth replied. “The house is so crowded with all our stuff, but nothing feels right.” She shrugged, not wanting to go further and remember the rest of her conversation with her grandmother. “Anyway, is there a rush?”

“No.” Jason hesitated and glanced at her before returning his attention to the kids. “It might make things worse in the end. I thought things with Sonny were better, but...Emily said something—”

“Oh.” Elizabeth huffed. “She probably made it sound worse than it was. Jason, seriously...” She touched his arm so he’d look at him for a moment. “Carly and I will never be friends. Never. I could literally push her out of the way of speeding train and she’d snark at me about ripping her outfit. As for Sonny...” Troubled, she studied Cameron for a long moment, remembering the Christmas Party and the way Sonny had spoken about her first child, the little soul that had never been given the chance to grow.

“I grieve for loss of the friendship he and I once had,” she murmured. “But I suppose with Ric, with the way I acted when Carly was missing, I don’t blame either of them for not being kindly disposed towards me—”

“Elizabeth, he didn’t blame you then.” Jason leaned forward. “He never blamed you. He knew you were...that Ric had manipulated you. And then once you were in the hospital, he was just worried. When you woke up, you went the police. You tried to help Carly. She knew that then.”

“But then I remarried—” She stopped. “No. No, I’m not going back to the time. I’ve...made my peace with my choices. With my mistakes. If Sonny still holds it against me—”

“He just...” Jason exhaled slowly. “This situation with Evie is eating at him. I don’t think it’s *ever* going to get better.”

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured, taking one of his hand in both of hers. “I just...my heart breaks for what you’re going through. I wish I could have done something when it would have made a

difference.”

Jason shook his head, watching as Evie scooted backwards, reaching the edge of the blanket. “I’m just...trying to do what Sam would have wanted. She wanted me to love Evie as my own, the way she didn’t trust Sonny to.” He hesitated. “And I know that if Sonny and Carly had Evie, they would raise her to forget Sam. Maybe they wouldn’t ever tell Evie about her mother, and Sam deserved better than that.”

“I know. She sacrificed so much for her daughter, she deserves to be a presence in Evie’s life, even if it’s just a memory.” She sighed. “And things with Carly aren’t getting better?”

“No.” Jason paused. “They’re...I think she knows, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth frowned and straightened her shoulders. “What do you mean she *knows*?” Her fingers tightened in his. “About Evie?”

“It’s just...something she said a few weeks ago. It makes...I think she knows and she’s keeping it herself.”

A tingle shot down her spine, a foreboding chill seeped into her bones. If Carly was keeping a secret, then it meant... “You think she has a plan. That if she’s keeping the secret, it’s because it works for her right now.”

“And maybe it won’t forever,” Jason confirmed. He slowly disentangled their hands so he could put Evie back into a seated position, as the six month old had ended up on her back, waving her arms and wailing. Immediately, the infant grinned at her father and picked up a toy boat to chew on.

Once he sat back down, Elizabeth continued. “Carly’s plans never work out for *you*.”

“No.” He looked away, where the park opened up to the lake and gazebo. “No, they usually destroy my life.”

“Jason, have you thought of addressing it to Sonny? Telling him what you suspect?” Her chest ached, her ears were buzzing. She could see the misery in his eyes, could see he felt as though he were at the edge of precipice—that he might end up the way he had five years earlier, lying, bleeding, and broken in the snow waiting for death to claim him.

“If I did...he might take her,” Jason confessed in a low voice. She leaned forward, straining to hear him. “And if he wanted her, what would I say to him? No, Sonny, you can’t have your own daughter —”

“Jason, it’s not *like* you to stick your head in the sand,” Elizabeth said. “You’re just waiting for the other shoe to drop—”

“What else should I do?” he asked, meeting her eyes. “That’s what I did with Michael. That’s all I *could* do with him—”

“It’s different now,” she argued. “AJ didn’t know what was going on. You were perpetuating this huge lie to everyone—but you know that no one really believes Evie is your daughter, including the woman you were trying to lie to the most. Jason, you have *legal* custody of her. You’d have to sign it over to Sonny.”

“I know. Diane and I spoke about it—” He hesitated and eyed her. “You think I should refuse to relinquish guardianship. That I should tell Sonny no.”

“I…” Elizabeth closed her mouth for a moment. “It would be so easy to suggest that,” she admitted. “But…I don’t *know*, Jason. I know that if it were just about Evie, then yes. You are absolutely the better father. You would be what’s best for her. But, I know that sort of decision would just…complicate the rest of it. Your job.” She chewed on her bottom lip. “I guess…there are no easy answers here.”

“No. No there’s not.” Sighing, Jason once again rescued his daughter from her turtle-like position, placing her back on the blanket. “Right now, it’s an uneasy silence. Acceptance of the situation. If I can just hold it together until Sonny can pull himself back from the edge, I can talk about it rationally. He’s not happy with Carly, he’s afraid to divorce her. If…he did that, maybe it would be easier for him to raise Evie.”

“And you’re still left out in the cold,” Elizabeth told him, aggrieved. “How is *that* fair?”

“How else is this supposed to end?” Jason asked her. “Do you see a way for me to raise Evie *without* things blowing up with Sonny and Carly?”

“I…” She sighed and shook her head. “No. I guess your plan is the best. I’m…just frustrated, Jason. I want so much more for you, but you know better than me how the fallout will affect you. I just…I hate to see you hurting. To see you distanced from Sonny, unable to really enjoy this wonderful little girl.”

Because she loved him so much that seeing the pain and misery in his eyes caused her stomach to roll and her chest to ache.

Sighing, she looked away, back at her son. She always ended up right back in this moment, in love with this man whose life was so complicated, he was usually unable to make time for something more.

Why should this time be any different?

# Chapter Ten

*I'm not the one who broke you  
I'm not the one you should fear  
We got to move you darlin'  
I thought I lost you somewhere  
But you were never really ever there at all*  
- Here Is Gone, Goo Goo Dolls

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*Friday, April 29, 2005*

## **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Carly handed Michael a napkin as he wolfed down his waffles. “Try and breathe between bites,” she instructed her eldest child before turning her attention to Morgan who had recently been upgraded to a booster seat and was spooning yogurt awkwardly into his mouth. “Try not...to wear it all this morning.”

Across the table, Sonny sat silently, sipping his coffee and reading the morning edition of the Port Charles Herald. She wished this felt as domestic as it might have looked to an outsider, but he was silent because they had argued that morning.

She wanted to try in-vitro fertilization and he had refused.

She wanted to go away for a weekend to the island or even to New York City — to leave the boys with her mother and just escape the constant pressure of being Carly Corinthos.

Of not knowing what to do next.

But he had refused.

“I gotta get to school,” Michael chirped, dropping his fork to his plate with a clatter that caused Sonny to flinch. He launched himself out of the chair, stopped for his book bag on the sofa before throwing open the door. “C’mon, Rocco! I’ll be late and today we’re getting a new guinea pig—”

His bright chatter faded as the door closed behind them. Carly turned to Sonny. “He seems to be... better,” she offered.

“Mmm,” Sonny murmured, and Carly scowled, looking back at Morgan. Even his wide yogurt-stained grin couldn’t boost her spirits. Her argument with Courtney earlier that month weighed on her shoulders.

Of course she knew that simply walking into Jason’s penthouse and trying to hint that perhaps the custody arrangement needed to be revisited would never work. Jason was committed to protecting Michael and Morgan. He would *never* admit the truth of Evie’s paternity if he still thought it might

cost the boys their stability.

But Carly was out of options. Having their own child was not going to work. As long as Sonny felt he had abandoned his daughter, the guilt was going to eat at him and push him closer to the edge – a place that Carly had truly only seen once.

And she feared this crash may make that seem like a day at a carnival.

And the only way to eliminate that guilt would be to bring Evie into their family, but Courtney was absolutely right. To have Jason give up another child...how could she ever ask it of him?

But in the last month, she had begun to see a way out. Jason had barely survived the loss of Michael, but Carly knew it was because he'd been alone. Robin had dropped the bomb and fled to Paris, Carly had slept with Sonny, and Jason had had no one to turn to.

Except Elizabeth Webber.

She had seen the two together recently, had heard the rumors.

And Elizabeth had a son.

Maybe...just *maybe*...if she could be sure Jason would be okay somehow. If she could...lessen the damage, this might work.

And wouldn't it be in Jason's long-term best interests to protect Sonny and his peace of mind? Surely *Jason* was exhausted from the tight rope they had all been walking, wasn't he?

"Sonny, I've been...thinking about Jason."

Sonny lifted his head from his newspaper and peered at her. "What...about Jason?" he asked, cautiously.

"I don't like what happened when we saw Elizabeth a few weeks ago at the doctor's office." Carly tapped her fingers restlessly on the table, absently pushing her glass of orange juice out of Morgan's reaching hands. "She and I may have...had our differences, but I think...maybe she could be good for Jason."

Sonny squinted, and she knew he was thinking her words through, considering them and looking for the catch. "How so?" he asked, finally folding the newspaper and setting it next to him.

"Well," Carly drawled. "I know the last...God, the last year has been rough for all of us, what with..." She swallowed hard. "Sam and everything. But Elizabeth...and her son...could be just the distraction Jason needs."

He tilted his head, still squinting. "I'm not following you."

God. Connect the dots, you imbecile. Carly swallowed the huff of exasperation that crawled up in her

throat and smiled hesitantly. “Well, things are tense between you and Jason, because you know how he hurt Courtney with Sam. And sometimes I think Evie’s...as adorable as she may be...is just a reminder of everything that went wrong in your friendship.”

The corner of his mouth twisted into a grimace and Sonny looked out the large picture window that overlooked the park. “You’re not wrong there,” he said quietly.

“But if Jason moves on with someone who isn’t... connected to you. Not your sister, not your...” She wiggled her fingers. “Whatever. Elizabeth is different. And God knows, you...used to like her. I mean, Ric notwithstanding.” Her stomach pitched at the mention of the man who had pretended to be her friend only to kidnap her and hold her hostage.

She looked at Morgan, her miracle baby, and took a deep breath. Everything she did to save her marriage was for her boys in the end. Michael and Morgan deserved the best life she could give them. The power, the prestige, the wealth that came with being Sonny’s children. Everything she had *never* had.

“She did divorce him in the end,” Carly told him. “And from what I can see, has cut all ties with him, so maybe she’s not the moron I always thought she was.” She shrugged. “Anyway, she’s got a ready-made family for Jason. He could be happy with her. Just what you and I want for him, right?”

“Right.” Sonny cleared his throat. “Maybe...maybe Elizabeth *is* the answer to the problems. She... and her son.” He reached for his newspaper. “We’ll...have to see how it plays out.”

“I guess we will.” Carly sipped her juice, hoping Sonny had seen the connection she’d tried to paint.

If Jason had another child waiting for him, surely...it *had* to assuage some of the pain she knew he would feel when Evie came to live with them.

And Carly would honor his sacrifice by loving Evie the best she could. She would be the reason their lives got back on track, not just a reminder of that whore and Sonny’s lies.

It could still be okay. Carly just...had to have patience. They were limping along for the moment, and surely, if she held out just a little longer, continued to drop hints in Sonny’s ears about Jason securing his own future...

They could emerge from this dark period without Sonny falling off the ledge.

### **General Hospital: Cafeteria**

Emily set her tray down across from her fiancé and smiled. “So did you confirm with the staff in Greece about our honeymoon?” she asked.

Nikolas sipped his espresso and nodded. “Yes, they’ll be expecting us for three weeks. I’m even... having some rooms redone.”

She nodded sagely. “De-Cassadined,” Emily remarked, tearing the wrapper from her sandwich. “I’ll



never understand the preoccupation with dark and gloom.”

“It’s dignified,” her prince said with a straight face. Then he grinned. “Things on track with your bachelorette party?”

“Yep. Elizabeth scheduled it for the week before the wedding. She wanted it to be a surprise but since most of the guests are doctors and nurses, that was out the window.” She eyed him. “And your party?”

“Lucky wanted strippers.” Nikolas paused. “I told him it wasn’t really my scene.”

“So he’ll probably only hire one.” She shrugged. “I’ve been working on the seating chart, but I just... don’t know where to put my brother.” She huffed. “If he and Elizabeth would just...” She wiggled her fingers. “You know, get it together already, I could shove him at her table without them snarking at me —”

“You could probably just put him there anyway,” Nikolas interrupted. “It’s not like Jason wants to sit with his actual family or any of the other doctors. I don’t know why he’s even bothering to come to the reception.”

Emily blinked. “I...*may* have intimated that you had many single friends coming from around the world. Dark, mysterious men with accents. I suggested introducing Elizabeth to one of them if Jason was sure he wasn’t interested.”

“How is *that* not meddling?” Nikolas asked, exasperated. “Emily, you promised you weren’t going to nag either of them. Elizabeth all but took my head off last week when I saw her. She seems to think we’re in league together.”

“We *are*, but mostly because I gave you no choice.” Emily rolled her eyes. “I would not have to...step up my participation if they would just stop dancing around and just admit what the rest of the damn world saw weeks ago—”

“Emily.” Nikolas’s calm voice broke into her rant and she glared at him. “Do you want them to start dating because they were once interested in one another? The way you came home and threw yourself into a relationship with Zander? The way Elizabeth tried so hard with Lucky when he came home?”

She scowled. “No. No, but they’re clearly in love—”

“I don’t know about that,” Nikolas said, slowly, “but maybe they’re creating something new. What they had before? It was there, but it clearly wasn’t strong enough to survive what life threw at them.”

Emily pursed her lips. “So what you’re saying is that if they acted on their attraction now, it might just fizzle like it did before.”

“Or maybe it would work, but Em, you have to trust them to know what’s right—”

“I...” Emily leaned back. “Look, I *know* you’re right. I just...I get frustrated. I want them to be happy now. Not in five years. If I have to wait that long to be Elizabeth’s maid of honor, I’ll...just wither

away—”

Nikolas held up a hand. “First, I get your frustration. But we’re not inside their heads. What the rest of the world sees? It’s just superficial. It’s attraction. I see they enjoy each other’s company. That they have a good friendship, but we don’t know what holds them back. It may be something insurmountable at the moment. Emily, you complained that Carly pushed him at Courtney—”

“Oh, fine. I’ll butt out for a while.” She pointed a finger at him. “But if it we get married and there’s still no change, I make no promises, you understand?”

Nikolas arched an eyebrow. “Fair enough I suppose.”

“But you’re right about the seating. Jason is probably only going to see Elizabeth, they’re friends anyway. Audrey tolerates him now, and Steve doesn’t have a problem with him, so...” She took out a notepad and made a notation. “I’ll do it that way.” She sighed at him. “I just...I want everyone to be as happy as we are.”

He reached across the table, and took her hand in his. “But our road wasn’t easy,” he reminded her. “You were married, I was accused of murder, then I had lost my memory, and we had to deal with Mary...” He trailed off and dipped his head. He raised it and sighed. “Emily, we’re stronger *because* we got through all of that. We’re going to stand the test of time because I know there will never be anyone I love the way I love you. Don’t you want your brother and our best friend to reach the same realization?”

“God, I hate when you’re logical. Yes, of course, I do.” She grimaced. “You bastard with your sense-making.”

## **Corinthos & Morgan Warehouse: Sonny’s Office**

Jason leaned forward and set a folder on Sonny’s desk. “We found Mickey.”

His partner lifted his eyebrows. “And since he’s not in front of me explaining himself, he’s not available to do so.” He nodded and pursed his lips. “Who’s responsible for his...scheduling difficulty?”

Relieved that today Sonny seemed mostly himself, Jason answered him. “Not us. Johnny and his men found him in the bushes off the interstate. He’d been recently shot in the head.”

“So they kept him alive for two months or he turned on us and they shot him anyway.” Sonny stroked his chin. “We don’t know anything more yet?”

“No...not yet, but I got Johnny and Francis on it. I don’t know if we’ll find out more unless something else happens,” Jason admitted. “We don’t have the same resources the authorities do when it comes to crime scenes and it’s not like they left a calling card.”

“Fuckers never do.” Sonny sighed and leaned back in his chair, perusing the ceiling. “I don’t like sitting back, I don’t *like* being on the defense.”

“Neither do I,” Jason admitted. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve got Stan looking into the Ruiz and Zaccharas, but nothing’s popping at the moment.”

“Security still heightened?” Sonny asked. “I know Carly’s guards are doubled, I’ve seen the extra men in the lobby...” He hesitated. “Is...Elizabeth being looked after?”

Jason waited a moment, but decided to trust this stability for however long it would last. “I’m seeing her later today,” he admitted. “I’m going to ask her if she would consider someone more full time, and I’ve organized a man on her house for now, but I don’t want to...there’s been no direct threat against anyone.”

“Right, right. And extra security just draws attention to the people who aren’t fucking with us at the moment.” He rubbed his eyes. “I get we don’t know much about who’s behind this, but, Christ, Jase, there’s got to be *something* we can do. Some...” His hand clenched in a fist, Sonny dropped it on the desk. “Tell me we can do something.”

“I told Stan to step up, he’s bringing on some extra fire power behind the scenes to cover all the bases. I pulled Jimmy and Roscoe from the warehouse. I put Jimmy on Anthony and Roscoe on the Ruiz brothers. If nothing else, it might help to rule them out.”

Sonny waited a moment. “What about Johnny?”

Jason exhaled slowly. “Like I said, I don’t...consider Johnny part of his father’s business. I don’t see a point in wasting man power. I’d rather pull a third man to cover Javier and Manny more effectively. I don’t think Hector would be involved, but if he is, it’s through his sons.”

“That’s true,” Sonny allowed, “but I think it’s a mistake to exclude Johnny Zacchara from surveillance. He’s in Port Charles often enough. Maybe you’re giving the kid more credit than he’s due. Maybe he’s using the nurse as a shield.”

It hadn’t felt that way then. Nadine had been too green, and Johnny had looked chagrined when Jason had taken him to task for putting her in that situation. *Could* that have been an act? Would it really hurt to eliminate Johnny Zacchara once and for all from suspicion?

“We can’t rule that out, I guess. I’ll talk to Johnny, see who he recommends—”

“Don’t do it just to placate me.”

Sonny’s tone was low, almost dangerous. His dark eyes snapped to Jason’s and the man he’d been speaking to for the past half hour had vanished. Swallowing, Jason leaned forward. “That’s not what I’m doing—”

“What do you *take* me for?” Sonny bit out, rising from his chair. “You’ve been telling me for months Johnny ain’t the guy, and now you’re just willing to investigate? What, you think I’m stupid? I don’t *see* what you’re doin’?”

Slowly, Jason pushed himself to his feet. “No, Sonny. I’m just agreeing with you. Maybe I don’t want

to think I'm wrong. I let him near Elizabeth, I allowed him to engage her in small talk, to stay at her showing. If he is involved, he's aware of her. You think I like knowing that?"

His chest heaving, his eyes blazing, Sonny all but snarled, "Don't *play*, Jason. Who the hell do you think you are? You work for me! This is *my* territory!" He planted a hand flat against his chest. "You fucking taking orders from *me*!"

"I know. You want Johnny investigated more fully, that's what I'm gonna do." Keeping his voice even and hoping like hell his expression was as blank as he intended, Jason continued, "I told you I'm not taking chances with the people who are important to us. I've always...made the security decisions. Taken the lead when looking into a threat."

Sonny stared at him for another long moment before nodding. "Fine. Just so long as you get it." He dropped back into his seat and something on his desk caught his notice. He stared at it for a moment before raising his eyes. And...there he was again. His partner. His friend.

"I-I'm sorry." Roughly, Sonny continued. "I just...I don't want to take any chances."

That was true, but he and Jason both knew that while the last few weeks had been stable, Sonny's temper always simmered under the surface. Jason was going to have to tread even more lightly to keep it from being triggered. Too much was at stake.

## Old Bridge

As soon as the bike drew to a stop on the bridge, Jason switched off the engine, hit the kickstand, climbed off and stood looking over the side, his hands clenched in fists on the stone ledge.

Elizabeth slowly drew off her helmet and shook out her hair. He'd been pensive since he'd picked her up almost an hour ago, and had taken the cliff road faster than she could remember.

She drew her leg over the side of the bike and joined him. "Can you talk about it?" she asked.

He exhaled slowly and turned to face her, resting a hip against the stone. "Not really," he admitted. "I'm sorry—I should have canceled but—"

"It's fine." She lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug. "I was already free since Steven came over to have dinner and offered to watch Cam. Get some guy time in, he told me." Looking down at the helmet she still held in her hands. "I guess it's about Sonny."

Jason dipped his head, and for a moment, she wish she hadn't pushed. But he shook his head slightly. "He's been good for a while. In control. I almost thought..."

"You had your friend back," Elizabeth finished softly when he trailed off. "I'm so sorry, Jason."

"It's getting worse." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "The slide doesn't usually last this long—he's holding back the crash, but now he's switching back and forth. One second, he's there and the next... it's like we're not having the same conversation."

“I know what it’s like to watch someone change in front of you like that,” Elizabeth said. “I mean, it’s not...really the same, except I suppose it was kind of a mental illness.” When Jason just tilted his head towards her in question, she clarified. “When Lucky was brainwashed. Remember? I told you back then that we’d have these conversations where it felt like we were connecting like we used to, but then he’d just go blank and turn into this other person. This stranger who kept telling me to be with Nikolas. It was...not scary, but just...” She shrugged. “Unnerving.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s the word for it.” Jason was quiet for a moment, the rushing water of the creek running towards the lake the only sound. “I used to be able to keep him steady, to bring him back, but I can’t this time. Nothing I do is making it better, only worse.”

Elizabeth drew her bottom lip between her teeth. “Because *you’re* part of the reason it’s happening,” she said quietly. She set the helmet on the ledge and stepped towards him. “Jason—”

“I didn’t start this slide,” Jason said, cutting her off. “That was Carly’s shooting and all that crap with Alcazar last year. But...I aggravated it. With...faking the paternity results. And then custody—”

“You didn’t ask for custody of Evie,” Elizabeth reminded him. “If on the day she was born and Sam died, if Sonny had asked you to sign over guardianship, you would have done it.”

“Yeah,” he admitted. “I would...I would have hated it. I would have been breaking my promise, but he...didn’t know what Sam did. He never would have agreed willingly. But...things with Carly and the boys were up in the air and he wanted to keep his family together.”

“But he sees keeping her as a betrayal.” She twisted her fingers together to prevent herself from reaching out toward him. “Jason—”

“It’s nothing new,” he said, interrupting her again. “I wanted to ask you about Milo.”

Elizabeth blinked at the swift change in subject to her part-time guard. “Sure, what about him?”

“I...know he’s only around some of the time. He’s not taking you places or...following you directly.” Jason faced her more fully, and she could read the exhaustion, the misery and the nerves in his eyes. “But I...want him to be more...full-time. For a while. I...assigned another guard to sit outside your house at night, but in his car so Audrey or your neighbors won’t see—”

Security was part of being in Jason’s life and she knew he had enough on his plate. “Whatever you think is good,” she said. “I know you wouldn’t ask if you didn’t think it was necessary. Just let me know what to expect and I’ll do it.”

Jason closed his mouth, the explanations and justifications stopping mid-stream. “Thank you,” he said. “I appreciate it.”

“In return,” Elizabeth said, holding up one finger. “I’d like you to bring Evie—and yourself—to Cameron’s birthday party next week.”

Jason grimaced slightly, which she didn’t take personally as she knew how he loathed gatherings of

any kind. “Elizabeth—”

“Hear me out.” She held up a hand. “It’s not a big gathering. We’re going to be here in the park. Emily and Nikolas, my grandmother and my brother, Bobbie, Lucas, Felicia and her girls. I invited Alexis and Kristina, but you know...her husband is staying home.”

He muttered something under his breath, but she couldn’t quite catch it. “Anyway, Jason, it’s important to me that Cameron’s first birthday be filled with the people who are important to us.” This time, she did reach forward and grasped his hand. “You are important to me. I want you to be important to Cameron, too.”

Jason looked down at their hands before raising his eyes to meet hers. There was something in them she could not quite describe. “I want that, too,” he said, his voice dropping slightly. “I-I’ll be there.”

“Great.” Elizabeth squeezed his hands and smiled. “I’m really glad we did this. Tonight, I mean.” Her cheeks heating, she glanced away. “Sometimes I feel like we run into each other accidentally, but...I want to make the effort...to see you more.” Her heart in her throat, she risked a look at him.

Jason looked slightly surprised, but not horrified. He cleared his throat. “That’s...okay.” He was quiet for a moment. “Thank you for listening tonight.”

“Anytime.”

# Chapter Eleven

*But with you, you, you  
I can see what I need  
I can dream realistically  
I knew that this was different from the start  
And it seems that every time  
We're eye to eye  
I can find another piece of you  
That I don't wanna lose*  
- Fine By Me, Andy Grammer

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*Saturday, May 7, 2005*

## **Kelly's: Courtyard**

Carly sighed in relief as her sister-in-law took a seat across from her. She had been so worried she'd burned her bridges with Courtney the month before. She'd been frustrated, impatient, and angry and had moved too quickly.

Of course Courtney would not leap to break Jason's heart. Why should she find it easy when Carly couldn't bring herself to pull the trigger? She knew it would be relatively simple—tell Sonny she knew, that she wanted Evie with them.

And maybe Jason would resist at first, but he'd *see* the rightness of it. He'd sign over guardianship and Sonny would be okay again. It'd be difficult for Jason, Carly wasn't naive, but he was all but dating Elizabeth. She had a son. She would see Jason through it.

And Jason should *want* to help Carly in this, because a stable and conflict-free Sonny made everyone's life better. Keeping Evie was just making the situation worse, but Carly did not blame her best friend.

Jason thought he was protecting Carly and the boys. Soon, she would let him off the hook. He shouldn't be raising someone else's child—not like this. Elizabeth's bastard didn't have a father. It was the perfect solution.

But the time was not yet ripe.

"Carly," Courtney said, her voice, the set of her shoulders—everything about her screamed uncomfortable. "I wasn't expecting you to ask me to lunch."

"Well, I'm glad you're here." Carly spooned some sugar into her iced tea and stirred it. "Michael and Morgan are so excited to spend the afternoon with you—Rocco is bringing them by later. I wanted to...I wanted to apologize."

“Okay.” Courtney set her tote down. “For what?”

“For the last time we spoke.” Carly bit her lip, trying to appear contrite. “I...I’ve just been frustrated and I haven’t really been listening to anyone else. I *know* you only have my best interests at heart. The boys’ best interest, even Sonny. Of course... the situation being what it is, it makes sense for Evie to stay where she is.”

Courtney frowned and Carly could see the other woman wasn’t buying it. Not all of it. “The truth is, Courtney, I know this is mostly my fault. I mean, yes, Sonny was wrong to lie to me, but I could...I could have made so many things easier last year.”

Which was partially true. If she had just waited until the paternity test results came in to tell Sonny she was going to rake him over the coals in divorce court, Jason wouldn’t have felt the need to step in. To help.

“Okay,” Courtney said. She glanced up as Georgie Jones emerged and asked for a soda and a plate of fries. “So...you’re not going to ask Jason to give up custody.”

“No, no.” Carly sighed. “It would solve so many problems in the short-term, but they would create them too. It certainly would not make Jason and Sonny’s relationship any better, Jason would probably resent the both of us. Particularly me, if he found out I never believed the lie.”

“And let him fall in love with another child you planned to take away.”

Carly narrowed her eyes at Courtney’s icy words and clenched her hands in her lap. “I suppose he may...consider it from that point of view,” she said, her teeth clenched. “But it was not my intention. It’s not like Sonny discussed *any* of this with me.”

“No.” Courtney’s shoulders sagged and she leaned back in her chair. “No. They both just...assumed your position would remain the same even once Sam had passed away. It should have been brought out into the open.”

“Exactly.” Carly nodded. “I’m just not sure what to do next. It can’t stay like this forever.”

“No.” Courtney sighed. “No, I don’t suppose it can. I just...don’t know what should happen. After all these months, Evie believes Jason is her father—”

This was the least of Carly’s worries. Evie was six months old. Michael had adjusted after over a year of having Jason in his life as a father. The little boy barely remembered those days, and as it was, Jason was barely a blip in Michael’s life now. *Evie* was not her concern. “I think that any change, honestly, has to come from Jason.”

Courtney blinked, surprise in her blue eyes. “You mean, Jason has to suggest changing things—to sign away his rights.”

“Yes. Sonny’s racked with guilt—in his less...stable moments, it’s about abandoning his daughter. When he’s in control? He knows what taking Evie away will do to Jason. What this tension is already



doing. So, you know, he's paralyzed." She sipped her tea. "Jason's going to have to make the first move."

"I suppose...that makes sense," Courtney murmured, "but what if he doesn't? I mean, you don't know what he and Sam discussed. Maybe Jason promised Sam he would keep Evie—"

Carly waved away that concern. "She's dead. Who gives a crap what *she* wanted?" It was that little whore's fault in the first place. "Jason loves Sonny like a brother. He'll come around. He always does, you know that."

"I do." Courtney thanked Georgie as the waitress set her order down. "So, what should I do with Michael and Morgan this afternoon? Anything happening in Port Charles?"

"Well." Carly sat back and smiled. Sometimes opportunities just fell into your lap. "It's a beautiful day. Maybe you should take them to the park."

### **Port Charles Park: Gazebo**

Emily removed the plastic cover from a tray of pastries. "A gift from Cook," she told Elizabeth as she set it on the picnic table.

"Mmmm, they look delicious." Elizabeth looked over to where Lucas and Steven were hanging some streamers from the gazebo. "Not too much. He's only one."

"Yeah, more than three streamers is so passé," Lucas told Steven with a straight face.

"Boys." Maxie huffed as she set down her mother's gift to Cameron. "Let me do this. I swear, if you want anything nice, you have to do it yourself."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes as the blonde teenager took over the decorating duties. "I'm not sure why she cares. She only came for Bobbie."

"It's the principle," Emily told her seriously. She glanced around. Georgie and Dillon were helping Felicia and Bobbie set up the rest of the food and beverages. Audrey was chatting with Monica near the gift table while Nikolas and Alexis were keeping an eye on Cameron and Kristina playing with toys. "It's a nice gathering. Practically everyone you know." She paused. "You're missing some people."

"I invited Lucky and Leyla but they're in New York for the weekend," Elizabeth replied blandly, setting down a blue paper plate.

"Webber."

"Quartermaine."

Emily huffed. "Whatever. I don't even like you." She held up the stuffed giraffe. "Where you do want the centerpiece?"

“Uh, duh, the center.” Maxie stepped up to them and grabbed said giraffe. “Honestly, Emily.”

“Hey, who died and made you party planner?” Georgie demanded, yanking the giraffe back. “You don’t even like kids.”

“Yes, but I like parties.” Maxie reached for the animal again.

“Just think, Elizabeth. One day you’ll have a teenager, too.” Felicia stepped between her daughters, retrieved the animal and handed it back to Emily. “To your corners.”

As both girls separated, Elizabeth smiled and shook her head. “They weren’t bothering me. And considering the placement of the decorations, it’s clear Maxie has a better eye than I do.”

“Still, you have to set boundaries or they’ll try to take over the world.” Felicia smiled and returned to Bobbie.

Emily set the giraffe in the middle of the table. “Anyway. Did you invite my brother?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said, setting out the last plate. “He said he’d bring Evie, but she usually naps this time of the afternoon, so I’m sure he’s waiting until she’s awake.”

“You know when Evie naps?” Emily said.

“Don’t start.”

“That’s...it’s really cute.”

“I will ruin your life.”

“I mean, it’s sweet.”

“Go over there and annoy your fiancé.”

### **Garden Path Near the Playground**

“Uncle Jason!”

At the sound of Michael’s voice, Jason straightened up from fastening Evie into her carriage. He exhaled slowly as he saw Michael running towards him and following behind, Courtney with Morgan in her arms.

“Hey, kiddo.” He knelt down to receive a hug from Michael. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s Aunt Courtney day,” the seven-year-old told him very seriously. “So we’re in the park to play. I’m gonna show Morgan the swings.”

“I’m...” Courtney set Morgan on his feet and watched the toddler follow on unsteady feet after

Michael who darted towards the slide. “Michael, watch your brother!” Turning back to Jason, she twisted her fingers in front of her. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know...I guess I should have because Carly suggested I bring the boys here—” She coughed. “We can go—”

“I’m not...” Jason dipped his head and took a deep breath. “I’m not going to be at the playground. Elizabeth’s son Cameron is...he’s having a birthday party today.”

“Oh.” Her mouth closed, and Jason wondered why she looked hurt. “I...saw you two at the Christmas Party, and I guess...things are going well.”

And now he understood. He opened his mouth to deny it, but then stopped. Because he knew she wouldn’t believe it, and it wasn’t as if it weren’t partially true.

“And look at Evie,” Courtney said, stepping forward. “So much change since I saw her at Christmas. She looks...” Her voice faltered. “She looks so much like Sam,” she finished finally.

He stopped himself from saying that Elizabeth had remarked on that just a few days ago. He stood there, uncomfortable. This was the woman he had promised to love forever, had married.

And divorced.

Who thought he violated their marriage vows by conceiving the baby in the carriage between them.

“I’m sorry, this is weird, isn’t it?” Courtney said finally. “I’m not...” She hesitated. “I don’t *want* it to be weird, Jason. You...were very good to me and I... know things are difficult for you right now. I don’t want to be someone else who makes life difficult.”

He blinked at her and that something weird in her eyes—that reminded him of Carly—it was there when she looked back at him.

“You’re not,” he said finally. “I’m sorry for what happened last year. For...putting you through it.”

“I’m sure it seemed like a good idea at the time.” She glanced over at the playground where Michael was dumping sand on his brother. “I should be with the boys.” Still facing Jason, she stepped backwards toward the playground. “Jason, for what it’s worth, I want us both to be happy. I mean, it just...wasn’t right. I...I really am okay with it.”

“Okay.” Jason gripped the handle of Evie’s carriage. “Are...are you happy in New York?”

“I am.” Courtney nodded, glancing over her shoulder again to make sure the boys were okay. “I really, really am. The foundation is...helping so many people, and I’ve made some friends.” She smiled.

“You should get to your party.”

“Yeah...” Jason waited another moment. “I’ll see you later.”

**Port Charles Park: Gazebo**

Cameron was sobbing by the time Elizabeth placed the small personal cake in front of him with a burning bright green candle in the shape of a number one. The crowd of people singing *Happy Birthday* was not going over well.

“They all do that,” Felicia said with a laugh and a pat on Elizabeth’s arm.

“Look, he doesn’t even know he’s supposed to make a mess.” Emily laughed and took one of Cameron’s arms to plop it into his cake. “C’mon, little man!”

“Maybe he just doesn’t *want* to make a mess,” Nikolas said dryly as he flicked an imaginary piece of lint from his linen shirt.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and plopped Cameron’s other hand into the cake, smearing it a little. The boy looked at her with what could only be described as incredulous expression, then gingerly raised the cake covered fist to his mouth.

“Where does this caution come from?” Emily asked. “Your mother is the most impulsive woman I’ve ever met.” Elizabeth saw her glance at Jason, seated at the end of the picnic table. “Must be the company she keeps.”

The crowd gathered snickered while Jason just offered a bland stare.

“First, I cannot believe you think I’m more impulsive than *you* are,” Elizabeth said. “Second, I taught my kid manners. So bite me.”

“Anyway,” Bobbie drawled. “I remember that Lucas needed a bit of encouragement to start as well, and it looks like Cameron has the right idea.”

The newly minted one-year-old was demolishing the cake now, with pieces of frosting tangled in his brown curls. He grinned at his mother and held out a chunk of chocolate cake.

“No, thanks, baby.” Elizabeth batted it away and reached for a napkin. “Thanks so much for coming everyone, I know Cameron isn’t going to remember it, but I will. It means a lot.”

“Well, if you need a baby sitter,” Georgie began but her sister rolled her eyes.

“You are such a suck up.”

“Shut up, Maxie.”

“Quiet, heathens,” Felicia cut them both off. “Why don’t you help Lucas put some of those presents in Elizabeth’s car—”

“Oh, no, Felicia, it’s not necessary,” Elizabeth began, but the blonde woman just waved her away.

“You’ll learn soon enough, Elizabeth, that the only good thing about having teenagers is putting them to work.” Felicia stood up. “And then you can take down the decorations.”

“I feel like I’m being punished,” Maxie complained as her mother herded the trio towards the table of presents.

“I’m sorry if they’re a pain,” Bobbie began.

“No, no.” Elizabeth shook her head. “They’re good kids, and I know Georgie would be a great baby sitter.” She blinked as the flash from Emily’s camera all but blinded her. “Whoa, Em. What the—”

“Sorry, sorry. I forgot to switch it off.” Emily set the digital camera down. “Just wanted a few shots of my godson enjoying his first birthday cake.”

“Gram,” Steven said. “What do you say we take Cameron over to get cleaned up and he can play with Kristina and Evie a bit more.” He climbed out from the picnic table.

“All right. Bobbie?”

“Sure.” The redhead smiled at them and followed Steven and her grandmother to the table where Cameron’s bag was kept so they could fish out the wipes.

“I’ll get the streamers, Liz,” Nikolas told her. “Did you want to save any?”

“No.” Elizabeth narrowed her eyes as Emily followed her fiancé, leaving her alone at the table with Jason. “Do you ever think you’re the subject of a massive conspiracy?”

“No.” Jason sighed and slid down the table so he was across from her. “But I’m starting to. Wasn’t Alexis here earlier?”

“Mmm…” Elizabeth nodded as she started to pile the empty plates together. “But she was called in with one her clients before you got here.” She paused. “Thanks for coming, I know you hate this kind of thing.”

“I do,” Jason admitted. He slid out of the table, and reached for an open trash bag to help her clean up. “I’ve never really understood birthdays or the point of celebrating them especially when the kids are this young, but I guess it’s not really about that.”

“It’s about starting a tradition,” Elizabeth said. “I remember birthday parties as being one of the highlights in the Webber household. We used to go to amusement parks or really nice restaurants when we were a bit older.” She chuckled as she wrapped plastic around what was left of some hummus dip. “Of course, you had to behave to get those special meals, so *I* rarely got it.” She glanced over to where Cam was toddling after Kristina. “I want something different for my kids. I don’t want Cam to ever feel like he has to earn my love.”

“I’m sure he already feels that,” Jason said. “You’re a good mother.”

“I’m trying to be.” She stacked what was left of the plastic cups on top of each other. “You seemed… quiet when you got here. Everything okay?”

“Yeah.” But he hesitated a moment. “I saw Courtney with the boys in the playground on my way here.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth stopped, her hands frozen around a dish of ambrosia. “I guess you don’t see her much.”

“No.” Jason tossed the last stack of plates into the trash. “Not since the Christmas party. She comes up a few times a month to see Michael and Morgan, but she usually takes them places. I make a conscious effort to avoid her. It’s...I don’t like bringing Evie around her.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. “Is she...angry?”

“No, she’s...” Jason shook his head. “Like everyone else, apparently. Never really thought it was true, but I know it hurt her the way I did things. That Sam moved in with me, and even if people don’t think Evie is my daughter, they thought Sam and I...” he trailed off and shrugged, uncomfortable.

“I get it. I’ve...been in that position,” Elizabeth admitted. “Feeling stuck when it looks the other person has moved on, the whole world looking at you like you did something wrong, like you weren’t enough.” She blinked. “I’m not talking about you...with Courtney. I’m...when I came home last year for Lila’s funeral, I ran into Alexis and Ric in the park.”

“That must have been...difficult.” Jason leaned against the table and glanced over to see that Nikolas and Emily had joined the trio watching the children. Emily had Evie perched on her hip and gesturing widely with her other hand as she said something to Audrey and Bobbie.

“I guess. Our divorce was final by that point, so I don’t know why it felt so...fast. But they’re married now, so I guess maybe she’s able to give him something I just couldn’t. Anyway, I’m glad Courtney isn’t making this difficult.”

“She said she was happy in New York.”

Elizabeth took the garbage bag from him and tightened the twist tie around the top of it. “What about the boys? Was it good seeing them?”

“Yeah. Michael looks good. I—Sonny told me a few weeks ago there’s been some behavior issues, but he seemed okay today.” Jason stared at his hands. “He ran to me and hugged me.”

“You don’t see them much anymore, do you?”

“No,” he said. “To see them, I have to be around Sonny and Carly, and it just...seemed easier not to be.”

“I figured.” Elizabeth shook her head. “It seems unfair. You started this to protect them and now they’re not even in your life. You’re probably the only stable thing in their life—”

“Bobbie does what she can,” Jason said. “And they still have Leticia. She’s been there since they were babies. I know Morgan is closer to Courtney than maybe to his own mother, because she took

care of him so much the first few months.” He glanced up at the blue sky. “They’ll be okay.”

“Maybe. As long as Sonny keeps it together.” She paused, because sometimes it felt like when she asked about Sonny, she was broaching territory that dealt with their business and the last thing she wanted was to be shut down because she wasn’t supposed to know.

“I know what you’re going to ask,” Jason said when she offered nothing more. The corner of his mouth lifted slightly. “And things are okay. *This* week,” he added almost as an afterthought. “It was a bad fight last week, which usually means Sonny draws back and gets things under control.”

“Is it a good thing that he seems to recognize when he’s gone too far?” Elizabeth asked. “That he’s able to control it?”

“I’m not sure. It’s never been like this before. The slide doesn’t last for months, usually weeks. He crashes, and then it’s...over. I’ve never...I’ve never seen him control it like this before, but I don’t know. The...breaks are coming closer together,” he admitted.

“Almost like a contraction,” she said. “Coming closer and closer together.”

“Yeah,” he confirmed after a moment. “It’s a lot like that. I just...I have to keep it together. Once he crashes, once he’s past that, I know I can make it better. I always do.”

If they had been anywhere but the middle of the park, with members of their families and friends gathered only twenty feet away, trying their best not to look in their direction very often, Elizabeth might have reached for his hand or rested her head on his shoulder—offered him some sort of physical comfort. But she did not want to give Emily any ammunition for her snarks.

And she knew that his belief that once Sonny had fallen over that dark edge, Jason could pull it all back together and cobble together a solution they could all live with—she knew that belief was keeping him from making a move at the moment. He wasn’t quite sticking his head in the sand, but it wasn’t far off.

“What are you doing later?” she asked, wanting to lighten the subject and bring some of the fun back to the day. “Are you busy?”

“No.” He eyed her. “You want to take a ride?”

She snorted. “Like you have to ask. Maybe I can hit Georgie up for that baby-sitting she was offering earlier.”

“That...sounds like a great idea.” And this time he reached for her hand, letting his fingers wrap around her palm.

Looking into his eyes at this moment, and knowing that he had sat through this afternoon despite the knowing looks and leading questions about the relationships, she could almost believe...

That this time *would* be different.





# Chapter Twelve

*Something about you now  
I can't quite figure out  
Everything she does is beautiful  
Everything she does is right  
'Cause it's you and me and all of the people with nothing to do, nothing to lose  
And it's you and me and all of the people  
And I don't know why I can't keep my eyes off of you  
- You and Me, Lifehouse*

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*Friday, May 27, 2005*

## **Wyndemere: Ballroom**

This was the part Elizabeth had been looking forward to and dreading. The speech. Nothing like a room filled with Emily and Nikolas's family, friends, and business colleagues to give a woman stage fright. As she listened to Lucky talk about his relationship with Nikolas and history with Emily, she glanced up from her notes to her grandmother's table.

When Elizabeth had spied the seating arrangements, Emily had sheepishly admitted that putting Jason somewhere had been almost impossible but she thought he might not mind sitting with Audrey and Steve, as well as Steve's date and a nurse from the hospital. It was jarring to see her grandmother smiling at Jason and pointing at a photo Jason was holding. Though Jason was not one for photographs, he did carry one of Evie because inevitably, he ran into Bobbie, Monica or someone else he actually liked who asked about her.

And he was sharing it with her grandmother.

At that moment, Jason glanced up and their eyes met. Feeling her cheeks flushed, Elizabeth returned the smile and looked back down at her notes. Since Cameron's party earlier that month, she had all but abandoned any delusion that she and Jason were not traversing the same road they had a few years earlier. The only question that remained was the length of that journey and its final destination. She could not bring herself to hope for a happy ending.

And she could not stop herself from doing so.

She glanced over to find Lucky winding down his speech and raising his glass. After they had toasted and Lucky sat, she rose to her feet, flashing Emily a bright smile before looking at the crowd.

"What can I say about Emily Bowen-Quartermaine Cassadine?" Elizabeth began, raising her champagne glass. "We've been friends since high school and...well..." She arched a brow at the trio seated at the head table with her. "I suppose you could say Lucky and I know where *all* the dead bodies are buried."

Laughter rang out in the large room, but Emily just rolled her eyes because she knew Elizabeth was talking about the actual dead body of Ted Wilson. In the audience, Jason just lightly shook his head. Elizabeth shrugged and continued. “I’ve known Nikolas about the same time as Emily, but he and I did not see eye to eye when I moved here.” She grinned at Nikolas. “I think...I *may* have given you some decent reasons to view me as your girlfriend’s bratty little sister.”

Nikolas coughed lightly with a word that sounded suspiciously like *condoms* and Lucky choked on his champagne.

“But despite the first impressions, I grew to love you both...” Her voice tightened. “So...much. When we thought Lucky had died, I could not have survived those first few months without the two of you. There’s not a word for what’s between us. It’s not just friendship, and it’s not just family. You...” She hesitated. “You’re my people, and I can’t...really think of a better way to say it.”

Emily reached over and took Elizabeth’s free hand in her own. “That works,” she said softly.

“I watched you almost two years ago, when we thought we’d lose you, Em. Thank God you pulled through.” A tear slid down Elizabeth’s cheek. “And even though the road was filled with so many obstacles, it seemed almost *impossible* to keep going. Here the two of you sit, living the fairy tale. Watching the two of you exchange vows today...it gives me hope for myself. For the rest of us. That maybe if we don’t give up, we can have the happy ending, too.”

She raised her glass higher. “To Nikolas and Emily,” she toasted. “And their happiness.”

As she sat down, she caught Jason’s eye and smiled.

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Later, after dinner had been served and the dancing had begun, Emily sighed from the circle of her new husband’s arms, causing him to frown.

“That was *not* a happy sigh,” he admonished and spun her slightly so he could follow the line of her eyes. Unsurprisingly, he spied Jason and Elizabeth standing near the edge of the dance floor, Elizabeth with a glass of wine in her hand and Jason with a pint of beer. “What now?”

“Nothing. I suppose I just wish I could get them to dance, but...” She lightly lifted one shoulder. “C’est la vie. I’ve done all that I can, I suppose.”

“Elizabeth’s toast leaves me to believe that she is quite open to the next step,” Nikolas said. Other men might be annoyed with Emily’s concentration on her brother and best friend on their wedding day, but he saw it for what it was—the overflow of her own happiness driving her to want it for those she loved best. Rather than perceiving it as a distraction from their day, it was an extension of it. “Emily—”

“I know, I know. Worry about the things I *can* control. I guess I can’t help but wish I could create one more opportunity for them.” She peered at him curiously. “How’s your aim?”

And because he knew her so well, he lifted his eyes to the high ceiling of the ball room. “Considering I was fencing in Greece when other boys were learning to throw a ball, unspectacular. I suppose you intend to engineer a bouquet and garter opportunity. Emily, even if you could, they’d both hate it. Having to put a garter on her in front—”

“Oh, no, no.” Emily shook her head. “He would loathe it, and she’d be mortified. No, I thought... giving them a choice of a dance. They can stand next to each other all night and talk, but a dance? A waltz in the arms of your perfect person?” Emily’s fingertips danced on his shoulder. “That could be the crowning opportunity of my career, you know. I could bow out gracefully from their lives then.”

Nikolas pursed his lips and looked back over at his old friend. Elizabeth was resting her arm on Jason’s forearm with a smirk on her face, and Jason’s expression was open amusement. Even he, who had once detested the concept of their relationship, could see the spark. The potential.

And he wanted Elizabeth to be happy. Not to mention his own wife.

He looked back at Emily. “I can’t guarantee anything, but I will do what I can.”

“You are ridiculously fantastic.” Emily broke their dance pose to lean up on her toes and kissed him fervently. The ballroom exploded in laughter and cheers.

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Elizabeth wrinkled her nose as she recognized the martial light in her friend’s eyes as Emily headed towards them. “I think your sister is about to throw the bouquet.”

“Which would explain why she’s coming over here.” Jason nodded and took Elizabeth’s wine glass from her. “She’s just going to start dragging you to the others,” he said when she arched a brow. “I don’t want you to spill the wine.”

“Not like I’ll be wearing this again.” She smoothed a hand down the short chiffon gown. “But I take your point.” She pointed a finger at him. “If I have to do *this*, you have to do the garter toss. It’s only fair.”

“I don’t see how.” Jason shook his head, his mouth curved into that half smile she just wanted to press her lips against.

She sniffed. “It just is.”

“Elizabeth! Time for all the single ladies!” Emily chirped. She grabbed Elizabeth’s hand, and as Jason had predicted, did not wait for an answer.

“If you aim at me, Emily, I’m going to make Nikolas a widower,” Elizabeth threatened as Emily deposited her next to Bobbie, Georgie and Maxie.

“Oh, don’t be a spoil sport,” Maxie chirped, her lithe body clad in a short black satin confection. “Just stand there and don’t move. I’ll take care of this.”

“Shut up, Maxie,” Georgie elbowed her. “Liz is going to get married before you ever find anyone deluded enough.” She flashed Elizabeth a shy smile. “Maxie’s a brat.”

“Bite me, Georgie,” the blonde snipped, tossing her blonde hair out of her eyes. “Let the professionals handle this—”

“I seem to remember,” Bobbie began with a smile, “Mac and Felicia’s wedding.” She looked at Elizabeth. “Do you?”

“Oh, God...” Elizabeth laughed, pressing a hand to her mouth. “I ended up with most of the flowers in my hair, but yes, I do. Wow, that...seems like another life.”

“All right!” Emily clapped her hands from the front of the room. “Let’s get this going. Ladies, try not to murder each other.” She cast one more long look at the group assembled, and Elizabeth saw her narrow her eyes at Elizabeth’s position. Little brat.

As soon as Emily had turned her back, Elizabeth took one long step to the left to avoid Emily’s aim.

Though why she was surprised when Emily released the bouquet of roses and tulips with a decidedly crooked curve towards her, she couldn’t say.

Emily had always known her better than anyone else.

Leaving a pouting Maxie and laughing Georgie behind with their aunt Bobbie to commiserate, Elizabeth returned to Jason’s side, the bridal bouquet tucked in the crook of her elbow. “I could learn to hate your sister.” She sniffed. “In fact, I’m going to ask you not to go for the garter. It’s about time we turned the tables on her. I am not some trained little puppy she can push around.”

Jason frowned and shook his head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, please. Emily’s as transparent as the brain cells in Maxie Jones’ head.” Elizabeth huffed and glared at the bouquet in her arms. “How many times have we asked her to lay off? But does she? Nope. Just keeps pushing. We can’t let her keep having her way.”

“Okay,” he said, drawing out the word as if to indicate he had lost the thread of the conversation. And then he shifted his feet and his uncertain blue eyes met hers. “W-would it be so...bad?”

“Oh.” Elizabeth pressed her lips together. “No. *No*, that’s not—shoot.” Behind her, she saw Nikolas and Emily setting up for the garter toss, but she focused on the man in front of her, hoping she hadn’t, in her annoyance with Emily’s overbearing ways, derailed things between them. They had not really verbalized what was happening between them, but...she knew.

“No, I’m just...” She lifted the bouquet into the air slightly. “I don’t want you...to feel like you...” Her cheeks flushed and she looked away. “I mean, I just want it to...be our...choice.” Her tongue felt several sizes too big for her mouth and the mortification was rising from her cheeks to the top of her head. Christ, was this *really* the place for this conversation?

“It is,” Jason told her. He lifted his hand, perhaps to reach out for her and then a silky blue garter landed in his palm. They both stared down at it, and then turned towards the dance floor.

The group of single men had parted to give them a clear view of Nikolas throwing his triumphant fist in the air and Emily bouncing up and down like a five year old.

“We’ve been double-teamed!” Elizabeth gasped, indignantly.

Emily swanned her way over to them, her hands clasped behind her back, with an innocent smile. “So. That happened.”

“Emily Paige Bowen-Quartermaine,” Elizabeth began, “if you think I am sitting on the chair and letting Jason feel me up in front of a hundred people—”

“Wait, what?” Jason interrupted. “Em—”

“Relax.” Emily waved a dismissive hand. “I have the sense God gave a mule—”

“I’ve seen *no* indication of this—” Elizabeth shot back.

“I have decided to alter that particular tradition,” Emily sniffed. “Instead, I just ask that you join the rest of the world on the dance floor for one dance.”

“Em, can we talk for a minute—”

Emily cut her off with another wave of the hand. “Listen, I’ve decided to bow out of my position as opportunity creator for you guys since you don’t need me—”

“—never needed—”

“Opportunity creator?” Jason repeated at the same time.

But Emily ignored them both. “You don’t need to thank me, just...enjoy what I’ve given you.” She flashed a smile. “Now, it’s *my* wedding day, *I’m* the bride, and you do what I say. Dance.” She took the garter and bouquet from them. “I’ll make sure you get these back, but—”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes, but rather than give into the desire to poke her best friend, she merely sniffed and turned to Jason. “If she’s really going to retire from constantly butting in—”

“Ha!”

“—then we might as well do this.”

Jason sighed and looked at his sister. “Emily.”

She stared at him, blandly. “It’s my wedding day,” she repeated. She pointed at herself. “Bride.”

He held out a hand to Elizabeth. “She’s right.”

And Elizabeth had decided to stop protesting because she wanted to dance with Jason after all. They’d only danced once before and it barely qualified as she’d been pretending he was Lucky.

*Used to be that I believed in something  
Used to be that I believed in love*

They stood in front of one another for a moment before Elizabeth raised her hands to his shoulders and he gingerly grasped her waist, the heat of his hands burning through the thin layers of chiffon to her skin.

Trying to ignore the fact that she knew people were staring at them, she pitched her voice low. “Jason, I just...don’t want you to feel forced into anything. Emily thinks she knows best, but she doesn’t—”

“Forget about Emily,” Jason responded, his voice low and almost raspy. “It’s just you and me here.”

“Right.” And just like that, Elizabeth did forget about the rest of world. She slid one hand closer to his neck, lacing her fingers through the short blond hair at his nap, the other hand resting just above his heart. “That’s usually the way it works best,” she murmured, her eyes catching his.

*It's been a long time since I've had that feeling*

He exhaled slowly, and drew her closer. “Elizabeth—”

*I could love someone*

“No, I’m sorry.” She shook her head, not wanting to disrupt the status quo, realizing too late that this was why she had procrastinated in moving to the next step.

*I could trust someone*

Admitting they wanted more had been the stumbling block for years, tripping up their friendship and derailing any chance of that intangible something more. She wanted his friendship almost as much as she wanted more. And if they tried for that next step and failed again...

She just knew it would be the last time they would be in this place.

*I said I'd never let nobody near my heart again darlin'*

“We...have to talk,” Jason said, his thumb moving along the base of her spine. “There...are things I want to say to you. Things you deserve to hear.”

*I said I'd never let nobody in*

She bit her lip and dropped her eyes to look at the collar of his tuxedo. “I...want to hear them,” she confessed, her heart pounding so loudly that she could barely hear the strains of the ballad to which

they danced. "I'm...just...I'm scared, Jason."

*But if you asked me to*

"I know." And though his voice was uncertain, his grip remained strong. He pressed lips together for a moment. "Let's...do you know the garden? Is there some place..."

"Yeah." Feeling as though her heart had climbed into her throat, she nodded and gestured towards the doors that opened onto the terrace. "Let's...go...out there."

### **Wyndemere: Gardens**

Neither spoke as Elizabeth silently led him through the vast and elaborate English-styled gardens of Nikolas's estate. She stopped in front of bench tucked into the shadows, away from the light and sounds of other guests in the gardens, the strains of music just barely audible from the house.

Was he ready to do this? To take that next step? It would be a major change, and to his chagrin, Jason couldn't remember the last time he'd set out to do something with deliberation and thought.

*I just might change my mind*

For weeks now, he had weight the possibility of asking for more, asking her to stand by him but his troubles with Sonny and the pressures of his life choices had continued to hold him back.

*And let you in my life forever*

But tonight, he had seen the uncertainty in her beautiful eyes and he knew that the more he held back, the less sure she was of how he felt, and for the first time in years, he wanted to tell her what she meant to him.

To try to put into words her place in his life and the way she lit it up.

*If you asked me to*

"Elizabeth..." And then he faltered. Because one thing had remained the same despite the passage of nearly five years.

He still didn't have the words.

She smiled hesitantly and turned slightly on the bench. Her shoulders shook, and belatedly he realized that her short strapless dress did not offer much protection against the chilly spring night of upstate New York. He drew off his tuxedo jacket and tucked it around her shoulders. "Is that better?"

"Thanks." Twisting her fingers in her lap, she cleared her throat. "It's...so hard to know what to say, isn't it?" she confessed, her voice barely above a whisper.

*I just might give my heart*

“These last few months...” Jason hesitated again. “You...with Sonny and Evie...” He shook his head, frustrated, wishing for the first time in his life he was more like other people with charm and smooth words. She deserved those pretty words, deserved them from someone who meant them. “I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

“All I did was listen,” she murmured. Her eyes left her lap, but he couldn’t quite see them in the shadows.

“Not just that...” He looked away then, towards the garden path. “I don’t know how it’s going to work out...with Evie. With my job.”

He looked back at her. “And sometimes...it seems unfair to ask...to even think about asking you...with everything that’s going on.” Again, he shook his head. He used to be a man of few words, used to saying what he thought, going after what he wanted.

When had that changed?

*And stay here in your arms forever*

“Jason...” She leaned forward and covered his hand with her own, her cold fingers wrapping around his larger ones. “None of that matters to me. I mean, yes, it does in that sense that I hate that you have to go through it, but it would never be a reason I would step back.”

*If you asked me to*

“I know.” And he did—he knew the reasons he would hesitate to step forward would not matter to her, but for the first time, he wondered if she harbored any doubts, if the uncertainty he felt was his alone.

“Jason...” As if reading his mind, she squared her shoulders. “I know that our...that...I’m an issue for Sonny.” Her tongue swept across her top lip before she drew the bottom one to nibble it on. “If I...agitate Sonny, and I suppose Carly by extension...what does that mean when things...are different?”

*If you asked me to*

He shook his head. “I-I don’t know what you mean. And you don’t...agitate Sonny.” Jason hesitated. “It’s not even you. It’s just...he resents anyone in Evie’s life that isn’t him. He just...when he gets into one of those moods, when he’s not in control, when he wants to lash out at me, he uses you. Because he knows it’s...” He shifted. “It’s the best way to get a rise out of me.”

“I suppose that wouldn’t change even if we didn’t...” She looked down again. “Sonny and Carly have always been at the center of your life, Jason. And I would be lying if I didn’t wonder...if we were reconnecting because they’re not in your life the way they were.”

“I...don’t know the answer to that.” After a moment, he continued. “Would that matter? They’re...not in my life. We’re not close anymore.”



*Somehow ever since I've been around you*

“But you’ve been on the outs with Sonny before,” Elizabeth continued. “I don’t want to wake up one day and…” A tear slid down her cheek. “And be alone. Like I was every day in the penthouse. You chose Sonny’s stability before. I understand why,” she said quickly when he opened his mouth to protest. “It was a dangerous time, and I don’t… I want you to know that I understood. I even accept it. But… I can’t pretend I don’t worry about it happening again.”

*Can't go back to being on my own*

He dipped his head, because he didn’t know what to tell her. He had deliberately chosen to lie to her in order to preserve Sonny’s sense of peace, in order to prove his loyalty.

Could he really promise he wouldn’t do that again?

*Can't help feeling darling since I've found you*

“You won’t have to because I already chose you,” he said finally. She frowned and shook her head, and he knew he would have to admit just how damaged his relationship with Sonny was.

*That I've found my home*

“Jason—”

“Sonny has made it clear during those bad moments that he believes I’m not loyal to him, that I would rather have you in my life than placate him.” He hesitated, because it felt unfair to his partner to paint in him that light. “But in his clearer moments, Elizabeth, when he’s the Sonny I remember, he doesn’t see it that way. He worried for your protection when he found out Johnny Zacchara was at your showing.”

*That I'm finally home*

“I know that something isn’t right with Sonny,” Elizabeth murmured. “And I know how difficult it must be for you, even for Carly and the boys, when he hasn’t been stable in months. I suppose… I just…” She sighed, her breath shaky, as she turned her eyes away and looked towards the garden path.

“I spent most of last year putting myself back together after several terrible years of bad choices and devastation,” Elizabeth said. “And while I won’t lie to you and tell you I didn’t love Ric… it wasn’t…” She pursed her lips. “He didn’t… it’s not like it is with you.” She slid closer. “You and I have been in each other’s lives so much longer than we’ve been friends. We have a history, Jason, and we’ve already… lost each other more than once. I’m afraid that if open myself up… I’ll just lose again. Like I always do.”

*I said I'd never let nobody get too close to me darling*

Jason opened his mouth, but then closed it because he didn’t know what to say. How could he

promise her anything concrete when he didn't know what would happen? He had also experienced a bad marriage, had buried a friend and his grandmother, watched two of his most important friendships crumble in front of his eyes.

Nothing was guaranteed.

"But," Elizabeth continued, "I know that we would never be sitting in this moment if you didn't..." Her fingers tightened around his. "Things have been difficult with Sonny for months, and even though it would be easier for you to step back, you didn't. So I have to trust that. It's just...it's hard, Jason, to open that door when I can't be sure what's on the other side."

"I know it is, and I can't promise I won't ever hurt you. I can try not to, but—"

"Life happens." She was closer now, and though her eyes were wet with tears, they were shining. Her lips were curved into a small smile. "We can...we can promise to try."

And he recognized the old words from the last time they had been in this moment.

*I said I needed, needed to be free*

"I can promise that," he murmured, cupping her cheek gently.

"You know, we keep ending up in this moment," she murmured, their lips mere inches apart. "If I believed in fate, I'd say it's trying to tell us something."

*If you asked me to*

"What do you think that is?" he asked, his thumb brushing her bottom lip.

Her smile broadened and in her eyes, something lit up.

*I give you my world*

"To stop talking," she said, fisting her hand in his tuxedo shirt and closing the distance between their mouths.

*Everything, everything*

Her lips were warm and sweet against his. Jason slid his hand into her loose curls, pressing her closer. His tongue traced the fullness of her lip before dipping inside to deepen the kiss and finally taste her the way he had wanted to for years.

*If you asked me to*

He drew back slightly after a long moment, her breath heavy against his lips. "I never thought we could be back here," he murmured. "Thank you for coming home last year."

“Thank you,” she whispered, nipping at his lower lip. “For giving me a ride home five years ago.”

*Just ask me to*

# Chapter Thirteen

*Take my hand, I'll teach you to dance.  
I'll spin you around, won't let you fall down.  
Would you let me lead? You can step on my feet  
Give it a try, it'll be alright  
- All About Us, This Is We*

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*Tuesday, June 7, 2014*

## **Warehouse: Sonny's Office**

Something had changed.

Sonny sat behind his desk and studied his partner, the man whom he still called friend though he had a feeling that was more of a label than a description.

And something was different about him.

Could he ask Jason? Had things been quiet, even stable between them long enough? The last blow up had been more than a month ago, the blow up about Johnny Zacchara's surveillance. Sonny had continued making his lists to control his conversations and had taken to locking himself in the maid's room at the penthouse when Carly was at the club and the kids were gone. In that room, he allowed himself to rant, to rave, to scream.

He let the emotions out, hoping that the release would control them. And they were, to a certain extent. He exerted complete control in the areas he could—he carved more time out to cook, concentrating on teaching Michael to eat healthier and spending more time with him in particular.

To keep control in his personal life, so he could keep his cool during business meetings.

He could do this.

Sonny cleared his throat and glanced at his list. Jason. Mickey. Trucks. He could do this. "Ah, your sister's wedding went well, I guess."

Jason nodded, his expression guarded. "It did, she and Nikolas are in Greece for the honeymoon." He shifted, looking almost uncomfortable. "I haven't been by since because—"

Sonny held up a hand. "If there was something to report, you'd tell me." He laid his hands flat on the desk, because sometimes just that centered him. "Um, you doing okay? I mean..." He paused. "Elizabeth doing okay?"

Jason didn't answer right away, but Sonny didn't let the irritation rise, didn't feel it crawl into his throat. Maybe it was going to be okay. He had worked hard the last few weeks to get himself under

control.

Once he could control the dark moments, he could eliminate them.

‘She’s fine,’ Jason answered finally. ‘We, decided, ah...’ He glanced away, seemed to make some sort of internal decision before meeting Sonny’s eyes. ‘We’re seeing each other.’

This was not going to be a problem. Elizabeth was a good woman with a beautiful child. She had always cared for Jason, would be good to him. Would be good to Evie.

And Sonny, above all, knew that he wanted what was best for Evie.

He knew he wasn’t. Not until he could control himself.

‘Good,’ Sonny said finally, hoping it had not taken him too long to answer, but Jason seemed to understand that that extra pause was a good thing. He was thinking before he spoke, weighing his words. ‘Ah, it’s nothing I didn’t expect to hear, but it’s good, you know? I know you don’t believe me, but I always liked her.’

‘I know. She...’ Jason shifted again. ‘She said the same about you.’

‘Good, good.’ Sonny crossed Jason’s name off the list. ‘You haven’t reported in about the surveillance, so I figure we don’t know anything new.’

‘No.’ Jason shook his head, and now the frustration Sonny had been feeling filtered into his expression. ‘We’re not closer to figuring out who took the truck and took out Mickey. The Ruiz brothers are in Miami, no movement from them. No unexplained meetings or calls. I told Roscoe to stay on it, to see if I could move another man down there to cover one of the brothers.’

‘And...the Zaccharas?’ Sonny asked. He would make it through this. If Jason told him Johnny wasn’t involved, this time Sonny was determined to trust his judgment. Jason had no reason to protect Johnny, this man had met Elizabeth who was no longer just a friend.

Jason sighed. ‘I had Jimmy on Anthony. No movement there, but Anthony doesn’t leave Crimson Manor that often. People come to him. Nothing out of the ordinary, according to him, but it’s tough. Can’t tap his phones because there’s always someone there. He’s looking into ways to get more information. I told Stan to get some tech help, so Stan found someone to take on that work. I’ll know more in a week or so.’

He was quiet a moment. ‘I talked to our Johnny about Johnny Zacchara, and he recommended Francis. So I pulled him up from the island. He’s covered Zacchara, but mostly it’s galleries and restaurants when the kid is in the city. He’s in Port Charles often.’

‘How often?’ Sonny winced when he heard the sharp tone in his voice. No. Let him finish.

‘A few nights a week,’ Jason admitted. ‘His girlfriend has a place, Zacchara is there most of the time.’ He stopped for a moment. ‘He goes to Luke’s a lot. And he was at Jake’s one night, playing

pool.”

Something in his voice had shifted there. There was something Jason wasn't saying. “And?” Sonny demanded. He didn't notice that his hands were balled into fists.

“And he played a game of pool with a guy who used to work for Alcazar,” Jason admitted. “But Francis seemed to think Johnny didn't know the guy. He came in late, his girlfriend was already there with some friends from work. He played the game to kill time and then he left with Nadine.”

“You didn't think to lead with this?”

How the hell was he supposed to trust the bastard when Jason kept lying to him? And damn it if it wasn't a lie to tell them they had nothing to go on.

“I didn't...I know how you were going to look at it,” Jason said, but his tone was placating, Sonny could fucking hear that endless note of patience. Fucking Sonny is crazy again, just be calm, just be measured.

He wasn't a damned child.

“You keep telling me this son of a bitch is innocent,” Sonny snarled. “Why the hell can't you see it? He's the only enemy running tame in my territory, he's around when shipments go missing, when trucks get hijacked. He's talking to Alcazar's fucking men, and you're telling me the little shit is innocent?”

He was out of his chair now, his balled fists on the desk as he leaned forward.

Jason dipped his head, and Sonny hated him in that moment because the bastard was just trying to think how to answer him, how to keep Sonny calm.

“What do I have to do to make you see I know what the hell I'm talking about?” Sonny continued, his voice rising. “Haven't I made sacrifices to show you I'm in control, but you keep fucking treating me like I'm going to lose it, like I don't know my own organization. Damn you, Jason, I gave you my daughter. When the fuck are you going to start trusting me?”

Jason raised his head but the placating expression was gone, his eyes were angry, his mouth tight. “You think you gave me Evie?” he retorted. He also got to his feet, his clenched fists at his side. “Is that what you think happened?”

Taken aback by the tone because Jason rarely confronted him, Sonny straightened. “What do you call it?” he snapped. “You have her, I don't.”

“I call it cleaning up another one of your goddamn messes.” Jason stepped forward. “I shouldn't have changed those results. I admit that was a mistake. But you kept it going. You decided that I was right, that Carly would destroy those boys in the divorce. You strung Sam along, making her feel like trash, making her feel like Evie would always be an afterthought to Michael and Morgan.”

“And you didn’t reassure her, did you?” His head was spinning, his blood spoiling. “You fucking took your chance to have your own family. Were you fucking her after all?”

Jason shook his head, the disgust on his face clear. “She died pleading with me to keep her daughter from you. And I promised her I would take care of Evie. But if you had wanted her that night, if you had asked me to sign over guardianship, I would have done that, Sonny.”

“Oh, but now it’s too late?” Sonny stalked around the side of his desk and jabbed his finger at Jason. “Is that what this is? You taking a stand, Jason?”

“What do you want me to say?” Jason spread his arms out wide. “You made the decision to let it stand. You chose to leave Evie with me. You didn’t give her to me, you just kept your life from blowing up.”

“This is payback for Michael isn’t it?” Sonny demanded. “For taking him in, for adopting him. He was yours—”

“He was never mine.” Jason’s hands fell to the side. “And Evie’s not mine. Not really. But she was Sam’s. What did we always say about Carly’s right to keep AJ out of Michael’s life?”

“Don’t you fucking turn this around on me—”

“I’m not. You want me to take a stand, Sonny? Fine. You used Sam and made her feel like nothing. You signed paperwork without reading it, and terminated your parental rights. And you chose to let that stand when you learned that I had guardianship and you were nothing to her.” Jason stepped forward. “Sam made her choice. And you made yours. You’re going to have to live with that.”

Before Sonny could say something—anything—Jason had slammed the door behind him.

Son a bitch.

### **Port Charles Municipal Building: Hallway**

“Thank you again, Ms. Webber,” Mayor Garrett Floyd said as he walked her out of his office. “That painting is exactly what I wanted.”

“Well, I’ve never worked on commission before,” she admitted as they stopped in front of a bank of elevators. “But I was intrigued by your request. Just a lot of blue.” She readjusted her purse strap. “I’m glad you like it.”

“We’re very proud of you, Ms. Webber,” the mayor told her. “One of the new leading lights of the art world is a hometown sweetheart. I want to make sure everyone sees my Webber original.”

Because now he had amped up the charm, and his hand that been casually guiding her forward on her upper arm slid down to cup her elbow, Elizabeth sighed. Well, at least he paid first. She stepped back.

“It means a lot that so many in town have been supportive of my work,” she remarked. “Did I tell you that Jason Morgan was at my showing in New York?” She laughed, the sound almost artificial. “He should have known with our relationship, I would have just given him the painting.”

Floyd’s hand dropped to his side, his smile disappeared. “Your, ah, relationship.” One giant step back. “Ah, yes. I remember hearing something to that effect. Well, then.” He coughed. “I’ll just...have a nice day, Ms. Webber.”

“Sack of crap,” she muttered when he had turned the corner back to his office. She jabbed the down button.

“Nicely done, Elizabeth.”

It was the first time in more than a year she had heard his voice directed at her. She slowly turned to find Ric standing there, in a suit and carrying a briefcase.

“Ric,” her voice still flat from her conversation with the mayor.

“I’m sorry.” And now he shifted, seeming uncomfortable. “I know...that we had, I suppose, an unspoken agreement to just...co-exist without interaction—”

The doors slid open, but Elizabeth just stood there. Better to let him get this done so she could go home, feed Cameron, and then meet Jason at Jake’s.

That’s all she wanted to do right now, particularly after dealing with the oily mayor and now seeing her ex-husband.

“We did, and I was satisfied with how that was working out.” She switched her bag to her other shoulder, just to have something to do with her hands. “What’s changed your mind?”

“I, ah, didn’t want you to hear it from anyone but us, because I just...” Ric exhaled harshly. “I’ve never been good to you, Elizabeth. I didn’t know if you’d even care, but—”

“Spit it out, Ric. I have other things to do with my life.” She folded her arms in front of her, her heeled toe beginning to tap against the marble floor.

“Alexis and I are having a child,” Ric said quickly. “I just—”

Her hands fell to her side, her mouth parted. “Oh.” Her stomach twisted, but she couldn’t understand why. “Well, that’s nice.”

“I just...” His hand reached out, but dropped before he could finish extending it. “I wanted to...make amends. To make sure that...everything is okay.”

“That what is okay?” Elizabeth retorted. “What do you want from me, Ric?”

“I—” He looked away. “I just wanted you to be happy—Alexis mentioned that you were seeing Jason



again—”

“What I do is none of your business,” Elizabeth cut in. “Do you want me to wish you happiness, Ric? Tell you all is forgiven? Is that what you need to hear?”

“Elizabeth—”

“How about this?” She hit the elevator button. “I don’t think about you much at all, Ric. You’re out of my life and that’s just the way I like it.”

## **Jake’s**

Jason straightened and turned away from the pool table when he heard the outside door to the bar open. Elizabeth walked in, took in the empty room, dumped her purse on a chair and walked straight towards him. When she wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her head to his chest, his arms automatically slid around her shoulders.

“Hey. Bad day?”

She nodded, and some of his own anger and frustration slid away in response to hers. How often in the last few weeks had she listened to him talk about his problems with Sonny and Carly without asking for anything in return?

He slid his fingertips down the soft, thin material of her light purple sun dress. “What happened?” he asked.

“God.” Her voice was muffled. “The world.”

“Okay.” He released her for a moment in order to set his pool cue awkwardly behind him on the table, before tilting her chin up to look at him. “I thought you were dropping a painting at the mayor’s.”

“I did.” She glanced away. “That was fine. I mean, he hit on me afterward, but—”

Jason scowled and stood up straight, dislodging her temporarily. “What?”

“Don’t worry, that was just...a minor annoyance.” She waved a hand. “I only had to mention your name before he turned as white as a sheet and hurried away.” Her hands slid from his back to the belt loops of his jeans. “I don’t think I’ll be hearing from Floyd again.”

Setting that aside, Jason nodded. “So what happened?” he asked again.

Elizabeth tilted her head back, her hair falling like a waterfall down her back. “Ric was there.”

Stupid little piece of scum. This world would have been a lot better if Jason had been allowed to wipe him from the planet years ago. “What did he do?” he demanded. “I can take care of Ric—”

“It’s not him so much as...” She pursed her lips. “He wanted to tell me that Alexis is pregnant, because he thought it would bother me if I heard it from someone else, like I’d be blindsided.” She rolled her eyes. “God. As if I spend my time thinking about him and his new wife.”

“Okay,” Jason drawled, tilting his head. “So if the pregnancy doesn’t bother you...”

“It’s just...” She shook her head and looked down. “I hate seeing him. I hate remembering who I was when I was with him—” Elizabeth wrapped one arm around her waist and used the other to cover her eyes. “How little I must have valued myself to swallow his lies, to believe in him—”

“Hey.” He reached for the hand over her eyes and took it between both of his own. “Hey. Don’t do this to yourself.”

“It makes me angry, Jason.” Now with her chin tilted up, her eyes flashing. “How could I do that to myself? To let myself be degraded that way? I let myself believe that I deserved to be used, that I couldn’t do better—”

“But you don’t believe that anymore.” His chest burning, he gripped her hand more tightly. He hated watching her do this to herself, to castigate herself for a mistake that she’d already fixed. “You told me that yourself, remember?”

“I know.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I know. I just...sometimes I forget. I was standing there, listening to him talk about amends and how he wants me to be happy—” She rolled her eyes. “And I just...don’t know how I let that happen to me.”

“You have to forgive yourself,” he told her. “You said it was easier when you and Ric just ignored each other’s existence, but it’s clear that’s not going to be an option.” Unless Ric did something that warranted him being tossed from a moving car. “So you’re going to have to forgive yourself.”

“I...” She pressed her lips together. “I did, Jason. I-I told you that I was in therapy last year, that I realized why I was with him—”

“Knowing the reasons why is different from forgiving yourself. Elizabeth, you did the best you could. You saw it was wrong, and you got out.” The back of his hand slid down the soft skin of her cheek before sliding into her hair. “You started a new life. You told me that you had finally stopped seeing yourself as broken.”

“I know.” She swiped at her eyes. “God. I know. Maybe I left therapy too soon. It’s so easy to say I’m past it all when Ric’s not in my life. But it’s arrogant to pretend five months of therapy can solve years of unhealthy choices.” Her smile was shaky but genuine, so the tightness in his chest eased.

“I just...wish you could see you the way I do.” He brushed his lips lightly against hers, feeling some of the tension bleed away from her shoulders. “You’re so strong.”

She huffed and looked away, but her cheeks flushed slightly. “Jason—”

“It would have been so easy to stay in California. You were making a good life for yourself there. I

know Port Charles holds a lot of bad memories, you didn't have to come back and face them." He tilted his head a bit, trying to meet her eyes. "Elizabeth, I know it's...going to take more time, but you can't keep looking at Ric Lansing and blaming yourself. You're better than that, and you deserve more than that."

"I know." She nodded. "I do know that. I came home to get my life back, because staying away would be like running away. And I'm so glad I did." Her fingers gripped the material of his shirt. "Because I found you. And this...being with you, has been worth it. I'm not just talking about the last week or so, but since the minute I sat down on the bench last winter..." Raising herself up on her tips of her toes, she pressed her lips to his.

"I'm glad," he murmured.

She drew back after a moment and glanced around the bar. "Where is everyone anyway?"

"I...paid Coleman to close the place for the night." Jason gestured towards the table where she had dumped her purse. "Do you want a beer?"

Elizabeth frowned and eyed the vodka bottle next to the open bottle of beer, with a few shot glasses next to it. She looked back at him, her arms sliding away from his waist. "Did...did something happen today?" she asked. "It's...not like you to close the place. You...like the atmosphere here. You told me no one bothers you here."

"I just...didn't want to be around people," he said after a moment, but he already knew he was going to tell her what had happened earlier. It was too important not to, but he'd hoped to wait a little longer. Their relationship could never be normal, but he'd hoped for something resembling it tonight.

"Okay." She drew in her bottom lip. "I...did you want to talk about it?"

He sighed and reached for the pool cue. "Not really. Do you want to play?"

"I'd rather watch you."

As he lined up a shot, Elizabeth took one of the empty shot glasses, filled it with vodka, and tossed it back like it was water.

"Do you remember the last time we were in here?" she asked after he had taken the shot and sent two balls into the corner pocket. He glanced up to find her leaning over the table slightly.

"Uh...yeah." He stood and rounded the table for another shot. "The last time I came home."

"Mmmhmm..." Elizabeth walked towards him, her fingers drifting over the cheap wood the table. "You taught me to play."

"I tried." Jason straightened and turned as she approached him, setting the cue on the table. "You weren't really paying attention." And they'd been interrupted, but he wasn't going to say that. That was before, and it didn't matter now.

“Well, I was very distracted.” She stepped in front of him, and turned so that her back was pressed against his front. She reached for his hands and pulled them around her waist. “You had your arms around me...” She tilted her head back and he leaned down, brushing his lips on the soft skin just behind her ear. “I could feel your breath on my skin...”

“I wanted to kiss you,” he admitted, his thumbs sliding across the soft cotton, her skin almost burning beneath his skin.

“You have no idea how many dreams...” Elizabeth turned in his arms, her lips a breath away. “How many times I fantasized about that moment, about being in your room...that day you washed my makeup away...” Her fingers brushed over his cheek. “I had this one dream about you and my little black dress...peeling it off with your teeth...”

He was tired of the teasing, of the images of she’d created in his mind. For too many years, Elizabeth herself had been a fantasy, a vision he could not bring himself to trust, to hope for. He remembered that dress, remembered the gloves she had left in his room. He could still smell the scent of her perfume, the way her skin felt beneath his fingers as he watched his face.

Still remember the almost mocking vision of her in his room, smiling at him.

He closed his mouth over hers, his hands sliding to her waist, gripping her hips tightly, dragging her closer to him. Her fists were tangled in his shirt, one of her legs sliding around his waist, trying to get closer.

He drew back. “Elizabeth—”

“Is upstairs empty?” she asked, her hands tangled in his hair. She nipped at his lip. “Maybe your old room?”

## **Jake’s: Upstairs Room**

“When do you have to be home?”

Elizabeth raised her head from Jason’s chest, blinking at him. “Hmm? Oh. No special time. Gram put Cameron to bed for me.”

His fingertips resumed the light stroking of her spine, her toes almost curling from the shivers. This moment...the last hour or so...had been everything she’d dreamed about and more.

“I’ve been trying so hard not to see all of this as a second chance,” she murmured. “Because I don’t really think we ever had a proper first one.”

“Oh?” His hand slid all the way up her back and into her hair.

Elizabeth propped herself up on her elbows to peer more closely at him in the dim light offered by the moon filtering through the old blinds. “I mean, we had chances but...you know, I just...don’t think either of us were ready.” She smiled faintly. “But maybe we were supposed to find each other this

time.”

“I don’t know about any of that,” he said after a moment. “I just know the day I looked up and saw you standing at the bottom of the stairs at the docks...” He hesitated. “I don’t know how to explain it. It was like...finding something you didn’t even know you were looking for or was lost.”

She closed her eyes, her smile spreading. “I know exactly what you mean. I came home to raise my little boy, to be with my family. I told myself I was done with love, with romance because there wasn’t room for it. But Emily was right.”

He laughed, turning flat on his back. “Don’t ever tell her that.”

“Believe me, I’ll save that for when we have a really big fight.” She bit her lip. “She asked me not to walk away from it if I found it again, and I’m so glad I listened to her, Jason.”

“She told me the same thing.” His finger slid over her brow, as if tracing her features, and then fell away. He slid up the back board a bit, so he was sitting up. “I should tell you what happened earlier today.”

Elizabeth drew her legs up, so she was sitting across from him, tugging the sheet over her body. “Another fight with Sonny?”

“Yeah.” He leaned over and switched on the bedside light. He looked weary. “But it was...it was different.” Jason was quiet for a moment. “I know I always tell you there are things you can’t know —”

“And I really get that,” Elizabeth began, but he held up a hand.

“But there’s also things I should tell you because it’s...” He lifted a shoulder. “It’s different now.”

“Like when Johnny Zacchara introduced his girlfriend to us but hadn’t told her anything.”

“Right.” He reached for her hand. “I need you to know the people involved. Your guard will know people by sight, but I want you to be aware.”

“Okay.” Elizabeth nodded. “Whatever you need.”

Jason exhaled slowly. “Without going into detail, there’s been trouble lately. You know that because I put Milo on you a few months ago, but even before that, he was just...I asked him to be around.”

“I figured when I saw him at Kelly’s every time I was there and had never seen him before.” She squeezed his hand.

“Right. Well, we don’t know where the trouble is coming from which makes it difficult because we have to keep our eyes on everyone.”

“And you and Sonny disagree on who to keep your eye on?” Elizabeth tilted her head. “But...hasn’t

that sort of thing always been your strength? What Sonny expects from you?"

"Yeah." He dipped his head. "There's...one person in particular. Sonny is convinced he's the guilty party, but I don't...I just don't see it. I put a guy on him anyway." He sighed. "And this idiot just...does things that doesn't help his situation. Makes him look guilty. And I can't not tell Sonny these things because then it'll make him think I'm keeping things from him."

"And that's what happened today?" Elizabeth asked. "Jason—"

"That's how it started," he told her. "But it...he said that I should trust him, trust his instincts, that he'd been trying to prove that I should by giving me Evie."

"Giving?" she repeated, frowning. "That's...not what happened."

"No," he agreed. "And I told him so. He accused me of sleeping with Sam—" He stopped and met her eyes. "Which never happened, Elizabeth. I promise—"

"I know that," she murmured. She'd heard some snickers, wisps of rumors that she'd been a rebound. While most of the town had never accepted Evie's paternity, they had assumed Jason and Sam were sleeping together.

"It just...he threw Michael in my face, wanting to know if keeping Evie was payback for his adoption...and I told him that he'd made the choice to let Sam's con stand when Evie was born." He closed his eyes. "And he asked me if that meant it was too late for him to change his mind."

She knew how the conversation must have ended for Jason to have waited all night to discuss this but her heart broke all the same. "What did you tell him?"

"That I was choosing my promise to Sam, the way I chose to protect Carly from AJ. I—I had never told him before...about Sam's last request. About her pleas to keep him away. I told him we'd all made our choices."

"You told him you were keeping Evie."

"Not in those words, but he knew that's what I meant." He shook his head. "I didn't even know I was going to say it until it happened. I know we talked about it, about refusing to sign over guardianship. I really didn't know what I was going to do until it happened."

"What made you decide?" she asked softly.

"I thought about what you said at Christmas. About Evie and her best interests. That's...it's what Sam wanted me to do, to protect her daughter. And I don't...trust Sonny. Not the way he is now." Jason drew her closer, his arm around her, her head tucked into his chest. "The thought of putting Evie into Sonny and Carly's care...I can't do it. If Sonny would just...let himself crash so we could dig him back out, maybe."

"But as long as he holds himself in check, you'll maintain the status quo?" Elizabeth asked. "Jason,

what if he calls your bluff? What if he tells Carly?"

"He'd have to sue me for custody," Jason told her. "He'd have to win in court to force my hand. I-I didn't want it be like this. I thought maybe it would be temporary."

Maybe. Or maybe he'd just put his head down and avoided thinking about it, but Elizabeth knew he'd hoped deep down that somehow, some miracle could be wrought to fix the damage. "I know," she murmured. "But you're right. Evie should come first. And you know if Sonny were the man he used to be, he'd see that, too. He went back to Carly for Michael and Morgan, didn't he?"

"He did, but I wish he hadn't." He was quiet for a long moment. "You don't think I should wait for Sonny to make the next move."

"I think..." Elizabeth drawled, "that you probably have enough on your plate without making the situation worse. If you're having business troubles, that should be the focus. I'm sure Sonny, in his more stable moments, feels the same. Find out who's giving you issues. If Sonny wants to push this, if he wants to make an unstable and possibly dangerous situation worse, well then, that's his prerogative." She looked up at him. "I wish I could do more, Jason. I feel like listening isn't enough."

"It's...everything." He leaned down to brush his lips against hers.

Later, as they both reluctantly dressed to return to their respective homes and children, Jason put a hand on Elizabeth's upper arm. "Would you...tomorrow night. I..." He shook his head slightly. "Would you come over tomorrow and spend the night?"

She wanted to. After tonight, she wanted to spend every night with him, but... "I don't know, Jason. Cam is pretty good about my grandmother or my brother putting him to sleep, but he likes having me there in the morning—"

"No, I mean..." He drew her closer. "You said you wanted me to be important to Cam. To be part of his life."

"I do."

"I want you to be in Evie's life. To be important to her." He hesitated. "So I want you to bring Cam over. For you both to be there. I-I can give Nora the night off, she's already off on Mondays."

"Oh." Her cheeks were burning, her heart pounding. She knew what an important step this was, even if Jason couldn't quite articulate it. It was the start of blending their two lives together. Of their children becoming part of what was happening between them.

Did she want to take that risk? To open her heart to Evie, to let Jason be so much a part of Cam's life?

"Of course. I can't wait." She kissed him firmly to show him her hesitation was unimportant. They had a chance to really make a life together and she couldn't wait to find out where it was going.

# Chapter Fourteen

*When the cloud in the sky starts to pour  
And your life is just a storm you're braving  
Don't tell yourself you can't lean on someone else  
Cause we all need saving sometimes*  
- We All Need Saving, Jon McLaughlin

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*Thursday, July 14, 2005*

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Elizabeth glanced at the clock on the mantel and winced. She fastened her earring as she slid her feet into her heels. "I'm going to be so late."

Nora set Evie on the playmat behind the armchair then straightened. "I thought your meeting with your agent wasn't for another hour."

"Yeah..." Elizabeth crossed the room and retrieved her portfolio where she'd stowed it the night before in Jason's office. "But I still have to pack up Cam, drop him at my grandmother's before I can meet him at the Grille."

Nora pursed her lips. "Ms. Webber, did I do something to annoy you?"

"What?" Elizabeth blinked. She set the portfolio on the ground. "Why?"

Nora gestured towards the mat where Cam sat, tugging toys from the basket she kept there. "He can stay with me, Ms. Webber. I'm here with Evie anyway."

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. "But you're her nanny, I mean I know you watched him in New York—"

"But you've refused to let me since you and Mr. Morgan started dating." Nora crossed her arms. "You're always dropping him with your brother or grandmother. Did...did I do something wrong? I mean, if you don't like me—"

"Nora, if I had a problem with you watching my son, why would you think I wouldn't say anything to Jason?" Elizabeth tilted her head. "You're fantastic with Evie. But I don't pay you, Jason does. I don't want you or him to think I'd take advantage of that arrangement. Cam and I...we've got our own thing —"

"Ms. Webber, if I could be real for a second here." Nora held up a hand. "Mr. Morgan pays me an insane amount to hang out with Evie the few hours a day he's not here. In fact, I've been praising the heavens you guys are together since he actually leaves the house at night. I mean, I barely earn the money I make, which is fine, but seriously. One more kid, who's as awesome as Cam, is not taking advantage." She shrugged. "Plus, you're here so much—"



“I mean, I guess it hadn’t really occurred to me,” Elizabeth said. “I...just...I don’t know. I guess in my head, it’s one thing for Jason to hire a nanny, but...” She lifted a shoulder.

“It’s a mom thing.” Nora nodded. “You don’t work full-time like Mr. Morgan, so why would you bother with a nanny instead of baby-sitters as needed. Totally get it. We talked about this kind of stuff in my gender studies class all the time—”

At Elizabeth’s blank look, she explained. “I’m a part-time college student, that’s why I had Mondays off last semester. Anyway, it’s like this societal pressure on a mother. Gender stereotypes.”

“Um. I guess.” Elizabeth scratched her brow. “I mean I guess we could talk about it, but—”

“Let me make your life easier today by keeping Cam.” Nora shrugged. “We can work out any particulars later, but I can assure you I’m already basically overpaid.”

“Hmmm...” Elizabeth rested her hands on her hips. Nora might not realize it, but Jason overpaid her to ensure loyalty and to compensate for guards and security inconveniences.

Still, Nora was already here and Cam liked her. What could it hurt to allow the woman to watch him?

“All right.” She leaned down to brush a kiss on Cameron’s head. “Bye, baby. Be good for Nora.” She paused and then brushed a kiss to Evie’s cheek. “I’ll see you both later.”

Evie grinned at her, and held out a red truck with both her chubby hands. Elizabeth laughed and pressed the button to make the sirens wail. She giggled and then threw the truck.

“Thanks, Nora,” Elizabeth hefted the portfolio in her hand and left.

If she’d waited five minutes longer, she could have avoided the blonde woman waiting for the elevator. She turned to Milo who just shrugged and joined his brother Max who stood next to Carly.

Carly glanced at her as the doors opened. “Elizabeth,” she said stiffly. She glanced at the portfolio. “An art thing?”

The almost pleasant tone took Elizabeth aback for a minute, so she was slow to step onto the elevator. “Oh, yeah. A meeting with my agent.”

Carly nodded and folded her arms. They were both quiet as the elevator slipped from the fifteenth floor to the thirteenth. Carly cleared her throat. “So I guess things are good with Jason.”

Elizabeth glanced at her from the corner of her eyes. “They’re okay,” she drawled. “Why?”

“I mean you and your son are here all the time.” Carly shrugged. “That’s good. I mean, I want Jason to be happy.”

Remembering Jason’s suspicions, Elizabeth just nodded. “Well, we make each other happy.” Maybe she was baiting the harpy, but a pleasant Carly was a plotting Carly.

And a plotting Carly did no one any good.

“I figured.” The elevator slid to the fifth floor. Elizabeth had never wanted to see the parking garage more than anything else in her whole life. “It doesn’t bother you, about Evie, I mean?”

“What about Evie?” Elizabeth turned slightly, surprised Carly would address the situation so directly. “She’s a beautiful little girl.”

“I’m sure she is, but you know, people are talking about it all.” Carly shrugged. “But I guess if you don’t *mind* being known as the rebound—”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes as the door slid open and they both stepped into the parking garage. Milo stepped away to talk to the guard to bring around both cars. “Carly—”

“I mean, he was screwing that whore all of last year. They were planning a family together. It doesn’t bother you that Jason’s dumped you in her place?” She arched a brow. “He went and found himself a mother for his bastard.”

What the goddamn hell? Elizabeth stepped towards the other woman. “Are you *serious*? You’re coming at me because Jason and I are together more than six months after Evie’s mother died? What about you? How fast did you spin between Tony, Jason, AJ, and Sonny?” She narrowed her eyes. “And we can’t forget Lorenzo Alcazar.”

“I’m *saying*,” Carly said, her teeth clenched. “I’m surprised you don’t resent being a replacement for Jason’s whore. You know she screwed Sonny, Jason and Jax in about a five minute span—”

“That would be Sam’s business, not mine.” Elizabeth tossed her hair over her shoulder. “You know, Carly, for someone who says they want Jason to be happy, you sure spend a lot of time attacking Jason’s choices.” Lowering her voice, she continued, “Maybe this is a concept you don’t understand but Evie is not Sam, and to paint the daughter with the alleged sins of her mother is so goddamn reprehensible, I can’t even *begin* to see why Jason bothers with you.”

“Please, little Miss Mary Sunshine. I live in the real world.” Carly stepped towards her. “I know what Jason has done for me in my life. I am well-aware of the fact that *everything* I have — my marriage and my boys — is because Jason made that happen. He has protected me for years. You think I’m not grateful?”

“You’ve got a funny way of showing it,” Elizabeth snapped. “Attacking me, attacking Sam, attacking Evie...what the hell is wrong with you, Carly? You’ve got your precious marriage, your penthouse, your club, and your gorgeous boys. Why the hell are you so unhappy?”

Carly laughed then, a bitter and nearly twisted sound. “Please. Don’t throw stones at a glass house, honey. You and I *both* know what’s making me miserable.”

Her car drew up then. “I hate the way Jason and Sonny are around each other now,” Carly said. “You know how close they were once. How much Jason depended on Sonny, loved him, looked up to him.”

“I do.”

“That’s all gone now.” Carly pursed her lips. “Maybe it’s gone because Jason...” She paused. “Because Jason took Sam away under Sonny’s nose, but we all know when it started. We all know who’s to blame for this.”

Elizabeth drew her brows together. “Carly—”

“You think because I’m a narcissistic, self-absorbed bitch I can’t *see* what’s right in front of my face?” Carly demanded. She stalked to the car, where an impassive Max stood with the door open. “I started it. The night I slept with Sonny. When I let Sonny adopt Michael. I’d even bet money that Jason went after Sam to get her away from Sonny, so *I* wouldn’t destroy him in court over the boys.” She shook her head. “Nothing I’ve tried so far has fixed it. I don’t even know if I can. So here’s my piece of advice to you, Sunshine.”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together and remained silent, because Carly’s behavior was more troubling than she’d expected.

“Make Jason as happy as you can for as long as you can. He deserves it after the bullshit Sonny and I have put him through.” She stopped. “Will continue to put him through. He’s too good for both of us, and you know we’ll destroy him sooner or later. Make him see that. Because the *only* one who can make this stop now is Jason.”

Carly stopped and closed her eyes. “God, I really am a selfish bitch.”

And with that, she slid into the car and Max closed the door. His dark eyes met Elizabeth’s. “You all right, Miss Webber?”

“No,” Elizabeth admitted. “I never know what to think about Carly.”

“Join the club,” the older guard murmured as he slid into the passenger seat.

After Carly’s car had driven out of the garage, her car drew in front of the guard’s station. Milo hurried forward to open the door for her. “Miss Webber?”

She sighed and handed him her portfolio to place in the trunk. “Is this what it feels like when someone declares war?”

“I wouldn’t...know, Miss Webber.” Uncomfortable now, the young man shifted. “But I bet it’s not far off.”

## **General Hospital: Cafeteria**

“Would you mind if I took a seat?”

Audrey glanced up and smiled warmly at her old friend. “Of course, Monica. Join me.” Monica set down her lunch tray as Audrey moved a set of charts to the side. “How are you?”

“Good.” Monica tore open a sugar packet and dumped the contents into her Styrofoam cup. “And... you? Your family?”

Audrey smiled, and took pity on Monica because she knew exactly what the point of this little meeting was. “Elizabeth and Cam are doing quite well.”

Monica’s cheeks were stained with red as the younger woman looked away. “I shouldn’t...but since Lila died last year, I’ve been *so* concerned for Jason. I’ve hoped he would find some sort of happiness, and...I’ve seen them around.” She held up a hand. “Not that I’ve been looking, but they’re at Kelly’s sometimes or...”

“It’s perfectly fine.” Audrey sipped her tea. “There isn’t much detail I can offer, to be honest. Elizabeth plays her cards quite close to her chest. I suppose that’s due to the last few years.” She tapped her fingernails against the porcelain mug in her hands. “I wasn’t always as supportive as I could have been.”

“Do you know how long they’ve been seeing each other?” Monica asked.

“I’d say seriously since Emily’s wedding.” Audrey smiled. “Your daughter is quite the Quartermaine, engineering that bouquet and garter nonsense. But they’ve been...” She pursed her lips. “I know *Emily* would call it circling one another for months. Meeting for talks, I’ve watched Cam a few times while she’s gone on that motorcycle.”

“What *would* you call it?” Monica asked.

“Finding one another again.” Audrey leaned back in the uncomfortable hospital chair, her mug in one hand, her other arm across her waist. “Learning who one another is after all this time. They were both...gun shy, I would say.”

“Hard not to be after what they’ve been through. Bad marriages, in particular.” Monica sipped her coffee. “I always liked Elizabeth, you know. I remember the first time I became aware...that there was something there. Something more than just Emily’s brother and her friend.” She tilted her head. “It was the summer he came home, and Elizabeth was in trouble. Jason allowed Edward to blackmail him in order to get help.”

“Well, I knew they were friends. After Lucky died, I was concerned about that.” Audrey glanced down at her cup, feeling that sick sense of shame spreading through her. “I judged her harshly. Him as well. I didn’t *see* what he could possibly bring to her life after all the loss and hurt she’d suffered. I couldn’t see how he had already helped her. The sparkle was back. The rebellious side that had been all but lost after her...”

“Her rape,” Monica murmured. “I...remember her outcry at Tom Baker’s trial.”

Audrey nodded. “She curled up inside herself for months, only letting Lucky in. Occasionally myself and her sister, but only Lucky *really* broke through that tough exterior. Then, she lost him and I truly thought I would never see my granddaughter shine again.” She closed her eyes and bit her lip. “Until I

saw her getting off your son's motorcycle that fall." Opening her eyes, Audrey looked at Monica. "I encouraged her this time to take a chance if it was there to be taken."

"I'm glad. Because we both know the road ahead for my son is...not so easy." Monica glanced across the cafeteria where Bobbie was laughing with Amy Vining. "This...business with Evie is going to come to a head."

"Sooner rather than later, I should think." Audrey pursed her lips. "But I think Elizabeth will provide him the strength he needs to get through it." She leaned forward. "I can tell you that in the last month, my granddaughter and her son have only spent a handful of nights at home."

Monica lifted her eyebrows. "Oh? It's...that serious? Her *son* is spending time at the penthouse?"

"She comes by to pick up clothes, spends the night sometimes for show but..." Audrey lifted a shoulder. "I wouldn't be surprised if the situation changed soon. If perhaps something more permanent might be in the cards."

"Oh, I wonder if they'd get married," Monica mused. "Do you...think he would invite me?"

"I would think Elizabeth would encourage it," Audrey said after a moment. "Jason's not as close with Sonny and Carly as he once was. He may be more open to a relationship. As long as you didn't push."

"I wouldn't." Monica held up a hand. "I really...I try to take my cues from Jason."

"Anyhow, I don't know about marriage. I think Elizabeth is still quite...apprehensive on the subject, with her failed wedding to Lucky, then that disaster of a marriage to Ric." Audrey frowned. "And Jason's own experience hasn't been much better. But maybe for the sake of the children, they would consider it. It's hard, I suppose. Things are so different than when I was their age."

"Marriage is not always the endgame," Monica agreed. "But yet, they're still quick to jump to it, as if it's some sort of sport."

"I wish I could have been smarter at Elizabeth's age," Audrey said. "To learn how lucky I was with Steve, how I should have cherished our life together. I can see things I could have done differently, things he might have done, even little things."

"Well, Alan and I managed to stay together," Monica mused, "but I wonder if I had to live it again, if I would have done it so much more differently." She paused. "Then again, I wouldn't have Jason if not for the troubles in our marriage"

"True. I often forget he's not your biological son, you loved him so well." Audrey reached out and touched her hand. "He's coming back to you, Monica. Little steps. He's not the same man who woke from that coma or kept Michael from you."

"I hope that's true, but I'm content to see that he's happy." Monica paused. "And while he is not a man who wears his heart on his sleeve, I can see that he is with Elizabeth. I just hope it can stay that way."

## Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

Jason was already home when Elizabeth arrived later that afternoon. She set down the black portfolio and curled up to him on the sofa where he was reading through some files. “Ugh.”

He gathered her into his side and pressed her lips to her hair. “Bad day.”

“Long day.” She snuggled into him. “Where are the kids?”

“Nora took them to the park for a bit. There’s some sort of kid activity she said they’d love but that involved balloons and face painting.” He grimaced. “I decided to skip that.” He stroked her hair, his fingers sliding through the silky strands. “Did your meeting with your agent go badly?”

“No. He’s just *exhausting*.” She drew back. “He wants to schedule another, smaller show for this winter.” She rolled her eyes. “An *intimate* one. No big deal, right? Except he thinks we should hold it at a gallery in Port Charles.”

Jason hesitated. “Do we have an art gallery here?”

“Yes. But it’s kind of low-class, according to Luther—that’s my agent.” She sighed. “And I made the mistake of mentioning how much easier my life would be if I could deal with a gallery closer than New York, which started the argument we had last year. When I told Luther I was coming back here, he wanted me to move to the city because it’d be better for my art.”

He didn’t like thinking about her not coming home last winter, knowing the only reason they were together was her love for her grandmother pulling her back. “Where did things end up?”

“He wants to talk to some of his contacts in New York, to see if anyone is interested in opening a branch up here, with my show as their launching pad.” She wrinkled her nose. “He’s hot to schedule another show as soon as possible.”

Jason didn’t really care one way or the other, but he knew how much it meant to her to make a living from her art, so he nodded. “Is there a reason for that? Do artists do that normally?”

“No, it’s usually a lot longer between shows, but I’ve been really prolific and…” Elizabeth looked down, her fingers tracing a pattern on his jeans. “He wants to capitalize on the changes in my life.”

“The changes…” Jason repeated, not following her.

“Oh…” Elizabeth huffed. “Apparently my personal relationship with you is driving up the prices on the few pieces that remained unsold from my showing, as well as pushing in commissions.”

“Your…” Jason closed his eyes. “Because I’m a high profile alleged criminal.” Was there *any* part of her life his choices wouldn’t corrupt eventually?

“I know, people are *insane*. They’re willing to pay above market value because I have a connection to you.” She bit her lip. “This doesn’t bother you, does it?”

“Doesn’t it bother you?” he responded. “People should buy your wok because it’s good, because it speaks to them. Not because of what *I* may or may not do as a career.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Elizabeth, I didn’t think about it—”

“Hey...” She pressed a finger to his chest. “What did you tell me about that red shoe painting I sold? When I was hung up with the idea that I’d made money of it. What did you say to me?”

Jason frowned. “That other people put the price on it, you just painted it.”

“Exactly. First, let me make this *very* clear to you. The fact that morons are willing to pay more money for one of my paintings because *we’re* dating says more about them than it does about you,” Elizabeth said. “Second, being with you has only made my art better. Luther looked at some of the photos I took of the pieces in my studio that I’ve been working on since April, and he says they show an emotional arc that people will eat up.” She smirked. “Apparently, the darkness, loneliness and isolation of my first show is going to be completely eclipsed by the newfound hope for the future I’ve found.”

Jason scowled. “What *darkness*?”

She laughed, which eased the tightness in his chest. “It’s just art speak. Luther loves the new stuff, thinks it’ll sell even better than the last show. To show emotional growth, it’ll just engage the art world, make them part of the story.”

“I...” He blinked. “I have *no* idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, neither do I. I just paint what I feel.” She shrugged and kicked off her heels. “That was actually the highlight of the meeting for me, even though I knew it would bother you a bit. The downside is this gallery idea — Luther wants me to partner in with whoever opens the branch. To lend my name will apparently give it credibility and popularity.” Her eyes were wide now. “I mean, do you hear those words? My name will lend credibility. Because I have a name in the art world.”

“That’s a good thing, right?” he asked, unsure. This was so out of his realm of comfort, he couldn’t begin to know the right thing to say.

“It’s weird.” She pursed her lips. “Jason, a year ago, no one had heard of me. I was in therapy, mostly feeling like a complete failure except for my beautiful little boy. And now, I’m...” She sighed and closed her eyes. “Now, I’m the toast of the art world, I have my amazing family and friends standing behind me...” Her eyes drifted open and they were sparkling. “I have *you*. I have Cameron and Evie. God, Jason, I am so ridiculously happy that I’m pretty sure I’ll screw it up any moment now. I’m really good at it.”

He leaned forward to capture her mouth in a soft kiss. “I know what you mean.”

“And I’m going to screw it right up now,” she said on a sigh when she drew away.

“What?” Jason frowned. “Elizabeth—”

“I ran into Carly when I was leaving earlier,” she said. “Jason...I think I know what she wants from you.”

Jason sighed, disentangled himself from Elizabeth, and crossed to the window to look out over the harbor. “To sign my guardianship of Evie over to Sonny.”

“Yeah...”

He heard the rustling as she stood. “Jason,” she continued, her voice drawing closer. “I don’t know how much longer we can put off making a decision.”

He turned to face her. “I thought I had. I told Sonny I wasn’t going to—”

“I know what you told him,” Elizabeth interrupted. “But Carly remains the wild card. Jason, I want...” She hesitated. “I want to build a life with you. That’s what all these months have been about. I have always understood how matters came to this point, but I *don’t* understand why...” She dipped her head. “Why we don’t get Sonny some help.”

“You say that like it’s so easy.” Jason folded his arms, feeling uncharacteristically annoyed with her, even though he knew she was right. “You think it’s the first time that’s been suggested?”

“I’m saying that I understand that the situation is difficult,” Elizabeth drew out the words. “That it’s not just about Sonny’s mental well-being. I know if any sign of weakness becomes apparent to the people who aren’t loyal to Sonny, it’ll create problems. You told me you’ve spent years placating him in these moods. I don’t know if that’s going to work this time—”

“I can’t force him to get help.” He shook his head. “Short of that, all I can do is minimize the damage—” He stopped. “What exactly did Carly say to you?”

“She’s *so* angry inside, Jason. She tells me how much you’ve protected her, she even told me that she knows Sam was part of a plan to continue that protection, to protect that boys.” Elizabeth shook her head. “I think she’s still trying to play as if she doesn’t know anything, but I don’t buy it. Her anger towards Sam is so fresh, but Jason...I’m scared for *you*.”

“For me?” Jason shook his head. “Carly isn’t a danger to me—”

“Really?” Elizabeth asked, tilting her head. “All the while she’s talking to me about knowing the damage she’s done, I only see the way her eyes look when she talks about you. And it’s not the way it used to be. Right now, she blames Sam. She blames herself. But we both know Carly isn’t going to play the martyr for long. It’s *not* a skin she fits in well.”

Jason sighed and rubbed his face. “You think she’ll blame me.”

“I think she’s halfway there even if she doesn’t recognize it.” Elizabeth stepped towards him. “You’ve told me yourself—in his good moments, Sonny seems to recognize his reasons for letting the situation stand, but in his worst moments, he blames you. Do you think *Carly* doesn’t see that? She’s so used to you fixing things. If you don’t come through for her, if you let Sonny crash and her world collapses



with him, do you think she won't find a way to blame you?"

"So, what do I do? Sign her away, give Sam's daughter to Carly and Sonny?" Jason shook his head. "I-I can't do that. Elizabeth, I can't *believe* you're asking me—"

"I'm not asking you to do anything," Elizabeth said. "I love Evie, too. And I have a great deal of respect for Sam and her wishes, because I know what it's like to feel disposable, to be desperate to protect yourself and your child from a man who'll just ruin it all. I was married to Sonny's brother, Jason. Do you think I don't *know* the darkness that runs in their family? I want to keep her as far away from Sonny and Carly as possible. Unless Sonny gets some help, he'll never be a fit father."

He had never considered that Ric's brand of insanity might be in anyway related to Sonny's, but again he'd disregarded Elizabeth's own experiences in this. She knew what it was like to be surrounded by someone who was sinking, refusing to see it, refusing to ask for help.

"So what do I do?" Jason asked.

Elizabeth closed her eyes. "I can't...I can't tell you that, Jason. This isn't my world. I don't know the ramifications in your business—"

"Forget that for a minute." Jason shook his head. "Just...if I go to Sonny, lay this all out, tell him Carly knows, and has known for months, and still refuse to give up guardianship, do you really think he'd get help?"

"Or it might make matters worse," Elizabeth said softly. "I know that. And God, Jason, the *last* thing I want to do is make this worse for you, but I..." She pressed her lips together. "Jason, I love you. And it kills me to see you like this. I've never known you to be paralyzed like this."

He walked past her and sat on the arm of the sofa. "I love you, too," he said, finally. "And you're right. We can't build a life together unless we start making decisions."

Elizabeth's eyes softened. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her forehead to his. "I would take this all away for you if I could." Her fingers slid through his hair, and he closed his eyes.

She was right. He'd been living like this for nearly a year, waiting for Sonny to change his mind, waiting for Carly to walk out. Waiting for the situation to explode. He wanted something different in his life. He wanted to have Elizabeth with him, to be with Cam and Evie, to have a family, even if he didn't truly deserve it.

He'd spent too many years walking away from that.

It was time to walk towards something.

"I'll talk to Sonny," he said finally. "But...I can't—I have to wait, make sure he's in control. It's the only way to make sure he listens to me." His hands slid down to her waist, tracing the lines of her body, the feel of her skin beneath soft fabric of her dress. "I'll make it clear. It's time Carly knew the truth, and more importantly, that he needs to get help. Or..."

He paused. "I can pursue adoption for Evie after a year. That's in November. If he hasn't gotten help by then, he never will, and I'm not going to put my life on hold anymore hoping he will."

## **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

It was late in the evening when Carly returned home, annoyed with herself for the confrontation with Elizabeth in the garage. She had tried so hard to keep her cool, to show Elizabeth that she was welcome at Harborview. That she and her son were a good thing in Jason's life.

And instead, the vitriol poured out like it always did. Why couldn't she control herself anymore? She'd blurted out the truth to Courtney all those months ago and it was only because her sister-in-law wanted to preserve the status quo that she'd refrained from telling Jason.

Carly kicked off her heels and lowered herself into the armchair adjacent to the sofa, her head throbbing. She was so tired. To the bone and even the deep tissues of her muscles tired. That kind of soul-shattering exhaustion she remembered when she'd been pregnant with Michael and trying like hell to keep the house of cards from caving in.

Jason must suspect that Carly knew more than she was telling. If he hadn't before now, Elizabeth would surely tell him about the parking garage where she'd almost overplayed her hand.

Behind her, Sonny came in. Her husband murmured something to the guard on the door before walking to the mini bar to pour himself a bourbon. "Where are the boys?"

"At my mother's," Carly replied. She slowly straightened and drew her legs underneath her. "How was your day?"

"Fine." Sonny tossed back the alcohol. "Didn't fight with Jason, so that's something."

And Carly *wanted* to believe it meant something that it had been nearly a month since Sonny's last violent mood swing, but she knew it didn't. He still hadn't had that crash. They were in a holding pattern, just waiting for the next storm.

And she was so close to tossing in her hand and walking away.

No. She could still do this. She'd meant what she said to Elizabeth earlier. Carly had started the damage between Jason and Sonny, and she knew that she'd played a heavy role in the events of the year before.

Jason couldn't keep Evie. It couldn't happen if Sonny was ever going to be the man he was before. Her husband was drowning in guilt, in anger and hatred for himself. Soon enough, that distaste would turn to her because it was her fault.

And Jason would ultimately be the one to end this stand-off, because he held guardianship. He'd have to sign it over for Sonny to start the road back to something normal.

But Carly knew *she* could change the game, and maybe it was time for a fresh hand.

“Sonny.”

He glanced at her over his shoulder, his eyes dark and weary. “What?”

“I know Evie is your daughter.”

# Chapter Fifteen

*Catch the wheel that breaks the butterfly  
I cried the rain that fills the ocean wide  
I tried to talk with God to no avail  
Calling Him in and out of nowhere  
Said if You won't save me, please don't waste my time  
— Falling Down, Oasis*

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*Thursday, July 7, 2005*

## **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Sonny's hand tightened around the tumbler in his fingers. "Say that again," he said softly.

"Sonny, I know Evie is your daughter."

Yes, those were the words but somehow, he still couldn't quite understand them. Couldn't make them register in his brain. Carly knew Evie was his daughter.

"What—" His tongue felt too thick, the words wouldn't form. Sonny turned to look at his wife, at the mother of his children, for whom he had sacrificed so much.

Her face was blank, but her eyes were dark. "I've always known."

His chest clenched, and Sonny set down the tumbler, terrified he might throw it.

"I was content to let the situation stand," Carly continued, standing so utterly still he scarcely recognized her. "I didn't want *any* reminders of that time in our home, and that's all Evie would be. Before Sam died, it just...it made sense to keep it going. Jason is an amazing father—" She pursed her lips and broke eye contact. "And after Sam died, when you still did *nothing* to change it, I said nothing. Because it was for the best."

God. God. Everything he'd done to protect her from the knowledge had been for nothing. He'd moved her back into his home, had abandoned Sam and the feelings he'd felt for her—so that he could protect Carly and the boys.

And it had been for nothing.

"And now?" Sonny managed to say.

"You're...so unhappy, Sonny." Carly clasped her fingers in front of her. "I know it's the guilt over Evie. And I *know* Jason wouldn't even consider changing the arrangement as long as he believed that I was in the dark."

“So what, you think it’s that simple?” Sonny choked off a bitter chuckle and tossed down the entire tumbler of bourbon. “Hey, Jason, that little girl you’ve raised for eight months as your daughter? I want her back now. Forget all the things we said, the promises. *Carly* has decided it’s okay.”

Carly pressed her lips together and took a moment to respond. “I’m...not *blind* to Jason’s difficulty. And that it’s particularly painful considering the position I put him in with Michael all those years ago, but I...did *not* ask him to do this.”

“Didn’t you?” Sonny bit out. He stalked away from her, towards the kitchen. Towards the window. Towards anywhere that wasn’t Carly. “Every time you called him, *every* time you begged him to fix your problems, you don’t think you trained him to jump? You didn’t even have to ask.”

“He was protecting the boys, and I’m ashamed of that, Sonny.” Carly planted her hands on her hips, her eyes accusing now. “But I’m not the one who started this. You moved that whore into our home and then moved her across the hall. Jason just stepped in where you wouldn’t. No one forced you to continue the lie. The slut is dead, Sonny, and still you left your daughter across the hall. You’re going to blame *that* entirely on me?”

No. And wasn’t that the fucking tragedy? He’d loved to cast the blame entirely at Carly’s feet. But he’d been just culpable. He had driven Sam to such desperate measures.

Bitch. Tricked him. Played right into Jason’s hands—

No. Sonny dipped his head. No. He had told Sam over and over again in every way except words that she and their daughter were not as important as his family with Carly.

Sam believed him, so she’d found someone who would love Evie the way she deserved.

“Sonny, we can’t let this continue,” Carly said. “If you are ever going to be in your daughter’s life, *now* is the time to step up. Yes, this is going to be horrible for Jason, and I am truly sorry. But I never told him to do this. I waited, didn’t I? I waited until he wasn’t alone—”

“You’re a fucking calculating bitch, you mean.” Sonny whirled to face her. “You mean you waited until Elizabeth looked like she was going to stick around this time. Her and her son. That’s the bullshit you were spouting a few months ago. You think that her kid can replace Evie.”

Carly huffed and looked away, but that was it, wasn’t it? In her head, Jason had planned a family with Sam and Evie, so Elizabeth and Cam were almost the same thing.

“You think people are replaceable?” he snarled. “You think making sure Jason had another kid in his life would make up for losing one?”

God, what a terrifying thing to learn about the woman to whom you’d sworn yourself to. What kind of life would Evie have with her? Would she ever be more than Sam’s daughter?

He’d known all long that he’d have to choose between a marriage to Carly and a life as Evie’s father, but it was so much more complicated than that. If he walked away from Carly, he ran the risk of losing

Michael and Morgan. Morgan he could fight for, but maybe Carly would keep Michael from him. They would always be in the middle, and Evie would grow up, maybe blaming herself.

No, to protect Michael and Morgan, to do right by Evie, he had to walk away.

His guilt didn't change things. Carly's knowledge just made the situation...less complicated.

"Do you think I'd bring that little girl into a home with *you*?" Sonny said, his voice almost conversational. "Do you think I'd subject her to that?"

Carly's nostrils flared. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means exactly that. You're a decent enough mother to Michael and Morgan, but that's because they're yours." He shrugged and turned towards the window, looking out over the Port Charles skyline. "I don't know if you could ever love Evie that way."

"I *could*," Carly said. "I-I wasn't sure at first, but I know I could. You just...you never gave me a chance, Sonny. You lied to me over and over again."

"I had to."

"To hell with that!" Her voice rose. "To hell with that, Sonny Corinthos! You never gave me a chance! Never! You shot me in the fucking head and then were *surprised* when I didn't immediately leap back into your life!"

He turned back to her. "Carly—"

"You've been punishing me for years now," she seethed. "I was kidnapped, held hostage, electrocuted, shot in the goddamn head during delivery and you think I should have calmly accepted your affair with that piece of trash? Calmly accepted your bastard child? You're so goddamn *delusional*." Her chest was heaving now, her face flushed. "But I could have. I could have calmed down. I could have done so much if you'd given me the chance, but instead you wrote me off. And now you're angry because I never fucking believed your lie?"

Sonny hesitated. There was something in her words that dug at him, because they were true, and he could see them. He could feel her desperation, her own unhappiness. "Carly—"

She shook her head. "For better or worse, Sonny. That's what marriage is. I'm not walking away because it's hard right now. We have two children together. We *can* do better."

He stepped towards her. "I don't know if that's true—"

"I do." Carly swiped at a tear with her thumb. "We just...have to resolve this situation with Evie. Jason—he should know that I know the truth. You know he'll do what he can to help. That's why he did all this, isn't it?"

Sonny nodded and looked away. "I'll tell him you know, but anything else...that's between Jason and

me.”

She nodded. “All right.” She stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked at him. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad this is in the open now, Sonny. We...we can only get better from here.”

As Carly ascended the stairs, Sonny shook his head. He’d kept his temper, had not felt the walls caving in, but that didn’t mean anything. Arguing with Carly rarely...invited the darkness. Carly rarely expected him to be anyone than the man in front of her.

It was the rest of the world he couldn’t control.

*Friday, July 8, 2005*

### **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

Emily dropped her tote on the ground and took the seat across from Elizabeth. “It should not have taken us nearly a month to meet without boys around,” she complained, reaching across to steal a fry from Elizabeth’s plate.

Elizabeth sighed and leaned back. “I know. Between your summer schedule at the hospital, the kids, painting...”

“And Jason,” Emily responded with a beaming smile. “I’m totally cool with you taking time to get that relationship grounded. You guys *needed* some solo time...Georgie! Just the girl I’ve been dying to see. I need a BLT, fries and the largest soda you can get me. Stat.”

“You’ll get it when Don finishes it and not a minute sooner,” Georgie said, scrawling the order on her pad. “You’re not in the hospital.” She glanced at Elizabeth. “You need a refill?”

“Please.” Once Georgie had left, Elizabeth leaned forward. “So...Jason’s going to try to talk to Sonny today.”

Emily paused, another fry in her fingers. “About Evie?”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “I had an odd conversation with Carly, and I just...I have such a bad feeling, Em. You know that Jason and I have suspected she’s known the truth for months.”

“I know, which *never* bodes well for my brother.” Emily wrinkled her nose. “I wonder what she’s up to. I’ve been doing some reading on the symptoms I’ve noticed in Sonny—” She paused as Georgie set down their drinks.

“What do you think?”

“Oh, it’s likely bipolar, I mean there’s nothing surprising there, but it’s all about *which* kind, you know?” Emily sipped soda. “So I talked to a psychiatrist at the hospital, Lainey Winters. I told her about the lightning quick mood changes, the long periods of calm mixed with huge explosions. I also suggested some paranoid tendencies because knowing Sonny as long as I have, he definitely leans that

way.”

“What did Lainey say?” Elizabeth asked, swirling her chili in her bowl. “Does she have any ideas what we should do?”

“Well, she suggested that the subject in question may be suffering from mixed bipolar disorder, which is like experiencing the symptoms rapidly. It explains that scene at the hospital, where Sonny was calm, even embarrassed by Carly one minute, and then lost it on you the next.” Emily dumped some ketchup on her plate. “Lainey suggested I get my friend into treatment ASAP to correctly diagnose him and offer medication.”

“Well, that’s what Jason is going to talk to him about.” Elizabeth tucked a loose piece of hair behind her ear. “If Sonny doesn’t seek treatment by the time Evie turns one, Jason will go ahead and petition for adoption.”

Emily pursed her lips. “He’s giving Sonny an ultimatum? I—I’m not sure if that’s the best idea, Liz. I mean, the thing about Sonny is he’s super paranoid and controlling on a *normal* basis. Any challenge to that, if he’s even close to a breaking point in the cycle could be bad.”

“Well, what are we supposed to do, Emily?” Elizabeth sighed, pushing her plate aside. “We can’t live like this. How can we put a future together? Evie needs stability, and if Jason is her father, then I—” She stopped and looked away.

“I get it. You and Jason are blending your lives together. You’ve got a son without a father, he’s technically got a daughter without a mother. Anyone who doesn’t know the circumstances, you just adopt each other’s kids and move on.” Emily shrugged. “But you guys are paralyzed, because I don’t know if Jason ever really saw himself adopting Evie. Or having a relationship where he’d be planning for permanence.”

“Well, I don’t know about permanence,” Elizabeth said, twisting her fingers in her lap. “I didn’t say anything about that. I mean, it’s just—I spend a lot of time with her, and I know it’s going to break my heart if we lose—I mean, if Jason loses custody—not to mention what it will do to him—”

“Elizabeth, it’s *me* you’re talking to. And you know it stays between us.”

“Em...” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “I’m terrified. For Jason. For myself. For Evie. And even Sonny. What if...what if Carly *never* believed it?”

“You mean, what if Carly’s been manipulating the situation from the getgo?” Emily leaned back in her chair and waited a moment. “Well, then we’re all fucked. Because if Carly’s dropping hints—”

“It’s more than that. I think...I think she’s starting to blame Jason for not finding a better way to fix this,” Elizabeth admitted. “Like, she was okay with it as long as it looked like her marriage would be okay. And I don’t know, if Sam hadn’t died, it *would* be different. Maybe the grief and guilt Sonny has wouldn’t be feeding into this problem he has. But now that it’s destroying Sonny, I think she looks at Evie as a solution.”



“A solution that Jason *should* be offering,” Emily finished. “And the longer he puts off fixing this situation, the more desperate she’ll get. Christ, Elizabeth. What do you think she’s capable of if she turns against Jason?”

“I don’t know. She’s never come this close before. I mean, yeah, she’s destroyed his life with Michael and Robin, then sleeping with Sonny.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “But Jason was collateral damage in those situations. If Carly decides *Jason* is the enemy?” She shook her head. “I don’t know. The last time she declared war like that was Robin.”

“And before that, her mother. Carly’s capable of a lot of destruction when she wants something.” Emily hesitated. “Have you talked to Jason about this?”

“Yeah. I’m not sure how much he buys my theory. You know, despite it all, he still has such a blind spot for Sonny and Carly. I mean, Sonny, I get that. He...” Elizabeth paused. “He told me once that Sonny taught him half of everything he knows, and that Robin taught him the rest of it. That’s who Sonny is to Jason. No matter what happens, Jason will *always* look for that in him.”

“That loyalty has never been deserved,” Emily muttered.

“But I don’t understand the blindness for Carly. I get that she’s Michael’s mother, but at some point... when does that stop being an excuse?” Elizabeth huffed. “I mean, how much damage does Carly have to do before Jason gets it? Carly’s out for Carly. Why doesn’t he see that?”

“I guess you’d have to be around during the accident,” Emily said after a long moment. She bit into her burger and swallowed. “When Jason woke up, the doctors told us his brain damage meant he’d never be normal. Everyone looked at him like some kind of...damaged person. He’d never be Jason Quartermaine again. They saw him as something that needed to be fixed. Something broken, not capable of real human emotion.” Her voice thickened. “And it used to make me so mad when they’d just describe him as brain damaged, like he wasn’t worth it.”

“I know, I used to see the way Taggart went after him,” Elizabeth murmured. “Talked down to him, like he was a child who didn’t get it. I *hated* it. I used to flip on Taggart for it.”

“Carly—she never saw him that way, you know?” Emily tilted her head. “She always saw him as a man. Even more, someone capable of fixing her problems. Even Robin, as much as I adored her and know how good she was for Jason for a long time, she never got past the part where Jason didn’t need constant lessons. Carly—for all her faults—never saw him as a student.”

“I guess. But still. I just...I don’t know. Could Carly turn Sonny against Jason?” Elizabeth asked. “I’d like to believe that even in the worst of his moods, Sonny would see that Jason cares for him, would do anything for him.”

“I know, Liz.” Emily set her burger down. “But the thing is? If Sonny does have this disorder, when he’s in the deepest, darkest part of this cycle, he might not see Jason as a friend, but rather someone challenging him. If Sonny doesn’t get treatment, if Carly decides this is all Jason’s fault, I don’t like where we’re going with this.”

“So should Jason not talk to Sonny?” Elizabeth asked. “Because it’s my fault. I pushed him to do something—”

“I can’t answer that. I can say that I think Evie’s better off where she is. I think you guys should go ahead and adopt her, or at least Jason should.” Emily tapped her fingers against her scrub-clad thigh. “Carly’s toxic. She’ll always be in Sonny’s life because of the boys. The further away Evie is, the better we all are. Jason told me about Sam, about the way she pleaded with him.”

“I think that’s what really holds him back. He could have found a different resolution months ago. Could have challenged Carly on her knowledge.” Elizabeth reached for her iced tea. “But he knew what Sam wanted for her daughter.”

“And Sam’s wishes should count for something. Sonny only wants Evie on his terms. She’s just a baby, Elizabeth, and she deserves the best the world can give her. I don’t see that being Sonny or Carly.”

“I just...can’t see an end point to this.” Elizabeth sighed. “But I also refuse to let it rule my life. I’m going to go forward. I love being with Jason, I love my career. There’s a lot going right. I just...one day at a time.”

“Not sure what else you can do.”

## **Hardy Home: Living Room**

Steven knelt on the floor and reached under the sofa. “Gram, what does the other shoe look like?”

“Honestly.” Audrey sighed from across the room. “It’s a white flat. This is not difficult—” She stopped as Steven drew back, a pill bottle in his hand. “What...what is that?”

“Heart medication.” Steven looked at her. “In *your* name, Gram. What’s...going on?”

“I’m sure I don’t know how that got under there.” She strode forward and reached for it, but Steven held it back.

“Gram. I know this medication.” Steven rose to his feet. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing—” Audrey stopped and closed her eyes. “Okay. I have a minor heart condition, but it’s treatable. I’ve been in good health since I was diagnosed in January—”

“January?” Steven repeated. He handed her the medication. “What is this *minor* condition and why don’t I know about it?”

“I didn’t want to worry anyone. It’s mitral stenosis—just an issue with my heart valve,” she explained. “And I just knew you and your sister would be worried when it’s really not your concern —”

“So Elizabeth doesn’t know either?” Steven nodded. “Well, that’s going to change.” He reached for

his cell phone, but Audrey reached out to grab his hand. “Gram—”

“No, I don’t...want to burden her. She’s been so happy these last few weeks, Steven. Please.”

“Are you never going to tell her?” Steven demanded. “She would be heartbroken if you said nothing —”

“I’ll tell her, but it’s just...I *like* seeing her happy.” Audrey took his hand in hers. “Don’t you?”

“No, Gram, don’t pull that on me—” But Steven sighed and nodded. “Fine. For now. But don’t keep pushing this, Gram. Elizabeth will handle this. She’s a strong woman, and she’s got Jason to /back her up now.”

“Soon, Steven, I promise.” Audrey paused. “Now, if you don’t mind, could you find my other shoe?”

### **Warehouse: Sonny’s Office**

Jason hesitated just over the threshold of the office, waiting for his partner to raise his eyes from some paperwork and notice him.

It was a conversation almost a year in the making, but Jason still wasn’t sure how to go about it. But he knew that putting it off would just add to the tension shadowing his life. It had crept into his relationship with Elizabeth—not in a way that would damage it, he knew. But her worry and her concern for him would only increase the longer they drew this out.

“Jason.” Sonny leaned back. “I wasn’t expecting you today.”

The other man’s eyes looked relatively clear, but Jason knew that was deceptive. Even if he was in control this moment, there was no guarantee it would last.

“Yeah, I know, there’s just something we have to talk about.” Jason closed the door behind him and took a seat in front of Sonny. “Sonny, I think Carly knows the truth. About Evie.”

Sonny stared at for a long moment and then nodded. “I...was going to call you later when I knew how to—she admitted it last night.”

Jason frowned. “What? Why?”

“She said she was tired of the lies. We had a pretty bad argument.” Sonny sighed. “And she made me see how little credit I gave her. That I took her at her word about how she’d react to Evie, and started to lie. She wanted a clean slate.”

“O-Okay,” Jason said after a pause. “I was contacted by family services earlier this month.” He rubbed his hands on his denim-clad thighs. “After a year of guardianship, I’m eligible to adopt Evie. They wanted to ask about a possible petition.”

Sonny merely blinked, but his breathing picked up. “I—I don’t know what to do with that, Jason.

You've admitted you have no intention of signing custody back to me. I-I'm not even sure doing so would be a good idea at this point." He closed his eyes. "At the same time, knowing that I abandoned my flesh and blood...it doesn't sit right with me."

"I know." Jason waited. "It was *never* my intention to deprive you of having Evie. But...it just happened that way. You—you weren't stepping up. And Sam...she was terrified of the way Carly would treat Evie. I...didn't have a choice, Sonny."

Sonny slowly shook his head. "You always had a choice, Jason. Don't pretend differently. You could have insisted I take custody—leave you out of it. You chose not to."

Which was technically true, but something in Jason rebelled at having to force a man to take care of his own child. Being with Evie, with Cameron now...he couldn't imagine giving them up. Didn't Evie deserve better than that? So yeah, Jason had had a choice, and he couldn't quite bring himself to regret the one he'd made.

"If you want to change the situation now," Sonny continued, "we can discuss the best way to do so. Maybe Carly can spend time with Evie—"

"I—" Jason closed his mouth. "No, that's not...Sonny, I'm not signing over the guardianship. Not now anyway."

Sonny furrowed his brow, his lips thinned. "Excuse me?"

"You need...you *need* to talk to someone," Jason told him. "You've been riding on the edge for months now, maybe a lot longer that. We both know it's getting worse. You've gone after Elizabeth, after me—because you think we're replacing you in Evie's life. I can't...I love her, Sonny."

"Who, Elizabeth?" Sonny licked his lips. "So? I'll knock it off. Jason—"

"Yes, Elizabeth, but I meant Evie. I can't...let her go into a situation where I'm not sure she'll be okay. And right now, Sonny, I can't do it."

Sonny just stared at him. "So that's it? You're keeping my daughter."

"If you haven't worked on this, if you haven't gone for treatment by the time Evie turns one..." Jason rose to his feet. "I'll petition for adoption. I can't put her life on hold, and I won't put mine on hold anymore—"

"I don't see you doing much waiting around," Sonny returned blandly. "You managed to convince Elizabeth to give you another chance. What life have you put on *hold* for me?"

"The one where I'm comfortable asking Elizabeth for something more permanent. It's bad enough I might lose Evie, but I won't let her fall in love with Evie as her mother only to watch someone take her away."

"But if I got *help*," Sonny said, adding stress on the word help that told Jason everything he needed to

know about his feeling on the subject, “You’d be willing to change the custody arrangement.”

“Because it’s the right thing to do for *everyone*,” Jason said. “You know it couldn’t go on forever the way we were doing it. Now...it’s on the table.”

“I’ll take your suggestion under advisement,” the other man retorted. “Is that everything?”

“Yeah.” Jason nodded. “Yeah.”

He left, but hadn’t made it more than a few steps before he heard glass crashing in the room he’d just vacated.

# Chapter Sixteen

*Say what you wanna say  
And let the words fall out  
Honestly I wanna see you be brave  
With what you want to say  
And let the words fall out  
Honestly I wanna see you be brave*  
- Brave, Sara Bareilles

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*Monday, July 11, 2005*

## **Kelly's: Courtyard**

"There's my brother." Emily kissed the top of his head as she moved past him to sit across the table. "It feels like ages since I saw you."

"Two weeks," Jason said absently as he opened a bag of small cereal puffs and dumped it on the tray of Evie's booster seat. "We had lunch."

Emily dismissed that with a wave of her hand. "I meant one on one brother sister time. We're always around other people. I can't bug you the way I want to." She pouted. "You ordered without me."

Jason looked at her with some impatience. "You're a half hour late. I was hungry."

"I practically had to sneak out to take my lunch break. I wish I could skip the intern part and go straight through to the doctoring part." She perused the lunch menu. "So, how's things? Where's Cam and Elizabeth today?"

"Elizabeth's at her studio, so Steven took Cameron for the day." Jason shifted. "You don't like the hospital?"

"It's fine, just busy, busy." Emily glanced up and grinned. "Hey, Georgie. I swear, you never leave this place."

"Don't I know it," the teenager complained. She took Emily's order and then went back inside.

"And I saw how you sidestepped the question," Emily said. She reached across the table for a fry. "You didn't tell me how things were."

"They're fine." He shifted again. "Actually—"

Her eyes lit up. "You're going to ask me for advice? Fantastic. I've been waiting for this day my whole life—"

“We’ve only known each other half your life.”

She narrowed her eyes. “It feels like so much longer.” Emily leaned back in her chair. Brothers. “So, actually what? Finish your sentence.”

“It’s...about Elizabeth.” Jason hesitated. “I...want to ask her to move in with me.”

Holy crapola. This was the mother lode. “Into the penthouse?” Emily asked. “Because, I mean, I know the short-term stuff is fine, but...” She sighed. “Elizabeth said things...were getting a bit more tense with Sonny and Carly.”

“Yeah.” Jason rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, they are. I...you know I was thinking of moving out a few months ago but decided not to in order to keep the situation from getting worse.”

“But now?” Emily prompted when her brother remained silent.

“Now Carly knows the truth, and I’ve told Sonny I don’t plan to sign away my guardianship until I’m satisfied he’s in a better place. So it’s as a good time as any to find somewhere else to live.”

“Makes complete sense.” Emily waited until Georgie set down her order and refilled Jason’s coffee cup. Once she was gone, she reached for the ketchup to dump on her fries. “So what’s the ish? Elizabeth and Cam are basically living with you as it is. You don’t think she’ll agree until you find a new place?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” Jason shook his head. “I’ve...I’ve never asked anyone to move in with me before.”

Emily pursed her lips. “No, I guess that’s true. You and Robin just kind of fell into it, and didn’t Courtney start staying with you after Ric kidnapped her?”

“Something like that. This...with Elizabeth, it’s different. I don’t know. You’re right, I should just ask her—”

“No, I get it,” Emily held up a hand. “It’s a deliberate commitment. Plus, you have the kids. Both of them. I mean...” She cast a glance at her niece, who held out a mushy cereal puff. “No, thanks, baby. You finish it.” To Jason, she continued, “Evie’s situation is complicated, but Cameron’s a permanent fixture, no if, ands, or buts. You guys move in together, there’s a logical progression. Who are you going to be to him?”

“I’d adopt him if that’s something Elizabeth would want—”

“Nope.” Emily shook her head. “Not good enough. She’s not going to want that wishy washy kind of thing—if you want it, I’ll do it. Do it because *you* want it. Because you want Cameron to be part of your life.” Emily leaned forward. “Jase, it’s a big enough step when you’re not a single mother.”

“You’re right.” Jason reached for his coffee. “I want to adopt him, and I want Elizabeth with me.”

She bit into her burger with relish. God, how far they'd come since that day in December. "Have you...considered something permanent between you?" She hoped he wouldn't close down now. "I'm not trying to nag, I know how much that annoyed you both—"

"I have," Jason interrupted. "But I can't ignore that we've both been married before. Mine was..." He pushed his half-eaten pastrami sandwich away. "I don't know. It ended up being a mistake. But Elizabeth's experience with Ric was so much worse."

"That's the truth. Slimy piece of crap. He's lucky he's been so good to Alexis and Kristina, or else I would have sicced Nikolas on him ages ago." Emily sipped her soda. "So bad marriages all around. It's not like I don't get that. I married someone because it seemed like a good idea and then I broke his heart in the worst way possible." She pressed her lips together. "I know what's it like to be scared of the future because of what came before."

She sighed and twisted her wedding ring on her finger. "And it's not something to think about lightly, that's for sure. But Jason, when it's right, it's right." She closed her eyes, remembering that incredible day six weeks earlier. "There's something about standing there with each other, in front of the people you love, and making that promise. It means something." She opened her eyes and focused on Jason. "I know you didn't always see it that way, that it was just some paperwork—"

"I know it's more now. I just....it's only been a few weeks—"

"Time is relative, Jase. Are you going to tell me there's something about Elizabeth that would change your mind in another six months?" She tilted her head. "Or is it because of the situation with Sonny and Carly that you're still hesitating?"

"It's a factor," Jason admitted. "I don't know, Emily. I just have to think about it some more."

"Hey, you've been doing something right so far," Emily told him. "Just follow your instincts."

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Bedroom**

Carly removed her diamond earrings and placed them in the velvet lined drawer of her jewelry box. Across the room, she watched as Sonny methodically and silently removed his suit and changed into the silk pajamas he wore to bed.

They had not spoken about their argument the week before—he had spent a great deal of time at the warehouse, she at her club. When they had spoken, it had been about the boys.

That ended now.

"Have you spoken to Jason?" she asked.

He glanced over at her, his dark eyes unreadable in the shadows of their bedroom. "Yes."

She pursed her lips when he said nothing more. Why must everything be so goddamn push and pull? Didn't he understand she couldn't fix a goddamn thing if no one ever told her the fucking truth?



“I suppose that means nothing is going to change.” She twisted on the vanity seat to look at him directly. “That he’ll retain custody.”

“For now.”

His short answers were only stoking her ire. Of course he blamed her when she damn well knew the root of the problem was Sonny himself. If he had just trusted her, they could have avoided this.

If he had kept his filthy hands off that whore, none of this would be happening.

She turned back and reached for her cold cream. Another approach was necessary, she could see this now. She had tried to talk to Jason before without any change. If Sonny had been rebuffed in his attempts to regain custody of his daughter, then Jason had no intention of doing the right thing.

And why the hell wasn’t Jason trying to help make this situation go away? He was with that simpering little twit and her bastard. He had a family; he knew keeping Evie was destroying Sonny. What the hell was she holding up?

Didn’t he understand he held the cards?

Or maybe Sonny hadn’t pushed enough. Surely, Jason would relent if Sonny just pushed. How to make that happen?

She applied the cream to her face, slowly massaging the lotion into her skin. “Was it Jason’s idea to change the results of the paternity test or yours?” she asked.

Sonny sighed. “Carly, I don’t—”

“I think we should talk about how it happened,” Carly asked. She dabbed some of the cream into the delicate surface under her eyes. “The only way we’re going to have a fresh start for our marriage or for our boys is if we do this. I don’t want it to fester like it has for a year.”

Her husband sat on the bed, a newspaper in his hands. “I—I didn’t know he was going to do it until he did it.”

As Carly had suspected. She nodded. “Did...you think it might be the truth?”

“I wondered,” Sonny admitted. “Until I realized he and Courtney hadn’t separated at the time it would have happened. He wouldn’t have done that to my sister.” He clenched his hands. “Even though he’s been pretty damn quick to forget her.”

“I...should have dealt with it better, Sonny,” Carly said, though she didn’t think her actions had been nearly as bad as his. She’d been shot in the head—hadn’t she forgiven that? Did no one remember what she’d been through? “I just...I was hurt. I lashed out. I don’t...know if I meant what I said about the boys.”

She’d meant every word of it and had intended to use Alexis’s secret to destroy him in court, but that

wasn't important now.

"Well, I took you for your word." Sonny stood, crossed to the window that overlooked the city. "I thought...I'd use the summer to figure out how to fix things."

There was more to this story, but Carly knew he would never tell her and if it reflected badly on Sonny, it was unlikely to come from Jason either.

They were always more loyal to one another than they were to her. Men. They all stuck together.

"And when Sam died?" Carly murmured. She set the tub of cold cream down and slowly began to draw her brush through her blonde hair. "Why didn't it come out then?"

"Sam...tricked me into terminating my parental rights," Sonny said through clenched teeth. "I thought I was signing a trust for Evie. Instead, she took them away and created a will that left guardianship to Jason in the event of her death."

Carly smirked. If she didn't hate that whore so much, she might admire the tactic. A woman scorned had scorched him right back. Served him right.

It was easy to see this from Sam's side of it. She'd been used, tossed away, foisted on Jason. Sonny had returned to his family. Why should she make it easy on the bastard who discarded her?

There was a certain poetry, a certain sense of innate justice that Carly respected.

That didn't change the way of the world.

"I'm surprised Jason upheld it after she was gone." Carly set her brush down and twisted to the side to look at his dark form at the end of the room. "That he didn't take the opportunity to walk away from it. I can't imagine it was easy on him, with what happened to Michael."

"We believed you'd take the boys and fight me in court." Sonny shifted and turned to look at her. "He was protecting the boys from that. Protecting Evie from..." His voice faltered, and he just shook his head.

"From being raised by a woman who loathed the woman who bore her." Carly narrowed her eyes. What a high opinion these men had of her. She would have adapted to the situation. Maybe she never would have loved Evie the way she did Michael and Morgan, but she could separate the daughter from the mother.

And even if she didn't fully believe that, what gave them the right to decide that for her? To take away her chance to prove herself?

They didn't trust her, didn't even give her a damn chance. She was almost tempted to prove them right. Call Alexis, demand Sonny be raked over the coals for his affairs, for his lies.

But that didn't serve her purpose. Her children deserved their place in life, and if Carly had to

sacrifice her self-respect to gain it for them, that's exactly what she'd do.

"You didn't give me much choice, Carly—"

"It sounds like Jason didn't give you much of one either," Carly said. "Decided to take responsibility, stood aside while Sam tricked you..." She shook her head. "I wonder if the rumors were true. If maybe he fell for her. She probably batted her whore eyes at him, wanted to raise her baby with him. He's rich, single, and loves children. Perfect target."

Sonny didn't say anything for a long moment. "Are you saying you think Jason helped her trick me?"

"No." But Carly made sure to hesitate.

The only way to get Evie in this penthouse, the only way to assuage Sonny's guilt was to make him go after Evie.

And if Jason wanted to stop her from fixing all their problems, well then maybe he deserved what he got.

"And even if he did, you know it was just to protect you." Carly raised an eyebrow. "You know he'd do anything to protect you." She paused. "Anything he deemed necessary."

Her stomach twisted as she looked back into her vanity mirror, into her own reflection because she knew the rules of the game she was playing and it didn't entirely sit right with her.

She was selling Jason down the river in Sonny's eyes, putting the weight of the blame on him. It couldn't stay on her, not if she wanted to preserve her marriage.

And really, as much as she loved Jason, as much as she knew his heart had been in the right place, it was his fault. He'd decided he knew what was best without consulting either of them.

Turning Sonny against Jason had not been her first choice, but Jason had set the board; all the moves had been his. Sonny had only reacted to them, leaving Carly entirely out of the equation.

She was done being a pawn. It was time to remind them that somewhere inside Carly Corinthos lurked Caroline Benson.

A woman with a plan.

### **Morgan Penthouse: Bedroom**

She was still trembling when Jason leaned down, brushed his lips against hers, her fingers laced through his hair. "Why does it always seem to get better?" she murmured, trying to get her breath.

"I don't know." Jason rolled to his side slightly and tucked her against him. "But it does."

"I love you." She closed her eyes, her fingers tracing small patterns on his damp chest. "Not just for

your body, though.”

She felt more than heard the laugh roll through him. “Well, that’s good.”

They laid in comfortable silence for a while longer, as they often did on the nights she spent at his penthouse—which, in the last month, had been more often than she was at home.

She knew Cameron and Evie were asleep at the other end of the hall in a room that had easily adapted to another crib, dresser, and several more toys more suited for a growing boy with their nanny in the adjoining room.

“You know what’s freaking me out?” she asked. Before he could respond, she continued. “This is the happiest I can remember being in years.” She lifted her head to rest her chin on his arm so she could look at him. “Everything about this feels right.”

“It does,” he agreed, his fingers sifting through her hair. “And...I’ve been happy, too. I-I love you so much.” And though the words felt slightly stilted, even forced, she knew they weren’t false. He was a man who often found it difficult to express himself.

Which made the moments when he did so much better.

“I just want it to last forever,” she admitted, closing her eyes.

“Maybe—maybe it can.”

Her eyes flew open, and she pulled herself to a sitting position, tugging the sheet over her breasts. “What?”

“I—” Jason cleared his throat and also sat up, his face only partially visible in the moonlight that filtered through the blinds at the window. “I mean...we could...you could be here. Um, more.” He took a deep breath. “All the time.”

“Like...live with you,” Elizabeth clarified, her heart racing. “Jason...I—”

“I know it’s only been a few weeks,” he interrupted. “And maybe it’s too soon, but I just...” He looked around, and even though the room was darkened, she saw his gaze touch on the dresser littered with her jewelry, her makeup. The half-open closet door that housed a few suits, but more of her clothes.

“I mean, I’m already...here most of the time.” Elizabeth shifted. “My grandmother is always...” She licked her lips. “She’s always joking with me that I—I just come in for my mail.”

“I know.” Jason switched on the table lamp. “I don’t want to rush you or move too fast—”

“It’s been almost six years since we met,” she murmured, “I don’t think moving too fast is something we can be accused of.” She dragged one hand through her hair. “Okay. I mean, it’s...one thing for Cam and I to spend the nights, but you know he’s got a ton of stuff at Gram’s. I mean, he’d live here.”

“He kind of already does,” Jason told her. “If—if it’s me you’re worried about with him—”

“No.” God, she was making this more complicated than she had to. “I just...if we live together, Jason, it’s just...a thing to consider. About...our kids.” She twisted her fingers in her lap. “I love you, and I want you to be important to my son. I just...I have...to be cautious.”

“I know.” Jason tilted his head. “But what’s really wrong? Is it really about Cam?”

“I just...I’m just scared,” she admitted. “We’ve been so careful this time, Jason. And we’ve done everything right. And it’s been perfect. I mean, Sonny and Carly are not a factor in this, I promise. Because that problem exists whether we live together or not, so it’s not about that. It’s...about changing things.” She bit her lip to keep it from trembling.

“Sometimes,” she continued, softly, “we don’t always do well with change.”

“Like the last time we sort of lived together,” Jason responded. “When Sonny was going through... something like this, and I chose his well-being over being honest with you.”

“If we’re going to simplify it, maybe. I mean, it’s different now. We...we’re in a different place, and we’re different people, but...” She scrubbed a hand over her face. “I don’t know how to explain it.”

“I want us to be a family,” Jason said. “I-I want to adopt Cameron.”

Her head snapped up at that. “Jason—”

“A-And if I adopt Evie, then I’d want you to adopt her, too.”

Holy crap. “You want to...” Her throat was tight, she pressed a fist to her mouth. “You want to adopt my son. And...you...want me to adopt Evie.”

“We-we could get married, if you’d feel better about it that way—”

The room spun for a moment, and she swallowed hard. “Jason, I don’t want you to say that because you think it’s what I want—”

“I want to be with you,” he interrupted. “To be a family with you.” He paused. “I didn’t...used to think that marriage was part of that. I thought it was just...paperwork. Something people did to make themselves feel better.”

Oh my God, this was really happening to her. “Jason—”

“But I know it’s about more than that.” He glanced away for a moment, then looked back at her. “It’s about making promises to one another. I...want to make them to you.”

Her heart was going to fly right out of her chest, she just knew it. “Jason...” She reached for his hand. “Are—is this a proposal? Are...” A tear slid down her cheek. “Are you asking me to marry you?”

“Maybe I should—it should be a different way. I—I don’t have a ring—”

“That’s not important to me.” She swiped at her tears and crawled into his lap. “Are we getting engaged? Is this what’s happening?”

His lips curved into a slow grin as he brought her clasped hands to his lips. “Yeah. So you’ll marry me?”

She beamed. “Hell yes!” And then proceeded to punctuate a series of yeses with kisses to his cheeks, his lips, and anywhere else she could reach.

Elizabeth Webber was going to marry Jason Morgan, and no one on this planet was going to stop her.

# Chapter Seventeen

*I gotta say something I've been thinking about  
I can't wait to lay around with you  
And tell you all the secrets I've been keeping to myself  
It's been awhile since I've felt butterflies.  
Do you feel the same way too?  
If every single second could last that much longer  
Would you hold me?*  
- Kiss Me Again, We Are in the Crowd

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*Tuesday, July 12, 2005*

## **Warehouse: Sonny's Office**

Jason stepped over the threshold, the first time he had been face to face with his partner since their confrontation the week before over Carly and Evie. He wanted to believe they could still pull this situation back from the fire.

It would hurt to sign custody of Evie away, he knew that. And he knew it wasn't following the spirit of his promise to Sam, but if Sonny could get help—if he could really deal with his demons for the first time in his life, he might find himself again.

Be the man Jason had given his loyalty to all those years ago.

If there was any hope of drawing that man out again, finding him inside the darkness, Jason thought he could live with the pain of losing Evie. Because Sonny, at his best, was a good father. He would be good for Evie.

And Jason wanted to believe they could find that.

Sonny glanced up from the paperwork he was considering and leaned back in his chair, his dark eyes flat. "We didn't have a meeting today."

"No." Jason lowered himself into the chair. "No, this isn't...business. It's personal."

"Oh?" Sonny lifted his brows. "I didn't think we had anything personal to discuss after your ultimatum last week."

"It wasn't—" Jason stopped and shook his head. "I'm sorry if you feel that way. I didn't...I want this to be better, Sonny."

"You think I like the state of affairs?" Sonny snapped. "You think I like walking on eggshells all the damn time?"

Jason exhaled slowly. “I want what’s best for all of us, but Evie comes first. I made a promise to Sam to look after her—”

“To keep her away from me.” Sonny pressed his lips together. “Did you help her take my daughter away?”

“What?” Jason demanded. “Are you accusing me of tricking you into signing those papers?” How did it always spiral like this? When had Jason lost control of the moment? He used to be able to keep Sonny calm, to keep him stable.

“I don’t know. You didn’t seem surprised when her lawyer showed up.” His lips curled back in a sneer. “It was a *fait accompli* according to Diane Miller. I had signed the termination papers, and she’d filed them in family court. You had legal guardianship, even though my damn name is on the birth certificate—”

“I didn’t know—I told you this then.” Jason clenched his fists. “But you didn’t want the details. You just wanted to keep everything the way it was. You and Carly were making your marriage work. Sam knew she’d be forgotten, that you would never tell Evie about her—”

“So you decided for me—”

“*You* decided,” Jason cut in, his teeth clenched. “I started this, but you finished it. I told you it didn’t have to be this way, but you—” He closed his eyes. “Sonny, I’m not trying to punish you, I just—you need help. You need to talk to someone—”

“I’d be fine if I weren’t surrounded by liars, by traitors,” Sonny hissed. “I used to believe in you, Jason. I used to think you had my back—”

“I told you I would always protect your family,” Jason said. He rose to his feet. “And I’m doing that. I tried to protect Michael and Morgan, but I failed. I’m protecting Evie—”

“What gives you the right to decide I’m not a fit father?” Sonny lunged to his feet, leaning over his desk with his hands flat on the surface. “What makes you the better man?”

“I don’t know that I am,” Jason replied honestly. “I know what Sam wanted. I’m doing right by her. She knew you’d never put Evie first. Never value her above Carly and the boys. And nothing you’ve done this last year has proved her wrong.” He stepped backwards toward the door. “I came here, Sonny, because I wanted to believe we could still find common ground. Because I’m—Elizabeth and I are engaged. And I wanted to tell you.”

Sonny straightened, and he swallowed hard. “You—you’re getting married. To Elizabeth.”

Jason nodded and looked away. “And this morning, when we talked about telling the people we loved, telling our family, I wanted to tell you. Because you’ve been my family longer than anyone else.” He looked back to Sonny. “You taught me about loyalty. About friendship. What I know about being a father, I learned from you.”



Sonny looked down. “You don’t feel that way now.”

“Because you’ve lost yourself to the darkness. You’re trying to hold back the crash, trying to control it, but you can’t. You need to deal with it. You need to make it stop, or you’ll never be that man again.”

“You calling me crazy?” Sonny demanded, but his voice had lost some of that heat. “You think I need a shrink?”

“I don’t know,” Jason responded. “I just know that Carly and I have been holding you together for years, but we can’t do it anymore. I’ve been trying to do it all year, but it’s not working anymore. We need to do something else.”

“And if I don’t agree with you, you’ll keep Evie from me,” Sonny said. “You think that’s not an ultimatum?”

“I want Evie to know her father,” Jason told him. “I want her to know you the way I do. But she’s just a little girl, Sonny. Sam asked me to protect her. You asked me to raise her. I’m doing the best I can.”

“I’ll take your concern under advisement, but it looks to me like you want me to say no. So *you* can adopt her. So maybe Elizabeth can, too. You’ll adopt her little bastard son and be one happy family,” Sonny drawled.

“Don’t—” Jason’s throat was tight. “Don’t talk about Cameron that way. Or Elizabeth. I would never let anyone talk that way about Carly or Michael. Cameron *is* going to be my son. The way Michael is yours—”

“And you’ve never forgiven me for that—”

“You’ve never forgiven yourself,” Jason cut in sharply. “That’s why you keep bringing it up. In your better moments, you see this as evening the score. A child for a child. Yeah, it hurt losing Michael, but once you adopted him, I knew he was somewhere safe. With someone who would love him.” He hesitated. “And he was never mine to keep.”

“Evie’s not yours either, Jason,” Sonny rounded the desk, stepping towards. “So when you’re planning your perfect life with Elizabeth, remember that. I’m her father. This situation exists because *I* allow it to. I could go to a judge tomorrow and get her back—”

“If that’s the way you want to handle it, that would be your prerogative.” His head throbbed and now he wished he had never walked through the door. Did he really think that he could walk in here and tell him about Elizabeth like it was the old days? Did he think Sonny would be happy for him?

“You do think you’re the better man, don’t you? Don’t you—don’t you walk away from me!”

But Jason was already walking towards the door and pulling it open.

He wouldn’t make that mistake again.

## Hardy House: Living Room

Emily pulled the curtain back from the window only to have Steven slap her hand lightly. “Hey! I’m . . . I’m just looking!”

“You know she hates it when you spy on her,” Elizabeth’s brother said with a good-natured smile, drawing her away towards the small crowd gathered by the sofa. Audrey was passing out glasses of champagne—something she claimed she just had lying around—while Monica and Bobbie were laughing with Nikolas.

Elizabeth had called earlier that day and asked if Emily and Nikolas could join some other members of the family at her grandmother’s that evening—she and Jason had something they wanted to share.

Emily had managed—barely—not to squeal until her cell phone was back in her pocket. She had stood in the lounge at the hospital jumping up and down like a crazy banshee. Her resident in the surgical program had just eyed her suspiciously before almost running away.

And then she’d arrived to learn Jason had called Monica and Bobbie. Their mother had the hugest grin on her face as she and Bobbie chattered about hospital news. She was finally being included in Jason’s life, and Emily had every hope that if there was going to be a wedding—and of course there would be, because *what* else could this news be?—Jason would be inviting other members of the Quartermaines.

Reluctantly, she knew, but finally—the fractures were healing.

“They’ve been standing out there forever,” Emily huffed, taking a glass of champagne. “And if they walk in and catch us drinking this, Elizabeth is going to murder me.”

Audrey pursed her lips. “You’re right. I should have saved it for after they actually announced—” Her cheeks flushed. “I suppose I just . . . I got ahead of myself. It’s not as though we know for sure—”

“But what else can it be?” Bobbie asked, her eyes sparkling. “I can’t imagine them gathering us for any *other* reason except an engagement—” Her eyes widened. “Oh, what if she’s pregnant?”

“Oh, God. Don’t even . . .” Monica’s eyes misted. “Oh, that would be *wonderful*—”

“Whoa, whoa—” Steven said, making a timeout gesture with his hands. “Listen, crazy family of mine—let’s not have my sister pregnant and married before she walks through the door. It could be anything. Jason could be adopting Cameron, they could be moving into together.” He pointed at his grandmother. “You—put those glasses back in the kitchen.”

“Steven Lars Webber,” Audrey began.

“Why aren’t they coming in?” Emily interrupted, going back to the window. “Jason arrived almost five minutes ago. Get in here, you lousy bastards.”

“She’s just looking forward to taking the credit for this,” Nikolas told Steven. “Opportunity creator,

don't you know."

Emily scowled at him. "You always say that like I'm crazy. You think I didn't have a hand in this? I put Lucky and Leyla together." She frowned at Steven. "You dating anyone?"

"Oh, hell, that is the last thing I need right now," Steven said. "Where the hell is my sister?"

## **Hardy House: Outside**

"I'm sorry it didn't go so well," Elizabeth murmured, shifting Cameron to her other hip. "I know... you were hoping..."

"It's fine." Jason shook his head. "I just...I think I made it worse." He glanced back towards the house. "Emily's peeking again."

"Yeah, I know." Elizabeth turned towards the window only to see the curtain fall back in place. "I'm pretty sure our engagement won't come as a surprise to anyone. They're probably already drinking champagne or something."

"I wouldn't put it past my sister," he admitted. He nodded towards the front door. "Should we go ahead and get this over with?"

"So romantic," she sighed, but laughed when he scowled. "I know what you mean, *and* I know this part drives you nuts." Evie began to squirm in Jason's embrace, so they started up the walk.

Elizabeth started to push the door open but Emily yanked it all the way. "Finally!" the other woman said with an exaggerated roll of her eyes. "Give me a kid—" She plucked Cameron from her grasp.

They stepped inside, and Elizabeth pursed her lips at the sight of her grandmother's champagne glasses and the milling crowd. They couldn't even wait for them to announce the news before they started to celebrate?

But these people loved them, and their acceptance and support meant the world to her—particularly when she knew Jason wished Sonny were here.

Monica stepped forward, nearly reaching for Evie before she stopped herself. The longing in her eyes was almost impossible to watch, but it had been Jason's idea to include his mother and Bobbie, someone he had always been able to talk with. So Elizabeth tugged on his elbow discreetly, and Jason handed Evie to Monica.

"Oh, she's getting so big." Monica pressed her lips to Evie's forehead. The seven-month-old giggled and reached for her necklace. "And her hair is darker."

"She looks more like Sam all the time," Elizabeth said brushing a kiss on Monica's cheek before greeting Bobbie and her grandmother. She almost laughed at the way all their eyes were on her bare finger.

“Enough chatter!” Emily declared. “We’ve come here for a purpose—” She stopped when the weight of Jason’s glare settled on her. “And it’s your prerogative to do what you want,” she finished in a mumble, setting Cameron on his feet so he could walk unsteadily towards his great-grandmother.

Elizabeth reached for Jason’s hand, linked them. “Do you want to do it?” she asked with a grin.

Jason shrugged. “We’re getting married,” he said plainly.

The squeals from Emily nearly drowned out the rest of the room, but Bobbie and Monica were both stepping forward to hug them. Nikolas and Steven shook Jason’s hands before embracing Elizabeth—and the force of her grandmother’s hug almost lifted Elizabeth from her feet.

“Oh, my darlings!” Audrey said, her eyes bright. She released Elizabeth and stepped towards Jason, surprising him with a kiss on the cheek and a light hug. “We thought this might be the news, but I didn’t want to get my hopes up—”

“As it is, I’m not going to be able to peel my wife from the ceiling,” Nikolas said, but he was grinning with an arm around said wife. “Congratulations, both of you.”

“This...” Monica handed Evie to Bobbie and stepped towards Jason. “Thank you—for...letting me be part of this.”

“I...” Jason looked at Elizabeth briefly. “I want Cameron and Evie to have people in their lives who love them.” He leaned down to lift Cameron in his arms as the fourteen-month-old boy tugged at his jeans. “We’re...going to get the adoption papers started as soon as we can.”

“Another grandchild!” Monica beamed. “Oh...” She pressed a hand to her mouth. “Oh, your grandmother would be over the moon, Jason.” She looked at Elizabeth, and reached for her hand. “She always liked you, Elizabeth. I just *know* she would love this.”

“I’m just so glad Cameron and Evie are going to have so many people in their family.” Elizabeth squeezed Monica’s hand. “My parents aren’t...in my life. So I hope you’ll really consider Cameron part of yours.” She looked at Bobbie, this wonderful woman who had always stood behind her. “You, too, Bobbie. You’ve been so good to me—”

“Honey, you’d have to do something pretty terrible to get rid of me,” the redhead declared. She grinned. “Spencers are annoying like that.”

Jason frowned slightly, no doubt remembering how hard it had been for Elizabeth to eject a certain Spencer, but he just shook his head.

“Where’s the ring?” Emily demanded.

“I raised her better than this,” Monica said with a roll of her eyes. “Emily—”

“What?” Emily shrugged. “It’s a valid question—”

“We...” Elizabeth shrugged. “It was a spur of the moment decision last night. I don’t think Jason and I even knew it was on the table until there we were...engaged.” And her smile felt permanently affixed to her face. “There’s plenty of time for rings—”

“What about setting a date?” Bobbie asked. “Are you going to wait as long as these two?” She gestured towards Emily and Nikolas.

“I—” She looked at Jason who just lifted a shoulder. “We haven’t really thought about that either.”

“I think...” Steven said from across the room, with the bottle of champagne in his hands. “We should stop the interrogation and have a toast to my sister and her new fiancé.”

“That is a fantastic idea,” Audrey declared. “I already set out enough glasses—” She offered a sheepish grin as Steven began to pour. “We may have anticipated your news just a little.”

“I don’t think you can celebrate news like this too much,” Bobbie said. “Jason and Elizabeth know it’s only because we love them so much.”

“That’s what I’m told,” Jason dryly as Elizabeth elbowed him.

### **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Later, after putting Cameron and Evie down for the night under Nora’s watchful eye, Elizabeth sat next to Jason on the sofa, her smile still stretched from ear to ear. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Not as bad getting shot, no,” Jason agreed, stretching his arm across the back of the sofa. But he was grinning at her. “You must *really* think I hate people for as often as you apologize for dragging me to crowded events.”

She tucked her legs underneath her, her knees pressing into his thigh. “I know you don’t even like the majority of people you actually know, much less strangers,” Elizabeth said. “So, yeah, I’m always kind of feeling bad when you do something you wouldn’t otherwise because I asked you to.”

“I liked the people in that room tonight.” Jason reached for her hand, lacing their fingers together. “Nikolas is good for my sister—she’s never been happier. I know how much your brother and grandmother mean to you—” He hesitated. “And I invited Monica and Bobbie, so how could I argue?”

“Monica looked so happy tonight,” Elizabeth mused, resting her head against the seat cushions. “I think she could have lit the entire town with that smile. She loves you so much.”

“I used...” Jason tilted his head back slightly. “I used to see her looking at me like that and I’d think...it’s not...about me. It’s for who I *used* to be. I didn’t think she saw me.”

“Do you still consider Jason Quartermaine to be a different person? Someone separate from you?” she asked. “I remember the way you used to talk about it...when we first met. Even though you’d use the first person, I still felt like you considered it separate.”

“I had to then.” His fingers rubbed over her skin, absently tracing patterns across her palm. “It was the only way to deal with the way people looked at me. The Quartermaines wanted me to be who I was. The doctors didn’t think I’d ever be able to live on my own.” His face tightened. “Tony Jones wanted them to take Michael from me. That I couldn’t be a fit parent because of the accident.”

“He was just angry Carly preferred you to him.” Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. “You were a better father to Michael than some men are to children that are *actually* theirs.”

“Robin helped a lot,” Jason admitted. “And mostly, I just...I read all the books that were out there. And it got easier. Because Michael—he was such a good baby...” He stopped and shook his head. “Anyway. I think Monica...she knows who I am now. And accepts my choices. Maybe she doesn’t like them, but she knows they’re mine to make.”

“Do you think you’d want to invite the rest of your family to the wedding?” she asked hesitantly. “Alan....Edward...Ned and Dillon?”

“There was a time,” Jason said slowly, “that I would have been so angry at the insinuation that they were my family—that I was part of them at all.” He looked away.

“And now?”

“And now,” Jason said, “I think I could deal with it. I used to think they lied and schemed and destroyed each other for fun. And they *do* that, particularly Tracy and Edward. But Ned...other than what happened to Kristina a few years ago...I’ve never had problem with him.” He frowned. “I’m not even sure I know Dillon all that well.” He looked at her. “Everyone asked for details. If we set the date, how big it was going to be—I don’t know what you want to do about that.”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Part of me just...” She lifted a shoulder. “I want to start our lives. To have a quiet and quick ceremony so we can just...be a family.”

“But the rest of you?” Jason asked, tilting his head. “Do you want something bigger?”

“Not huge,” Elizabeth admitted. “But I don’t know...I’d like to try something traditional for a change.” She sighed. “Maybe be engaged for a while, enjoying it. It’s the first time someone has proposed to me without being brainwashed or me being pregnant...I’d like to have *that* for a while.”

“As long as you’re with me, it’s not important to me,” Jason admitted. “I still want you and Cameron to move in. Here, to start with. We could start looking for something else.”

“We’ll start packing as soon as possible.” She leaned forward, brushed her lips over his. “As for the rest of it? I don’t want something like I had before. They were small ceremonies—just me...and...” She shrugged. “I’d like to wear a pretty dress, to have my brother walk me down the aisle...with Evie and Cameron. With Emily as my matron of honor.” Elizabeth sighed and looked down. “You’d hate every minute of it.”

And Sonny wouldn’t be his best man, so who would *Jason* have standing by him? Nikolas? A

Quartermaine cousin he barely knew? It seemed preposterous to her to want a normal wedding when it might just remind him of everything he'd lost.

"Where'd you go?" he murmured, releasing her hand so he could tip her chin up. "Elizabeth? If that's what you want—"

"I was thinking how your best man should be Sonny," Elizabeth admitted. "How once he would have been so happy for us. He used to care about me, you know. He put guards on me when you weren't here, and he kept me safe when I had to fake my death." She closed her eyes. "He should be a part of all this."

"I know." He exhaled slowly. "I could...I could ask someone else. One of the guys who work with us. Cody. Or Francis. You know them—"

"But it's not the same." She shook her head. "Emily is part of my life, part of who I am. Jason, I love Evie, you know that, and my heart breaks that maybe we can't...keep her. But I would rather Sonny raise her if it meant we had *him* back." Her eyes burned and a tear slid down her cheek. "I didn't even know how much I pictured him in our lives until I realized it wouldn't happen—"

"Hey." Jason tugged her towards him, wrapping his arms around her. "Hey. I'm sorry. I always forget you and Sonny were close once—"

"It's not even that—I just didn't let myself think about what *you* were losing." She sniffled, tucking her head under his chin. "He's your best friend, Jason. He's part of your family. He was a brother to you—" Elizabeth lifted her head. "Can't we just...kidnap him and force him to get help?"

"Don't think I haven't considered it." Jason sighed. "I don't know, Elizabeth. I thought the same thing earlier. I love Evie so much, I do. But he's her father and he'd be a good one if he'd just...confront what's inside him. I just don't how to make it happen."

"Maybe it's time we start really thinking about it." Elizabeth put her hands on his shoulders. "I want our wedding to be what's right for both of us. And it would be right for you to have Sonny standing next to you."

He was quiet for a moment before he rested his forehead against hers. "I don't even know if that's a possibility anymore."

Well, if Jason couldn't hold out hope for things to change, Elizabeth would have to believe enough for the both of them.

# Chapter Eighteen

*As he begins to raise his voice  
You lower yours and grant him one last choice  
Drive until you lose the road  
Or break with the ones you've followed  
He will do one of two things  
He will admit to everything  
Or he'll say he's just not the same  
And you begin to wonder why you came*  
- How to Save a Life, The Fray

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*Thursday, July 14, 2005*

## **Warehouse: Sonny's Office**

Max tapped on Sonny's partially open door and stepped just over the threshold. "Mr. C? Elizabeth Webber is here to see you."

Seated at his desk while scribbling notes for his next meeting with Jason, Sonny glanced up. Squinted at his bodyguard. "Elizabeth? To see me?"

"Yeah." Max glanced over his shoulder. "Said so herself. Should I show her back?"

"Uh." Sonny blinked, leaned back in his chair. "Yeah. Yeah."

He had not seen Jason since the meeting on Tuesday, since he had missed his chance to put his relationship with Jason on a better footing—since he had treated the news of the engagement as a personal attack.

Sonny still couldn't quite articulate where it had gone wrong, but that was beginning to feel familiar. He would think one thing and something entirely different would fly out of his mouth.

Elizabeth stepped up behind Max with a hesitant smile. "Hey, Sonny. I hope this isn't a bad time."

Her easy tone and smile threw him off. Surely Jason had told her of their volatile relationship, and Sonny could still taste the shame as he remembered the way he'd gone after her the few times they'd been in the same room.

"No, no." He rose to his feet and rounded the desk. "Ah. You know Jason isn't here."

"I do." She toyed with the strap of her purse as it rested over her shoulder. "I made sure today was a day he was going to be at home with Cam and Evie."

And the easy way that flowed from her—Cam and Evie. As if they were already a family unit. Sonny



tensed, but the vitriol he expected didn't rise in his throat.

Maybe today would be a good day.

He looked at Max. "You can go, but, ah, we'll leave the door open—"

"Sonny, that's not necessary." Elizabeth flashed a smile at the guard. "I think maybe we should have some privacy."

He watched as she closed the door behind Max and moved more into the room. The trust she was showing him, the open and friendly expression—he couldn't figure out what was happening.

As if the last few years hadn't happened.

"Ah, do you want some water? Some tea?" Sonny gestured towards his mini bar, but she shook her head.

"No." She set her purse over the seat and then clasped her fingers together. "Sonny, I hope me coming here today isn't going to make things worse, you know? I just...I've been kind of taking a back seat, letting Jason deal with it all."

"Ah..." Sonny blinked. "I know the last few times we've spoken, I've been out of line, but—"

"It's just..." Elizabeth glanced down at her hand and he noticed that it was now adorned with a delicate diamond ring set in a silver band. "Jason and I...we're really planning a future together, and I want—I need to know if you're going to be part of it."

His mouth was dry, he took a slight step back. "Elizabeth—"

"I know Jason has talked to you a bit about Evie," Elizabeth continued. "About a way out of this mess, particularly now that Carly knows. But I don't think he articulated himself all that well."

"He made himself clear." Sonny returned to his desk and lowered himself into his seat. "He thinks I'm crazy, that I'm a bad father—" He exhaled on a rush of breath. "Maybe he's right. I created this situation, didn't I?"

"Jason isn't blameless," Elizabeth murmured as she sat down as well. "And neither is Carly. The three of you made this what it is. I don't pretend to know all the reasons, but *how* we got here isn't the point anymore, Sonny. It's what we're going to do from now on." She hesitated. "I know Jason suggested you...talk to someone—"

"Like I'm fucking Tony Soprano," he muttered, but he looked away. "Like talking fixes anything—"

"Sonny..." She rested her hand on the edge of the desk, leaning forward. "I'm sure Jason has told you next to nothing about the months I spent in California before and after Cameron."

He blinked at the sudden topic change. "No, it, ah, never really came up."

“I went to stay with an aunt I had been close to before I moved to Port Charles.” Elizabeth tucked a piece of hair behind her ears. “And I was there, facing the end of my marriage, being a single mother—and feeling like such a complete failure at life. *Everything* I had touched turned to ashes. Everything I tried fell apart around me. I couldn’t even...” She sighed. “I couldn’t even explain to her why I had married Ric in the first place.”

“It was the million dollar question.” Sonny leaned back in the chair.

“I felt so alone, so—broken.” She bit her lip. “I know what it’s like to look at yourself, to see these choices you’ve made, the things you’ve said, and to feel like a stranger inside your own head. I know now that most of it was the way I coped with my own sense of inadequacy, but the more I tried to explain it, the more I tried to rationalize it, the less it made sense to me. And it’s scary to look at yourself in the mirror and not recognize the person looking back at you.”

His mouth was dry because so much of what she was saying felt right to him, but how could she really understand? “What’s your point, Elizabeth?”

“I used Ric’s alimony to get myself a really good therapist. I figured it was the least he owed me.” She crossed her legs at the ankle and looked away. “I know you don’t see the value in that, and maybe it’s not the right way forward for you. I don’t know, I can’t answer that. I just know—” She bit her lip and was quiet for a moment. “I couldn’t *see* the patterns in my life until I was talking to someone who didn’t know me, who didn’t know the people involved. There was no pressure to protect myself, to protect others. I just...talked. And the more I talked, the more I started to understand what was wrong with me.”

“Elizabeth, look—” He hesitated. “There’s nothing wrong with you, okay? I don’t know why you needed a therapist to see that—”

“I needed to learn that for myself,” Elizabeth interrupted, but she smiled. “Because I *didn’t* know that. I thought there had to be something wrong with me. Because Lucky didn’t love me anymore, because Jason turned to Courtney, because I was never enough for Ric—I was the common denominator, so it *had* to be me—”

“They’re all idiots,” Sonny growled, because he hated this. He hated watching Elizabeth tearing herself down in his presence because she thought it might build him up. “Even Jason. If he couldn’t see what you were worth—” He planted a hand against his chest. “*I* saw it. Years ago. He used to talk about taking you for rides and his voice would change—”

“I didn’t see him either, Sonny.” Elizabeth stood, rounded the desk and leaned against the side of it, only a few feet from him. “I took him for granted, because it’s so easy to do that. Jason gives, and he gives, and he gives. He gives so effortlessly that you don’t even realize you’re using him until it’s too late. Until you’re so reliant on the stability, on the trust, on the way he cares about you. You know what I mean, Sonny. Because Jason is loyal even in the face of his own destruction.”

And God, she was right. He’d used Jason until Jason had had nothing left to give, and continued to demand. Sonny braced his elbows on his desk and rested his head in his hands. “God. Elizabeth.”

“I remember the first time I really met you. I mean, the first time I saw you for who you were.” Her voice was softer now. “You have this innate kindness and warmth, this beautiful core of compassion and strength—”

He laughed then and looked at her in disbelief. “Are you *kidding* me?”

“You’ve lost your way a bit, Sonny. That’s all. I remember the night of the garage fire.” Her voice faltered a bit. “When Taggart showed me that subway token, and I just...I don’t remember much. It’s really hazy, but I know I never hit the ground.”

His chest burned. “I thought it was my fault—”

“And you helped me sit down, you stayed with me.” She touched his hand. “You didn’t know me, but you sat with me until Bobbie could gather herself. Jason was there, but *you* were the one that stepped forward to support me. It was that effortless kindness that made me see you and Jason as more than what Port Charles made you out to be. When I came to you that winter because Jason was shot, you knew he didn’t want to see you—”

He shook his head. “Don’t—I *can’t* think about those days—”

“He didn’t want to see you or Carly,” Elizabeth continued. “But you, Sonny? You gave him the space to deal with it. She kept pushing herself into my studio, but you kept your distance. And I saw how it was tearing you apart. I knew it was hurting him—that he didn’t know if he could do his job anymore —”

It was a wonder that Jason had ever returned at all. The expression on his face that evening, when Carly had come down those stairs in his shirt—God. How Jason could stand to come back to the penthouse, to look at him...

“Sonny, Jason loves you. You saw something worthwhile in him when everyone else saw a brain damaged nothing. You gave him self-esteem, a sense of identity. You were his family.” She straightened. “When Jason told you he couldn’t see Evie with you unless you talked to someone, it’s because of that relationship. He loves you, Sonny.”

“I doubt that.” Sonny got to his feet and moved back into the main part of the room, started to pace a bit. “He must not tell you much—”

“He tells me enough to know that some days are good—some days feel like you’re really in the room with him. And other days, it’s like a switch flips and you’ve stepped away.” Elizabeth tilted her head. “Jason loves Evie, don’t get me wrong. He loves her enough to do right by her. You didn’t want custody all year—I can’t believe that’s only because of Carly.”

Sonny said nothing because she wasn’t wrong. Not really. He was damaged inside and had nothing to offer this little girl he had so carelessly created and given away.

But Elizabeth was looking at him as if that didn’t have to be the end of it. “I—”

“Jason and I were talking about the kind of wedding we’d want. When we’d set a date...” Elizabeth stepped towards him. “What kind of ceremony...and I realized every time I pictured our wedding—I saw you standing next to Jason. That’s where you should be, Sonny. I want that for Jason. I love him so much, Sonny.”

“I know—” Sonny couldn’t let himself imagine a day when he could be part of the picture she was painting. “I know I’ve been...the things I’ve said to you—I can’t seem to—” Even the words were stuck in his throat. “He’s always cared for you, Elizabeth—”

“Neither one of us were ready before,” she murmured. “But we are now. We’re going to be happy, Sonny, because we’ve worked too hard to get it right.”

She reached for her purse. “I don’t know if talking to someone could help you the way it did me, Sonny. But you *know* that something has to change. He loves you, Sonny. More than anything else in this world, and the thought of being without you is killing him. I can’t watch him die a little every time he comes home from meeting with you and it’s gone badly. It breaks my heart.” A tear slid down her cheek. “And I love you, too, Sonny. For all the ways you were there for me once, and for what you’ve been to Jason. Please. If you don’t do it for yourself, do it for your children.”

She walked out the door, closing it gently behind her.

And he just stared after her because he realized he hadn’t lost his temper, hadn’t cursed her out. Hadn’t blown the situation up.

Why had *her* plea to talk to someone cut him to the quick when Jason’s had only inspired anger?

Because for the first time in so long, Sonny didn’t feel alone.

Could he make a change? Could he find a way to get it back? To be even a shadow of the man Elizabeth spoke of with such warmth, affection, and love?

God, wasn’t it worth the try?

### **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

When Cody tapped on the front door the penthouse and then pushed it open, Jason was surprised to see Audrey Hardy standing next to him. He set Cameron on the floor so he could run to his great-grandmother, and then got to his feet from the floor where he’d been with both children.

“Mrs. Hardy.” He shifted, somewhat uncomfortable. “Elizabeth isn’t here—”

“Yes, I know.” Audrey leaned down and lifted Cameron in her arms. “Hello, my little darling.” She pressed a smacking kiss to his cheek and laughed as he giggled. “She told me she would be painting most of the day, so I thought it would be a good chance to catch you alone.”

“Oh.” Jason grabbed Evie as she made a beeline for the open door. “Cody, no interruptions, okay?”

Cody closed the door once Audrey had stepped over the threshold. “He seems nice. Elizabeth’s guard—Milo, I think she said his name was—he’s a sweet boy.”

“Um.” Jason looked around, but he didn’t know what he was looking for. The last time he’d been alone with Audrey Hardy, he’d been recovering from a gunshot and she’d thought he was sleeping with Elizabeth.

“Relax,” Audrey held out a hand as she moved past him towards the sofa. “I just—I realized that I don’t know you very well, and there was something I wanted to ask you before I broached the subject with Elizabeth.” She set her purse on the table and then turned back to him. “I was quite close with your grandmother, and I’m sure you know that Monica, Alan, and I are very old friends.”

“I know.” When Evie started to squirm, Jason set her back on the ground. As she crawled towards her play mat, Jason gestured for Audrey to take a seat.

Once she had, he sat in the chair. “I-I know that you and my grandmother discussed the situation with Evie, Mrs. Hardy, so if that’s—”

“Oh, no.” Audrey smiled briefly at the crawling eight-month-old child. “I mean, of course, I’m concerned for the outcome of the situation because I can’t imagine it will end well, but I’m sure you and Elizabeth will be able to handle whatever happens.” She folded her hands in her lap. “Jason, I’m here because I wanted to throw the two of you an engagement party.”

Jason hesitated, because he couldn’t think of *anything* he wanted less, but he knew how much Elizabeth’s grandmother meant to her—and that Audrey’s full-throated approval and blessing towards their relationship this time around was important to her.

“And I can tell from your face it’s not a particularly welcome idea.” Audrey pressed her lips together, as if to suppress a smile. “Which is why I decided to ask you first. I didn’t want to bring it up to Elizabeth if you weren’t in favor of it—”

“It’s not that exactly.” Jason shifted and looked at the kids before returning his eyes to Audrey. “I just...I kind of thought we had covered all that the other night—”

“I know, and you know that Monica was over the moon about it, but this would be something a bit more formal. Not quite on the level of something Nikolas and Emily might throw—” Audrey hesitated. “Jason, you know better than anyone that I haven’t always been the sort of family Elizabeth needed—I often judged her choices and encouraged her to stay in situations that—in hindsight—I can see contributed to her problems last year.” She glanced away, towards the window.

“When she told me about being in therapy, about the reasons she had stayed with Lucky, with Ric—it broke my heart. When she’d been attacked in high school, she held back from telling me and I...” Audrey looked at her hands. “I encouraged her to forget about it, not to dwell on it. Though I tried to make it up to her later, I can see now where those feelings of shame came from.”

“Mrs. Hardy—” Jason began again.

“So when she came home this last year, looking strong and confident, with her beautiful son, I told myself that it would be *different* this time,” Audrey continued, meeting his eyes again. “I would stop telling Elizabeth what I thought and just listen to her. Even when it became apparent she was opening her heart to you again, I encouraged her to follow her heart. And I’m glad I did, Jason.”

He had nothing to say to this—he had never expected anyone outside of his own sister to see him as worthy of Elizabeth, much less her grandmother. “I was lucky she gave me another chance,” Jason said, finally.

“She’s been so happy these last few months, and the sparkle in her eyes when she stood by your side on Tuesday evening...” Audrey smiled. “It’s all I could ever want for her. I can worry about her, but when I think of all the heartache and pain, all the terror she’s been through since moving to Port Charles, I can honestly say that I don’t believe the worst of it could be laid on your doorstep. You always took care of my Elizabeth, even when I couldn’t see it.”

Audrey shifted forward slightly towards the edge of the sofa. “And Jason, that’s why I would like to throw a party for the two of you. So that Elizabeth sees the love and acceptance I have for her. For your future. So that your family and mine can join in this celebration. You...may still struggle with your connection to the Quartermaines, but I—” She paused now, looking uncomfortable. “I remember you before. When you were an aspiring medical student. My husband—Elizabeth’s grandfather—looked forward to you starting an internship at the hospital.”

The idea of Jason Quartermaine’s old plans didn’t sting as much as they’d one had, because Jason could hear in her voice she was speaking of something that just...hadn’t happened. Not with regrets or bitterness, just a recitation of the facts. “I know how much she loved her grandfather,” he said, because he didn’t know what else to offer.

“But I hoped from your inclusion of Monica the other night, that you might be moving past that, and I thought a party might be a trial run—to see if you can be in the same room with other members of the family without wanting to throw Edward out a window.”

The idea didn’t quite appeal to Jason, but he could see the hope in Audrey’s eyes, and he remembered the way Elizabeth had spoken of their wedding—of something she wanted to celebrate. To enjoy.

And it went without saying that his grandmother would have been an honored guest.

“Elizabeth...talked about doing things differently this time,” Jason said after a moment. “We’ve both been married before, but neither of those were quite...” He hesitated. “Conventional, I guess. And she deserves something special. If it were just up to me, I mean, we’d get a license tomorrow and be married in a few days, but I know she wants something more.” He lifted Evie into his arms again when she tugged at his jeans. “And we’ve talked about inviting the Quartermaines to the wedding, so I guess a trial run would be a good idea.”

Audrey beamed at him which told him he’d made the right choice. It was only one night after all, where was the harm in that?

## General Hospital: Nurse's Station

Emily peered at Nadine Crowell with an eye towards setting her up with Steven. Now that Jason and Elizabeth were engaged—and she allowed herself a mental happy dance at the reminder—she could move on to the true challenge.

After six months of a several carefully crafted opportunities, Emily could now admit that it was easy to set up two people who were really just looking for an excuse to be together. She had just... facilitated their time together.

Steven Webber, the adorable bastard, was a playboy. And *they* were so much more difficult.

But Emily was up to the task.

“Are you seeing anyone?” she asked the blonde scrawling in a chart.

Nadine blinked. “What? Oh. Yeah.” Her cheeks flushed. “For almost a year now. Why?”

Crap. Emily pursed her lips. “No reason.” Maybe a nurse was the wrong person. Maybe Steven needed someone who could help him unwind at the end of the day, but still understood his dedication and the time he put into his work.

This was going to require a great deal more research and planning.

As if she had conjured him from a spell, Steven stepped off the elevator and headed for the desk. “Hey, Em. I wanted to see if you had a minute.”

“Sure.” Emily followed him to the waiting area. “I’ve got about five minutes before my resident finds me.” She perched on the edge of the chair as he leaned against the sofa. “What’s on your mind?”

“Ah.” Steven rested a few charts against his midsection and squinted. “Listen. I like your brother. Even though I know...maybe he’s not particularly the guy I would have picked for Bits.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You certainly seemed happy about it when they announced their engagement.” He was *not* going to rain on her parade.

“No, listen. I am.” He leaned forward. “I decided to move here a few years ago, but I had to wait for a spot to open up at GH—and the reason I did that was to be closer to Bits and my grandmother. I know my sister has had a rough time of it, with her first marriage and her relationship with Lucky. We weren’t close for a long time, but we wrote and called. I can see that she’s happy now, and that’s all a brother really wants.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I guess I’m just worried with the situation surrounding Jason.” Steven shifted. “With his partner. I don’t even care about his job, because I don’t know much about it, to be honest.” He hesitated. “Elizabeth having Jason as a support system—it’s going to be really important. I want to make sure

that it's...whatever's happening with Sonny Corinthos and his wife—it's not going to be an issue for my sister and her fiancé."

Emily frowned. "Steven, is something going on with Elizabeth I don't know about? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." Steven sighed. "I don't meant to be cryptic—"

"Look, whatever's going to happen, I can tell you that Elizabeth and my brother are solid. As frustrating as it was to watch them to take baby steps towards each other for months, it gave them a chance to really establish a foundation. They're going to hold strong. So whatever comes their way, they're going to handle it together." She tilted her head. "Does that help with your concerns?"

"Yeah." Steven nodded. "Yeah."

"Okay, well, I should get back to my rounds before Dr. Drake finds out I took a minute for myself. He's a slave driver."

### **New York City, Upper West Side: Courtney's Apartment**

Courtney slid out of her heels and tossed her leather bag to the side, ready to unwind after an exhausting day of meetings. Even as she walked towards her wine rack and picked out a bottle, her busy mind refused to shut down, thinking about the slate of appointments the next morning.

Henry from the Harlem Boys Home—she remembered his name because of the alliteration. Joanie from the mayor's office, Kamille from the Plaza where the next fundraiser would be held—

Jax from Port Charles, to talk about doing a joint fundraiser. One of her brother's old enemies, but Courtney had separated herself from all of that.

Still, it would be nice to see a familiar face.

As she poured herself a glass of pinot grigio, her cell phone rang. She looked across the room at her bag and grimaced, but trekked back to retrieve it.

"Hello?"

*"Courtney? What took so long?"*

Courtney sighed and took a long swig of the wine. She was going to need it. "Carly. Hey. Sorry, my phone was in my bag."

*"Oh. Did Sonny call you?"*

"Um..." Courtney lowered herself onto her sofa and squinted. "Yeah. He said he's coming to the city this weekend, asked if he could stay with me rather than a hotel."



*“Did he tell you why?”*

“No.” She rolled her eyes. “Hey, by the way, Carly, I’m fine, you know. Not seeing anyone new.”

*“What? What are you talking about?” Carly snapped. “Why are you changing the subject?”*

“Just to hear myself clearly.” Courtney tipped her glass back. “No, Sonny didn’t mention it. I thought maybe it was for a meeting.” Or maybe to get away from his shrill wife.

The longer she was away from Carly Corinthos, the more she remembered why she hadn’t initially liked the woman. She was snappish, selfish, and mostly—a twit.

*“You don’t think it’s to see a woman?”*

“Carly, I have no damn idea. I was surprised when he called, but if he wanted to see another woman, he’d hardly stay in his sister’s guest room.” Courtney pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. God.

*“You would tell me if he was?”*

Courtney blinked. What a question. “Sure,” she said, not sure if that was a lie or not. “Of course. Carly—”

*“Because he’s not telling me what’s going on, and things have been weird since I told him I knew about Evie—”*

She eyed the wine in her hand. This wasn’t strong enough to deal with Carly—

Hell, now Courtney understood why AJ had been alcoholic. This woman could drive *anyone* to drink.

“Well, Carly, I don’t know what to tell you—oh, hell, my phone is dying. Should have charged it, bye.”

She pressed the end button and tossed the phone toward the ends of the sofa.

She had a sudden urge to contact her ex-husband with profuse apologies for not believing him about how toxic Sonny and Carly could be to a person’s mental health.

# Chapter Nineteen

*So little time*

*Try to understand that I'm*

*Trying to make a move just to stay in the game*

*I try to stay awake and remember my name*

*But everybody's changing*

*And I don't feel the same*

- Everybody's Changing, Keane

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*Saturday, July 16, 2005*

## **New York City, Upper West Side, Matthews Penthouse: Living Room**

Courtney watched as her brother prowled her spacious living room, peering out the windows over her lovely view of Central Park.

Something was not quite right with Sonny.

And not in the way it had not been right for months, for years. Something new was wrong. Which really summed up Courtney's entire relationship with her enigmatic older brother.

He had come into her life when she was already fully grown, a surprise to a young woman only seeking out her absentee father. And part of Courtney had been elated—she had known other girls with older brothers in Atlantic City—these brothers usually took their sister's sides, drove them around, and kept the worst of the boys from annoying them.

Courtney had *always* wanted an older brother.

But Sonny had not been the older brother of her dreams, and now nearly four years later, she still wasn't entirely sure how well she knew him.

"Thanks for letting me stay," Sonny said, turning to her, his dark eyes flat. "I know it was short notice—I just didn't want my name showing up on any hotel registries."

"It's fine." Courtney sipped her water and then set it on the side table. "Carly called asking me why you were here."

"What'd you tell her?"

"The truth," she replied. "I didn't know. But Sonny, I promise you, I would have said the same thing if I *knew* the reason why. If you wanted Carly to know why you were here, she would. It's not my place to tell her."

Sonny frowned at her, darkly silhouetted against the otherwise bright July sun beaming into through

the windows. “You two are friends. Aren’t you?”

“Because it’s easier.” Courtney pursed her lips. “Being away from her, I started to remember why Carly and I didn’t get along when I first met her.” She hesitated. “And I’m finally being honest with myself as to why I decided she and I should be friends in the first place.”

“Jason.”

It wasn’t her best moment, but Courtney had long ago decided that pretending she hadn’t done the things she’d done served no purpose. “I—yeah. I was running from all the things that went wrong with AJ. And Jason felt safe. I wanted him. I didn’t know how to make that happen.”

Sonny sank into an armchair. “I knew it would be a mistake.” He scrubbed a hand over his mouth. “You and I were never really close, Courtney. Even when you were with Jason, but it never felt right to me.”

“It never felt right to either of us,” she murmured. She perched at the edge of her sofa. “Which is why it only worked for as long as it did because there was always something more important going on around us and honestly, Jason didn’t have the time to realize it.” She leaned forward. “Sonny, you can talk to me. You’re right. We’ve never been close, but that doesn’t have to be the way it is forever.”

Sonny stood again, restless. He started to pace. “What do you think of Evie? Of Jason and Evie, and that business with Sam?”

Courtney leaned back against the sofa and crossed her legs. “I think Jason sacrificed himself to protect the boys. Carly threatened to walk away again, to start that horror show all over again, and in the deepest part of Jason’s heart, he still loves Michael as his own. He couldn’t put him through that again.” She lifted a shoulder. “So he lied.”

Sonny’s shoulders slumped as he stood with his back to her. “I didn’t want you to be hurt by all of that, Courtney. I was—I was glad you packed up and left.”

“I always knew once the divorce was final, I would need to leave Port Charles. Two failed marriages in two years, Sonny. I needed to be somewhere else.” She folded her hands in her lap. “So Jason lied. I was never sure how much you knew then.”

“Jason started it on his own.” Sonny turned to her. “But I continued it. I thought it served a purpose. I couldn’t have Sam and Evie in my life. Not with Carly around. Not if I wanted my boys, too. I couldn’t have it all.” He closed his eyes. “And I told myself over and over again that it would be okay. Jason would be good to Sam and Evie—”

“I knew for months, Sonny. Maybe—maybe at first, I wondered if Jason had slept with Sam to get her away from you. But I didn’t really believe that. The timing never worked. For all the damage Jason and I did to one another—I never worried about him being unfaithful to me.” She sighed. “Well, unless *Elizabeth* had given him an opening. If it had been Elizabeth, I would have believed it. But not Sam.”

“They’re engaged,” Sonny murmured. “Just this last week.”

Courtney took that news in, and waited for the pang. Waited for the sadness. But she felt nothing. Just a wistful longing for the friendship she had once shared with her co-worker before Courtney had sabotaged it. And a lingering feeling that some things couldn’t be denied.

“Good.” Courtney rose to her feet. “He and I were an aberration, Sonny. A detour. All roads always led back to her, Sonny. I saw it then, and I see it now. I hope he’s happy. That’s all I want for him.”

“And I accused him of helping Sam to trick me,” Sonny murmured. “Of stealing my daughter.”

Courtney closed her eyes and rubbed her temple. “Sonny—”

“I didn’t—I didn’t know I would say it until it was out there. And—” Sonny met her eyes, now a bit wild. “It keeps happening, Courtney. Every time I see him, I have this urge to wrap my hands around his neck for stealing Evie from me. For having the family I want. *God*.” He pressed his lips together and swallowed. “And I feel those things even though I know they’re not true. He started the situation with Sam and Evie, but I—I kept it going. I made the choice.”

“Sonny...” Courtney approached him, her hands slightly lifted. “I know maybe you don’t want to hear this, but you need to talk to someone—”

He laughed then, a bitter, dark, and twisted sound that held no humor at all. “You’re not the first. Jason told me the only way I could be in Evie’s life is if I talked to someone. I wanted to kill him for it.”

She swallowed. “Sonny—”

“I mean, I thought, how *dare* he give me ultimatums—he’d be nothing without me—” But Sonny shook his head. “Then Elizabeth came to me.”

She sighed. All roads would *always* lead to Elizabeth. “And she said the same thing?”

“She reminded me how we met.” Sonny started to pace again, but he was calmer now. “And she talked about who I was to her once. She told me I was kind, compassionate...” He shook his head. “I don’t see it, but she does. And-and I thought maybe if—maybe if Elizabeth saw it, it wasn’t crazy to think I could find it.” He looked at her. “She was a little sister to me before I met you, Courtney. I looked out for her, kept her safe. I knew what she meant to Jason once upon a time. And I did my best by her.”

And Courtney told herself that his words didn’t mean she herself had been replaced by Elizabeth. In fact, the opposite seemed to be true. Because Courtney could probably pinpoint the time when it changed—when Sonny had an actual sister to look after.

Courtney had replaced Elizabeth briefly for Sonny and Jason, but she’d been a misshapen puzzle piece that didn’t fit.

“And now?”

“Now I attack her when I see her because I know what she means to Jason.” Sonny wiped his hands across the back of his mouth. “Because he has her unconditional love and support. Because she’s a wonderful mother who will love Evie the way I can’t. The way Sam can’t. The way Carly doesn’t understand. Because I’m jealous that Jason walked away from her all those times and there she is, again. Her heart open, her hands out. Why the hell does he deserve that and I get Carly?”

Courtney sighed. “Sonny—”

“But I can’t control myself anymore.” Sonny crossed again to the windows. “The words, the feelings, the way I look at Jason—I can’t *stop* it. I try not to. I try to remember how Jason has always been there for me, and I can do it. Until he’s been in the room. But now I just—” He broke off. “I’m here to talk to someone. To see if maybe—I don’t know. Maybe I’m depressed. Maybe I’m crazy.”

Courtney bit her lip. “I’m glad you’re here to talk to someone, Sonny. And I’m glad you came to me.” She took his hand in hers. “Maybe we don’t know each other as well as we thought we did, but you know what?” She waited for him to meet her eyes. “In all the world, you’re the only person who belongs to me. And I belong to you. That’s what siblings should be. A person to whom you can open up to, show all the ugly parts of yourself and know that somehow, they love you anyway.”

She gently kissed his cheek. “When we knew each other before, I didn’t see the gift I was getting. And maybe you didn’t know what to do with another sister. But I want to be part of your family, Sonny. And I want to see you through this. Because that kind and compassionate man Elizabeth thought she knew once upon a time? I can see him in there.”

She gripped her brother’s shoulder. “Don’t let him be lost forever, Sonny. You’re—you’re my *only* brother. And I need you.”

Sonny dipped his head and rested his forehead against her shoulder, and just for a moment...

Courtney Matthews was the strong one.

## **Kelly’s: Dining Room**

Audrey slid into a seat across from Jax. “I’m so glad you agreed to meet with me, Mr. Jacks.”

“Please.” The blond Australian held up a hand with a brilliant grin. “Jax. I was intrigued by your call, Mrs. Hardy.”

Audrey waited as Georgie came over to take their drink orders before moving into her pitch. “You may have heard the gossip that my granddaughter is getting married—”

“To Jason Morgan.” Jax nodded, but his smile dimmed a bit. “It’s been making the rounds. Bobbie Spencer is a vociferous supporter of the match.”

And clearly Jax wasn’t, but that wasn’t Audrey’s problem. She was a woman on a mission. “Well, I

am pleased my granddaughter has finally chosen someone who treats her right. I'd like to throw them an engagement party."

Jax nodded. "That sounds nice, but I'm not sure how I can help—"

"Well, I thought Club 101 might be a good venue, and I was under the impression you owned it." George returned with his coffee and her tea. "So I wanted—"

"I signed papers about three months ago, finalizing the sale." Jax stirred some sugar into the black coffee. "I invested in it with Carly Corinthos during the period she was divorced from Sonny, and then bought her out when she went back to him. I didn't want to be in business with him—"

"Completely understandable—"

"But I've been moving out of the night club business," Jax continued. "It's not really my area, you see. And Carly recently offered to buy it from me, to add to The Cellar." He nodded towards the door. "Here Carly comes now."

"Oh, ah..." Audrey twisted as Jax gestured for Carly, who had just entered through the doors of Kelly and approached them with an annoyed look. "I don't—"

"Mrs. Hardy is looking to throw an engagement party at 101," Jax told Carly. "With your friendship with Jason, this actually works better, doesn't it?"

Carly pursed her lips and considered Audrey, who almost squirmed. She did not want to engage in business with Carly Corinthos, but Jax had placed her in a delicate position.

Audrey might not be privy to all the details concerning Jason's relationship with Sonny and Carly, but she did not want to rock the boat by pulling out of the idea in front of Carly.

"Ah, I suppose it does," Audrey murmured.

Carly pulled out a chair and sat. "I don't much care for Elizabeth, but it's something I can do for Jason." Her dark eyes were expressionless. "I'll have my assistant call you to set it up. She handles most of the direct business at 101 while I deal with The Cellar."

"All right." Audrey gave her number to Carly. "Ah, thanks, Carly."

"No problem."

The blonde woman stood and disappeared into the back. Jax grinned at Audrey. "That was lucky, her coming in just then, eh?"

"You have no idea." Audrey sipped her tea and hoped she hadn't just engineered the end of the world.

**Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Elizabeth emerged from the back office, her face scrunched up in annoyance. “I have to cry defeat.” She tossed the papers at Jason who was reading on the sofa. “I have no idea *what* these say.”

Jason set his coffee on the table and reached for the discarded sheets. “I told you.”

“And so did my brother *and* Nikolas.” Elizabeth sat on the sofa and listened to the squeals and laughter coming from the playroom upstairs where Nora, Cam, and Evie were playing. “At least someone is having fun.”

“You should ask Nikolas for a lawyer to represent you.” Jason sat up and started to put the papers back in order. “Your agent isn’t much help.”

“He got me into this.” Elizabeth rubbed her eyes. “Maybe this is a bad time to be thinking about going into business, but I know the Jerome Gallery. It’s not quite as prestigious as the Harris, but it’s launched so many careers. The owner has a fantastic eye for new talent and it would be...” She twisted her fingers. “I liked to the idea about an art school attached to it, about a place for low income students who can’t afford more instruction—”

“I know.” Jason set the papers on the table. “I can put you in touch with Bernie, but you might prefer someone who’s a bit more familiar with this type of business.” He looked at her. “And if you’re thinking about putting off your career because of Sonny or the wedding—”

“I have two small children at home, Jason.” Elizabeth pursed her lips. “I’m getting married. It’s all I can do carve out time to spend in the studio every day, but thank God for Nora. I take back everything I ever said about nannies. She’s fantastic. I just—”

“Don’t want another thing taking you away from Cam. And Evie.” Jason drew her to his side. “I get it. But you were excited when your agent called yesterday. We can make it work. I mean, could you move your studio to the gallery? Work out of there?”

“Maybe.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “I don’t know. I guess, I don’t know, it’s happening so fast, Jason.” She twisted her engagement ring. “I don’t need money now, which is all I really wanted from my art—to have the opportunity to do something I love that would let me support my son. But with you and the money from the first show, that’s not a problem. Now I might partner in a gallery, be involved in a charitable foundation for art education—”

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.” He kissed her forehead. “But if you want it, we’ll find a way.” His cell phone chirped then and he frowned at the incoming call.

He lifted his arm away from her and hit the talk button. “Sonny?”

*“Jason, I—I’m in New York. Until Tuesday.”*

“New York?” Jason stood. “Is—is it about Courtney?”

*“No, no.” Sonny’s voice faded a bit. “It’s...I’ll be back Tuesday.”*

The line went silent. Jason lifted the phone from his ear and just stared at it.

“Jason?” Elizabeth sat up, her legs tucked underneath her. “What’s—what’s going on? Is Sonny okay?”

“He’s in New York. Until Tuesday.” He slipped the phone back into his pocket. “I haven’t seen him since Tuesday, since I told him about the engagement. Haven’t talked to him either. But now he’s in New York.” He exhaled slowly. “I don’t—I don’t know what’s going on.”

She bit her lip. “Jason. I—I went to talk to him.”

Jason looked at her, at her uncertain eyes. “To Sonny?” he asked, even though clearly that’s who she meant. “Why?”

“Because you—because of what we talked about.” Elizabeth twisted her fingers together. “Because I wanted to see if Sonny could get better. If he could—I don’t think I made it worse, Jason. He seemed okay when I was there. Not quite his old self, but he was somewhere in there.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Jason sat next to her. “Elizabeth—”

“Because I—” She bit her lip. “If I had told you before I went, you would have asked me not to. And after—I just didn’t know if it had done any good. But I told him he should talk to someone. Anyone. That it had helped me. Emily and I—we’ve been trying to figure out what might be wrong with Sonny.”

And now his *sister* was involved. “Elizabeth—”

“Emily asked a friend at the hospital about some of Sonny’s symptoms, about the way he flips without warning. About the mood swings, and the things he says. The things the two of us have personally seen, and Lainey said it might be bipolar disorder.”

Jason frowned. “Okay, so?”

“Well, I asked Lainey the best way to talk to someone who might be suffering from it,” Elizabeth said. “Because we thought maybe Sonny would see what we had—the argument you’d had with him already—as a challenge. And it was the wrong way to do that, we know that now. Because it might have made Sonny dig in his heels, and-and increase the paranoia that sometimes accompanies it.”

“So what should we have done?” Jason asked, his ire fading. “*Is* there a better way?”

“I told him about my therapy,” Elizabeth replied. “About the way I felt when I went to California. How much I felt like a failure—how looking back at what happened with Ric, with Zander, and Lucky made me feel worthless and stupid—”

“Elizabeth—” Jason closed his eyes, realizing she had ripped herself open for Sonny. “You didn’t have—”



“How I couldn’t understand the things I had done, the way I had acted—” Elizabeth continued. “Because Sonny needed to know that he wasn’t alone. He needed to feel like I was *with* him, you know? Like I could really understand what it felt like to be in that kind of darkness. I told him how much I loved him, how I remembered the night at the garage when he caught me and gave me something to hold onto—”

She stopped, dipped her head. “Are you mad at me?”

“Mad?” Jason repeated. “Are you kidding me? Elizabeth. The way Sonny has treated you—the way he’s acted towards you—and then you tore open a vein in front of him just so he could—so *maybe* he’d get some help?” Her generosity stunned him.

“I wasn’t lying to him when I told him I understood the way he felt.” Elizabeth leaned towards him. “I told you once, when Ric was shot—that it should be been you. I *said* that to you, Jason. And I pulled a gun on you—”

“Hey—” Because her voice was thick now, and tears were spilling from her eyes, Jason roughly pulled her to him, across his lap so he could hold her. Make it stop. “Don’t. That’s not important now —”

“The horrible things I did and said to you, Jason...you gave me another chance. You let me back in even though I hadn’t done *anything* to deserve that—of course I could forgive Sonny. It’s not him saying those things. I mean, yeah, it is, but it comes from this dark place inside him and he can’t—can’t control it...” Her eyes were closed. “But I could. A-And I did them anyway—”

“Stop it.” Jason brushed her hair away from her face, both hands framing the line of her jaw. “*Stop* it. I love you. None of that matters to me.”

“But—”

“Elizabeth.” He exhaled slowly and tucked her into his embrace. “Maybe you should talk to this friend of Emily’s. You-you said your therapist in California helped. Maybe—maybe you stopped seeing her too soon.”

The fingers of her left hand were clutching at the dark blue fabric of his t-shirt, the diamond catching flashes of the sunlight. “Jason—”

“Because I forgave you for those things a long time ago. Maybe even as soon as they happened. Because you forgave me for the bomb in your studio, for being kidnapped—”

“That’s different.” She sniffled. “You didn’t *do* those things—”

“No, but I answered my phone every time Sonny and Carly called. And I lied to you to protect Sonny’s peace of mind.” He rested his chin in her dark hair. “And instead of working things out with you, instead of proving to you what you meant to me, I took the easy way out. I started seeing someone who didn’t ask much of me. I walked away from you, Elizabeth, and straight to Courtney. And you’re

not holding *that* against me.”

“I walked away from you first,” she murmured. “And I slept with Zander.”

“We could spend the rest of our lives cataloging all the things we’ve done to each other,” Jason told her. “All the times we almost took the next step and didn’t. All the ways we’ve hurt each other. But none of that matters to me now.” He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. “You took another chance on me, Elizabeth. And I took one on you. Does the rest of it matter compared to what we have now?”

She was quiet for a long moment. “No. No. But—” She raised her head from his shoulder and gently ran her fingers through his hair, her nails lightly scraping his skin. “But maybe you’re right. I should talk to someone. I didn’t...I still have a lot of guilt bottled up inside. And I want to come to terms with it. I *have* to forgive myself. You were right that night at Jake’s. It’s not enough to know why I did them or not to do them again.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath. “I have to forgive myself.” She was silent again. “Do you think Sonny went to New York to talk to someone?”

“Maybe.” He brushed his lips against hers. “But thank you. For trying to help him. Maybe it worked.”

And maybe it would—if Elizabeth was right about the best way to approach Sonny. If he had seen just a small piece of the guilt she struggled with all the time, the misery she still fought through—maybe Sonny had felt a sense of kinship with her.

And maybe they could pull this back from the fire after all.

# Part Three: Mercy

*“If I can't feel, if I can't move, if I can't think, and I can't care, then what conceivable point is there in living?”*

— Kay Redfield Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*

# Chapter Twenty

*There's a darkness living deep in my soul  
I still got a purpose to serve  
So let your light shine, deep into my home  
God, don't let me lose my nerve  
Don't let me lose my nerve*  
- Put Your Lights On, Santana featuring Everlast

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*Thursday, August 4, 2005*

## **Warehouse: Sonny's Office**

Everything was going to pieces around him. Two bookies had been arrested, a third had disappeared outright, their warehouse had been raided by the PCPD, and there was a labor strike among the waterfront workers.

It should have been a disaster—he *should* be ready to burn the place down.

Sonny had complete control over it all.

He looked to Francis Corelli. “You look like shit, man. You slept?”

Francis scrubbed a hand over his face, his skin shadowed with stubble, his eyes rimmed with red. “No. I came here straight from the airport. Alcazar is still in Venezuela. I talked to Ramon down there, he said there’s been no peep of him outside his usual territory.”

Sonny scowled and pointed at Johnny O’Brien. “What about the Ruizes?”

“Nothing. Which doesn’t mean anything,” Johnny said. He shifted on his feet. “They usually play things pretty close to the chest until it’s too late. I’m working on getting a mole inside the organization, but Hector is old school and usually doesn’t trust anyone who isn’t family.”

Sonny looked at Tommy Esposito who didn’t look remotely cheerful. “And nothing from the Zaccharas.”

“No, sir.” Tommy’s scowl matched his three co-lieutenants. “I got a guy inside. He’s one of Trevor’s lackeys, but he says there hasn’t been any notion of Anthony moving on anything up here.”

From his position at Sonny’s side, Jason spoke for the first time. “What about his son? He still out of the game?”

“Yeah.” Tommy’s eyes flicked at Sonny, but Sonny said nothing. Sonny’s earlier suspicions of the Zacchara were well-known, but that was then. “As far as Trevor and Anthony are concerned, Johnny’s a dilettante. Does nothing all day but hang around a girlfriend he thinks Anthony doesn’t

know about or go to art shows and music clubs. Mostly, people think he's useless."

Sonny sat in his chair and sighed. "So we're no closer to the bastard who's gas lighting us." He *did* have the urge to swipe all his papers from the desk, but he didn't feel it the way he might have just a month earlier.

He was just...frustrated. Someone was coming at him and they were investigating all the usual suspects in the usual ways, and they were getting nowhere. "Who haven't we thought of?" Sonny asked Jason. "You call in Stan? He still got Faith Roscoe on his radar?"

"She's sunning herself in Ibiza," Jason said. "We have a guy at the airport. As soon as she makes moves to leave, we'll know, but we made our position real clear when we forced her and Alcazar out of town last year. Either of them steps foot in our territory, we're not going to ask questions first."

"She'll come back eventually," Sonny murmured. "But this doesn't feel like Faith." He looked back at the three men standing in front of him. "Until one of these assholes does something to warrant my lieutenants on them 24/7, I'm pulling you. Pick the best guy from each of your crews. Keep them on Alcazar, Hector, and Anthony." He looked at Jason. "Send someone to keep a closer eye on Faith. I don't want any surprises. Maybe they're not behind what's going on, but I don't want any of them reading weakness. Keep working on getting guys into higher levels. Moles are always good."

He rose to his feet again. "I need you three at home for now. Tommy, the bookies are running scared after Frankie and Ollie were arrested. Get them under control. Get collections moving again. Johnny, I want you on security with Jason." He looked at Jason again. "I know you're solid on that, Jase, but an extra pair of eyes never hurts. We got too much at stake to put anyone at risk. Make sure the Towers are safe, Carly's clubs, Michael's school, ah..." Sonny hesitated and squinted. "Elizabeth's got her old studio opened up right? At the docks?"

"I bought the building last month," Jason told him. "We're upgrading the security now. I also have the hospital secure and Elizabeth's grandmother."

"Kelly's," Francis said. They looked at him. "You're not directly linked to it, but Carly's connection is well-known. And your father still manages it. And you know, Elizabeth used to work there."

"Yeah." Sonny nodded. "And make sure Bobbie and Lucas have good security at the Brownstone." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm missing something."

"The warehouse is already pretty secure," Jason said. "I can't think of anything else, Sonny."

Sonny nodded. "Francis, then, I want you to get together with Jordan. Meet with the head of the waterfront union. I'm *supposed* to control these damn workers, make them remember that. I own half the water front. They don't want to work for me, they can go somewhere else. Get this strike over with. It puts too many eyes on our activities. I got Vega in my ear about suspending his shipments into Canada, and it goes without saying I don't want to hear Zacchara bitching at me about not moving his product."

“Sonny...” Johnny traded a look with Francis. “Have you thought about the other possibility for what’s going on?”

Sonny slid a hand over his face. “You mean that it’s not an external threat?” He exhaled slowly. “Yeah. Yeah. I know it might be an inside job. It has the hallmarks.”

He watched as Jason tensed slightly at his side and knew his partner expected some sort of explosion. But Sonny felt calm. Pissed as fucking hell, but calm. He could do this. He’d dealt with traitors before.

“Yeah. I got Stan and Bernie coming in after you guys. We’re going to start in depth background checks, identify some possibilities.” Sonny hesitated. “I know things have been...rocky this last year. I let my personal life get a bit out of control, but that’s over now.”

He knew his lieutenants weren’t completely convinced but Sonny knew as long as Jason was loyal to him, these men would be too. And while that did claw at him a bit, he knew it wasn’t undeserved.

“You guys got your assignments. You can report to Jason unless I need to see you again.”

Once the three men had filed out, Jason took a seat in front of Sonny’s desk. “I didn’t know you had considered a possible traitor,” he said, his tone carefully flat.

“Didn’t want to voice it for sure until I heard from the guys.” Sonny twisted off the cap from a bottle of water and sipped. “I fucking hate traitors, but I guess with the bullshit of the last few years, I shouldn’t be surprised.” He met Jason’s eyes. “I know you’re waiting for me to lose it over this.”

“I...” Jason shook his head. “No, you’ve been better, Sonny. I hope it’s okay that I say—” He shifted. “I know we don’t have a good track record of talking about this.”

“No, we don’t, but that’s about *me*, not you.” Sonny laid his hands flat on the desk. “I’m on medication. It’s early days yet, I won’t know if it’s the right answer for another month or so, but for now, it keeps me balanced.” He met Jason’s eyes. “Thank you, for standing by me. I’m not—I’m not saying we’re right yet. That I’m good. But I’m closer today than I was yesterday, and I have every hope that tomorrow will be better.”

“So you did go to New York to see a doctor,” Jason said, some of tension bleeding from his shoulders. “I—I wondered.”

Sonny nodded. “I met with a doctor. He comes up once a week for a therapy session.” He hesitated. “Did—did Elizabeth mention she had come to see me?”

Jason nodded. “Yeah. She—she wanted to help.”

“That’s usually how she gets herself in trouble,” Sonny murmured, but he smiled. “She’s like you, Jason. Too generous with herself. Gives and gives until there’s not much left to her. She told me a bit about California. I got the idea maybe she’s not all the way past the crap my brother put her through, so I hope she’s okay.”

“She is.” Jason leaned forward, hesitated a moment. “She still has a lot of guilt inside. About that summer and the panic room. She’s...been talking to a friend at the hospital about it.”

“Good.” Sonny sipped his water again. “Good. I like her. I always did. I hope she’ll let me take her for a spin on the dance floor at your party next week.”

Jason winced. “Yeah. I’m sure she will.”

Sonny laughed, and God, didn’t it feel damn *good* to be doing this? To be talking to Jason like they were friends again and not undeclared enemies? Fuck what a wasteland this last year had been. He could do this. He could pull himself back from the edge.

“It’ll be a good time,” he told his friend. “You’ll wear a suit, pose for some pictures. She’ll look gorgeous as always, and you’ll make her happy.”

Max knocked on Sonny’s slightly ajar door and pushed it open. “Yo, boss, Bernie and Stan are here.”

The light hearted banter of the past few moments were forgotten as Jason and Sonny got down to business.

## **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

Carly sipped her iced tea and tried not let her eyes cross as Bobbie talked about the work Lucas was doing at PCU in his pre-med program. Carly thought she should get credit for even remembering what the little pissant was studying. He always looked at her as if she was still the home wrecker that broke his parents apart.

She *was*, but she didn’t like it when people who didn’t know better judged her. Fucking Lucas. He’d been adopted, but Bobbie had fought for him. Wanted to keep him. Not like the bastard daughter she’d tracked down just for shits and giggles long after she’d thrown Carly away.

Carly swallowed those thoughts, because that wasn’t her life anymore. She and Bobbie were even now, after all. Bobbie’s perfect life had been smashed to smithereens, and that’s all Carly had ever wanted.

It was *enough*. Carly had other things on her mind—more important than reminding Bobbie what a shitty mother she had been.

“...and I’m so glad you and Jason are doing better...”

Jason’s name in the middle of Bobbie’s babble caught Carly’s attention so she tuned back into her mother. “What? Why do you say that?”

Bobbie set her water on the table with a frown. “Well, you’re hosting his engagement party next week, Carly. Why else would Jason allow that if things weren’t better?”

Because that old harridan had been cornered into it. Carly smirked. She had seen the annoyance in

Audrey Hardy's eyes when Jax called Carly to the table. She had seen the way Audrey's eyes darted back and forth, but there had been no graceful way to bow out, not without possibly complicating matters between Jason and Sonny.

"That's got nothing to do with me and Jason," Carly said. She pushed her fork around her in her salad. "It's about Jason and Sonny. Preserving the peace at any cost."

"I will admit, things seem to be better in that quarter," Bobbie said. "I was doing the books last week, and they came in and had coffee at the counter. Sonny seems to be doing so much better, Carly. It's wonderful to see the light back in his eyes."

Fucker was probably having an affair again. She didn't care *what* Courtney said—Sonny had been different after that trip to New York. He'd found someone who didn't remind him of the daughter he'd given away. He disappeared for hours every week. She knew there was something going on, and oh, wouldn't Sonny be *sorry* when she got to the bottom of it?

If Port Charles thought Carly had been a vindictive slut when it came to her mother, oh the world had better put on their fucking seatbelts if she discovered Sonny cheating on her again. She would burn it to the ground. Total war. Scorched earth. *Nowhere* Sonny could hide. She would rip his balls out—

"Carly? Isn't it better at home?"

Carly blinked and looked at her mother, realizing for the first time Bobbie had expected a response. "Oh. Yeah. Things are fan-fucking-tastic. The perfect marriage, Bobbie."

Bobbie frowned. "Carly—"

"Is Lucas dating anyone?" Carly asked, because she was tired of talking about Sonny.

## **Kelly's: Dining Room**

Elizabeth winced as she saw Carly and Bobbie were still in the courtyard eating lunch. She was going to have to wait them out—she was doing such a great job of avoiding Carly these days.

"I hope that's not for me," Nikolas said, arching a brow as he pulled out a sheaf of papers from his briefcase. "I like to think I'm not that much work."

Elizabeth laughed. "No, no, of course not." She gestured toward the door. "Carly and Bobbie were in the courtyard when I got here, so I came in through the back—Mike loves me, after all. But they're still out there."

"Ah." Nikolas nodded. "Still keeping the peace by not talking to her. I suppose that means Audrey is dealing with the details for the party?"

"Well, it was *her* idea to have it at Carly's club." Elizabeth shook her head. "Carly's assistant is doing most of the stuff. Gram says she only signed the contract with Carly."



“Hmm...” Nikolas handed her the papers. “I had Andrew go over this. He made a few notations and offered to handle the negotiations if you’re inclined to go forward.”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose as she took in the post-it note attached to the proposed partnership agreement. “What does he think?”

“Well, I knew the name Jerome sounded vaguely familiar,” Nikolas told her. “So I asked Emily, who thought Luke might know. I had Lucky run interference. Luke asked Bobbie because he couldn’t remember where he heard the name—”

“Is this going somewhere?”

“And Bobbie remembered Victor and Julian Jerome. Some crime family from New York that set up shop for a few years in Port Charles about fifteen, sixteen years ago.” Nikolas sighed. “Always comes back to that. Anyway, she didn’t remember any Ava Jerome attached to that. There was a sister, but she had a different last name. Lucas’s natural father is Julian Jerome—”

“Oh, yeah, I remember now.” Elizabeth frowned. “Hmm. Jason didn’t say anything but I guess if they were that long ago, it was before Sonny’s time. I guess I’ll get him to run a background check on Ava before we go any further.”

“It’s probably a coincidence,” Nikolas said. “But better safe than sorry. Anyway, as for the contract itself, Andrew said it was a bit unfair. Considering your reputation in the art world—”

“The fact that I *have* one still astounds me,” Elizabeth murmured.

“And the fact that your work was shown at the Harris Gallery, which is more prestigious and has a longer history in New York—the Jerome gallery is a bit more niche. It tends to launch careers but that’s pretty much it.” Nikolas sipped his coffee. “So he thinks the fifty-fifty profit offering isn’t very fair. You’ll be doing most of the work here in Port Charles. Once the galley is open, that agreement provides you’ll head up the gallery and the foundation, which means you’ll be doing the lion’s share of the work.”

Elizabeth scowled. “I *told* Luther I didn’t want something so time consuming. I have two small children and a career of my own, not to mention I’m getting married.”

“It wouldn’t be that difficult, Liz.” Nikolas leaned forward. “I could put you in touch with some good managers. They’d steer you through a lot of the grunt work. You’d show up, be the gorgeous face at the benefits, but you could leave them most of the work. Still, Andrew says you should counter with an eighty-twenty split and refuse to go lower than seventy-thirty. You don’t need Ava Jerome. You have your own reputation.”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth chewed her lip. “But I want someone to share the risk. I made a lot from my first show, and Luther has looked at the work I’ll be exhibiting in December—he expects it to be even bigger. But still, I don’t want to tie up my capital in this.” She glanced at him. “And it goes without saying that while Jason would invest if I needed him, he doesn’t want to.”

“He wants it to be separate in case...” Nikolas waved his hand in the air. “Something happens. I suppose he wants to keep your art money separate as well.”

“Yeah. I mean, I’ll have access to his accounts, but you know, it’s just easier this way. I have my own money manager, too. Literally the only thing Jason and I are sharing *are* the kids.” She smiled. “It’s fine. It’s nice to have enough money to worry about it.”

“Any idea if you’ll be adopting Evie?” Nikolas asked.

“No.” Elizabeth tucked the partnership agreement in her bag. “No, but I don’t think either of us will. Sonny’s been doing so much better lately. And while Carly is a concern, Jason seems to think we’ll be able to work something out with custody at some point. We did, however, start the process for Cameron.”

Nikolas hesitated, and she sighed. “Go ahead, Nikolas. I know you want to say it.”

“You know that I’ve tried very hard to be supportive this time,” he told her. “And I haven’t even been lying. I *can* see you’re happier with Jason, and since my family has tried to kill you on more than one occasion, it’s not like I have a lot of room to talk. So when I say this next part, I want you remember how good I’ve been.”

“You’ve been the very definition of a best friend,” Elizabeth told him with mock somberness. “So carry on.”

“You and I both know the next danger is not going to come from what Jason does for a living,” Nikolas said. “It’s going to come from Sonny and Carly. Now, I know Sonny is doing better. He and I were part of the meeting with the union leaders last week since this godforsaken strike is screwing up both our businesses. There was a calmness about him I have not seen in years. So whatever he’s doing, I’m glad.”

“But?” she prompted.

“But if Sonny’s being treated with medication, as Emily thinks, she worries that he might stop taking it. Or that it’s something that is working for now, but it might not work full-time. She’s been studying bipolar disorder like crazy and she says it’s a difficult illness to treat. If Sonny’s doctor caught him in the middle of a low cycle, he might prescribe anti-depressants, thinking it was depression.”

Elizabeth hesitated. “Jason—he said Sonny hasn’t said much about the medication he’s on. Barely acknowledges it. I don’t know what he’s taking. But—” She bit her lip. “An anti-depressant would help him in the low points, but if he starts to cycle up—”

“Yeah, exactly. Emily gave me this list...” He pulled it out from his pocket. “Some symptoms to look for if he starts to cycle. She’s been so busy at the hospital—”

Elizabeth took it. “An anti-depressant would probably aggravate the situation during a manic episode, wouldn’t it?” she said softly. “Heighten it.”

“I’ve never seen Sonny during a truly manic episode, but I can’t imagine it’s pretty. Jason would know better.”

She pursed her lips as she scanned symptoms. “Jason...” She closed her eyes, feeling guilty about talking about this behind Jason’s back, but this was her life she was protecting. “He said that Sonny’s been trying to control it for months. That he hasn’t crashed.”

“If he crashes on anti-depressants, it could make it worse.” Nikolas leaned back in his chair. “I don’t know much about this, Liz. And maybe I don’t care for Sonny much, but I’ve seen what mental illness does to people. God knows my family is delusional. I just...maybe we’re overreacting. We don’t even know if it’s bipolar disorder.”

“No, I guess we don’t.” Elizabeth sighed and put the list away. “But I can’t think what else it might be.” She looked at him. “Thank you for being such an amazing friend, Nikolas. I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

“The feeling is more than mutual.”

### **Morgan Penthouse: Bedroom**

Jason pulled back the bed sheet and frowned slightly at her. “Jerome? No, there’s no one on the radar with that name.”

Elizabeth unclasped her necklace and set it inside her jewelry case. “Nikolas thought it was probably a coincidence, but he wanted me to be aware.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and watched as she removed her watch and earrings before opening a dresser drawer for one of his t-shirts to sleep in. “I’ll have Bernie run a check on her. It’s probably nothing, but Nikolas is right. Better to be safe than sorry.”

She smiled at him as she drew the cotton over her head, the hem hanging halfway to her knees. She crawled over the bed until she was on her knees in front of him. “I’m going to hire a lawyer Nikolas recommended to go over the contract anyway.”

“But you think you’re going to go through with it.”

“Yeah, but I’m definitely going to be bugging Nikolas for all kinds of advice.” She bit her lip. “I know we talked about you not investing in it, and you know, I get it, but if Nikolas offers, you won’t be mad?”

“No.” Jason twisted until he was seated fully on the bed and rested his hands at her hips. “I don’t want the gallery combined with my money in anyway. If the IRS ever came after us, if any assets were ever seized, I don’t want you to be left without any resources. You should get your own investors, your own lawyers, and business managers.”

“That’s what I figured, but I thought I should be sure.” She brushed her lips against his before sliding under the sheets and adjusting the monitor for Evie and Cam’s room. Nora had one as well and

normally reached the nursery before Elizabeth or Jason, but Elizabeth still kept it on her side of the bed.

“But I would feel better if you’d let Bernie run background checks on any investors or people you hire to work there,” Jason said. “Just to be safe.”

“I figured. And you’ll be in charge of the security, too.” She turned on her side. “After everything my grandmother is putting you through with this party, it’s the least I can do, right?”

Jason smirked as he switched off his lamp, plunging the room in shadows. He drew her to her side. “Sonny asked if you’d save him a dance.”

“Yeah?” She peered up at him. “So things really *are* better?”

“They are.” Jason hesitated. “Sonny is seeing a doctor. Once a week. And he’s on medication. He says they won’t know for a few more weeks if it’s the right dosage, but he’s...it’s as close to his old self as I’ve ever seen him. He’s been calm, in control. Even joked with me today.” He stroked her back, his fingers dancing down her spine. “He told me you came to see him.”

“Yeah?”

“And he said he hoped you were doing okay. It was like...”

“Like it used to be?” she murmured.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “I don’t know if it’s going to last, but whatever you said to him—it got through. Maybe it’ll still be rough while he gets his treatment adjusted, but maybe it’ll be all right.”

“I’m so glad.” She leaned up to kiss him more fully. “I told you we’d get through this.”

“Yeah, you did.” And he rolled her to her back, kissing her neck as she giggled.

He was not a good man, but whatever he’d done to deserve her walking back into his life last December—he would spent the rest of his life making sure she never regretted it.

# Chapter Twenty-One

*I wanna love you, forever I do  
I wanna spend all of my days with you  
I'll carry your burdens and be the wind at your back  
I wanna spend my forever - forever like that*  
- Forever Like That, Ben Rector

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*Friday, August 12, 2005*

## Club 101

“This,” Bobbie said to Audrey as the first guests trickled into her daughter’s club, “is going to be a good night.”

Audrey raised a brow at her old friend. “What gives you that impression?” she asked dryly. She kept one eye on Carly behind the bar—she didn’t trust that harpy as far as she could throw her. She had been relatively absent during the party planning, but there was no way Audrey was going to let her ruin Elizabeth’s night.

Her granddaughter stood across the room with her fiancé, their children, Steven, Emily, and Nikolas. She watched as Elizabeth wiggled her fingers in Emily’s direction, showing off the gorgeous diamond ring Jason had given her shortly after proposing.

No matter that all the people in that group had seen the ring a dozen times, Elizabeth’s smile was still as radiant as that night they had gathered in Audrey’s home to announce the news.

To see Elizabeth happy like that? It was worth any sacrifice.

“Audrey?” Bobbie put a hand on her arm. “You look a little pale.”

“I’m fine, Bobbie.” Audrey patted Bobbie’s hand. “I just...need to eat. It was a busy day finalizing everything—oh, the Quartermaines have arrived. I should run interference before they reach the children.”

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Elizabeth felt Jason tense at her side, and immediately her eyes went to the entrance. Sure enough, the Quartermaine party had arrived. While Monica was smiling brightly, Edward and Alan looked uncomfortable, Ned headed straight for the bar, and Dillon shuffled in with his usual crowd—the Jones’ girls and Lucas.

“It’ll be fine.” She squeezed his arm, before handing Cameron to Emily. “Let’s go over, say hello. Get it over with.”

“I’m not going to get in an argument,” Jason told her as she steered him towards his family.

“No, I know, but you’ll feel better if they’re not circling you all night, planning their attack.”

Elizabeth stopped in front of Monica, Alan, and Edward. “I’m so glad you guys could make it!”

“Thank you for inviting us.” Monica embraced Elizabeth lightly. She lifted her arms halfway to Jason, but was already dropping them when he leaned forward to gently hug her.

“It’s *not* a party without the Quartermaines,” Elizabeth said. She accepted Alan, then Edward’s kiss on the cheek. “Have you seen the ring Jason gave me?”

She wiggled her hand in front of the Quartermaine men, as they obediently oohed and aahed over it.

“Ah, Jason.” Edward coughed, then cleared his throat. “I don’t know if you were made aware of it at the time—you didn’t...you weren’t at the reading of Lila’s will.”

Jason shook his head. “No, I—I couldn’t.”

“Well...” Edward paused. “She left you her wedding ring.” He reached into his pocket and drew out a velvet box. “I think she would...she would be happy to see it on Elizabeth’s finger.”

Elizabeth’s throat tickled as Jason accepted the box and flipped it open. The ring wasn’t overly extravagant—a simple gold ring with a beautiful inset of diamonds and sapphires.

“Ah, it was a family ring.” Edward coughed again. “My, ah, grandmother left it to me in her will for my wife.”

“It’s lovely,” Elizabeth said. “I remember admiring it on Lila often.” She looked at Jason. “It would be like having her with us, Jason.”

“Yeah.” Jason cleared his throat and glanced at his grandfather. “Thank you. I’ll...of course we’ll use it.”

“Good.” Edward nodded. “Good. I, ah, Alan, perhaps we should inspect the bar. Give Jason a moment with his—with, ah, Monica.”

“Of course.” Alan embraced Elizabeth once more with another kiss to her cheek. “Welcome to the family, Elizabeth.”

“That didn’t go so badly,” Monica remarked as the two men ambled towards the bar, joining a few doctors Emily had invited from the hospital. “I would have mentioned Lila’s will, Jason, but your—Edward wanted to do it. He said it was something Lila would have wanted.”

“It’s fine.” Jason closed the box and slid into his suit jacket. “It’s, ah, a trial run, right? For the wedding? To make sure we can all be in the same room.”

Monica smiled. “Now, where are my grandchildren?”

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“I have a few candidates in mind for Steven.” Emily took a seat with Nikolas, Leyla, and Lucky. “But I think I may have reached too high with this one.”

Lucky snorted. “Trust you to find *Steven Webber* more challenging than Jason Morgan.”

Leyla rolled her eyes. “Of course he is. Steven’s not interested in anyone. Anyone with eyes saw *this* coming at the Christmas party.” She flicked his sleeve. “Men. Blind as bats.”

“Who are your maybes?” Nikolas asked, ignoring his brother and his girlfriend. The quicker he got Emily through this matchmaking stage, the more peace he’d have.

“Well, I figured it should be someone who shares his dedication to his career, who’d understand the hours, but not necessarily someone who works with him,” Emily said. “So that eliminated the nursing staff. That really threw me for a while.”

“As it would,” Lucky said with mock somberness. She lobbed an olive pit at him.

“But I am *nothing* if not adaptable,” Emily declared. “Did you guys know Gia Campbell moved back over the summer? She works with Lansing in the DA’s office.”

“Oh, she finished her law degree?” Nikolas asked.

“You don’t like her,” Lucky said.

“Who’s Gia?”

“I hate you all.” Emily sipped her ice water. “I don’t know if she’s changed. But *we’re* not the same kids we were that summer, are we?” She blinked. “I mean, I feel like a completely different person.”

“What summer?” Leyla pushed.

“Fair enough,” Lucky replied. “Is she your best candidate?”

“Well, no.” Emily furrowed her brow. “I was talking to Maxie at Kelly’s, and Robin Scorpio is thinking of moving home. But I think she’d be good with my resident—”

“Dr. Drake?” Leyla wrinkled her nose. “If you think Steven would be difficult, I can assure you Patrick Drake would be nigh on impossible.”

“Oh, hell.” Nikolas put a hand to his forehead. “No. Don’t—don’t do that. *Don’t* challenge her. She thinks this is her calling in life.”

Emily flicked his shoulder. “I make people happy, damn it.”

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This was a good night. Sonny posed for a picture with the engaged couple, even smiled as he watched them pose for photos with Cam and Evie. Evie looked gorgeous in her bright yellow dress. Her hair

was starting to come in, thick and dark.

She looked so much like her mother.

This year had been difficult, and not being with his daughter had twisted him up inside, but he knew she was safe with Jason and Elizabeth. He wasn't ready to have custody yet—a few more months of stability on his meds would put him in a better position.

And of course, deciding what to do with Carly.

He sipped his martini and eyed his wife as she spoke with her mother by the bar. The last month of clearly thinking—of talking about some of his issues with the therapist on Saturdays—He knew he had to get Carly out of his life.

Carly was his trigger. When she was around, he remembered the worst of the things he'd done. Betraying Jason. Walking away from Sam, away from his daughter.

Carly was his poison, but he wasn't ready to deal with it yet.

He had to be on his game, ready to deal with whatever she'd throw at him in divorce court. Ready to figure out a way for their boys to come out of this unscathed.

“Sonny!” Elizabeth approached him with a bright smile. The tug of envy, the wish that Jason's good fortune was his own—he still felt that, but it no longer ate at him.

It gave him something to look for when he was ready to try again.

“Elizabeth.” He kissed her cheek. “You look fantastic as always. The belle of the ball.” He eyed Jason who stood with his sister and...Alan? “Is that Jason conversing with Quartermaine sans bloodshed?”

“I know, it is pretty weird, but he's trying for me.” Elizabeth joined him at his table. “We haven't really had a chance to talk the last few weeks, with everything being so busy.” She chewed her bottom lip. “You look—you look good.”

“I feel good,” he told honestly. “Not quite my old self, but for the first time in a long time, it doesn't feel like that's such a far off goal.” He tilted his head. “Jason said you were wrapped up in a partnership agreement with a gallery in New York.”

“Oh, yeah.” She wrinkled her nose. “I had to hire a business manager and a lawyer. God. They're off negotiating with the Jeromes on my behalf.” Elizabeth sipped her cocktail. “Jason said Ava's background check came back clean, so at least that's *one* less thing to worry about, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, the name Jerome is an old one but still packs a bit of power.” Sonny squinted. “Long gone by the time I moved up from Bensonhurst, but certainly not forgotten. I'll look forward to your opening since I wasn't able to go to the first one—”



“I’m having a show at the Harris in New York in December,” she told him. She rolled her eyes. “My agent, Luther? Keeps talking about my new stuff showing my emergence from darkness and isolation.” She waved her hand. “Whatever. His hype will sell it, and I’ll have more capital to invest in the new place up here.”

“Well, isn’t this *cozy*?”

Carly’s voice dripped with venom as she sidled up to their table, one hand on the back of Sonny’s chair. “Shouldn’t you be drooling over Jason?”

“No,” Elizabeth said calmly. “He’s with his father and sister. Sonny and I are catching up.” She pursed her lips. “The club is wonderful, Carly. You’ve done a great job with it.”

“Like I give a crap what you think.”

“Carly,” Sonny said, his amusement and good humor vanished. “I don’t know what you’re doing right now, but I don’t appreciate it. You can either sit down and chat with us or you can go away.”

“You’d like that wouldn’t you?” his wife snapped. “Is *she* the reason you’re so distant? You and Jason trading women again?”

Sonny blinked at her, but Elizabeth smirked. “Why? You want another turn with Jason?”

“I’m not going to let you ruin my marriage, you little—”

Sonny rose to his feet and took Carly’s arm in his. “Stop this. Now. I don’t know what the hell you think you’re pulling, but I’m not having it. If you didn’t want to host their engagement party, then you should have told Audrey no. If you can’t behave yourself, then go home. You’re *not* ruining this.”

“She couldn’t even if she wanted to.” Elizabeth gracefully stood, her drink in her hand. “That’s why she’s angry, Sonny. She’s used to being able to chase away the women in Jason’s life, but you’ve never been able to get rid of me.”

“I did before, and I’ll do it again.” Carly spat. “It’s all your fault, you bitch. If it weren’t for you, Jason would remember what he owes Sonny—”

Sonny saw that Jason was looking at them now, starting to cross the room. Fuck. “Carly, Jason owes me nothing. Let’s go now—”

“Is everything okay?” Jason slid a hand around Elizabeth’s waist. “Carly?”

“I’d watch your little princess, Jase. She’s already batting her eyelashes at my husband.” Carly wrenched her arm from Sonny’s grasp. “Maybe she’ll get tired of you and want to move up the food chain—”

“I think you’re confusing me with you, Carly.” Elizabeth tossed her hair over her shoulder. “I’m *not* eighteen anymore. I’m not confused, I’m not feeling sorry for myself. I have what I want. I have the

life I want. I just wish you knew what it was like to be satisfied.” She looked up at Jason. “We’re fine, Jason. It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“You think you’ve won something?” Carly stepped towards Elizabeth. “You think you’ve beaten me? Little girl, you don’t even *know* what I’m capable of.”

“That’s enough—” Sonny felt the heat on the back of his neck as more and more of the party guests were looking at him. “Lower your voice, Carly.”

“I know you’re having an affair,” Carly snarled. “This is the way you always act when you’re involved with another woman. With Alexis. Sam. You think I don’t know it? You’re screwing someone else and I swear to God, if I find out it’s *her*—”

“Are you insane?” Sonny hissed. He took her arm and roughly steered her towards the back. “That’s it.”

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Jason watched as Sonny muscled his wife away, through a door behind the bar, then looked back at Elizabeth who seemed oddly unruffled. “Elizabeth—”

“She can’t even see he’s got one foot out the door and she’s shoving him the rest of the way.” Elizabeth sighed. “God. Jason, if Sonny continues to get better, we’ve got to get him away from her. It’s the only way.”

They started back across the room, towards his sister and Alan, now joined by another doctor from the hospital. “I know. You and Sonny looked okay before.”

“Yeah, we were talking about the gallery, and how Ava’s background check cleared her.” Elizabeth briefly leaned her head against his shoulder. “It was really nice, Jason. Whatever meds he’s on? They’re really working.”

“He said they’ll still need a few months to make sure the dosage is right, but it’s good so far.” He kissed the top of her head. “You were the turning point, Elizabeth. You gave him something to hope for.”

“Yeah, now I just need to push Carly over a cliff and we’ll all be good.”

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“Okay. Gram.” Steven took a seat across from his grandmother once Monica and Bobbie moved away to talk to Emily and Nikolas. “It’s her engagement party. Her life is solid. How much longer are we going to pretend you’re not sick?”

Audrey pursed her lips, then sipped her water. “Steven, I’m not a child—”

“No, but you’re my grandmother and one of the most important people in the world to Elizabeth and me. So when I tell you that I’m not comfortable keeping this from her for much longer, I mean it.” Steven leaned forward. “Gram. She loves you. Don’t make this harder on her in the long run—”

“Monica and I were discussing it—” Audrey was quiet for a moment. “The medication—it’s kept me stable for months, and there’s no reason to think my condition won’t remain so for longer. But I had a test last week that led us to believe that perhaps...”

“Gram.” Fear licked at Steven’s throat. “Gram, what’s going on?”

“Eventually, with this type of problem, medication really only staves off the inevitable. There’s either an operation to replace the valve or...” Audrey lifted a shoulder. “And I do *not* want Elizabeth blindsided if that proves to be the case.”

“And this test,” Steven prompted. “What did it lead you to believe?”

“That my medication is beginning to fail.” Audrey waited a moment. “Steven, I’m not going to have the surgery. I’m—I’m in my eighties. The recovery time, if I should even survive the surgery—”

Steven nearly swore but caught the word as it slid over his tongue. “Gram. Jesus. I know the risks, but isn’t it worth it? A new valve could give you another decade—Elizabeth is getting married. You should be there—”

“I’ve considered all of that and the thought of not—” Audrey closed her eyes. “The thought of not being there, Steven, for you. For Elizabeth. Even for Sarah. And my Tommy. It breaks my heart, and I know all the reasons I should do it, but I keep thinking of Steve—” She closed her eyes. “Collapsing in his office—”

“Hey, Gram—”

“This looks serious.” Elizabeth smiled as she took a seat at their table. “This is supposed to be a party—”

“We were just discussing a patient,” Audrey said with a smile, but Steven shook his head.

“That’s it, Gram. I’m not doing this. Bits, Gram is sick.”

“Steven—” Audrey shook her head sharply. “No, not tonight—”

“Steven, what’s going on?” Elizabeth demanded. “Gram?”

His little sister was strong, Steven knew. And the time for protecting her was over.

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Sonny was subdued when he returned from the back, a glass of water in his hand. He joined Jason, standing alone at the bar. “I had Max take her home. I’m sorry about that.”

“Elizabeth was more worried for you.” Jason glanced at him. “Carly—she’s Carly. We’ll deal with it. When you’re ready, when you feel in control, we’ll take care of Carly.”

“I’m going to divorce her,” Sonny said, and the words—they felt freeing. God. It felt good. “I don’t know if I ever loved her, Jase. I think—I think maybe I convinced myself if I was going to betray you, it should count. It should *matter*—”

“That stopped mattering to me a long time ago, Sonny.” Jason frowned a bit, and Sonny followed his gaze, watching Elizabeth at a table with her brother and grandmother. “It hurt, but it—it changed things for me. I loved Michael so much, I think I talked myself into loving Carly. But it wasn’t real.”

And it went without saying, though Jason would probably *never* admit it, that he’d already been half in love with Elizabeth at that point. “Anyway. I just—I have to make sure I can deal with the pressure a divorce from Carly would take. I don’t know why she’d think there was anything between Elizabeth and I—”

“You didn’t tell her you were seeing a doctor. And you seem happier. Carly’s basic. She thinks if she’s not the reason for the change, another woman must be.” Jason sipped his beer. “And when Carly thinks she’s being replaced, that’s probably the most dangerous time to be around her. She thought Bobbie replaced her with Lucas, thought Robin replaced her as Michael’s mother, thought I was replacing her with Elizabeth—” He shook his head. “It is what it is, Sonny. She sees you smiling with Elizabeth like she saw me dancing with her. It’s enough for her. She doesn’t need any actual evidence.”

And wasn’t that Carly wrapped up in a fucking bow? “Well.” Sonny sipped his water. “What we talked about before, Jase, about Evie—”

“Sonny—”

“Just…” Sonny lifted a hand. “I want to get to know her, but it’s not enough that I’m doing better. If you were to relinquish guardianship, I’d want it to be permanent. So it’s tabled until my meds are certain, until Carly’s not a factor. I’m doing right by Evie this way. Sam didn’t want her daughter around Carly, didn’t want Evie to feel less than Michael or Morgan. I can honor that. So as far as I’m concerned, the situation stands for now.”

Sonny started to say something else, but he saw Elizabeth’s face crumple at the same time Jason did. And they both started across the room.

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“I really didn’t want to do this tonight,” Audrey said, distressed. “Elizabeth, my darling—”

“Why won’t you have the surgery?” Elizabeth demanded. She looked to her brother. “Steven. Tell her. She has to be here. I’m getting *married*—”

“There’s no reason to assume that I won’t be there,” Audrey said. “I’m going in this week for more tests—”

“But you just said—” Elizabeth pressed her lips together as she saw Jason and Sonny approaching, concerned etched into their features. “We’ll—we’ll talk about this tomorrow, okay? I can’t…I can’t

right now.”

She rose to her feet and closed the distance between them, going right into Jason’s arms. “My grandmother’s sick,” she said into his shirt.

Jason’s arms closed around her. “Elizabeth—”

“I’ll leave you two,” Sonny said. But he touched her shoulder. “Let me know if I can do anything.”

“Let’s sit down,” Jason told her, maneuvering towards the side of the room. “What happened?”

“My grandmother—she has mitral stenosis, which I don’t know anything about except she needs heart valve replacement surgery—” Elizabeth pressed a hand to her eyes. “And she just told me she’s not going to have it.”

Which meant she would let herself fade away. Just when Elizabeth’s life was coming together, when she was in reach of everything she wanted—how was she supposed to face losing the only member of her family that had stood behind her? For better or worse, Audrey had always been there.

And now maybe she wouldn’t?

“Well,” Jason said after a moment. “It’s...it’s an invasive and difficult surgery. The recovery time, even for someone young and healthy—”

“Don’t—” Elizabeth stopped and took a deep breath. God, Jason’s strange little medical memories really picked inopportune times to show up. “I know all the reasons why it’s a risk but she could beat the odds and live another ten years—”

“Or she could die on the table.” Jason slid his hand through her hair. “And I bet that’s what she’s thinking about.”

“It’s just...” she shook her head. “It’s not *fair*, Jason. She has to go in for tests with Monica this week, to determine if the medication is starting to fail. And if the meds aren’t working—it’s just a matter of...” Her throat closed. “God. Oh, God. I can’t think about it.”

“Do you want to go home? We can leave,” Jason offered. “We’ll go get my bike and we’ll take a ride. So you won’t have to think.”

“God.” Tears slid down her cheeks. “God. I shouldn’t have asked what was wrong. This night—it was so perfect. We were so happy and you were getting along with your family—and Sonny was good. And I had *everything*. I should have known it wouldn’t stay perfect for long.”

Jason pulled her to her feet. “Come on, we’ll go out the back way.”

“I should say goodbye—” Elizabeth’s half-hearted protest was lost as her fiancé led her through the back offices into the alley. “Jason—”

“The Towers are a block away, we can be in the garage in ten minutes.” Jason eyed her dress, which stopped several inches above her knees. “Your dress is short enough, we don’t even have to change.”

And because she wanted to feel the wind rushing past her so fast, the world screaming past her in a mirage of colors—because she wanted to go so fast her brain would shut down, she closed her mouth and followed him.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

*Everyone's got an agenda, don't stop  
Keep that chin up, you'll be all right  
Can you believe what a year it's been  
Are you still the same?  
Has your opinion changed?  
'Cause I don't know you anymore  
I don't recognize this place*  
- I Don't Know You Anymore, Savage Garden

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*Sunday, August 14, 2005*

## **Warehouse: Sonny's Office**

It had been years since Sonny had felt this good about his life. Despite his failing marriage and the difficult custody issues regarding his children he knew to be in his future, despite the minor business problems that had been plaguing his organization for months...

Sonny was in *control*. He rose every morning knowing that he was in full possession of his own destiny—of his words and his emotions.

He had conquered the demon inside him and now that his illness was under control, he knew he could take anything else coming his way.

“The minor issues seem to be resolving themselves.” Sonny leaned back in his chair and studied his business partner. “Jordan got Frankie and Ollie released—they’re laying low. No shipment disruptions. Maybe nothing to worry about after all.”

“Maybe.” Jason allowed. “But no point in laying down our guard just yet.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Can’t risk someone just playing with us.”

“Sure, sure.” But Sonny thought Jason was just being cautious—no problems there, it was what he was paid to do. Sonny knew the worst was over.

They could turn their attentions to other matters. Time for Sonny to prove to Jason things had really changed. It wasn’t all about him, after all.

“I, ah, wanted to ask about Elizabeth.” Sonny shifted. “How’s her grandmother?”

Jason blinked at the change in topic but followed it. “Okay. She’s checking into the hospital to run some tests today, check the stress on her heart.” He shifted in his seat. “Elizabeth is there now.”

It was a shame if Audrey Hardy’s health was failing as her granddaughter’s world was coming together, but life did that sometimes. “If she needs anything—” Sonny gestured. “It goes without

saying.”

“Of course—”

Jason looked as though he have something more to say on the subject, but Sonny continued. “I talked to Jordan about Carly. About custody and the best time to file for divorce.”

Jason blinked. “Ah, Sonny...” He shifted again. “It’s...you’ve only been doing better a month—I thought you wanted to wait a bit more—”

“Why wait?” Sonny asked. “I used to think I didn’t lose it around Carly because I could see her clearly. You know, I’d only explode on you. Or unfortunately, Elizabeth. But not with Carly. Not since we reconciled. But I can see it now. She’s the trigger. I just never seem to be aimed at her.”

Jason’s brow furrowed. “Still—”

“Jordan thinks Carly has a good case to keep me away from the boys,” Sonny continued. “With the depression.”

“Depression?” Jason repeated. “Is—” He hesitated. “Is that what you’re being treated for?”

Sonny narrowed his eyes, not caring for the tone in his friend’s voice. “Yeah. And it makes sense. I’ve been better since I’m on the meds, since I started therapy.” He paused. “Why? You think *you* know better?”

And they both blinked at that—at the snappish tone, at the clipped question. Sonny swallowed. Where had that come from?

He was better. He was good.

He was in *control*.

Sonny reached for a glass of water. “Sorry.” He sipped it slowly. Deep breaths. “I just—it was hard for me to accept, too. I wasn’t expecting it, but he looked at all the evidence, all the things I told him. And that’s what he came up with.”

“Fair enough.” But Jason’s face had changed, just slightly. He was back on his guard.

Sonny told himself that was okay, that he could understand Jason’s defensiveness. He had put his best friend and his family through hell for the last year, probably even more. Jason had Sonny’s best interests in heart, had Evie in his head.

Sonny had to regain Jason’s trust, it couldn’t happen overnight.

“Listen.” Sonny rose to his feet. “I’m taking it seriously, Jason. I am. I wasn’t ready to deal with Carly, with the end of my marriage before. Because I thought—I thought maybe I didn’t deserve better.” He cleared his throat and forced the words out. “But I know the depression, the darkness, it’s



not her fault, but she's...she's not good for me. Because being with her, and then seeing you with Elizabeth, it makes me envious. Angry."

"Okay." Jason also rose to his feet. "And I guess that makes sense. I want you to be okay, Sonny. And if you think leaving Carly is the right way to do it, I can't blame you. But be careful. Carly's—" He hesitated. "She won't take it well."

"I have to tell her about my condition," Sonny replied. "I haven't yet. And my not talking is only making matters worse. I have to be honest with her. To a point. I don't think telling her our marriage is toxic to my mental health would be good for any of us."

"No," Jason agreed. "Just—" He exhaled slowly. "Don't ever forget when Carly's hurt, when she's angry, she'll try to punish someone. You and I both know what she's capable of when she's just trying to help. When she actively seeks to destroy you?" He shook his head and looked past Sonny. "I've never been the target of it, Sonny, but I've seen her. Hurricanes do less damage."

"I hear what you're saying," Sonny told him. "And I promise you, somehow, we're going to get out of this. I'm okay, Jason, but I want to be better."

## **General Hospital: Cardiology Waiting Room**

"Stop tapping your feet, Bits."

Elizabeth scowled at her brother. "Why are you so calm? I hate you." Never failed. The man never broke a sweat.

Steven just leaned back in his chair and folded his hands in his lap. "Is there a benefit to being anxious?"

"No, but..." She huffed and folded her arms. "Did you talk to Sarah last night?"

"I did," Steven confirmed. "She's planning to fly out in about a week to check on her, even though Gram doesn't want her to." At Elizabeth's eye roll, "She doesn't choose her own hours, little sister. She's a resident. She can only stay a day."

"It was *her* choice to change programs," Elizabeth muttered, but rolled her shoulders. "I'm sorry. I'm being bitchy because I just..."

"There's nothing we can do now," Steven said, his eternal patience never wavering. "The cardiology staff here are some of the best in the country, and you know Monica will take care of her like she was family." He paused. "She is family."

"I know, I just..." Elizabeth rose to her feet and crossed to the window overlooking the parking lot. "I know Gram has done the best she can, and I even understand why she waited to tell me, even if I wish she hadn't."

"Hey, she told me about five minutes before she told you, but yeah." Steven pressed his lips together.

“But whatever happens going forward, we’re in this together.”

The door opened then, and Monica stepped in. “Elizabeth, Steven.”

Steven rose, falling in line next to Elizabeth as they crossed the room. “Where’s Gram?” Elizabeth asked.

“Resting.” Monica crossed her arms over the chart in her arms. “How much do you know about your grandmother’s treatment so far? I get the sense Audrey left the two of you out of it until now.”

“She didn’t want us to know she’d been ill.” Steven rose. “I know that she was suffering from a mitral stenosis, but I didn’t know for how long, what the treatment plan was—”

Monica gestured to the seats. “Audrey came to me late last year. Before you moved home, Elizabeth.” She flicked open her chart. “She’d been feeling tired, a bit run down for some time, but when she started to have fainting spells accompanied by chest pain, she wanted to have some tests.”

“How did she hide that from us?” she asked Steven. “I lived with her—”

“She had the tests before you came home,” Monica clarified. “She already knew when you brought the baby home. We ran the usual tests—an ECG, some X-rays, and confirmed the diagnosis. Initially, it seemed to be a mild case. We decided to control it with a combination of drugs.”

“But that’s not working anymore,” Steven said, reaching for Elizabeth’s hand.

“It doesn’t always,” Monica admitted. “Audrey has calcium deposits in her heart—they’re keeping it from pumping correctly. The meds were to control the symptoms with the hope they didn’t worsen. Unfortunately, due to the test results…”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “She needs surgery.”

“Aren’t there a few types of procedures?” Steven asked. “It’s not my specialty, but—”

“There are,” Monica replied. “But she’s not a candidate for the less invasive one, the balloon valvuloplasty. At this point, her best option is to either replace the valve or perform surgery to remove the calcium deposits. Both of these procedures are incredibly risky, particularly for a woman of Audrey’s age.”

“Does Gram know this?” Elizabeth asked. “She seemed to—” She hesitated. “She seemed to have ruled it out before—”

“She’s not particularly interested in surgical options, no.” Monica shifted the chart on her lap. “I had hoped the less invasive one would be an option, but that won’t be the case.”

“How did this even happen?” Steven demanded. “People in this country don’t get mitral stenosis.” At Elizabeth’s blank look, he clarified. “It’s mostly caused by untreated strep throat or rheumatic fever —”

“Well, Audrey has some calcium deposits due to her age, but she worked in Vietnam for several years while she was young.” Monica hesitated. “She suffered from rheumatic fever at that point, but recovered. The damage to her heart was probably minimal while she was younger since your grandmother has been in relatively good health, but as she grew older, it became more noticeable.”

“Okay, so what now?” Elizabeth said, not giving a damn about how her grandmother had developed this disease. “She *needs* to have the surgery. You told her that, didn’t you?”

“I explained this to her, yes.” Monica hesitated. “But she was a surgical nurse herself once, Elizabeth. She knows the odds with open-heart surgery at her age. The recovery time is several months, with no guarantees her condition wouldn’t redevelop.”

“Without the surgery, what are her odds?” Steven asked. “I mean...” He swallowed. “How long could we expect?”

“Well, I’m going to hope Audrey changes her mind, but we’re going to change the combination of meds and try to control it for as long as we can.” Monica leaned forward. “I want to concentrate on making her comfortable as well. I don’t want her in any pain.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “You didn’t answer the question.”

“If the new combination of medication doesn’t ease the symptoms, if we can’t improve the pumping in her heart...” Monica sighed. “We’re looking at weeks. Maybe eight. Maybe more, maybe less. It’s hard to predict until we start the new treatment.” She hesitated. “I’m sorry, Steven, Elizabeth. This is the last thing I wanted to learn this morning.”

“Thank you, Monica.” Steven looked to his sister. “It’ll be okay, Bits. We’re in this together.”

He squeezed her hand, and Elizabeth returned his half-hearted smile. She only wished she shared his optimism.

## **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

“Michael’s just gathering his things together,” Carly said as she took a seat on the sofa.

Courtney nodded, tightening her grip on the strap of her purse. “I think he’ll like the amusement park,” she said.

“He usually loves Aunt Courtney day.” Her sister-in-law leaned back, but her casual pose did nothing to disguise the tension in her shoulders. “I’m glad you’ve decided to keep doing it despite our differences.”

*Differences.* What a way to describe it. They hadn’t spoken since Sonny’s trip to New York, and Courtney knew Carly believed she was covering for her brother. Covering up what exactly, Carly didn’t care clearly.

“I love Michael and Morgan,” Courtney said. She shifted. “And I love you and my brother. It’s why

I *hate* seeing you all so unhappy. Carly—”

“He’s going to divorce me,” Carly said flatly. “*Nothing* I’ve done has changed that. It’s just a matter of when.”

“Has—” Courtney hesitated. “Has he said something?”

“No, but he’s better. In control of himself. I don’t know if he’s having an affair or what, but whatever’s going on, he’s not talking to me.” Carly twisted her mouth. “I overplayed my hand.”

It disturbed Courtney to see Carly looking so defeated. She didn’t have a great deal of firsthand experience of watching Carly in action when she felt betrayed or threatened, but she knew enough to suspect Carly was just laying low.

Licking her wounds.

“Maybe it’s for the best,” Courtney offered. “It’s not as though you two have been happy the last few years. You’ve both tried—” When Carly scoffed, Courtney corrected herself. “I know *you*’ve tried, Carly. No one can say differently. He shot you in the head and you forgave him. He had an affair, and you forgave him. You were willing to bring an illegitimate daughter into the family, he stopped you. Carly, maybe I don’t agree with all your methods or decisions—”

“Few rarely do,” Carly remarked dryly, but her interest was engaged now.

“But I know your marriage means a lot to you. I don’t think my brother gave you a chance.” Courtney hesitated. “I don’t think either he or Jason ever gave you the chance to deal with Evie and Sam fairly. They lied to you from the start, and now they’ve got themselves wrapped up in this hideous custody tangle. It’s not fair to anyone.”

“I just—I *did* try.” Carly’s voice broke. “You know me. I try for the easy solutions. Do you think I want Sonny to take Evie away from Jason? I never asked them to do this to themselves. After Michael, I *never* would have suggested Jason take custody of Evie.” She pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. “But once it was done, I thought it might be okay. Jason is an amazing father and he’d love her so much. And then he fell in love with Elizabeth.”

And those words didn’t do more than pang Courtney’s heart—for what might have been and for what never should have been. “I know. I saw him last spring. There’s a tension in him, but it’s lightened. She was always good for him, Carly.”

“But Sonny is falling apart and it’s not my fault.” Carly shook her head. “It’s not. There’s a darkness in him that I can’t touch, I never could. He always refused help, and Jason used to be able to solve it —” She pressed her lips together. “I knew the guilt of leaving his daughter was eating him alive. I tried to come clean with him, to bring it into the open but now Jason doesn’t think Sonny is stable enough to have custody—” She laughed, a harsh and twisted sound that nearly made Courtney wince.

“And they’re blaming me *again* for it. They don’t think I’ll love Evie enough.” She rose, to pace in

front of the fireplace. “Maybe they’re right. Maybe I *am* a horrible mother who only loves my sons because they’re mine. And I used to think that I could never look at Evie and not see that whore.”

“Carly—” Courtney cast her eyes to the stairs, hoping Michael was taking his time.

“But I saw her at their engagement party, and—” Carly looked at her. “She’s starting to grow up, like the way babies do. She has her own features. God, Courtney, she has these beautiful dark eyes—she has Sonny’s eyes. Like Morgan. She’s Morgan’s sister.” She pressed a hand to her chest. “I could love Morgan’s sister. I *could* love that little girl for her sweet laugh.”

“Have you told Sonny any of this?” Courtney asked, rising to her feet. “What does he think?”

“Do you honestly think he’d believe me?” Carly murmured, wrapping her arms around herself. “He and Jason think they know me inside and out. And maybe they do know me better than I know myself. They think I’m a selfish, twisted, narcissist who only loves things I think belong to me.”

“They don’t—” Courtney stopped, because she didn’t know about Jason, but she could believe that of her brother.

“I’ve been fighting for so long to save my marriage, to save my place and position as Sonny Corinthos’ wife, and you know what Courtney?” She turned to her, Carly’s dark eyes hollow. “I can’t remember why I ever loved him.”

“Then why not stop?” Courtney said gently. “Carly—”

“Because if I’m not Sonny’s wife and the mother of his children, then who am I?” Carly spread her arms at her sound, gesturing the penthouse. “This is all I know. All I’ve wanted for years. And now I just want to burn it to the ground.”

## **Morgan Penthouse: Master Bedroom**

Jason frowned when he came into the bedroom that night, after checking on both sleeping children. Elizabeth was seated at her vanity table, which served as both a storage for her jewelry and makeup as well as a makeshift desk. He had offered her space downstairs, but she had put him off.

The disorganization of her business files ruffled his own orderly tendencies, but maybe when they moved, he could convince her to set up a proper office.

“Is that a new contract?” he asked, as he sat on the bed to remove his boots.

“Mmm...” Elizabeth nodded. “I talked to the business manager Nikolas suggested, but I wasn’t thrilled with him. If my name is going to be on this building, then I want to feel like I can be involved. He seemed to think I was going to sit back and let him do it all. So I called your custody lawyer...” She looked at him. “Diane? She has a general law practice, so she’s been doing the contracts with me.”

“I didn’t realize you’d called Diane—” Jason hesitated, but Diane only represented him when it came

to Evie. Jordan Baines handled the rest of their business, so Elizabeth was still unconnected. “She’s a good lawyer. She’ll take care of you.”

“Yeah, she’s already managed to break down the Jerome Gallery. It’ll be a sixty-forty split, and I get the sixty.” Elizabeth set the contract aside and turned to him. “I thought looking over her notes would take my mind off things, but it’s not.”

“Yeah.” Jason exhaled. “I can guess your grandmother’s tests didn’t go well.”

“God.” She closed her eyes. “No. They went about as badly as they could have. She needs major open heart surgery. Your mother—” Elizabeth hesitated. “Monica said if she doesn’t have it, it’s a matter of months, maybe less.”

He wasn’t surprised. At Audrey’s age, heart problems could precipitate a fast decline. “I’m sorry, Elizabeth.”

“Steven’s going to stay with her for a while.” Elizabeth rose to her feet, crossed the room to open a drawer in her dresser, and removed a t-shirt. “To make sure she’s not alone.”

“Elizabeth—”

“I brought an infant into her home.” She turned to face him, her face pale, eyes wide and dark with pain. “And I still have boxes and crap all over the house because we didn’t move everything—I complicated her life. How much stress did I cause her? How much have *I* done over the years?”

“Hey.” Jason stood, and drew her towards him, his hands on her elbows. “You know better than that. Your grandmother loves Cameron. And I’ve read about this—they actually recommend light exercise and normal routines. You did *not* make her condition worse—”

“I just—” Elizabeth dipped her head down, rested it against his chest. “I feel like she and I have really connected this last year. And she’s so essential to me. I had plans. She was going—” He felt tears dampen his shirt. “She was going to walk me down the aisle when we got married. A-and she was going to be so amazing with Cameron, with Evie. I need her to be here.”

“I know.” He slid his arms around her waist, resting his chin on the top of her head. “I wish there was something we could do. If it was a matter of money—”

“But it’s just her own stubbornness.” Elizabeth drew back. “She’s afraid of the recovery, afraid of the surgery, even though Monica is one of the cardiologists in the state. She wants to go out on her own terms, she told us. I’d rather she stand and fight—”

“You might convince her,” Jason told her. “I doubt you’ll give up and let her go without a fight.” He tucked her hair behind her ear. “I know for a fact that you’re pretty bossy when you’re taking care of someone.”

The reminder of their time in the studio drew the faint smile he’d hoped for. “Steven and I are putting together some research. I just—” She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and bit down. “I just

thought we were due for a break, Jason. I mean, this last year, for the both of us, has been stressful. My new career, the problems with Sonny—I thought we were finally in a place to be happy for five minutes. I mean...” She looked at him, met his eyes. “We fell in love, we’re planning a life together. Sonny’s turned a corner, why can’t the world leave us *alone*?”

Jason hesitated, because he wanted to talk to her about Sonny’s revelations earlier that day—that he was being treated only for depression. But he closed his mouth. There was time for that. Another time, another day.

Elizabeth furrowed her brow. “Jason? I know that look.”

“It’s not important.” He turned away from her and reached for his sweat pants. He would not burden her with his suspicions, with his worries.

“Jason—” She sighed. “Don’t—*don’t* protect me. I can deal with it—”

“You shouldn’t have to.” He faced her again, annoyed with himself. “That’s all you’ve done for the better part of a year. You convinced Sonny to see a doctor when no one else could. I’m not going to —” Jason stopped and shook his head.

“Hey...” Elizabeth stepped towards him. “That’s the deal, remember? I mean, I love you. For better or worse, remember? I know we’re not married yet, but do we really need to say the words to know they’re supposed to be true *all* the time and not just after some ceremony?” She tilted her head.

“Jason. If Sonny’s having issues again—”

“I don’t know that he is.” He stripped off his shirt and his jeans and drew on the gray sweatpants. “I just—I’ve talked to you and to Emily. I read about bipolar disorder, and I thought it made sense. But Sonny told me he wasn’t diagnosed with that.”

“He wasn’t?”

“No.” Jason sat on the bed and drew her down next to him. “He’s being treated for depression.”

Her eyes bulged. “Oh, *God*. He’s on anti-depressants. Nikolas—we talked about this. This very thing. God.” Elizabeth squeezed his hand. “Depression doesn’t explain the rages. The mood changes.”

“No,” Jason agreed, his chest tight. “But I think he talked to the doctor during one of the low points, and you know Sonny. He was probably trying to protect himself. Trying to protect the business.” He looked down at their joined hands. “If he’s actually bipolar—”

“Anti-depressants are only going to make it *worse* when he cycles back up again,” she murmured.

“I mean, maybe we’re wrong,” Jason said after a moment of tense silence. “We’re not psychiatrists —”

“But we know Sonny,” Elizabeth challenged. “And this doctor only has Sonny’s side of things. I just—yeah, Sonny *was* depressed when I saw him—”

“I need to do more reading,” he told her. “Elizabeth, I’m going to be on top of this. I promise—”

“Jason—”

“I’m not going to sit back like I did last year,” he interrupted. “It’s not just about custody of Evie. When Sonny has these moments, when he loses it, it affects *everyone*. Carly and the boys. You and the kids. The guys at work don’t trust him the way they used to. They’re still looking at me to confirm his orders, which Sonny is tolerating now, but it won’t last. He—” Jason cut off his irritated tirade. So much for not burdening Elizabeth.

“Jason, Carly needs to be brought into this.”

He frowned at her, started to shake his head, but she pressed her lips in a mutinous line. “Listen to me. Carly lives with him, she has children with him. I’m not thrilled with the ways she’s dealt with this situation, but you know you haven’t been fair to her. You lied to her, Sonny treats her with such disdain—”

“Elizabeth—”

“You know I’m right. Carly deserves the chance to deal with this the way we are.” Elizabeth touched his cheek. “You are *not* alone, Jason. You are not the only person who can look out for Sonny. I’m here. Carly should be, too. We need to start working together. I’m scared of what might happen if we keep holding her out of this.”

Jason sighed. “She and I—we’re so far apart—”

“I’ll talk to her,” Elizabeth said. He winced, but she forged on. “I know we have our issues, but we both have children in this world. Jason, let me do this for you. If nothing else...” She sighed. “It’ll distract me from my grandmother.”

He would never understand this woman, never comprehend the generosity of her heart, the fact that she loved him and was willing to raise her son in his life—

“I love you,” he told her. Elizabeth blinked at that. “I don’t say it enough—”

“You don’t have to...” She leaned forward, brushed her lips against his. “I can see it in your eyes, I can feel it when you touch me. Maybe I needed the words once, but I don’t—”

“You deserve them.” He returned her kisses, deeper now. “For all the times I didn’t say it.”

“Well...” She slid her arms around his neck, her fingers lightly dancing across the nape of his neck. “Then why don’t you show me?”



# Chapter Twenty-Three

*I've come too far  
To see the end now  
Even if my way is wrong  
I keep pushing on and on and on and on  
There's nothing left to say now  
There's nothing left to say now*  
- Nothing Left To Say Now, Imagine Dragons

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*Monday, August 15, 2005*

## **Morgan Penthouse: Master Bedroom**

Everything happened at once. Jason's cell phone began to chirp just before the land line's shrill ring joined in, and somewhere in the distance, a loud banging could be heard.

Elizabeth sat straight up, instantly alert, as Jason reached for his phone, already climbing out of the bed. She heard him say something, but she was already standing and reaching for her robe.

She pulled open the door and winced as she heard Evie's soft cries joining Cameron's surprised wail. Nora stepped out of her room, blearily rubbing her eyes. "Is there a fire?" she mumbled.

"I don't know," Elizabeth said, moving down the hall and heading for the stairs. The door downstairs opened and she heard Milo, Max, and Sonny's voices. "Hell. Can you calm the kids down?"

"Sure." Nora disappeared into the nursery.

"Damn it," Jason muttered, exiting behind her and tugging on a t-shirt. "There's a fire at the warehouse," he told her.

Elizabeth frowned. "And *that's* reason for them to burst in—" She huffed. "Excuse me while I go downstairs and knock some sense into them—"

"I'll take care of it," Jason interrupted. He winced again as he heard the cries from the nursery. "I'd rather if you—"

"Stay out of the way." She nodded and sighed, tying her robe more tightly. "I get it, Jason, but this is *insane*—"

"I know." His face was tight, his annoyance clear. "The cell phone was enough."

"Jason?" Sonny bellowed. "Where the hell are you?"

"He's coming!" Elizabeth snarled. "It's three in the morning, Sonny! Thanks for the waking the kids

—” She bit off the profanity she was about to let loose. It wouldn’t help. “Just get him out of here,” she hissed to Jason.

He nodded and headed down the steps as Elizabeth went to assist Nora with the kids. It would be a miracle if she could get them to settle back down, and it was more likely that they would both join her in bed.

### **Corinthos-Morgan Warehouse: Exterior**

If Jason had any doubts Sonny’s illness had been misdiagnosed, they were gone within the hour.

The warehouse was engulfed in flames by the time Jason and Sonny arrived at the warehouse, Milo and Max both having been left behind in order to keep the penthouse level secure.

“I fucking *knew* it!” Sonny growled as they exited the car and came to the police line. “I told you he was up to no good!”

Seeing as how just hours earlier, Sonny had been convinced the troubles were gone, Jason said nothing. He searched through the various emergency vehicles and officials, hoping to find one of the men who staffed the warehouse at night.

“Jason, Sonny.” Mac Scorpio approached them, his face marked with soot, his skin sweaty from the steaming heat. He rose his voice to be heard over the din. “We’re not sure how many people were inside—”

Sonny caught sight of Johnny O’Brien and abruptly left without a word. Jason kept an eye on him while trying to concentrate on the police commissioner. “Ah,” he coughed. “I think maybe five, seven at the most. Johnny—” He jerked this thumb at the duo standing about ten feet away. “He’s the warehouse manager, he’d know the schedule better.”

They both watched for a moment as the man in question stood like a statue while Sonny ranted and raved. The words “Zacchara, your fault, and bomb” filtered back to them.

“Any indication this is retribution for something?” Mac said blandly.

“No.” Jason shook his head. It would have been his standard answer regardless, but it was *true*. The problems they had been having were penny-ante. Blowing up their warehouse would have been an insane next step—it stopped all movement through the territory cold for weeks, even months. “I mean that, Mac. If you find evidence of arson, I’m going to be pissed as hell.” He planted his hands at his waist and shook his head. “Are they going to be able to put it out?”

“They’re trying to keep it from spreading at the moment,” Mac answered. He looked again at Sonny. “He seems convinced of this Zacchara guy. I’d rather keep the devil I know, if you know what I mean.” He rolled his shoulders. “Jason—”

“Mac, I’m not bullshitting you,” Jason said. He looked back the fire. “Did anyone make it out?”

“We’ve got five men. Two are en route to the hospital,” Mac answered. “Some burns. Some smoke inhalation. One looks serious.” He hesitated. “They said the fire looked like it started in one of the large work rooms, where the coffee is stored. That’s where the flames came from.”

“It looked fine when I left.” Jason folded his arms. “I’ll have Johnny talk to you, give you a full statement.” When Mac looked skeptical, he continued. “Full cooperation on this, Mac, you have my word. I have no reason to suspect arson, and no way to find out on my own if it was.”

“Fair enough.” Mac saw a firefighter trying to get his attention. “I have O’Brien’s information. Tell him we’ll be in touch. Right now, our focus is on getting this bastard out.”

“Yeah.” When the commissioner had left, Jason went over to Sonny and Johnny. The younger man looked pissed as hell, and Sonny—

Sonny looked like he had several months ago, when the slightest upset could send him over the edge.

“Mac said they got five men out so far, two are at the hospital. How many men were working tonight?” Jason asked, ignoring Sonny.

“Just them,” Johnny said. “It was a light night, they were mostly for security—”

“Some fucking *security*—”

Jason shot Sonny a glare. “Remember where we are,” he said, his teeth clenched. He looked back to Johnny, “We’ll be working out of my office at the penthouse for the next few days. You’re to give Mac your full cooperation—”

“God *damn* it, Jason—”

“I don’t believe this is arson,” Jason told Johnny. “The whole point of making commercial deals with the other Families was to ensure peace was in their financial interests. It would be the height of insanity, and I can’t think of how a bomb would get past the new security measures.”

“Me either—”

“*Obviously* they did,” Sonny cut in, his face flushed, his eyes bulging. He slashed his hand through the air. “I’ve had it up to here, Jason. I want Zacchara *gone*.”

The order, given so publicly and so precipitously, was *also* the height of insanity, and Jason saw Johnny’s eyes shift away. He sighed. “Johnny, have our guy double check Zacchara’s whereabouts.” When Johnny just lifted his brows, Jason clarified. “To put doubts to rest.”

“You’re fucking countering my orders?” Sonny demanded. His eyes narrowed. “I’ll take care of it myself.”

He stalked away, towards the car that brought them there.

“Jason—” Johnny began.

“Put someone on Johnny Zacchara immediately,” Jason interrupted, his eyes trained on Sonny. “And—and someone on Sonny. I don’t want him going off like this. I don’t want Anthony Zacchara going after us for doing something to his kid when the facts aren’t in.”

“I’m on it, but Jase?” Johnny shook his head. “We need to make some changes, and we need to make them fast. Or this whole thing is going to fall apart. We’re not going to survive another year like the last.”

“I know.” Jason exhaled slowly. “I know,” he repeated. “We’ll—we’ll talk about it. But I want eyes and ears on Zacchara and Sonny for now. I want to know what we’re dealing with first.”

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Carly sighed and nodded when Max opened the door to reveal Elizabeth standing there. “Sure, why not? This day has been shot to hell anyway.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, but came in. “Hey. Were you able to get back to sleep?”

Carly hesitated, looked away. She and Sonny no longer shared a room, so he’d received his phone call, dressed, and left for Jason’s without even telling her. “Yeah. You?”

“Not really.” The other woman waited a moment. “But that’s because Cam and Evie are so young, I guess. It’s not easy to settle them back down after someone pounds on the door at three in the morning, then bursts in shouting at the top of their lungs. I had to put them in bed with me just to get another hour.”

Carly frowned and gestured towards the breakfast nook. “Have a seat. I don’t know why Sonny would do that. Jason’s always been a light sleeper.”

Elizabeth lifted a brow at the reminder that Carly knew Jason’s sleeping habits, but let it pass. She and Carly sat down. “I guess Sonny wasn’t thinking. I haven’t heard from Jason, but that’s probably a good sign. He’d be in touch if something was wrong.”

Carly nodded, still mystified at this visit. Their last interaction had been at the party a few days earlier, but Elizabeth looked to be ignoring it for some reason.

“I’m here, Carly, not because of the fire, but because I wanted to talk to you.” Elizabeth waited a moment, as if searching for the right words. “We’re both raising children in this world, and I’m tired of walking on eggshells. I know you must be, as well.”

Carly nodded, warily. “Sure.”

“Sonny and I are *not* having an affair,” Elizabeth said. Carly narrowed her eyes, but the other woman continued. “I don’t think it’s my place to tell you what’s been going on but I highly doubt Sonny has told you and after this morning, I can’t take the chance he might later.”

“If *someone* doesn’t tell me what’s going on, I’m going to scream,” Carly snapped. The twit got to be in the inner circle, but not her? What the goddamn hell?

“I think it’s for the best if we lay our cards on the table.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “You know Sonny’s been struggling all year, and it’s not just about Evie and Sam.”

Her muscles tightened at the name of that soul-sucking whore, but Carly fought back the urge to snarl something. She needed information. Elizabeth had it. “I’ve noticed,” she said, her tone clipped. *Get on with it.*

“He went to a doctor in New York last month,” the brunette revealed. “That’s where he was with Courtney. And the doctor diagnosed him with depression. He’s been taking medication.”

Carly blinked at that and sat back. She had not expected that. “Depression,” she repeated. “That...” She squinted. “So that’s why he’s been better?”

“I think he’s actually bipolar,” Elizabeth replied. She reached into her bag and removed a few pamphlets. “They used to call it manic-depressive disorder. It’s marked by extreme highs, extreme lows—”

Against her better nature, Carly reached for the pamphlets. “What makes you think you know Sonny better than an actual doctor?” She winced when she heard the annoyance in her voice.

“I don’t know if I *am* right,” Elizabeth admitted, unfazed. “I just...I’m worried that if it is bipolar disorder, anti-depressants can exacerbate the symptoms, particularly if Sonny starts to head for an extreme high.”

Carly hesitated. “Because if he’s already feeling the highs from the disorder, the medicine makes it worse.”

“It’s been known to trigger psychotic breaks,” Elizabeth replied with a nod. “Carly, I’m not saying I’m right. I’m just saying I’m not satisfied anymore with Sonny’s progress. He was doing well for a few weeks, but I know he’s not being honest with you. I’m sure he’ll be angry that I’m telling you this, but you have a right to know. You have children in this home.”

How she despised being in the position to be grateful to this woman, but Carly couldn’t ignore the gesture. “You know Sonny won’t listen to me. He’s waiting to divorce me.”

Elizabeth faltered, looked away for a moment. “I think it’d be a mistake right now for him to start a process like that. He’s not stable, Carly. The man who burst into my home this morning—Sonny wouldn’t do that. The way he’s treated Jason for the last year—that’s not the Sonny you and I know.”

“No, I suppose not, though Jason’s not helping things.” Carly set the pamphlets down. “How much easier do you think this would be if Jason hadn’t started this mess?”

Elizabeth leaned back and shook her head. “Carly—”

“He’s *not* a saint, Elizabeth. He lied to Sonny. He lied to me. He took Evie from Sonny. And he knew what that was doing to him—”

“I can’t answer for those things,” Elizabeth interrupted. “I wasn’t here. I wasn’t involved. What is the point of looking back—”

“Because this is *Jason’s* fault.” Carly rose to her feet. “He lied to us both. He and that manipulative whore trapped Sonny into giving away his daughter. Now Jason won’t give her back—”

“He’s not stable,” Elizabeth repeated, getting to her feet and narrowing her eyes. “I don’t think he should be around any child, much less a defenseless infant. Sonny isn’t blameless, Carly—”

“No, but maybe *that’s* why he’s going over the edge again,” Carly challenged. “Because he was better, and Jason still refused. Maybe this is the payback Jason has been waiting for—for sleeping with me, for Michael.”

And that had to be it. Because if Sonny was raising Evie, it would all be better. She knew that. It would be the way she planned it. Maybe Sonny *was* ill—maybe this explained everything. If Carly could get him Evie, could get him the right treatment, he’d stay with her.

And it would be good again.

“You tell Jason he knows how to make this end. He always has. He just refuses to do it.” Carly lifted her chin. “I’m sorry for what I put him through with Michael, but that doesn’t give him the right to keep Evie.”

“I’m *not* having this conversation with you.” Elizabeth picked up her purse. “I came here to tell you what Sonny’s dealing with. How you deal with it is up to you, Carly.”

Before Carly could think of a retort, the other woman turned and stalked out, slamming the door behind her.

As if she were the wronged party!

*Carly* was the one who had been lied to, was the one whose way of life and marriage was at risk.

But maybe Elizabeth Webber had given the tools to make it better. She could still fix this. She could still make this right.

If Jason didn’t want to see reason, well then, Carly would have to *make* him.

### **Morgan Penthouse: Jason’s Office**

Jason had never intended to put this small room to active use. It housed his desk only because the space in the living room was better suited to a playpen and other pieces of furniture necessary for a nine-month-old and fifteen month old.

The idea of discussing business while Nora had Cam and Evie in the playroom upstairs tied his stomach in knots, but it could not be helped. The warehouse was off the table and until something more permanent could be arranged, this was for the best.

“They got the fire out after about two hours,” their business manager Bernie said. “They called out the arson investigators but I don’t think they found anything suspicious. We won’t have the report for a few more days, though.”

Jason sighed and put his head in his hands. “Johnny, eyes and ears on Zacchara and Sonny?”

“Max is with Sonny, but he only caught up to him about an hour ago.” Johnny hesitated. “We haven’t located Zacchara yet.”

Jason exhaled slowly. Shit. “Okay. How did Max...how did he take that assignment? I know we pulled him off the door—”

“He’s fine with tailing Sonny since he’s refusing his normal guards.” Johnny shifted. “Rocco is on the door, now. He’s good. Listen, Jason—”

“Johnny, I don’t have the time right now to deal with that,” Jason cut him off. “I know what you’re going to say. I can’t—” He shook his head. “I can’t do anything out right. We need to do damage control.” He looked to Bernie. “You’ve been in touch with Families?”

“They’ve expressed their concerns,” Bernie responded. “We’re putting an offer in a second warehouse—we had discussed buying a second one some time ago but it didn’t seem necessary. For the future though—”

“It probably doesn’t hurt to have a backup the next time.” Jason glanced around the all but bare room. It had a desk, a filing cabinet and a chair. “We’ll meet here for a while. The cops will probably back off by the end of the week. We can probably get back to a reasonable schedule in about two weeks.”

Bernie exchanged a look with Johnny before pursing his lips. “Jason, you know I have nothing but respect for Sonny—”

Jason doubted that. “Bernie—”

“Jason,” the older man interrupted, “the men are restless. Sonny’s actions this morning did not go unnoticed. He was...not himself. And I don’t have to tell you that the reason we haven’t seen more of an erosion of trust is more about *you* than it is loyalty for Sonny.”

“Sonny’s a loose cannon,” Johnny said bluntly. “None of us want to work for him anymore and we don’t know why the hell *you* put up with him.”

Jason stared at his friend, at someone who had been with Sonny almost as long as he had. This was what Jason had been trying to avoid for more than a year. Johnny had addressed the elephant in the room.

“Johnny—”

“You got a family now,” Johnny continued. “You can’t tell me you’re not afraid of what’ll happen if we can’t get Sonny on a leash. Do you think Max can really control him? He’s just a babysitter and knows it.” He lifted his chin. “I love you like a brother, Jase, and I’d walk through fire for you. But not for him. Not ever again.”

“Johnny, maybe not so bluntly,” Bernie murmured.

Jason honestly didn’t have an answer—and certainly not the one Johnny was looking for. It terrified him that Sonny could go off half-cocked and do something to the son of Anthony Zacchara. Zacchara was an old-school mobster with a penchant for cruelty and a touch of insanity himself. He was ruthless. If something happened to his pride and joy while on Sonny’s turf...he’d raze the city to the ground.

And there were too many people in the line of fire. Elizabeth and their kids. Carly and her boys. If something happened to one of them because of Sonny’s instability—

But to take control was to say something definitive about the future, about Sonny himself, and maybe Jason just wasn’t ready to let go.

Sonny knew he had problems. If they could get him under control, get him real treatment, not all was lost. They just needed to contain him until this had passed.

“You’re not wrong,” Jason said finally. “Sonny’s not stable. And all decisions are going through me right now. I need you to put all your energy into locating Zacchara—”

“Calling him Zacchara makes me think of his father. Can’t we just call him Junior?” Johnny interrupted. “Little bastard has *my* name—”

“Whatever. Find him. Bring him to me. I have to get him out of Port Charles until I can—” Fix Sonny. Fix the world. Maybe even in that order. “I *can’t* have Anthony Zacchara bringing his brand of crazy up here. Not now.”

“And *when* we have Junior contained?” Bernie prompted. “This isn’t going away, Jason. If you don’t step up, someone else will. And what should be a relatively peaceful exchange of power might turn bloody. It might not be one of our own who challenges us—”

“All we need is Hector Ruiz smelling blood in the water and he’ll sic Lorenzo Alcazar on us all over again,” Johnny interrupted. “Or he’ll send one of *his* insane sons. Jason—”

“I get it!” Jason shot back. “I’m putting out fires right now, Johnny. Don’t ask me to do this. Not now. I have to talk to Sonny. I have to get him under control—”

“I get that he’s your friend, that he’s family to you,” Johnny countered. “But you have a responsibility to the men who lay their life on the line for you. To your new fiancée and to those kids upstairs—”



“Don’t fucking tell me *my* responsibilities, O’Brien,” Jason snarled. “I get it. Go find Junior.”

“This isn’t over,” Johnny tossed over his shoulder as he stalked out.

Bernie sighed. “It grieves me that it’s come to this,” he said quietly. “I remember when men followed Sonny without question, but that changed somewhere along the line. They follow you now. And you know that. Moreover, Sonny knows that. I’m not blind—Sonny has troubles.”

“Bernie—”

“You’ve had your head in the sand for more than a year,” the older man said, almost gently. “Sonny hasn’t been himself since Lorenzo Alcazar gas lighted him with that Lily look alike. He shot Carly in the head, he had an affair—and he treated that young woman with such disrespect...” He sighed.

“And then the business with your daughter. You and Sonny have been traveling down different roads for a long time. You’re just the only one who doesn’t see it.”

“I see it,” Jason said after a moment. He looked at Bernie. “I didn’t want to, but I do. I promise you, Bernie, that I don’t just worry about my family. I worry about all the men who work with us. I won’t let it turn bloody.”

“Good.” Bernie nodded. “I’ll get started on the new warehouse.” He hesitated. “I really am sorry about this, Jason, but if something happens to Johnny Zacchara—”

“I know,” Jason said. “Let’s...let’s just hope that’s not the case.”

Or he wouldn’t be able to stop the blood from running in the streets.

## **Hardy Home: Living Room**

“Your mind is somewhere else, darling.”

Audrey’s tired voice drew Elizabeth’s attention and she focused on her grandmother. “I’m sorry, Gram. I didn’t get much sleep.”

“I saw the fire in the newspaper.” Audrey shifted her position on the sofa and sipped her tea. “Is everyone all right?”

“Everyone got out,” Elizabeth responded, leaning back and closing her eyes for a moment. “Jason called me a little while ago to let me know he was okay. He had to go down there around three. The commotion woke Cam and Evie, I barely got another hour...”

“You should have stayed home and rested while your nanny took the kids—”

“No, I wanted to see you, Gram. I’ll sleep tonight, I’m sure.” Elizabeth offered him a smile she hoped was more genuine than it felt.

Jason had told her that with the offices at the warehouse of commission, he’d be using the office at

home. Not Sonny's penthouse. Jason's. And Sonny's ranting and early morning visit to the penthouse made her worry that he'd begun to lose his control again.

She was beginning to believe Sonny's days of running Port Charles were numbered, and she wasn't sure how she felt about that.

"Gram," Elizabeth said, taking a deep breath. "I wanted to talk to you about what Monica said yesterday."

Audrey pressed her lips together. "Elizabeth, I don't want to argue—"

"I don't either." She leaned forward. "But, Gram—"

"I've done nothing but consider my options for months. I've made my decision, Elizabeth. Please tell me you respect it."

"How can I?" Elizabeth demanded. "You're giving up. I need you. Steven and Sarah need you. Uncle Tom needs you—"

"You'd never know from the copious amount of phone calls," her grandmother said tartly. "Elizabeth, I promise you, I am not giving up. We're trying a new treatment—I don't want to argue about it."

"Gram—"

"I *don't* want to argue," Audrey repeated.

Because she recognized the glint in her grandmother's eyes, Elizabeth subsided. She'd try again later, but she wasn't going to contribute to her grandmother's stress. "I just...I love you."

"I love you, too." Audrey squeezed her hand. "Please trust me."

"I do," she replied, though her heart wasn't in her answer.

In the span of only a matter of days, everything she'd built over the last year suddenly seemed to be slipping away and she wasn't sure how to stop it.

### **Nadine Crowell's Apartment: Living Room**

Nadine Crowell had told herself that dating Johnny Zacchara was going to be a disaster, but more than a year later, she'd mostly dismissed their major obstacles.

He didn't seem to mind that she hadn't traveled as much as he had, that she wasn't a huge fan of classical music (though she could listen to him play all day long), and that she didn't have a lot of money.

But he was always going to be Johnny Zacchara, son of Anthony Zacchara. He didn't want to introduce her to anyone in his family, though she occasionally ran into his sister in New York. He

wanted to keep her separate from all of that.

Which might have worked if she didn't live in a town controlled by Sonny Corinthos.

With one eye on the tabloid news program speculating on the various rivals that could have blown up the Corinthos-Morgan warehouse, Nadine kept an eye on her phone, waiting for Johnny to call.

Because he was late. And he was *never* late. He considered being on time as being late, so he was always obnoxiously early for everything.

Except tonight.

On a night when his father was rumored to have blown up a warehouse owned by the local gangster.

He never came that night. He never called or returned any of her texts. His phone rang and rang until somewhere around one in the morning. It went straight to voicemail, meaning it had either been shut off or the phone had died.

Something horrible had happened to her boyfriend and there wasn't a soul in the world Nadine could tell.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

*As the smoke and mirrors start to fade away  
And we're all we've got so let's hold on tight  
To the dreams that came before the fight  
We were living smoke and mirrors anyway*  
- Smoke and Mirrors, Lifehouse

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*Friday, August 19, 2005*

## **Morgan Penthouse: Jason's Office**

“An accident,” Jason repeated as he glanced through the initial report Johnny handed him. “They didn’t find any signs of arson?”

“No.” The other man leaned back in the chair they’d pulled in from the kitchen, one leg over his knee. “And believe me, between Scorpio and Lansing, they *were* looking. There’s no sign of accelerants. They’re leaning towards an electrical short as a source. Some sparks ignited on the main floor. The men didn’t see the flames until that room was engulfed.”

An accident. He could deal with that. He could *work* with that. He would show this report to Sonny and things could ease back. He hadn’t been able to pin Sonny down all week, and the truth be told, with Max tailing him, Jason had avoided his partner, not wanting to have the conversation they both knew they had to have.

“All right. As long as the police don’t change their opinions, I think we can relax there.” Jason set the report aside. He looked to Johnny. “I want you and the warehouse crew working with Bernie to get the new warehouse situated. I want everything up to code, I want the best security. I’m getting tired of replacing warehouses.”

It was their third warehouse in five years to go up in flames. This was getting ridiculous.

“You got it, Jase.”

They both turned their attention to Max who had remained uncharacteristically silent so far this morning. “Max?”

“Sonny’s...” The tall, brawny man scrubbed a hand over his face. “I don’t know how to describe it, Jase. He either *knows* I’m following him or I’m getting bad at this job, because I’ve lost him maybe once nearly every day. Not for long, but damn if I can’t figure out how it’s happening.”

Sonny disappearing for stretches of time during the same period Jason couldn’t put his hands on Johnny Zacchara did *not* bode well.

“If he knows you’re on him, then it’s time to add someone else to cover the bases. Pull whatever guy

Francis thinks is best and add him to the detail. I need eyes and ears on Sonny at all times, Max.”

“I know, I know. I got Rocco on the door now while Sonny’s home and with him when he leaves, but even Rocco can’t ignore an order to leave him alone. It’s not the way this works.”

“I know.” Jason leaned back. “We’ll figure something else out, but for now, Max, I need you to make this happen.”

And with that, Sonny’s guard was dismissed.

“O’Brien,” Jason said, “don’t start with me right now.”

“I’m not,” Johnny said. “You and me, we started in this business around the same time. You know that, right? So some of the guys have approached me.” When Jason glared at him, Johnny shook his head. “I’m *not* giving you names. But they want a change and they looked to me. You can’t lose the trust of the men who work in this organization, Jason, by pussy footing around. I put them off. I told them that until we got Junior under wraps and packed off to Daddy, drawing any more attention to our troubles with a power play would be suicide.”

Jason exhaled slowly. “I appreciate that, Johnny.” A mutiny was the last thing he needed right now.

“Are Elizabeth and the kids okay with us coming in and out of here so much this week?” Johnny asked. “I don’t see them around much.”

Jason’s shoulders tightened. He did not want to talk about the tension and stress that permeated his home these days. “They’re fine. Nora keeps the kids in the playroom upstairs and takes them to the park. Elizabeth works out of her studio most of the time. They know it’s temporary.” He frowned when Johnny appeared to hesitate. “What?”

“It’s *not* temporary, Jase.” Johnny rose to his feet. “I mean, you know that, right? We’ll find another place to meet often, but this...the level of responsibility you’re taking on? It’s just the beginning. Does she *know* that? Is that what she even signed on for?”

“You can go now,” Jason responded blandly.

For once, Johnny shut his mouth and left without another harsh reminder of how quickly things had unraveled. If Jason had thought this last year was difficult—trying to juggle his deteriorating partnership with Sonny, building a life with Elizabeth—it was nothing compared to this last week. He was no longer able to support the illusion that Sonny was in control.

He didn’t want the power, he never had, but he might have to take it in order to protect everyone else.

## **Wyndemere: Sitting Room**

Emily was smiling when she saw Elizabeth come through the door to her sitting room. “I’m so glad you’re finally here!”

Elizabeth managed a weak laugh as her friend hugged her tightly. “I came as soon as you called. You said it was urgent.” She’d dropped her brush, her paints, everything in order to race to the boat launch.

“Oh.” Emily colored a bit as they both sat on the sofa. “I’m sorry, Liz. I should have thought—I mean, I think it’s urgent, but it’s not in the sense of what Jason might mean.” She took Elizabeth’s hands in hers. “I just...I wanted to tell you. And I wanted to tell you now, and immediately, because I want some brightness in our life.”

And didn’t Elizabeth need that quite desperately? “Emily, what’s going on?”

“I’m pregnant!”

The words seemed to explode out of Emily’s mouth like a comet shooting across the sky. She laughed as she said them, drawing her hands back to touch her flat abdomen. “I’m only six weeks along, but I’m having a baby!”

“Oh...” Elizabeth pressed her hand to her mouth. “Oh, my God. Emily. Em.” She leaned forward and hugged her best friend with all the strength she could muster. “Oh, my God. I can’t *believe* it. I didn’t even know you were trying!”

“Since the wedding. Nikolas was a bit apprehensive—you know how badly Cassadines are with raising kids, but I told him I didn’t want to wait a single moment longer.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “I wanted to catch up to you. I didn’t want so much space between our kids. Two years is an *eternity*!”

“Oh, Emily...” Tears stung her eyes, and she hugged her again. “I love you so much. I’m *so* thrilled for you, what incredible news!”

“I’m due in late March, early April or so, according to Dr. Lee at the hospital.” Emily beamed. “I told my mother when I found out, because you know, Mom, and she’s just like—if sunbeams and rainbows could emerge from this woman, I think they would. She’s over the moon about having three grandchildren.”

Elizabeth’s smile faltered at the first time, though she appreciated the way Monica had embraced her son. “I don’t know what’s going to happen with Evie, Em.”

Emily pursed her lips. “I know things have been a bit tough this week with that awful fire, but Nikolas said the fire report said it was an accident.” She hesitated. “That helps, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know.” Elizabeth rose and walked towards the large windows overlooking the stables. “I’m sorry I said anything, Em, really. This is *your* day—”

“Hey, we had my moment. Now I want to talk to you.” Emily stood. “Things are okay, aren’t they? I mean, I know about Audrey—”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “A week ago, I was floating on air,” she murmured. “Everything was

coming together for me. You know? I had this incredible career with the prospect of even more success. I have this wonderful little boy who makes everything worth it. I have wonderful friends, amazing family.” She turned, opening her eyes. “And I had Jason, this unbelievable man who loved me, who wants my son. And Sonny—Sonny was like his old self. It was *perfect*.”

“Most of that is still true,” Emily said, but her tone was hesitant. “Isn’t it? Is Sonny...is he sliding again?”

“I think so, but Jason hasn’t said anything.” Elizabeth exhaled slowly. “He was fine on Friday night, but by Sunday, I could see Jason was having doubts about it lasting. He said Sonny is only being treated for depression.”

“Hell.” Emily’s mouth twisted. “*That’s* a recipe for disaster.”

“And then, Monday morning—” Elizabeth twisted her fingers together. “Sonny called Jason at three about the fire. But he had Max calling him on the landline, and Jason had only missed one ring—he answered it on the second, but it wasn’t fast enough. By the time Jason answered it, Sonny was already pounding at our door. I could hear Max and Milo trying to hold him back, but he burst through the door, shouting Jason’s name. He was out of *control*, Em. The kids were crying, I couldn’t get them settled down—”

“Well, the fire *was* upsetting...” Emily trailed off. “But I get it, it must have been scary.”

“And Jason’s working all the time. I’m not complaining about that,” she added in a rush of breath. “I’m just—I’m confused. I know Jason has always done a lot of the delegating, a lot of the go between stuff, but it’s different, Emily. He’s working out of the penthouse because the warehouse is gone, and that’s fine. Nora keeps the kids out of the way, and I’m at the studio or my grandmother’s, but I—I don’t think it’s temporary.”

Emily sat on the sofa, her dark eyes wide. “He’s going to take over.”

“I don’t *know*.” Elizabeth brought her hand to her mouth, bit on her fingernail, her other hand at her waist. “He’s not talking to me. He’s working all hours of the night, and I’m dividing my time between my studio, the kids, and my grandmother—” She closed her eyes. “It’s slipping away from me, Emily. *Just* like before.”

“Hey.” Emily took her hand and tugged her down. “Hey. Listen. Tell me what you’re thinking. What’s like before?”

Elizabeth could hardly breathe now that she had said the horrible words she had been holding in for days. “Before. When we tried. There was stuff going on with the business then, and Sonny was going through this. That’s when he faked his death. Jason lied to me about Sonny being dead, and I was *so* angry. He wasn’t talking to me, he wasn’t coming home. It was like I didn’t matter, that I wasn’t important enough. And when I found out, I just—I exploded.”

She bit her lip. “Carly, who had turned Sonny into the Feds a year earlier, *she* got to know the plan,

but not me. I hid Jason while he was shot, you know? I sacrificed friendships and my reputation to keep him safe, but none of that mattered. I felt *worthless*. Unimportant. Unloved. So I walked.”

“Elizabeth...” Emily murmured. “I didn’t—”

“Jason told me earlier this year that Sonny was on the verge of a breakdown during that period—that he’d been questioning his loyalty and his decisions. That Sonny had wanted to keep me in the dark, so Jason agreed to preserve the peace. And I let it go when he told me, because I could see *Jason* hadn’t seen it as choosing Sonny over me. But I did.”

“And still do, obviously.” Emily tilted her head. “Do you think he’s going to choose Sonny again?”

“I don’t know, because I don’t *know* what’s going on,” Elizabeth replied. “And I can’t push him. He’ll just tell me there are things I can’t know, like he did before. Emily, I don’t care if Jason ends up in charge. I’d be an idiot if I didn’t think that was a possibility, but...”

“You don’t want to be the last one to know again.” Emily sighed. “I’m so sorry—”

“No, *I’m* sorry.” Elizabeth shook her head. “I’m—I’m just tired, you know? It’s been a rough week, and I’m sure with the fire being an accident, things will be okay. It’s fine, Em.”

“It’s not.” Emily tightened her grip on Elizabeth’s hands, preventing her from standing. “And you get to feel the way you feel. I get it. I wasn’t here that last time, but I *can* see the parallels. A dangerous business situation, Sonny’s going off the rails, and you and Jason are trying to juggle a life together. You’d be an idiot if you didn’t feel some of the same doubts.”

She leaned forward. “You need to vent, you need to talk about this to me. Because I’ll talk you through it. Elizabeth, maybe there are similarities, but you know there are very important differences.”

When Elizabeth hesitated, Emily pressed her point. “You *know* there are,” she repeated. “And I want you to list them, so you can reassure yourself that is not the crisis you’re building it up to be.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath. “We’re engaged,” she said softly. “And we were just...barely starting something then. We’ve made promises, said things we’ve never said before.”

“Good. What else?”

“He’s already started the paperwork to adopt Cameron, and I know that’s not a decision he’d take lightly. I know he loves my son.”

Some of the tightness in her chest was starting to dissipate. “And until this week, he’s been brutally honest about Sonny’s condition, even about some of the problems he’s been facing at work. I didn’t know what Jason was facing the last time. I *never* would have walked out if I’d known Sonny’s issues back then.”

“Exactly, Liz.” Emily squeezed her hands once more before releasing them. “You and Jason are



stronger now. You weren't then. Jason's going through a lot right now, and so are you. The last thing either one of you needs is doubts about what the other is thinking. Do you think if you've seen the parallels, Jason hasn't?"

"He can't think—" Elizabeth looked at her friend. "I would never leave him. I'm just—scared of what this is all going to mean. Of what's going to change. But I would never walk out because of his job. It was never about what he does."

She closed her eyes. "I need to talk to him. I need to assure him that I'm here. I told him that before. I said that I was in it, that I mattered. But then I walked away from him. I won't make that mistake again."

"Good. We have that established." Emily hesitated. "About Sonny. I don't—if he's triggered a manic part of the disorder, then we're in for a bumpy ride. Do you think that's happening? Or is this just a setback?"

"I don't know," Elizabeth replied. "I just—" She closed her eyes. "I told Carly everything a few days ago, but it didn't change anything. She just has something *else* to blame Jason for. She seems to think if we handed Evie back to Sonny, this would all stop."

"It's not Evie's job to fix Sonny," Emily said, bristling. "Maybe Jason made mistakes, but his mistakes have kept that little girl in a safe and calm environment for the last year. Can we say that about Michael and Morgan?"

"I'm just—I'm scared, Emily. Everything is falling apart. I'm not—I know that if Jason and I are honest with one another, we can get through it, but that doesn't mean what's in front of us isn't terrifying."

"It'll be okay, Liz." But Emily didn't look convinced.

## **Harborview Towers: Hallway**

Jason stepped out of the elevator at the same time Carly and her guard were stepping on. He put his hand on the door to keep it from closing. "Carly. I've been trying to catch you for a few days."

"Oh?" The blonde arched a brow. "That's a change from the last year or so, isn't it, Jase?"

Jason hesitated. "Carly—"

"I know all about Sonny's *supposed* mental illness." Carly lifted her chin. "Did you tell him he was crazy so you could keep Evie? He thinks he's depressed, but I know better. I *read* those stupid pamphlets your girlfriend gave me. Sonny's always been obsessed with power, with control. That doesn't make him *crazy*."

"No," Jason said slowly, realizing Elizabeth had gone ahead and spoke to Carly as they had planned. "No, that's not what we're saying. Carly, you know how Sonny gets—" He flicked his eyes to her guard, but as it was Eddie, one of their long-time regulars, he felt comfortable continuing. "I think

he's getting worse—”

“You know how to make this stop, Jason,” Carly said. She pushed his hand clear of the doors. “You don't want to do it. You're being selfish, Jason, and you're destroying all of us in the process.”

The doors slid closed, leaving him standing in the hallway.

## **Morgan Penthouse: Master Bedroom**

By the time Jason left his office that night, it was close to midnight. The kids had been in bed for hours, and Elizabeth should also have been sleep by then.

But she was sitting up in bed, the bedside lamp still burning, and a sketchpad in her lap. “Hey.” She set her pad and pencil on the night stand. “I was hoping you would come to bed soon.”

“You're still up.” Jason sat on the edge of the bed next to her, drinking her in. The last moment of peace, of tranquility had been in this room, five days earlier, just before the fire.

The fatigue had seeped into his bones, but he somehow knew she hadn't just waited up to say good night. “Elizabeth...”

“I love you,” she told him. “And I love you whether you're doing whatever you normally do or if you end up doing whatever *Sonny* is supposed to do.” She sat up, tucking her knees underneath her. “But you can't keep me in the dark.”

“I wasn't—” He sighed and tilted his head to the ceiling. “I didn't mean to. I'm always going to want to protect you from this life, from the filth, from the violence. I'm sorry, but that's just how it is.”

“And I get that.” She touched his shoulder. “But Jason, you can't tell me that under normal circumstances, in situations like this, *you* would be handling everything from your own home, and not Sonny's. I haven't seen him once, which likely means he hasn't been here at all. You're telling me that would be normal procedure? For him not to be involved?”

He wanted to lay in bed, look at the ceiling and just listen to her breathe as she slept. Was that too much to ask?

But she was right. Even if the situation of working out of the penthouse was temporary, it wasn't the way things would run if Sonny were still able to do it himself.

And she deserved to know the changes on the horizon. And for her own safety, she deserved to know the risks they faced if things couldn't be controlled.

“No, it's not,” he answered finally. He kicked off his boots, so that he could sit on the bed and face her. “You remember Johnny Zacchara? You met him at your showing in the winter.”

“I do. You said he wasn't really friend or foe, but his father's lawyer was Ric's father.” Elizabeth tilted her head. “Has that changed?”

“No, but he’s—” Jason exhaled. “I told you a few months ago about a guy Sonny suspected of being behind some minor issues. That’s Zacchara. He’s been hanging around town for the better part of a year, probably longer before he came on our radar. He’s known for hanging out in music clubs and galleries. We think he met his girlfriend here at Luke’s. He’s around more now because of her.”

“And his being around makes Sonny more suspicious though he’s not done anything to warrant it.” Elizabeth nodded. “Okay.”

“He’s not really the problem,” Jason continued. “It’s his father. Anthony Zacchara.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “He’s...dangerous in a way that I can’t really explain. He’s insane. And I don’t mean that lightly. He has no principles, no boundaries. He’s completely ruthless and operates on pure fear. He is not someone we want against us.”

Elizabeth exhaled slowly. “Okay. I get that. So his son is hanging around, but you can’t do anything about it because the father will declare war. Do you think he or his father had something to do with the fire?”

“No.” Jason shook his head. “No, we’ve never had an inkling that Zacchara looks at us any more than an annoyance. He doesn’t care for Sonny, though that’s probably due more to Trevor Lansing’s influence. Zacchara’s ruthless, but he’s not stupid. He doesn’t start wars for the hell of it. When he comes after you, it’s because you deserve it.”

Elizabeth frowned. “I don’t understand. If Anthony Zacchara doesn’t have an issue with you, and Johnny Zacchara didn’t do anything, then—”

“Sonny has had Johnny in his sights for months. I’ve been able to stave him off by keeping a guy on him, but Sonny can’t let it go. And the morning of the fire, he—” Jason looked away. “I sent men to pull Johnny in so I could ship him to his father, or just get him the hell out of town, but—”

Her face changed and he knew she understood. “Oh, God, did something happen to him? He seemed so nice.”

“I don’t know,” Jason admitted. “We’re looking for him. And we hope not. Maybe he saw the fire, maybe he’s not so stupid. Maybe he’s decided to lay low. I don’t know. The thing is...”

“It’s possible Sonny put everyone in danger if he did something to Johnny Zacchara,” Elizabeth said softly. “And someone who is capable of that kind of thing isn’t exactly inspiring a lot of trust and loyalty.”

“It’s not just *my* family in danger if Anthony Zacchara comes after us for this,” Jason said, hating that he was exposing her to this world, but she had to know the stakes. Had to make informed decisions. “It’s the lives of every man who works for us and *their* families. If something happens to his son in Port Charles, Anthony Zacchara isn’t going to wait for me to deal with it myself. He’ll burn the city to the ground. He won’t care about collateral damage.”

“Jason...” Elizabeth drew her knees up in front of her and waited a moment. “I *want* Sonny to be

okay, you know that. I tried to make that happen. And I've tried not to push you when it comes to him."

"You haven't. Elizabeth—"

"But at some point, we're going to have to decide where we draw the line. Sonny is ill. If this happened, if he put us all in danger without proof, without a reason, then I don't—" She bit her lip. "I can't *live* in a world where he has access to this kind of power and can do this kind of damage. That's...I'm not saying I would leave you, I'm just—"

He put a hand on her knee, and she stopped talking. "And I can't live in a world where Sonny's mistakes cost lives," Jason said quietly. "Maybe I can put out the fires this time, and maybe we can fix this. But I don't know if it should go back to the way it was. If at any point, Sonny's illness, whatever is, puts the people that matter to me at risk—or anyone else. I've been accused of putting my head in the sand, of ignoring what's right in front of me."

She sighed. "Jason—"

"But that's not an option anymore, and I know that. I chose protecting Sonny over what was right for us once." She looked away at that reminder, and he knew he hadn't been wrong to suspect the parallels had been on her mind as well. "I'm not going to do it again. Because I can't protect Sonny anymore."

"Jason, I'm so sorry..." A tear slid down her cheek. "I hate this. I hate it *all*. I hate even suggesting you have to choose, because I love him, too, and I want him to be okay. I don't want him to struggle, and maybe if he were anyone else dealing with this disorder, we could muddle through, but he's not. He's Sonny Corinthos—"

"It's not a choice between you and Sonny," Jason interrupted. "Pretending it is just makes it sound like if we kept protecting him, things would be okay. We tried that once, Elizabeth. I chose protecting him and the status quo, and you decided you couldn't live with it."

"If you had told me what he was facing..." Elizabeth sighed. "I like to think I would been able to deal with, but I don't know."

"It didn't change anything. We're right back where we started, and no one would blame you if you took your son and ran. Because I just—" His chest was tight. "It's going to get worse before it gets better."

"If I were to leave you," Elizabeth said slowly, "it wouldn't change the situation. *You* would still be here. Evie would still be here. And so would Michael and Morgan."

She met his eyes. "It's not on the table, Jason. I don't know if you were talking hypothetically or giving me an out. I don't want it. The situation doesn't change for anyone I love just because I walk away from it. I didn't see that that before, but I'm not that scared little girl. I'm here, I'm in it." Another tear slid down her cheek. "And so are you. And *we* count. Whatever you have to choose

going forward, nothing between us changes. Because I love you. And I know that you love me. Whatever you face, take that with you.”

He leaned down, resting his forehead against her knees. Because he didn’t know he’d needed this. That he’d needed to hear her promise, her oath.

Jason thought he could face anything if he had Elizabeth standing behind him, and now he was convinced she would be.

“I love you,” he managed to say. He leaned forward, her legs falling to the side as he covered her, drawing her into a fierce and possessive kiss. “And I am never going to let you regret staying.”

“I couldn’t,” she murmured against his lips. “We were always going to end back here, Jason. And there’s nowhere else I would rather be.”

# Chapter Twenty-Five

*Hey we're just bleeding for nothing  
It's hard to breathe when you're standing on your own  
We'll kill ourselves to find freedom  
You'll kill yourself to find anything at all*  
- Hey Now, Augustana

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*Sunday, August 21, 2005*

## A Warehouse

Less than a week ago, Johnny Zacchara had left his girlfriend's apartment intending to grab a quick lunch at a cafe on the waterfront and then hole up in the apartment he rented nearby and play some music, though he rarely stayed there overnight anymore.

He had pulled into his parking garage, stepped out of his Porsche, and then...

That was it. That was all he remembered.

He'd woken in a small dark room, tied to a chair, duct tape stretched across his mouth.

Fucking hell.

He hadn't really given much thought to the fact Nadine lived in Corinthos-controlled Port Charles. Johnny had removed himself from his father's world, living in England for a handful of years and attending Oxford University before moving to New York City. He spent most of his time in music clubs and art galleries.

Until, on a whim, he'd traveled to a blues club here—Luke's had a great reputation. He'd seen a pretty blonde dancing on the floor with some of her friends, and that had been it.

But he'd barely thought about Sonny Corinthos. They hardly run in the same circles, and Johnny thought he had defused any issues by approaching Jason Morgan and his girlfriend at the art showing last February.

Apparently not. Sonny Corinthos had had him knocked out and tied up in this warehouse for...he thought it must be nearly a week but Johnny tended to black out between beatings. The mobster would show up to enjoy one of his men pounding on him, demand to know why Johnny was coming after him, and then leave, disgusted by Johnny's claims of innocence. They'd moved him a few days ago, and now the voices were new with a Hispanic accent, but they still beat the shit out of him when Sonny ordered it.

He didn't know why he wasn't dead yet. Maybe Sonny wanted to hear him admit whatever crime he thought Johnny had committed.

That would be his death warrant, so there was no hope of admitting guilt in order to escape.

He had to hold out hope that Nadine, worried by his absence, would do something. Would call the police, maybe. And after the third beating, maybe he wouldn't mind if Anthony Zacchara came to rescue him. He didn't care for his father, but he also didn't care for dying for no good fucking reason.

He had never introduced Nadine and his father, though both were aware of the other. He could see her now, pacing her apartment. Waiting for him to call. Worrying.

The door swung open and footsteps came closer though Johnny couldn't really hear them.

"You ready to admit it, you fucker?"

Fan-fucking-tastic. Another beating. Maybe they'd kill him this time and put him out of his misery.

### **Hardy Home: Living Room**

Elizabeth loved her brother, she really did. But there moments when she wanted to set him on fire. And today...today was one of those moment.

"Steven," she said again, watching him fold a blanket and set it on the back of the sofa. "I don't know why you won't help me convince Gram to have this surgery—"

Steven turned to face her, his eyes exhausted from spending all day working and then nights taking care of Audrey. Elizabeth did her best to be here as often as she could, but she had set things in motion with her agent for a show in October, Diane Miller was nailing down the final contract to open her own gallery in the spring, Nora was taking a summer class which necessitated Elizabeth having the kids two more days a week than normal—

And it went without saying that the situation at home had not been better. Jason was no longer meeting with men at the penthouse as often, but they were still there. Sonny had done a disappearing act—she hadn't seen him since the engagement party.

And Johnny Zacchara remained missing.

But she had to focus on the things she could control, and damn it, she could find a way to control this. "Steven—"

"Bits, what do you want me to say?" he demanded. "Gram's a nurse. I can't lie to her and tell her a woman in her eighties will be perfectly fine having major open-heart surgery. She's not an idiot—"

"She's throwing away a chance to have another decade," Elizabeth shot back.

"Damn it, Elizabeth—" Steven bit off his next words. "This is only the third time you've been here. You don't see the way Gram—" He looked away. "I'm not sure surgery is going to be an option."

Stung, she recoiled. "What does that mean? Of course it is—"

“It’s the middle of the day, and Gram is upstairs taking a nap.” Steven scowled. “When was the last time our indomitable grandmother took a nap in the middle of the damn day? She’s weaker than she was a week ago. This new medication isn’t working either.”

“No.” Elizabeth folded her arms and shook her head. “We’ll just—we’ll talk to Monica. We’ll find another medication. *Don’t* you shake your head at me, Steven Lars Webber! Maybe there’s another doctor—”

“You going to throw money at the problem, then?” Steven demanded. “That’s your way of dealing with it? She’s at home all day while I’m work, Elizabeth. Where the hell are you?”

“I—” Her throat closed. “I’m trying the best I can,” she choked out. “I have Cam and Evie—”

“And a goddamn nanny. You have money, remember?” he returned with a glare. “But you can’t be bothered—you judge Uncle Tommy and Sarah for not being here—at least they’re doing something useful. What the hell is your excuse? You live in town. You don’t work—”

“You have no right to accuse me of not being here!” she shot back. “I’m the one that never left. You’ve been here five minutes, Steven. I’ve been here eight years. And I work—”

“Or maybe you’re too wrapped up in your new fiancé,” Steven cut in, his tone so scathing she had to blink. “Taking care of his kid—”

“I don’t have to listen to this!” Elizabeth snapped, not really sure how this had become a conversation about her shortcomings. She thought she and Steven had turned a corner. They had never been close growing up—he had always been like her parents, like Sarah, trying to figure out what they would with Lizzie.

And maybe that’s all she’d ever been to him. His little sister who was okay unless she was given responsibility. Can’t trust Lizzie. She’ll break it. She’ll forget it.

She won’t take care of it.

She’s not good enough.

She’s not like us.

She took a deep breath. Fighting wasn’t going to get them anywhere. Wasn’t going to make her grandmother change her mind. “I love her, Steven. I just want to do right by her. I don’t know why you have make it personal. I’m sorry if I don’t live up to your standards—”

“Bits, I’m sorry—” Steven rubbed a hand over his face. “I know you’ve got your own life. And Gram would hate if you let something go in order to look after her. She hates that *I’m* here. I’m just...I’m just—I’m at a loss. She won’t have the surgery, but the new meds—” He dipped his head. “I’m watching her fade away, and there’s *nothing* I can do about it.”

Elizabeth sighed, stepped forward, and embraced her brother. “I’m sorry, Steven. I know you hate this



as much as I do. I'll do better. I'll stop by more—"

"No, I know things are insane for you." Steven put his hands on her forearms. "And of course you work, I just—I meant you didn't have a schedule. You know how proud I am of you, how much I love you. I'm just—I'm *sorry*."

"I know," Elizabeth murmured, swallowing her cutting remark. It was easy to dump on her, it always had been. But Steven looked exhausted and he *had* been bearing the brunt of Audrey's care for the last week.

And if she were fading as fast as Steven suggested...the nights would not be particularly restful. "We'll be okay, Steven. You and me. We just have stick together, okay?"

He kissed her forehead. "We will, Bits. And maybe you're right. We'll talk to Monica. Maybe there's another option."

But they both knew they were likely clinging to hope at this point.

### **Morgan Penthouse: Jason's Office**

Jason scrawled his name at the bottom of the paperwork Bernie handed him and checked to make sure all the necessary pages were initialed. "How fast can we push the sale through?" he asked, handing the contract back.

"I can have it finalized by the end of the week," Bernie promised. "And Johnny can start security the very next day. We'll make sure the place is secure." He glanced around the small room. "You're making the right decision, Jason."

He hoped so. The penthouse was no longer a tenable solution. Sonny was ducking his calls, and by the look on Max's face, the report on his comings and goings was likely to be a disappointing one.

Johnny Zacchara was missing. Sonny was behind it, even if he would never admit it, and Jason had taken over the day to day operations. They were no longer even pretending to run things by Sonny.

Jason, even if they hadn't said anything out loud, had taken control. And continuing to stay across the hall from his former business partner would be suicide.

So he bought a house on the outskirts of Port Charles with enough land to put up an electric fence and a gatehouse to control comings and goings—the best money security could buy—he hated the thought of it, but he wanted it in his back pocket in case it was necessary. The deed had been bought in Cam's name, in order to keep it off Sonny's radar, and Jason hated that as well.

There was nothing about this situation that was going well for him.

"Get it done," Jason said finally. He looked to Max. "What's the bad news?"

"It's worse than you thought." Max sighed, and nodded to Tommy, who tended to handle the gambling

rings and the bookies who kept them in the green. “Not only can I still not keep my eyes on Sonny without losing him, but Tommy thinks he knows what’s been going on.”

Jason directed his eyes to the swarthy Italian transplant. “Tommy?”

“Sonny came into one of the casinos on Van Ness last Monday,” Tommy said. “And he pulled some of my guys to work on a project. I didn’t know because I’ve been out on the streets with Francis and Johnny, trying to find Junior, and we didn’t exactly broadcast our concern.”

Which solved the mystery as to how Sonny would have gotten the jump on a younger, stronger man. “And?” Jason pressed.

“And Sonny relieved them of their duties two days ago. When they popped back up, they were bragging about doing some work for him personally—not something that usually happens to the guys down there.” Tommy scowled. “And it got back to me. I called them in. They’re low on the food chain, Jase. They don’t know the score the way we do up here.”

Jason leaned back. “I’m not going to knock out a couple of schmucks who thought they were doing their job. What’d they say, Tommy?”

“They grabbed Junior out of his parking garage last Monday,” Tommy confirmed. “They took him to a warehouse near Courtland Street, where they kept him tied up. Sonny would stop by once a day, ask Junior about the fire, he’d deny it. And then the guys would beat him. “

Jason got to his feet. “They know where this place is?” he demanded. God, this could be over now. If he could get the little bastard to safety, he could concentrate on Sonny—

“I already went there,” Tommy said, his tone apologetic now. “It’s empty. He’s been moved. But my guys didn’t do it. And I did a quick round up of my crew before I came here. No one will admit to taking their place. Francis is checking with his guys, but—”

Max took over. “Johnny and I cleared our guys. Whoever Sonny’s working with now, they’re not on our grid. Francis’s people know better.”

Jason sank back into his seat. The implications of this story were...they were devastating.

Johnny Zacchara was being beaten somewhere at regular intervals, and if he admitted guilt to make it stop, Sonny would likely kill him. Either way, his life was in danger. And since he hadn’t split, it was likely his girlfriend was freaking out. If she hadn’t called Anthony Zacchara yet, it was only a matter of time.

And that wasn’t the worst of it. If Sonny had stopped using their own guys, he had gone outside the organization. Either he’d picked up guys from off the street, or he’d gone to another family.

And if he’d done that...

“Jason,” Max said, “We know now that Sonny’s done something to Junior. It’s time we stop

pretending to tail him. You need to confront him, you need to get him to hand the kid over.”

“Yeah.” Jason cleared his throat. “Ah. We—” He couldn’t do that, though. He couldn’t make a move on Sonny. Sonny might not have gone over the edge into the psychotic break his sister had warned them about, but he wasn’t too far off.

And *his* family lived across the hall from him.

He had to get them to safety first. He took a deep breath and looked to Max. “Can you get me Cody?” he asked, referring to the guard who was on the door to the penthouse and was generally in charge of the security of Jason’s family.

Max nodded, and a few moments later, had brought the man in question to him. “Cody, ah, do you know where Nora and Elizabeth are?” Jason asked. He hadn’t had a chance to talk to either of them that morning.

“Milo took Miss Webber to see her grandmother and then she had appointment with Diane Miller downtown. Nora is with Denny and Lyle at the park with the kids.” Cody hesitated. “Did you want me to call them? Bring them back?”

“No, no...” Jason rose. “I just want to make—” He wanted to make sure the people he loved most in the world were okay. That someone was with them, protecting them. “Thanks, Cody.” He hesitated. He felt their eyes on them, these men who could be ruthless and even violent, and they knew they were pitying him.

He swallowed hard. “You can go back to the door.”

“Jason,” Johnny said. “Maybe some of Tommy’s guys don’t know the score, but that’s because they’re usually pretty far removed from this stuff. They’re too busy making money—”

“But they know it now,” Tommy interrupted, annoyed. “None of the guys are taking assignments from anyone who isn’t me. If they get another offer from Sonny, they know to agree and then call me so we can figure out what’s going on. They know who’s in charge, Jase.”

“Right,” Johnny said, rolling his eyes at his prickly colleague. “Anyway, what I’m saying is we’ve got the best people on Elizabeth and the kids. Sonny’s not going after them.”

Maybe, maybe not.

“Just get the house settled,” Jason told Bernie and Johnny. To Max and Tommy, he said, “Max, I want your energy and any man you can spare looking for Junior. But let’s continue to keep it quiet. I don’t want it filtering back to Anthony. It hasn’t yet, but I don’t know how often the kid is supposed to check in with his father. Get some eyes on the girlfriend. Don’t—don’t go near her, but I want to know if she reaches out to Anthony. I want warning. Tommy, I need you to keep things running smoothly in your area. I don’t want the cops raiding any of the casinos or grabbing any of the bookies. We need to look like we got our shit together.”

“Ah, Jase?” Cody knocked on the open door. “Courtney Matthews is at the front desk.”

Jason exhaled slowly. The last thing he wanted was a run-in with his ex-wife, but she was probably concerned about Sonny. And maybe she’d been in contact with him. “You can bring her up. We’re done in here.”

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Courtney still wasn’t sure she was doing the right thing, but she couldn’t stand it anymore.

A guard let her inside the penthouse, and Courtney stepped over the threshold into her former home, blinking at the changes. The pool table remained, but a playpen, a changing table, and a scattering of toys sat in the front of the room where Jason’s desk had once set.

And Jason was standing by the sofa, an air of impatience emanating from him. “I’m sorry for just showing up like this,” she said, “but I can’t—I can’t pretend I’m not worried anymore. And I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

Jason slid his hands into his jeans. “What’s going on, Courtney?” he asked. “Is this about Sonny or Carly?”

“It’s about them *both*,” Courtney answered. She set her bag on the back of the armchair. “Sonny came to stay with me last month, and I know he was going to see a doctor. He was doing a bit better the last few times I talked to him, but I called him last week, and—” She closed her eyes. “He was worse than I’ve seen him. He accused me of sniffing around him for money, of using him, of going behind his back to talk to you—which I hadn’t done. And I talked to Carly, who told me I should tell you and Elizabeth to give them custody of Evie if I wanted to help so much.”

Jason exhaled slowly. “Hell.” He pressed the heel of his hand to his eye and was quiet for a moment. “He’s sick, Courtney—”

“I *know* that,” she interrupted. “And I’m not worried about me. I’m worried about—” She bit off the words, swallowing the fear. “Jason, I’m scared for Michael and Morgan. And *even* for you, for Elizabeth. You didn’t hear the way Sonny talked about you. He thinks you’re out to get him. He thinks I’m helping you. I don’t know what I’d be helping you do, but he’s remembering the way we lied to him, and thinks I’ve been disloyal to him.”

“I didn’t—” He looked away. “I’m sorry, Courtney. Things—things have been difficult—and not just because of the last year or because of Evie.” Jason paused. “And I guess you know she’s Sonny’s daughter.”

“I always knew that.” Courtney dismissed that, because it wasn’t important now. The situation was so much worse than she’d ever thought it could be. She’d believed *Carly* was the person to worry about, but her brother’s searing anger on their phone call had terrified her. He’d never spoken to her like that, and even at the height of his anger with Jason... “That’s not important. No, it’s not about Evie anymore. I’m not sure it ever really was. Jason, we *need* to get the boys away from him. And from

Carly, if she won't leave him. I talked to a lawyer, but he doesn't think there's anything I can do since there's nothing on record and he doesn't appear to be a danger to them."

"Courtney—"

"I know about the fire last week, but Jason—" She hesitated. "He told me things last month—he said he was so angry with you sometimes he fantasized about—" She closed her eyes. "He talked about hurting you. Wrapping his hands around neck—and he's *so* angry at you, Jason—"

Jason swallowed, but it was the only outward reaction he showed. "Okay. That—that doesn't surprise me—"

"He thinks you're taking control of his life, that you're stripping him of the things he considers his. First you took Sam, then you took Evie. And we all know the men have always trusted you more." Courtney stepped towards him. "Jason, he sounded—he sounded like he's gone over that proverbial edge we've all worried about—"

"He's close to it," Jason said after a moment. "But he hasn't gone over yet." He didn't elaborate on how he could come to that conclusion.

The door opened behind them, and Elizabeth stepped in, blinking at Courtney in the room. "Courtney."

They hadn't been face to face in nearly two years. "I just came—I wanted to talk to Jason about the boys." She looked to Jason. "Just be on your guard okay? I'm going to talk to Bobbie about trying to convince Carly to do something."

She pushed past Elizabeth and left. She'd done what she could to warn Jason, but her attention had to be on the things she could do to help Michael and Morgan.

They deserved so much better.

Back inside, Elizabeth bit her lip and faced Jason. "Jason, is she okay? She looked so upset."

And because the look in Elizabeth's eyes wasn't annoyance or suspicion at finding him alone with his ex-wife, Jason sighed and sat on the sofa, exhausted.

Sonny had kidnapped Johnny Zacchara, had probably gone to another organization for help. Courtney thought Sonny was going to come after Jason. Elizabeth's grandmother was probably dying.

Everything was changing, and it was happening so fast, he couldn't get a grip on it.

"Jason." Elizabeth set her bag on the chair and perched on the coffee table in front of him. "They're all looking to you to make it right. To fix it. To make everyone safe, aren't they?"

He said nothing, but looked up. "I can't," he admitted. "I can't make it stop."

Elizabeth just nodded, reaching out to rub his knee. "No, I guess you can't," she said finally. "So let's

concentrate on what we can do. What happened while I was gone? Can you tell me?"

And he told her, because she deserved to know. He told her that Sonny had done exactly what they all feared, but maybe it was even worse than they thought, because if another family was involved, they'd see the inherent weakness in the organization. They'd smell blood in the water.

And if they couldn't return Johnny Zacchara to his father in relatively good shape, he'd have a war on two fronts.

And in the middle of everything—there were four children who had never asked for *any* of this.

He told her everything because what was the point of pretending there were things she couldn't know, as if she were safer kept in the dark?

Her face was pale when he finally stopped talking, but she nodded. "Okay. Okay. Well, that's—" Her laugh was thin, shaky. "Well, that's more than I—Okay."

Elizabeth stood and walked towards the large bay windows overlooking the bay, then turned back. "I know something that might help."

Jason frowned at her, skeptical. "What?"

"Steven is looking after Gram at night, but she's alone during the day. I was trying to see how I could spend more time there, and make sure someone is always there. So that's what we'll do. We can't stay across the hall from Sonny. Not if he's talking about you the way Courtney said." She nodded, her voice stronger. "So we'll move to my grandmother's house temporarily. That works, doesn't it?"

He stood. "Elizabeth—"

"You can still come here for meetings, if you need to. But I know the fact that the kids and I are here, so close to it all—it drives you insane. It can be one less thing for you to worry about, and I'll feel better being closer to my grandmother. It might be a tight fit, but it'll be temporary."

He hesitated. But it just might work. At least for a bit. He could put more security at the Hardy house, had already had some upgrades put in just for Audrey's sake. "We can do that."

"I don't know what I can do about the rest of it," Elizabeth said. "It's not my area." She stood in front of him, and put her hands on his chest. "It seems to me you need to get Johnny Zacchara back, right? You need to find him and get him home. Worrying about Sonny and another organization isn't going—it can't be your priority."

And some of the tension slid from Jason's chest. Because she was right. He couldn't fight a war on two fronts, so he had to make sure he didn't have to.

It was more important to mollify Anthony Zacchara.

"Elizabeth..." He lowered his forehead and just touched it to hers. "When this is over—"

“We’re *not* worrying about that right now.” Her fingers twisted in his shirt. “We’re going to make sure the people we love are safe. I’ll talk to Bobbie. Like Courtney said, she’s the best conduit to Carly. Michael and Morgan are in the middle of this, too. And we have to find a way to help *them*. We’ll make sure the kids are safe, across town and away from Sonny. You’ll find Johnny Zacchara, and ship him home. And then you’ll put Sonny under lock and key until he agrees to see another doctor. We can do this. One step at a time.”

He sighed. “I know, but—”

“And *then* you can go back to not telling me a blessed thing about what happens when you walk out that door, and I can go back to worrying about whether or not I can actually run an art gallery.”

And she made it sound so simple, Jason thought they might be able to do it.

He should have known it wouldn’t be that easy.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

*If we're only ever looking back  
We will drive ourselves insane  
As the friendship goes resentment grows  
We will walk our different ways  
But those are the days that bind us together, forever  
And those little things define us forever, forever*  
- Bad Blood, Bastille

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*Wednesday, August 24, 2005*

## **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

By the time Jason had finally managed to corner his partner, it was a week and a half after the warehouse fire. After Johnny Zacchara had disappeared without a trace only to end up in Sonny's custody.

Their contacts in the Zacchara organization didn't seem to think Anthony was aware of it, but if Johnny was MIA for much longer, the girlfriend was likely to contact him. She hadn't yet, which meant she was all too aware of the reaction she'd trigger.

Jason stood just behind Sonny, who was calmly sipping bourbon as he stared out over his view of the waterfront docks. "Where is he, Sonny?"

Sonny turned and arched a brow. "I wasn't aware you were in a position to give me orders," the other man practically purred, the arrogance and self-certainty oozing from every word. "Remember? You told me you didn't *want* the power."

Once, Jason would have stepped around the question. He would have ducked the confrontation, but the reasons for doing so were gone. Jason didn't have to protect his guardianship of Evie or Carly's ignorance.

Carly had never believed the lie—that was certain now, and Jason would rather be roasted over a pit of burning coals before surrendering custody of Sam's daughter to this man.

Jason had hoped his illness could be controlled, that they could resurrect a semblance of their old life, their old friendship, but Sonny's mental health would always be precarious, and Jason was no longer prepared to sacrifice his family or their men to the capricious nature of chemical imbalances.

"I don't," Jason said bluntly. "But you *can't* handle it. You kidnapped Johnny Zacchara, Sonny. Tommy's guys told us—you kept him in a warehouse and beat him, trying to force him to admit guilt. There's nothing to admit." Jason flung a copy of the final fire report at him. "It was an electrical fire. You're starting a war over an accident. You didn't wait for evidence, you didn't wait for a reason to go after him."



“I don’t need to *wait*.” Sonny ignored the papers as they settled at his feet. “You,” he scoffed. “They all worship you for your patience. For your steadiness. You’re not a fucking accountant, Jason. We don’t have the luxury of time here—”

“When you brought me into this business, you told me that there are two men I never want to piss off,” Jason interrupted. “Hector Ruiz, whose sons were ruthless animals even then, and Anthony Zacchara, a man rumored to have murdered his own wife while taking a shot at his kid. He’s *insane*, Sonny. And you know it. You fuck with his kid, Anthony Zacchara is going to unleash his people on you. On your family. On me and mine. We knew by the end of the day the fire was electrical, but you couldn’t wait a lousy six hours.” He fisted his hands. “Where is he?”

“I always wondered what it would take for you to turn on me,” Sonny mused. His lips curved into a bitter half-smile. “I screwed your woman, you didn’t blink. I left you in charge when you clearly weren’t ready, it didn’t seem to faze you. I cost you Elizabeth, and you just went about your business. I’ve all but destroyed Michael and Morgan’s childhood, but that’s not why you’re turning on me, is it?”

“I’m not—” Jason took a deep breath. “I’m *not* turning on you, Sonny. You’re—you know you’re not well. That whatever medication you were taking isn’t working. You need to go back to the doctor—”

“I’m in control, Jason.” Sonny sipped his bourbon. “*My* voice isn’t the one raised. Johnny Zacchara has done nothing but cause us trouble for months—”

“There was never any proof—”

“You didn’t want to see it because it meant you’d have to look away from your precious family,” Sonny sneered. “Because if you took your eyes off Elizabeth for a single minute, she’d run away like she always does. What? You think she won’t run now because you’re *engaged*? You’re still the naive little boy I took in all those years ago.”

“I want Johnny Zacchara,” Jason said evenly, ignoring the attacks. “We can sort out whatever the hell is wrong with you this time later. But I need him back. I need to pack him off to his father so I’m not facing a war from Anthony Zacchara—”

“You’re scared of a little territory scuffle?” Sonny chuckled. “That tells me you’re not cut out for this. I trusted you too much, that’s clear—”

“Anthony Zacchara doesn’t engage in *scuffles*,” Jason shot back. “When Moreno went after his trucking route, he blew up Moreno’s home and held his wife hostage for a month. For a fucking trucking route. What do you think he’ll do if he thinks you’ve got his son? Do you think he’ll care that I didn’t have a damn thing to do with it?”

No, Jason knew Anthony would blame him for letting Sonny lose control. Sonny would be destroyed, but Anthony would take personal pleasure in razing Jason and his family to the ground as a warning to others who let personal feelings rise above business.

“If his son wants to play with the big boys,” Sonny said, his voice still eerily calm, “Anthony should have known better than to send him.”

Jason bit off his protest. “Who are you working with?”

His partner blinked at him. “What do you mean?”

“You’re not using any of our guys to hold him,” Jason said. “And Tommy’s guys swear they left the kid alive. Which means you’ve got men holding him somewhere. If he’d confessed, you’d be throwing that in my face, and he’d be dead. He hasn’t confessed yet. Did you grab men off the street?”

“That,” Sonny said quietly, “is none of your business.” He raised his tumbler to his mouth. “You wanted the power, Jason? Fine. But don’t get too comfortable. I’ll be coming for what’s mine.” His dark eyes glinted. “*All* of it.”

There was nothing to accomplish here. He couldn’t beat the truth out of Sonny—he hadn’t had the psychotic break they’d feared, but Jason was more convinced than ever that Emily and Elizabeth had been correct. Sonny was bipolar and his antidepressants convinced him he was in complete control.

Even as everything disintegrated around him.

Jason closed Sonny’s penthouse door behind him and looked at Max. “You’re officially relieved of duty,” he told him. “Make sure Carly and the boys still have their guards, but you’re needed elsewhere.”

Max nodded and followed him to the elevator. There was nothing left Jason could do for his friend. His family had to come first. The organization had to come first.

## **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

Elizabeth slid into the seat across from Nikolas. “I am so sorry for being late—it’s Nora’s day for a summer class, so I have the kids—” She paused to lift Cameron out of the stroller and set him in a chair adjacent to hers before tugging Evie into her lap. “Maybe we could get some booster—”

Nikolas raised a hand. “Give me a second.” He went to the doorway at Kelly’s, reached inside and brought out two highchairs. With his usual brand of efficiency, both children were quickly settled with their sippy cups and snacks into their own chairs.

“You,” she said, “are going to be an *amazing* father.”

He laughed, the sound tinged with a bit of anxiety. “Well, it’s easy with other people’s children, but...” Nikolas lifted a shoulder. “I suppose I can’t be much worse than other members of my family.”

Elizabeth arched a brow. “That’s putting it mildly.” She glanced over where a cadre of guards had taken the other outside table. Milo, Denny, and Lyle looked a bit uncomfortable in their usual suits, but she and the children went nowhere without them.

Nikolas followed her gaze. “Security has been ramped up, I see,” he said quietly. “Emily mentioned things have been tense since the fire.”

“They’re...” Elizabeth set her menu down and twisted her napkin in her hands. “God, Nikolas, I don’t even know. We’re still getting settled in with my grandmother—we’re staying with her until Jason can find something more permanent, but he didn’t want us across from Sonny and Carly anymore. And Sonny—” She looked away. “Let’s just say it’s possible we were on the mark about his medication.”

“Ah.” Nikolas exhaled slowly. “Elizabeth, I’m not being—I don’t want to be like I was before, warning you away, but I would be remiss if I didn’t at least...voice my concern.”

Elizabeth couldn’t help but smile. “I’m sure you’d be much happier if you could hogtie me and put me and the kids on a plane to the far corners of the Earth. But I appreciate you not saying it.”

“It’s human nature to want your family safe,” Nikolas said, conceding her argument. “But I know that Jason is taking security seriously. He’s sent some men to check over things at the mansion and at Wyndemere. I allowed him access to the background checks we run on servants. I just...I worry that all his precautions won’t be enough.” He touched his throat where a faint scar still lingered. He’d once nearly died for standing too close to Jason.

“I know.” Elizabeth picked up a butter knife and looked at it. “And there are *no* easy answers. I love him. Nikolas. And he’s not just dealing with—business concerns. Sonny is out of control. He was always a father figure to Jason, you know. His best friend, his brother. And now...he basically has to decide between keeping us safe and Sonny.” She pursed her lips. “Maybe we’d be making different choices if not for Cam and Evie, but—”

“Emily mentioned you were feeling a bit...apprehensive,” Nikolas said. “Do you really think it’s just the kids precipitating Jason’s choices at the moment? Do you think if it were just the two of you, he’d sacrifice you for Sonny?”

“No.” Elizabeth shook her head. “*No*. I mean, of course not. I know he loves me. I know he takes our engagement seriously. He offered an out, but—” She looked away. “To be honest, Nikolas, I’m not...” She closed her eyes, pitching her voice low so that her guards could not possibly overhear her. “I’m not always convinced. I mean, most of the time, yeah. But sometimes, I wonder...”

“And *that’s* human nature, too,” Nikolas told her softly. “Because you know what it’s like to have someone constantly put someone else in front of you. With Lucky’s brainwashing, that always seemed to take precedence.”

“I guess. I mean, I just—” Elizabeth shook her head. “I don’t know. I know Jason and I aren’t together because of Evie and Cam. It’s been different this time, because Jason and I are different people, and we’ve allowed for that. I’m a stronger person. But yeah, part of me does wonder why it *always* has to be so hard.”

“And this is where I offer some platitude about how nothing worth having comes easy,” Nikolas said, “but I get it, Elizabeth. Life is full of difficulties, challenges, and obstacles, but when there *never*

seems to be a break, when it always seem the day or the moment can grow bleaker, you begin to wonder if it's worth it."

"I just...I want to be happy. I want to have my life with Jason, with the kids. With my brother and my grandmother. With you and Emily...I want us all to be happy for five minutes. All at the same exact time. *Why* isn't that something I get?"

"If I could answer that question, Elizabeth, I'd have solved one of life's enduring mysteries." Nikolas leaned back. "Are you having second thoughts?"

Elizabeth blinked at him. "No. Of course not—"

"And you can be honest with me." He hesitated. "I have no vested interest in you pursuing a life with Jason beyond hoping for your happiness. Emily seems to think the two of you are soulmates. I don't know. That's something only you can answer. So when I say you can be honest with me, I mean that." He waited. "*Are* you having second thoughts?" he repeated.

"Yes," Elizabeth admitted. "And third. And fourth. I'm *terrified* to raise my son in a world where one man's instability can bring it crashing down. If not Sonny, then one of Jason's enemies. I hate it. And there are moments, when I wait for a car to be swept for bombs before I put my son into it, I wonder what the *hell* I'm doing here."

"And yet..."

"And yet, I stay," Elizabeth finished. "Because I know that Jason loves me. That he loves me for who I am in this moment, not his fantasy of me. He doesn't want me to fix him, he doesn't need me to keep him rooted in this reality, or to save him. He loves *me*. And he loves my son. I've tried being without him. I always drift back. Because I love him. When I'm thinking about this insanity with Sonny, I'm not thinking about the dangers first, I'm thinking of that dream wedding where my grandmother walks me down the aisle, and Emily is my maid of honor—and Jason has Sonny standing next to him, and I know it will *never* happen. My grandmother is going to die, and Sonny is never going to be that man for either of us again. And if that realization breaks my heart, can you *imagine* how that destroys Jason?"

A tear slid down her cheek. "So yeah, I have my doubts sometimes. I wonder occasionally if it *were* just me, if Jason would put me aside to focus on Sonny, and if I could honestly blame him for that with all I know now. I worry that Cameron and Evie will grow up to resent my choices. But I can put those worries away. I love Jason, and he loves me. We love our children. Things are going to be difficult in the next few months—Sonny is going to crash and burn, my grandmother may not be with me much longer, but Nikolas?" She paused. "I can get through it. Because when I go home at the end of the day, Jason's there. He'll put his arms around me, and for a moment, it all goes away."

Nikolas nodded. "Okay then." He reached for the menu. "By the way, if Emily suggests using any form of the name Nikolas in our child's middle name, you are to discourage it immediately. That's not a request, it's a command."

And just like that, he turned the conversation to other topics.

## **General Hospital: Nurse's Station**

Emily flexed her fingers and scowled down at the stack of forms she still had to get through. “Do you think insurance forms are proof there’s no God?” she asked the blonde standing to her side.

Nadine Crowell blinked at her. “What? Oh. Yeah. Sure.”

Emily frowned. While she wasn’t close to the blonde perky nurse, she knew her relatively well through working together at the hospital and Leyla Mir’s relationship with Lucky—Leyla being Nadine’s best friend.

And lately, the usually bubbly woman had been withdrawn. Even distracted. Epiphany Johnson, the floor nurse, had been on her case for more than a week.

“You okay?” Emily asked. “You don’t seem like yourself.”

“Just...” Nadine jerked her shoulder. “Just tired. You know how these shifts can be.” She picked up a stack of files. “I’m gonna go work on these in the break room.”

She stepped away—Emily considered following her, but she really *didn’t* know the other woman that well. Maybe she could talk to Leyla.

Before Emily could decide whether to add Nadine Crowell to her roster of wounded hearts—as Nikolas liked to call them—Steven stepped off the elevator, looking every inch as exhausted as the woman who’d stepped away.

“Steven.” She set the pen down and rounded the counter. “Hey.”

“Hey, Em.” He pressed the heel of his hand in his eyes. “You talked to Bits today?”

“No, not yet—Nikolas is supposed to have lunch with her...” Emily took his arm and steered him toward the waiting room sofa. “Sit before you collapse. What’s up? I thought you were supposed to get more sleep with Liz and Jason moving in with Audrey.”

“Yeah, well they just spent their first night last night, so I guess I have some to catch up on.” He hesitated. “Em, Gram just had a checkup.”

“It’s only been a week since—” Emily pressed her lips together. “It didn’t go well, I suppose.”

“No, no, it did not.” Steve dipped his head. “I have to call my sister. Both of them. My parents. My uncle. I guess I should talk to TJ, though he’s never been close to Gram, thanks to his mother, but they should be on alert—”

“Steven—”

“Surgery,” Steven said evenly, though his expression was devastated. “Surgery is no longer an option. Gram has—she’s declined rapidly in the last week and a half. Monica said it happens sometimes—the medication can control things for a while, but once it stops, it just...” He dismissively waved his hand. “It just stops.”

“Oh, *God*—”

“Monica doesn’t think Gram would have made it through a surgery anyway, based on these results. She’s—” He closed his eyes. “It’s a matter of days now, Em. Maybe another two weeks if we’re lucky. She’s fading fast.”

“It—she was fine just two weeks ago,” Emily managed. “She was so happy at the party—”

“We all were.” He looked to Emily. “How did you do it last year?”

She blinked at him. “Do what?”

“When you lost your grandmother. She was like mine, right? Heart of the family. Center of it.” He expelled a harsh breath. “I don’t know what to do. I have to tell all these people Gram might go at any point, and I can’t—I can’t even process it myself.”

“I’m so sorry, Steven,” she murmured. She pressed her forehead to his shoulder. “My grandmother had been declining for years—we could all see it. But she had such a vibrant spirit, I suppose we thought she’d outlast us all. Then one morning, she was simply gone. She went in her sleep, how we all might hope she’d go.” Emily bit her lip. “Is Audrey in any pain?”

“Some shortness of breath, but not really—Monica has given her some meds to keep her comfortable—” He dipped his head again. “I should call Bits.” He looked to Emily. “Thanks. I appreciate you sitting with me.”

“Of course.” She squeezed his hand. “And tell me if there’s anything I can do. Nikolas and I are here for you.”

“She was happy at that party,” Steven said after a moment. “I know your brother hated it—it’s not his thing, but she told me he wanted to make Elizabeth happy. That he’d done it because he knew how much Gram meant to her. And she had a blast planning it, you know. She was so happy this last year with my sister and me in Port Charles, with her great-grandson. If she has—” He paused. “If this is it for her, then I’m glad she’s going out on a high.”

## **Warehouse: Jason’s Office**

Max wrinkled his nose at the distant sounds of construction as crews began to repair the damaged portions of the building. “Is this place safe?”

“The structure is sound enough,” Jason said. “I’m not thrilled either, but after this morning, I can’t go back to the penthouse and Mrs. Hardy’s home is out of the question. I don’t want anyone to know about the new house yet.” He looked to Tommy. “What do you have?”

Tommy shifted. “Stefano has always been the liaison between us and the Zaccharas—you know that. He contacted me last night. He wanted a meeting with Sonny.”

Jason exhaled slowly. “And you’re just telling me this *now*?” He glanced pointedly at the clock on the wall which indicated it was two in the afternoon. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Figuring out what to tell Stefano so it’s clear that you’re in charge without anyone thinking it’s a power play,” the other man retorted. “Or do you want Zacchara to smell blood in the water?”

“Tommy,” Bernie murmured. “We could do without the attitude. You should have called Jason immediately, and you know it. Where do we stand?”

“Stefano knows we’re having issues,” Tommy admitted. “He wanted to give us a heads up. Word is out that things are fluid here. Sonny is still nominally in charge, but you’re doing the work. Zacchara was testing the waters by asking to see Sonny.”

“It wasn’t about Junior?” Jason asked, not sure if this was a good thing or not. He wanted Anthony in the dark about his son as long as possible, but if he was interested in the weaknesses—

“Not for the most part. Stefano asked if we’d seen Junior around lately. He’s been lax on his weekly call to his father, but Anthony figures he’s holed up in PC with the girlfriend. Johnny has maybe two more weeks to check in before Anthony gets worried. He’s annoyed, but it’s not the first time the son has deliberately stayed out of touch.”

“Thank God they’re a fucked up family,” Max said. “We got time to track Junior down—”

“The longer Sonny has him somewhere, the less likely it is we get him back alive,” Jason interrupted. “Max, tailing Sonny isn’t doing us any good. “ He looked to the men gathered in the office. “He’s no longer in charge.”

Johnny nodded. “About damn time—”

Bernie scowled at him. “O’Brien—”

“I’m just saying—”

“Sonny seems to think we’re merely risking a *turf* war with Zacchara if the son doesn’t come home.” At the annoyed and confused expressions reflecting back, he nodded. “I know. It’s why I can’t risk even the illusion of leaving him in charge. I don’t want any of the men thinking they report to him. Johnny, call Francis on the island. Make sure he gets the change out to his guys there. Tommy, Max, Bernie, anyone balks, do what’s necessary to get them to go along.”

“I doubt we’ll have more than a ruffle of feathers,” Tommy said. “Most of the men have never met him anyway.” He lifted his chin. “What are we going to do about the rest of it?”

“Tommy, I need to keep lines of communication with the Zaccharas open, so keep Stefano in the loop. We can honestly say we haven’t seen him around, but we’ll keep our eyes open. I also need you to

concentrate on the bookies and the waterfront. Keep your territory running like usual. The cops are going to be digging into things, but I think the fire report calmed them down.” Jason looked to Johnny and Max. “I want you guys to tear this city, this county, even the state apart. I want Johnny Zacchara back, and I want him *alive*. And I need to talk to him before we send him home to Anthony.”

“What about whoever is holding him?” Johnny asked. “What muscle is Sonny using?”

“That’s what I want to know. If it’s guys off the street, that’s problematic, but it might be more likely Sonny has called in a favor from another organization. Tagliatti is still annoyed we didn’t skin Faith Roscoe, so he’s out. Vega has never particularly liked Sonny. He’s Italian, Sonny’s Cuban. It’s stupid, but it’s a point of honor for him.”

“Hell.” Max scowled. “That leaves Hector Ruiz. I’ll have Francis call Ramon. He might be able to give us some ideas.”

With their instructions given, the room cleared, leaving only Bernie and Jason. “Bernie—”

“The security upgrades will be done by the end of next week,” his business manager told him. “I tried to hurry it up, but I don’t want to compromise quality—”

“We’re okay at the Hardy house for a while.” Jason hesitated, thinking of how pale and wan Elizabeth’s grandmother had been that morning. “And I don’t...I know how much longer Mrs. Hardy will be with us. I don’t think Elizabeth will go to the new house until...” He hesitated. “Until things are resolved.”

The older man’s face softened. “Please extend my deepest condolences. The security at the house is decent enough. If we can keep the status quo, it should be okay.” He waited a moment. “Jason, I know these are tough times, but the men who work for you are loyal. They’ll do what they can to keep things from getting worse.”

“Even if Sonny gets his medication changed,” Jason said slowly, “I can’t imagine letting him be in charge again.” He met Bernie’s eyes. “Because he was doing well, and then everything just exploded in our faces. I can’t take the chance again. Not if I want to keep everyone safe.”

“I know.” Bernie sighed, gathering his files. “I guess we all knew we’d be looking to you someday, Jason, but I don’t suppose we thought it’d be like this.” He drew his shoulders back. “But we’ll get through it. We always do.”

And Jason knew he was right—somehow, they would come out on the other end of this. But at what cost?

## **Hardy Home: Elizabeth’s Bedroom**

After seeing that Nora had settled Cam and Evie in their temporary bedroom at the Hardy house and making sure their nanny was okay with the move, Jason went next door to Elizabeth’s bedroom.

She sat at a window next to the bed, perched on the windowsill, looking out over Maple Avenue.



Across the street, a dark SUV sat with a set of guards. With a guard on the front door and another on the back door, as well as a brand-new security system, he wondered if she was regretting the move to her grandmother's home.

"Hey." He closed the door. "You okay?"

"Fine," she murmured. She looked at him. "Gram looked tired today, didn't she?"

Jason sat in one of the chairs and unlaced his boots, not sure how to answer that question. He'd been present before dinner, while Audrey had been resting, when Steven had told Elizabeth the devastating news.

He wondered now if Audrey had just held herself together through sheer force of will through the engagement party. She was, as Steven had said, fading fast.

"She did," Jason said finally. "I'm sorry about the guards—"

"It's not—" Elizabeth turned, her back now to the window, her bare toes sinking into the carpet beneath the sill. "I'm fine with the guards. With the security system. Gram didn't care about any of that. And what's the point?" She closed her eyes. "It's not like things would be different if we'd stayed at the penthouse. She'd still be..."

He rose to his feet and crossed to her, pulling her up against him. "I don't know what to say to you," Jason admitted finally. "I can't make any of this go away."

"I know." She pressed her forehead against his chest. "There's nothing that *can* be said. Steven called my parents. They're going to try to get away, but they're in Botswana, and Sarah just came out over the weekend. She can't get the time from her program again. My uncle might be able to come in for a day, and TJ—my cousin—he's in medical school in Washington. No one seems to care." She drew away from him, scrubbing her hands over her face.

"But you know who called me today?" She turned to him. "Your grandfather. He called while you were on the phone. He told me the Quartermaines are devastated for all of us, and if there's anything he can do, just say the word." A tear slid down her cheek. "And he's not saying that because of you. I know you don't care for him, but he—" Elizabeth closed her eyes. "He sounded so *upset* on the phone. He told me Monica has been beside herself because she couldn't do more, and I just..." She pressed a hand to her mouth. "And I was so relieved because it meant Steven and I aren't alone. We aren't the only ones to grieve."

He didn't know what to say to any of this. His grandmother had been there one day, then gone the next. How did one face this gradual fading away? This long goodbye? And what could he say about Elizabeth's family except that they had always seemed selfish and useless to him.

"I'm sorry," Elizabeth said, her eyes red. "I shouldn't have—I know you don't consider Edward your grandfather—"

He held up a hand to ward off her apologies. “It’s not—I can’t say that anymore. Lila was my grandmother, so...” Jason looked away, remembering Emily’s birthday party, and Edward’s delight in Cameron, in talking with Elizabeth. The way the old man had looked at the party, holding out Lila’s wedding ring.

“As much as I’ve tried to deny it, he *is* my grandfather,” Jason said. “And Alan and Monica are my parents. I know they care about me.” And watching Elizabeth struggle with her own biological ties, how could he continue to deny his own when they tried so hard? “And they’ll be your family, too. I mean, you’ll probably regret that one day—”

She laughed then, pressing her hands to her mouth. “Oh, there’s no doubt about that. I’ve been to some of their parties.” But her humor passed swiftly, and she sank on the bed. “I’m just tired, Jason.”

He sat beside her, feeling her exhaustion. He wanted to look ahead, to picture a moment when he wouldn’t be thinking about all the ways his life could blow up, but he didn’t have the imagination for something like that. He’d never been good at thinking about the future.

“I know.” Jason took her hand in his, rubbing his finger across her engagement ring. “I wish I could make all this go away for you,” he told her.

“I know.” She leaned against him, her head tucked under his chin as he slid his arm around her shoulders. “I wish I could make it go away for you, too. But we can’t. This is the hand we’ve been dealt, and we have to handle that.” Elizabeth turned her hand so that she could lace her fingers through his. “But I know I have you at the end of the day, and it makes it easier.”

He tightened his grip around her shoulders. “I feel the same way,” Jason told her, feeling a bit clumsy about it, because he would never be able to articulate what it meant for him to have a day like the one he’d had and know he could come home to Elizabeth, put his arms around her, and the world could disappear for just a few moments.

It wasn’t much, but it was enough for now.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

*If terror falls upon your bed  
And sleep no longer comes  
Remember all the words I said  
Be still, be still, and know  
- Be Still, The Fray*

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*Friday, September 2, 2005*

## **Hardy Home: Living Room**

“Do you need another pillow, Gram?” Elizabeth asked as she set a cup of tea on the table next to her grandmother.

“I’m fine, darling.” Audrey pressed a hand on her granddaughter’s arm. “Sit with me for a moment.” Elizabeth bit her lip, but settled herself gingerly on the sofa next to her.

She was so tired these days and nearly ready for the end—but every morning she woke, it was a blessing. Audrey was prepared to go, but her heart broke knowing the turmoil she would leave her beloved grandchildren with.

“I always wanted a daughter,” Audrey said softly. Her hands felt thin, even cold, as she took Elizabeth’s much warmer ones within her own. “Did I tell you that?”

“No.” Elizabeth smiled at her. “Though I guess I thought you and Gramps might have wanted more children.”

“Ah, well, we were blessed in you, in Sarah, Steven...” She bit her lip. “And for a while, TJ, though once Tom and Simone divorced, we never did see as much as him as we’d liked. Maybe I ought to have fussed more, but it wasn’t—” Audrey blinked now, the tears stinging for the lost years with her only son, with the only continuation of her own blood line.

But here, in her beloved Elizabeth and Steven, *here* was the real Hardy lineage. Oh, how proud Steve would have been of these two. “When you and Sarah came to live here, I know it was rocky. And I know we did not always see eye to eye.”

“I didn’t make it easy,” Elizabeth said with a quick smile. “I was a terror, Gram—”

And how like her granddaughter to take the blame, as if Audrey hadn’t had a hand in any of it. She should have *insisted* Jeff and Andrea send her both girls, instead of only the one. Elizabeth had felt unwanted, unloved left in Colorado. And she’d always been compared to Sarah, always found wanting.

“You were a teenager, my love.” Audrey smiled at her. “I like to think we muddled through it the best

we could. I made so many mistakes, I said so many things—I would do anything to take them back—”

“Gram, *no*...” Elizabeth squeezed her grandmother’s hands. “No, no. Listen, I am who I am today because of the choices I made, because of the people I had in my life. I like who I am now. I have my little boy, I have Evie, and Jason. I love my family, I wouldn’t be here without my choices. And you...” A tear slid down her cheek. “You challenged me to always be better—”

What a kind way to say Audrey had always stood in judgment, in moral superiority—as if Audrey herself had never made a single mistake. “I love Steven and Sarah, but you...” she managed to reach a hand out and cup Elizabeth’s chin. “You are more than just my granddaughter. I am humbled by the courage you’ve shown in your life. So many times, my dear, you have been knocked down, you’ve stumbled—but you’ve never let it get the best of you.”

“Gram—”

“Your grandfather adored you, you know that?” Audrey said. “He always said you would prove all the naysayers wrong. Audrey, he would tell me, the boy is wrong for being upset at our Lizzie’s science grades. She’s a dreamer, not a doctor. We need more dreamers.”

“I never—” Elizabeth’s voice shook. “I never knew that.”

“Oh, yes. He knew Steven and Sarah would go on to be doctors—and he loved them for it, but he said the world needed more dreamers. Doctors—they heal wounds, but dreamers—they heal the mind. He loved your scribbles, your doodles.” She paused, taking as deep a breath as she could manage. “When I saw your beautiful work in New York, I *knew* your grandfather was with me. Do you know what he would have said if he were there?”

“What?” Elizabeth asked.

“Audrey, see? I was right. Our little Lizzie’s a dreamer with a beautiful view of the world. I have to see people as they are so I can fix them, but my Lizzie, oh, she sees them as they could be. The potential in them. She’ll make the world a better place.”

“I wish he’d been there.” Another tear slid down her granddaughter’s cheeks. Then another. “When he died, I wanted to die with him, Gram. I used to think I was a changeling, you know? Switched at birth, but Gramps always made me feel like I belonged. Like it was okay to be me.”

“I know.” Audrey let her hand fall back to her lap, exhausted by the effort. “I failed in that—” When Elizabeth shook her head, “I did, Elizabeth. *Don’t* let me off the hook. I judged you. I tried to force you into a mold. I—I tried to make you feel ashamed of who you were, of who you loved.”

“You were trying to protect me—”

“I know things are difficult for you right now. For Jason. I don’t pretend to have the answers, but I see the guards. I see the tension, you can feel it when Jason comes home. And you’re not living here just to be with me.”

“Gram—”

“When everything feels as though it’s falling apart,” Audrey told her, “*that’s* when it’s most important to hold on to each other. I want to be here for you, for Steven. I want to see Cam and Evie grow up, I want to see my Steven humbled by love. I want to be there when you get married—” Her chest tightened. “But I won’t. Not in body. I know I don’t have much time left, my love—”

“Gram—”

“But I will always be with you,” she continued over Elizabeth’s protests. “Just as your grandfather is always with you. You have his eyes, his kindness. His strength. And I like to think you have my stubborn nature, my determination to show the world it couldn’t break me. It never did, and it will *not* break you.” She pressed a hand to Elizabeth’s cheek. “I believe in you, my dreamer, my Elizabeth. And if you hold on to your children, to Jason, to your family, you will make it through anything.”

“I love you so much, Gram.” Elizabeth swallowed hard. “And I am so grateful I broke the rules and came here. I could not imagine my life anywhere else, with anyone else. And I want to be you when I grow up.”

“Darling...” Audrey smiled, but did not continue. Elizabeth was already better than Audrey had ever hoped to be. She patted Elizabeth’s cheek once more. “Shall we turn on the soaps? I’m curious to see what Erica Kane is up to today.”

## **Warehouse: Jason’s Office**

Jason put his head in his hands and drew in a deep breath. “Hector Ruiz.”

“I’m sorry, Jason.” Bernie shifted in his chair and glanced at Max. “But he put his top lieutenant on a flight to Port Charles two weeks ago. Stan found the flight records. I put Johnny on tracking him, but for now, we know Diego Lopez is here, under the radar and has been since Sonny dismissed Tommy’s crew.”

He hadn’t quite proved that Sonny was working *with* the Ruiz organization, but the evidence was certainly damning. And the only thing that would make this situation worse would be discovering Johnny Zacchara’s body.

A fight on two fronts with Ruiz and Zacchara. The nightmare scenario he’d been trying to avoid.

“Max—”

“Carly sent the boys to stay with Bobbie yesterday,” the former guard interrupted. “I don’t know why—Rocco and Vinnie are at the Brownstone, I talked to them, but all they know is there was some sort of argument, some sort of blow up, and Carly packed the boys off.”

Jason raised his head and frowned. “What about Carly? Did she leave, too?” Could she *finally* be coming around?

“No, she stayed. I don’t know that Bobbie even got an explanation,” Max continued. “I talked to her, though, and strengthened security. We’re upgrading her alarm system, checked over the exits, but the place is a nightmare. She still rents out the top floors, and there’s those tenants.”

“Do what you can for now.” Jason rubbed his eyes. At least Michael and Morgan were temporarily out of the line of fire. Maybe Courtney had made some progress since her visit two weeks ago.

Nothing else good had happened since Jason had assumed full control a week ago. Max and his crew were tearing apart the city looking for Johnny Zacchara, Tommy was trying to stall Stefano as Junior’s absence was starting to become more concerning for his father, Johnny was attempting to run business as usual and rebuild the warehouse—

And Sonny had gone radio silent. Jason no longer tried to contact his former partner, and Sonny had not sought him out.

“The girlfriend?” Max said. “She’s acting off. We don’t know much about her, but Stan pulled her personnel file from the hospital. She used to have relatively good reports—well-liked, efficient, but Nadine Crowell now has several reprimands. Being late, being distracted—she’s on thin ice. And all the bad reports start around Junior’s disappearance. She hasn’t gone to the police or Anthony, though.”

“Junior must have warned her about going to him for help,” Bernie said. “Jason—”

“He’s been missing now for nearly three weeks,” Jason interrupted. “We have to start figuring out what we do next. I can’t—” He exhaled. “I *can’t* keep putting my head in the sand and pretending we’ll magically find the kid alive. At this point, if Junior survives, he has a legitimate grudge against the organization. He’d have every right to go to his father and demand retribution.”

“If we could nab him first—” Max started.

“It doesn’t matter. We *have* to cut Sonny off at the knees. He’s using Hector Ruiz to go after the Zaccharas. Maybe there’s something there.” Jason hesitated. “If we were the ones to go to Zacchara —”

“That is fucking suicide,” Max cut in, sharply. He rose to his feet. “No way in hell, Jason. We can’t tell Anthony Zacchara that Sonny snatched his kid three weeks ago—he’ll take it out on *us* just to be contrary—”

“Maybe not,” Bernie interjected. “Trevor Lansing has a lot of influence with Anthony, and we all know he hates Sonny. We could turn that to our advantage, don’t you think?”

“Maybe we leave Anthony out of it,” Jason said. “I could take a meeting with Hector and make it clear that I’m willing to go to Anthony. If Hector thinks Anthony will come for him—and he will—he might give up Diego Lopez’s location to save his skin. We’re in contact with the Zaccharas. We know Hector’s involved.”

“He could call your bluff, go to Anthony himself, and blame it on you,” Bernie told him. “There’s a lot of ways this could go wrong, Jason—”

“Can we keep sitting around? We’ve tried *everything* else. I’ve tried to reason with Sonny, we’ve tried tailing him, we’ve torn the city apart to look for the kid—” Jason shook his head. “I don’t see any other options. I have to go to Anthony or Hector. If I go to Hector, I have a prayer to get Junior home alive.”

“And it’s his *sons* that are the animals,” Max reminded the business manager. “We should thank our lucky fucking stars Javier and Manny aren’t on the ground up here. Hector can still be reasoned with to a certain extent. It’s worth a try, Jason.”

“I’ll call Ramon and request a meeting,” Bernie stood. “Ah, should I ask Hector to come to Port Charles or will you make the trip to Miami?”

Jason hesitated. He couldn’t go to Miami. Not now. Audrey could go any moment and he would never forgive himself if he were away—

But asking Hector Ruiz to come to *him* was a sign of disrespect. If Jason was requesting the meeting, it was customary for him to go to the other party. It was just how things were done.

“Two more days,” Max said, almost kindly. “Give me two more days to find Junior. You should talk this over with Elizabeth. You know if you take this meeting, you have to go to him. And you know she’ll understand.”

“She shouldn’t have to,” Jason muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. But Max was right. Elizabeth would see the bigger picture—he’d be gone half a day at most. “Monday morning, if nothing has changed, we’ll call Ramon and set up the meeting.” He rose to his feet. “But I’m *done* sitting around. If Hector sent Diego, he might send one of the boys next. And if you think a turf war with Anthony Zacchara is a nightmare, toss in the Ruiz boys—”

Bernie visibly shuddered. “I’ll throw myself into the lake,” he muttered. “Save them the trouble.”

## **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

“Carly, I want you to come to the Brownstone with me.”

Her mother sat across from her, concern practically oozing from every pore, but it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered.

“I can’t.” Carly stirred her ice tea idly. “But thank you for taking the boys, I hope it’s just temporary —”

“Carly...” Bobbie leaned forward, pushing her untouched bowl of chili to the side. “Courtney and I are *very* worried. I haven’t seen Sonny, but Courtney has and she was almost...I’d say she was terrified. For you, the boys, for Jason and Elizabeth—”

“She’s overreacting.”

She wasn’t, but Carly wasn’t going to admit that. How *could* she admit she’d gotten it all so very wrong? She’d thought by showing Sonny she could be trusted—that she didn’t believe he was crazy, he would come back to her.

She’d shown him the pamphlets Elizabeth had given her, proclaiming her belief that whatever Sonny’s doctor had told him must be correct. After all, he was the one with the degree—the one Sonny had actually spoken with. Elizabeth Webber was nothing more a waif with an overactive imagination. What the hell did she know about someone’s mind?

But his reaction had chilled her to the bone. He’d grabbed her, shook her, demanding to know where she’d gotten these pamphlets.

*“Did Jason give them to you? Did he? That son of a bitch—I made him!”*

*Carly shook her head, frantically, trying to get away from him. “No, no, Jason wouldn’t—Sonny, you’re hurting me—”*

*“He thinks he’s got the power? He thinks he can beat me? I’ll destroy him—”*

And then he’d tossed Carly aside, like a rag doll. She’d hit the mini bar on her way to the floor as Sonny stormed out of the room. Glass had shattered, and she had several cuts.

She should have called Jason then. She knew that. She should have believed Elizabeth. But instead, Carly had stood up, grateful the boys were out with Courtney for the day. She had cleaned her cuts, swept up the glass, and calmly packed a bag for all of them.

It had been her intention to go, to leave, but Sonny had seen her leaving. And he’d told her what he would do to her if she walked away from him.

*“No one takes my boys.” He twisted her arm, the already sore muscles protesting. “You think you can take what’s mine? You’re mine, they’re mine. No one leaves.”*

So she’d stayed. She’d given the bags to Vinnie, told Courtney to take the boys to the Brownstone, and she’d stayed.

For now, Sonny believed they were visiting for a few days—it was closer to Michael’s summer camp, Carly had told him when he’d finally realized two days later the boys were gone. And Lucas was away at soccer camp in Vermont—her mother was so lonely.

And Sonny had agreed with a smile. He’d asked what’d happened to the minibar—because he didn’t remember their argument. Didn’t remember the bruises, the way he’d hurt her.

He’d apologized for how difficult things had been lately. His problems with Jason had spilled over, but he wanted to do better. He’d told her about his depression then, as if they’d never spoken of it before.



Now Carly honestly didn't know what to do. How could she leave him when he was so desperately ill? How could she keep clinging to the belief that if *only* Jason hadn't kept Evie, none of this would be happening?

Sonny needed her. He deserved someone who loved him to stick by him, not like Jason and Courtney who just wanted to put him away, to medicate him. To take away everything he loved.

"Carly?" Bobbie said. "Are you listening to me?"

"Yes." Carly set her spoon down. "I am. I know Sonny is ill. And I know Courtney is concerned. I'm dealing with it." She rubbed her arm, where a large dark purple bruise lay beneath the long sleeves. "He needs to adjust his treatment, but it's hard to bring that up when he's having problems with Jason. I'm not stupid, Mama. The boys are better off with you for now, and Evie is better off with Jason at the moment. Sonny is..."

Out of control. Beyond her ability to help. Oh, God, how did she get herself into this? How could she make it go away? Would he hurt her again?

How could she leave him? He'd be alone. He hated being alone.

"Sonny isn't himself," Carly said finally. "If I could make his problems with Jason better, I think it would help."

"Carly, I'm not sure you *can* help Sonny right now. Please—"

"The boys don't need to see his mood swings," Carly interrupted. "They'll just be upset, and I don't want that for them. I can deal with it."

*Tell me I'm wrong, Mama. Make me stop. Force me to come with you. Oh, God. I don't want to go back there. I don't know what to do.*

"My home is always open to you, Carly," Bobbie told her. "But maybe you're right. And Jason and Sonny will come around—they always do."

Yes. Yes. She could cling to that. Jason and Sonny had always muddled through their problems, had always fixed what was wrong. She just had to hold strong, keep Sonny from falling completely over the edge until Jason fixed things. He always fixed things.

She could depend on Jason. He had never let her down.

## **General Hospital: Nurse's Station**

Nadine hesitated in front of the nurse's station, studying the brunette intern scowling at the back of Dr. Patrick Drake's head as the resident waited for the elevator.

It had been three weeks since Johnny had left her apartment, since he had called. Since his phone had gone dead. She hadn't contacted the police, hadn't called his family.

She didn't know what was going on, but the last thing she wanted to do was make the situation worse. And if something had happened to Johnny, calling his father *would* make everything worse. She knew that.

And yet, it had been three weeks. Someone had to do *something*.

Nadine stepped up to the counter. "Emily, can I ask you a question?"

Emily glanced up. "Hey, Nadine. What's up?"

"Um..." She shifted. "Your brother is Jason Morgan, isn't he?"

"Yeah." Emily set her pen down, her dark eyes concerned. "Nadine, is something wrong? You've been so distracted lately—"

"I know." Nadine looked away and saw Epiphany Johnson, the charge nurse, eying her with the usual stink eye. "Listen, if I—if I needed to talk to your brother about something, I could—I could trust him, couldn't I?"

And it was to Emily's credit that she didn't ask why someone who had never spoken to her brother and wasn't particularly close to Emily, was asking this question. She nodded. "Jason is the best person I know, and he'll be there to help you. If you needed to talk to him." She reached across the counter to place her hand over Nadine's. "Call me, Nadine. And I'll make *sure* you get in to see him, okay?"

"Thanks. I need to go before Epiphany throws me out the window."

## **Hardy Home: Elizabeth's Bedroom**

Elizabeth set aside her sketchbook when Jason opened the door. "You're later than you thought you'd be," she murmured as she sat up in bed. He sighed and sat on the chair to pull off his shoes.

"I..." He hesitated. "I have to talk to you about something."

"That sounds ominous." She pushed aside the thin blanket and rose from the bed. "What's up? Did something happen?"

"It's more what *didn't* happen." He pulled a pair of sweat pants from a dresser drawer and set them on top of the dresser. "I know we haven't talked much about what's been going on—not since we moved in. It's not because I'm keeping things from you—" Jason turned. "It's just—there's no change."

"I don't need an itinerary of your day, Jason." Elizabeth folded her arms across her chest. "I just need the big picture details. Don't apologize, just tell me what's going on."

"Sonny—" He exhaled. Jason briefly explained Sonny's involvement with the Ruiz organization and their plan to cut off a turf war. Elizabeth listened closely, but didn't really see what it had to do with

her.

"It sounds like your best bet, I don't know what—" She hesitated. "Ruiz. That's the one in Miami." Elizabeth swallowed. "You'd have to meet him down there. That's the way these things work."

"*I'm* the one asking for the meeting. If it were Tagliatti or Vega, I might be able to make them understand I don't want to be away right now. Not even half a day." Jason waited a moment. "But Ruiz is different. I have to be careful with him—"

"When do you leave?" Elizabeth murmured. "How soon?"

"I don't *want* to go," Jason told her. "Max is taking the weekend—one last effort to find Junior. If I could be assured I don't have to deal with Zacchara—" He dipped his head. "But Bernie's going to contact our guy in Miami on Monday morning, so maybe that afternoon. Tuesday, I don't know yet." He looked at her. "Elizabeth, if there was another way—"

"But there's not." Elizabeth took a deep breath. Resentment was wasted here. She'd walked into this with her eyes wide open and Jason had been brutally honest with her. He was in charge now, he couldn't delegate this. She understood.

"Elizabeth—"

"What matters to me most of all," Elizabeth cut in, "is that everyone stays safe. And if you have to go to Miami to make that happen, Jason, then you'll have to do it." She nodded. "It's okay. Thank you for—thank you for waiting. I know you could have done it this weekend and called me from the plane—"

"I wouldn't have—"

"But you *didn't*." He'd made her part of it, taken the time and effort to keep her in the loop. This wasn't like last time. It was crappy timing, but it had to be done. "Jason, I understand, and I'm okay with it. It doesn't make me the happiest woman in the world, but I love you, and this is just something that *has* to happen." She took a deep breath. "I have Emily, Steven, and Nikolas. And Monica and Bobbie, if I need it." She offered a hesitant smile. "Maybe—maybe I won't need it."

"Maybe." He touched her shoulder, sliding his hand down to her elbow. "I love you."

"I love you, too." But when he reached for her, she drew back slightly. "I just want to check on my grandmother before we go to bed, okay?"

She didn't wait for his response, but instead, left the room and went down the hall to the room where her grandmother slept. She was okay. She could handle this. She didn't have to like it, but she could handle it.

Elizabeth pushed her grandmother's door open and stepped over the threshold. "Gram? What's wrong?"

Audrey was sitting up in bed, her hand pressed to her chest. "I—I can't—catch—" Her face was red,

her shoulders rising rapidly. “Eliz—”

“Don’t talk, Gram.” She raised her voice. “Jason! Help!”

She was at her grandmother’s side, reaching for the phone when Jason arrived. He took Audrey’s pulse. “Mrs. Hardy,” he told her, “we could wait for the ambulance, or I could carry you down to the car and we can be at the hospital in ten minutes.” He looked at her. “Do you want to wait?”

She shook her head. “N-No—”

Elizabeth watched as Jason carefully lifted her frail grandmother into his arms and started for the door. “I’ll get my purse. I need to call Steven—”

Less than two minutes later, their SUV was speeding through the darkened streets.

## **Warehouse**

Johnny Zacchara had reached the point where death would be a blessing. Everything hurt. He couldn’t distinguish his own smell from his surroundings, which annoyed him more than anything else. He’d been bound and gagged for days. Weeks. He had water poured down his throat once a day and some bread. Water and fucking bread.

He wanted a glass of merlot and some fucking caviar if he survived this.

But even the water and bread had started to taste like a five course meal. He wanted to go home. He wanted to see his piano, Nadine’s smile, hell, he’d like to see his father one more time, his sister.

He’d settle for goddamn *Trevor* at this point.

A door creaked open and footsteps came closer. “Still holding out, I see.”

Exhausted, Johnny lifted his head and listened intently. One set of footsteps. The door had closed behind him. And the voice belonged to Sonny Corinthos. He was alone. For the first time, the fucking lunatic was by himself. His gag was removed, but his blindfold remained.

Could he do something with that?

“I didn’t burn down your warehouse,” Johnny bit out. “And if you kill me, my father—”

“Maybe you don’t give a damn about your own life.” A hand yanked Johnny’s head back by grabbing his hair. “Maybe I’m using the wrong leverage.”

Sonny’s voice was close now, his breath warm on Johnny’s face. “Maybe if you had some company—you have a sweet girlfriend, don’t you?”

No. No, no, no. If Sonny knew about Nadine, he could do *this* to her. And Johnny would admit to anything to keep them from touching her. He’d die, but they’d probably kill her, too. He had no

illusions left.

He *had* to protect her.

And with a strength Johnny didn't know was left, he twisted his head out of Sonny's grip and rocked the chair backwards. He and Sonny both went crashing to the floor—

And chair shattered, allowing Johnny to get to his feet. They'd been bound to the chair, but not together. He still didn't have his sight or use of his hands, but damn it, he could run.

He kicked out at where he thought Sonny might be and was relieved to hear the older man crash back to the floor. Johnny rushed forward, wincing when he crashed into the wall. Frantically, he rubbed his face against the cement, trying to loosen his blindfold.

And finally, it slipped around his neck. Johnny could *see*! And the ropes at his wrist—they were loose.

Within a few seconds, by the time Sonny had managed to get back to his feet, Johnny Zacchara was a free man. He rushed at the older man, his eyes on the gun at his waistband.

Johnny tackled Sonny to the floor again and grappled for the gun. He managed to get a grip on it, but then a searing pain shot through his shoulder.

Sonny also had a grip on his the gun and had managed to pull the trigger.

Fucking hell. With his last ounce of strength, Johnny head butted Sonny and got control of the weapon. He stood and shot blindly in Sonny's direction, but he could hear voices rushing towards the room, footsteps clattering.

He ran for the back door, not caring if Sonny was dead or alive. He had to escape. He had to get home, to get help.

He disappeared into the inky dark Port Charles night.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

*Cross your heart and say you've never given up  
That you carried on when every door was shut  
That you live, you live with no regret  
We wear a smile to hide that we've been hurt before  
Keep our disasters in a suitcase by the door  
Cause you know, you know we're only human*  
-Broken Ones, Jacquie Mitchell

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*Saturday, September 3, 2005*

## General Hospital: Emergency Room

She looked so small, standing outside the hospital curtain in a pair of cotton shorts and t-shirt, a coat thrown hastily over her pajamas. Jason thanked the nurse who had helped him fill out the admission form before joining his fiancée.

“Did the doctor say anything yet?” he asked, putting an arm around Elizabeth’s shoulders. She leaned her head against his shoulders.

“She’s still in there—did you call Nora?”

“I did. She knows we’re not there.” Jason drew her away from the curtain, away from the jumble of voices and their medical jargon. “I called Steven. He’s on his way. And I called my sister.”

“No, Jason—” Elizabeth shook her head. “Emily’s working so much, and she’s pregnant—”

Jason nodded. “I know, but you know she’d be annoyed with you if you didn’t call her. She and Nikolas are on their way.”

“Why?” Elizabeth turned to him, her eyes red, exhausted, her cheeks stained with tears. “Because you think this is it? You think my grandmother is going to *die* tonight?”

“I—” Jason sighed. “I don’t know. I just—I just want to make sure you have everything you need. I’m sorry, maybe we should have waited for the doctor before I called Emily, but with the launch always taking so long—”

And the annoyance in her eyes died out, like an extinguished candle. “No, no. I know—I do. I *want* Emily here. I want her to tell me it’ll be okay, and Nikolas and Steven are friends. I want you all here —”

“Elizabeth—I came as soon as I got the call—” Bobbie touched her shoulder, stepping up to them. “Honey, do we know anything yet?”

“No, no, not yet.” Elizabeth turned from Jason’s embrace to hug her old friend. “Thank you for being here, Bobbie.”

“Of course.” Bobbie reached out to squeeze Jason’s hand. “We need to talk, Jason, when you have a moment.” She drew Elizabeth away for a moment. “Is Monica in with her?”

“I called her from the car, she got here at the same time we did,” Jason told her. “We’re just waiting to hear—”

There was an explosion of movement, of shouting just before the door to the emergency room swung open and a stretcher was rolled in, with several paramedics surrounding it—and behind them, Carly rushed in.

Jason blinked and then focused on the gurney. Sonny. Sonny had been shot. He had already taken a step towards the scene when Carly saw him and rushed over.

“You’re here already! Oh, you *always* come through!” She threw her arms around him and burst into tears. “I don’t know what happened. The police called me—they found Sonny in some dirty warehouse, someone called 911 but didn’t stick around—”

And then Carly drew away, tears glistening on her cheeks as she took in Elizabeth and Bobbie at his side. “Jase? What’s going on? Mama? Elizabeth?”

“My grandmother,” Elizabeth said faintly. “She’s...” She folded her arms across her chest and took a deep breath. “She’s in with the doctors.”

He should stay with her—he had a bad feeling about this, and he wanted to be with her when the worst happened.

But Sonny had been found in a warehouse, left alone. Not Johnny Zacchara. Had he escaped? Had Ruiz’s men deserted him there to die? Had they taken a body with them?

“You should check on Sonny,” Elizabeth said.

Her eyes were tired, her tone resigned. And when Jason looked at her, her expression was unreadable. As if this was merely the first in the long line of disappointments she could expect at his side. God, he hated himself for even considering leaving her with her grandmother on her deathbed.

“The doctors are with him—”

“Jason—” Carly protested.

“—so, I just need to call someone to—” Jason continued.

“But you’ll be thinking about it and worrying.” Elizabeth nodded to the doors of the emergency room. Steven was there, his hair disheveled. “Steven is here. Emily and Nikolas are on their way. I have Bobbie, your mother is taking care of her.” She attempted a smile but failed. “You have a job, Jason. I

get it. Go take care of it. I'll be fine."

He hesitated, but now wasn't the time for this conversation. He *did* have to take care of this, and it should be done personally, but it didn't make it any easier.

This would be the *last* time she'd have to make this kind of sacrifice, Jason told himself as he offered a brief greeting to Steven before taking Carly's arm and directing her away.

Elizabeth deserved better, and he was going to figure out how to give it to her. As soon as he could locate Johnny Zacchara, get Sonny the treatment he needed, he was going make some changes.

## **General Hospital: Emergency Room**

"Bits, where's Jason going?"

Elizabeth sighed and turned to her brother. "Something came up at work and it can't be put off." She took his arm, winding her own through it. "It's okay. I have you and Bobbie. Jason called Em and Nikolas—"

Steven looked as though he wanted to argue, but what was the point? Elizabeth had fallen in love with someone who could never make her his first priority one hundred percent of the time. She would have to make do with ninety percent.

And she *would*. This was a unique situation, she told herself, as she, Steven, and Bobbie sat in the hard plastic chairs of the waiting room, waiting desperately for some good news from Monica.

There would always be problems, always be rivals—she'd been around long enough to know that, but not like this. Not with Sonny putting them in danger, not with so much at stake. Maybe the next time, Jason would be able to delegate it. If he was in charge, he'd need someone to fill the position Jason had once held for Sonny.

It would be okay. They would get through this.

"Bobbie—" Elizabeth looked her suddenly. "You should be with Carly—I didn't even think—"

"She has Jason," Bobbie said. "I'm right where I need to be." Her mouth was set in a thin line. "If I thought Jason would be *here*, I'd go with her. Elizabeth, I don't understand—"

"But I do," Elizabeth cut in gently. "And I don't love it, but I made my choices. They're hard, and right now, I hate them. But I made them. There are things *only* Jason can take care of."

Steven grunted from her side, but there was nothing either them could say. It was bad timing that things with Sonny would blow up at the same time her grandmother had a health crisis, but this would pass.

Monica stepped out of the curtain, her expression grave. "Steven, Elizabeth."



Oh, God. Oh, God.

Elizabeth rose, and Bobbie's hand remained tight in hers as the older man also stood. "Monica—"

"I'm sorry..." Jason's mother strode forward. "She's not gone, but..."

"It won't be long," Steven said roughly. "A few hours?"

"Maybe." Monica swiped at her eyes. "We're moving her to a room and I promise you, we'll make her as comfortable as possible." She looked around, and probably wanted to ask about Jason, but mercifully, said nothing.

Elizabeth's grandmother would be gone by morning, and the last thing she wanted to talk about was Jason.

"I should call Mom and Dad, Sarah." Steven cleared his throat. "We won't be able to see her right away, you know."

"I'll go to the house," Bobbie offered. "Get you a change of clothes. Maybe pick up coffee on the way back?" She patted Elizabeth's shoulder. "What do you think?"

"That sounds fine." Elizabeth nodded. She sank back into a chair. "I'll—I'll wait here for Gram to be moved—"

Steven hesitated. "I can wait to call—"

"I'll go in a bit," Bobbie started, but Elizabeth waved them both off. She was fine. She was sad, of course, she told them, but they'd expected this, and Jason would be back in a few minutes.

They accepted her lies, and they both separated, leaving the ER through different doors, leaving Elizabeth alone in the plastic chair, twisting her engagement ring on her finger.

She loved him. She'd made the right choice, but she couldn't *stand* it right now.

Emily strode into the ER then, Nikolas on her heels. And it was the concern, the worry in her best friend's face that did it. Elizabeth took one look at her and crumpled into tears.

She could fall apart now, because Emily and Nikolas would understand. She didn't need to be strong for them.

## **Warehouse: Jason's Office**

Carly had been annoyed when Jason didn't do more than make sure she had a guard before leaving the hospital. He wanted to put the things he needed to take care of in motion so he could get back to the hospital.

He didn't think Audrey had a lot of time left, and he wanted to be with Elizabeth. He *needed* to be

there for her, to make sure she understood that he would be there for her the way she'd supported him all these months. She wasn't making a mistake to be with him and he wanted her to believe that.

"What do we know about the shooting?" Jason demanded. "Bernie?"

"911 call came in, reporting shots fired," Bernie responded. "By the time paramedics arrived, Sonny was alone, but there were signs of a struggle. Our guy at the PCPD gave me the preliminary police report. A chair was broken, some rope, some cloth that may have been used as a gag—"

"He must have been keeping Junior there," Max said. "As soon as the cops clear the area, we'll start our own search. There was some blood on the floor, two casings — one went into Sonny, so maybe the other went wild or Junior was hit."

"But no evidence that anyone was dragged or removed from the scene," Bernie continued. "There was a bit of a blood trail leading out the back door, but the cops lost it. Someone walked out of there, bleeding. Maybe it was Junior."

Jason scrubbed his hands over his face. "Okay. Okay. Sonny is under wraps for the moment. I want a guard stationed at the hospital, but he'll have an officer on the door so work around that. I want to reach out to Ramon—ask what the *hell* Diego Lopez is doing in my territory without an invitation. We can afford to be confrontational now. We have to be. We have to make Ruiz the bad guy if Junior goes home to Anthony."

"We have the girlfriend under surveillance, but there's been no contact. If Junior's hurt, he didn't go to any of the area hospitals. He still might go to her. She's a nurse. If we can intercept him there, maybe we can stop him from going to Anthony." Max shifted. "Jason—"

Jason held up his hand. "Bernie, what's the status on the new house? I want it up and running by the end of the week." It would be unlikely they would be moving there any time soon with Audrey's status, but he wanted it as a backup just in case.

"We're finishing it up, it'll be done." Bernie exchanged a glance with Max. "Ah, Jase, Cody told us Mrs. Hardy is in the hospital—"

"I'm getting back there shortly. I had to deal with this." He took a deep breath. "Max, stay on the girlfriend and put men in the field to look at the route between the warehouse and the girlfriend's. He'll go there first—she hasn't seen or heard from him in three weeks, we know it was relatively serious—he'd be an idiot not to check in with her first. Our best chance to hold off Anthony's wrath is to intercept him there. Bernie, get a hold of Ramon, and get us answers on Diego. And I won't be needing that meeting after all. I'm not traveling to Miami when Hector Ruiz disrespected me by sending his man into my town without a word. Make that clear."

He tried to look for another angle—had he covered it all? Was there anything left? "Bernie, get Tommy on the phone with Stefano. Tell him we have a line on Junior's status. We're going to throw Ruiz under the bus. Make it look like a frame job. Make sure Zacchara thinks we're doing all we can up here, but that Ruiz is the culprit. I don't want him throwing any more support at Sonny."

“Shouldn’t we wait until we actually know where Junior is?” Bernie asked. “It seems risky—”

“It’s preventative. We don’t know if we’ll be able to intercept the kid. I want Zacchara to know we’re on *his* side. We might make it through this unscathed if Junior gets home alive.”

“Jason,” Max said. “Johnny and I got this. We can make the necessary moves.” Jason just looked at him. “We’ve been talking about it—you need some guys to step up. Be your lieutenants. To delegate to. We know your big picture. We can take care of the details. You should be with Elizabeth.”

“That’s right,” Bernie told Jason. “Cody is taking point on security. The kids are safe at the house, Carly’s boys are secure at the Brownstone. We know the priorities. You can trust us.”

“Call me if you find the kid or when Ramon gets back to us about Lopez.” Jason tucked his cell phone in the pocket of his jeans. “I’ll be at the hospital.”

### **General Hospital: Audrey’s Room**

It was unlikely, Monica had told them, that Audrey would regain consciousness—she wasn’t receiving enough oxygen from her lungs due to the heart problems. Audrey had requested that no measures be taken at this point—no machines to breathe for her—they would never be able to turn them off.

So Audrey would slip away from them at some point, and all they could do was wait.

It had been an hour since Jason had left when Steven roused himself to look at his quiet sister. Emily and Nikolas were outside with Bobbie and Monica. Nikolas had taken on the responsibility of transporting the Hardy-Webber clan from their various points around the planet—if they could get away, Nikolas would make sure they got here.

Only family was allowed to visit in the ICU, and truthfully, Steven wanted a moment alone with his sister.

“You know that I like Jason,” Steven said, breaking the silence. Elizabeth just looked at him before looking at her grandmother. “I *do*, Bits. I know how happy you’ve been, and how much he loves you. I can see that. I just—” He dipped his head. “I don’t know. It doesn’t seem right.”

“I wish he were here,” Elizabeth murmured, “but if I dwell on it, I’ll start to resent him for things I know he *can’t* change. Things I told him I could handle. And I can. Jason has been honest with me about the problems he’s having. It’s not his fault Gram’s health suffered at the same time.”

“But—”

“It would be different if Sonny weren’t ill.” She shot him a dark glance. “And I’m not talking about tonight. I’m talking about his mental health. He’s dangerously unstable, and the problem has just gotten worse this last month. It’s not Jason’s fault, and I’m not going to hold it against him. He can’t be everything to everyone, and I won’t be one more person making demands on him—”

“You’re not one more person—” Steven huffed. “You’re his *fiancée*. He wants you to marry him—”

“I love you, Steven, I do, but you don’t know what Jason and I have been through these last few years. I hate that he’s not here, okay? I hate it. But I know *he* hates it, too. And I know he’s doing everything he can to be back here. What do you want me to do? Tell him it’s over because he’s not here? I love him. I know what he’s going through. His life is falling apart, too, Steven. I’m not going to make him feel bad about how he has to handle it.”

Steven sighed. “All right. All right, you’re right. You know your situation. I just—” He shook his head. “I’ve never been there for you the way I should have. I just kept my head down when Mom and Dad harped on you about your grades, about your behavior. I headed out when I went to college, and I never came home. We weren’t as close as we should have been. I wasn’t here for Lucky, for Ric. For the things you’ve been through.”

“I never held it against you,” she said dully. “We do what we have to do. And you’ve been great this last year. I know you love me, that you want the best for me.” She shifted in her chair. “I know what I’m doing, Steven. Jason may not be the choice you would make, that Mom or Dad, or even Gram would make for me, but he’s my choice and I know he’s the right one. I love him.”

“Okay.” And Steven let the conversation drop. There was no point in harping on it, because there was no right answer. Not everything in life was black and white. And while a mobster had never his dream for his baby sister, it wasn’t as if she *hadn’t* tried guys who’d walked the straight and narrow. Lucky had been a disaster and Ric—Ric had damaged her self-esteem, her dignity, her soul.

He’d never particularly enjoy having a criminal in the family, but if he treated Elizabeth right, well, Steven could overlook it.

Twenty minutes later, Jason slipped into the room to sit next to Elizabeth. Steven saw the tension in her expression ease—she hadn’t expected him back so fast, or maybe at all. But there he was, holding her hand.

Another hour passed in silence—Bobbie and Emily came in to change out the coffee, to press some food on all of them. Monica said Audrey’s situation hadn’t changed—it wouldn’t be long now, and Nikolas reported that the Webbers were prepared to leave Africa for a few days, that Sarah would be able to fly out for a memorial service if they held it on Tuesday or Wednesday. Uncle Tom would fly in from Georgia, and TJ would be in from Washington.

Just before dawn, Audrey March Hardy drew in her last breath.

Elizabeth rose, her face as pale as chalk, and reached for her grandmother’s limp hand. She pressed a kiss to it before pressing it against her heart. “Be at peace, Gram, and be with Gramps. He’s been waiting for you—and I know he’ll take care of you.” She turned into Jason’s embrace, and started to cry.

**Nadine’s Apartment: Living Room**

Nadine set her cell phone down for the seventh time. She couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, and had barely been able to draw in a decent breath since the news had broken the night before.

Sonny Corinthos had been shot and taken to the hospital. The news reported that sources in the PCPD said it had been a struggle, and that another man was believed to have been shot but was currently on the run.

And while Nadine had no reason to believe it, she *knew* in her heart that Sonny Corinthos had taken Johnny all those weeks ago—and that he'd been the other man.

He'd been shot and he'd disappeared.

What if he'd fallen into the lake? What if he passed out? What if he had died? Oh, God, would anyone even bother to come tell her? Would she *never* know?

She should call Johnny's father. He would know. He could tell her. She could trust him now. Johnny told her that if anything happened to him, if Nadine knew for certain, then she should call Anthony Zacchara. Anthony was ruthless, but he would protect her.

But maybe she could try Jason Morgan. She'd read the papers—she knew the gossip. Jason had taken over for Sonny, though no one could say how they knew it. Maybe Jason could tell her where Johnny was.

Her cell lit up with an unidentified number, but she scrambled to answer it. "Hello?"

*"Nadine?"*

Oh, God. His voice. "Johnny, thank God, thank God. Where are you? I'll come to you. I'm so glad you're okay, I was scared, I didn't call your father, but I was going to, but I just didn't know if I should—where are you?"

And like always, Johnny patiently waited out her rambles. *"I'm at a payphone near Van Ness and Courtland. I need—"* He coughed. *"I need you to come get me. I was afraid to show up at your place, I thought they'd be watching, but maybe you could come here and I could sneak in your car."*

"We'll make it work. I'm coming to get you. Stay right there."

She hung up the phone and burst into tears. He was okay. She could do *anything* now she knew he was okay.

Nadine wiped at her eyes after a moment and reached for her keys. She had a rescue operation to put into action.

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

*Do you think you can cope?*

*You figured me out?*

*That I'm lost and I'm hopeless*

*I'm bleeding and broken though I've never spoken*

*I come undone in this mad season*

- Mad Season, Matchbox 20

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*Sunday, September 4, 2005*

## **Hardy Home: Living Room**

Elizabeth set the phone back onto the receiver and rubbed her eyes. “Father Coates said we could have the church on Tuesday. Can everyone be here by then?”

Nikolas checked his notes. “Yeah—your parents got on the flight this morning in Botswana. They’ll fly into Johannesburg in about—” He looked at his watch. “Another hour. There’s a flight from there to New York City that land them in the US around eight tomorrow night our time. I arranged for Sarah, TJ, and Tom to fly into LaGuardia around the same time, so they can all fly up in the jet. Everyone will be here around midnight. We’re cutting it close, but they’ll be here for the service.”

“And Grandfather has arranged for everyone to have a room at the Cosmopolitan,” Emily continued. “And we have cars for the service the next day.”

Elizabeth drew in a deep breath. Where would she be without these people? Nikolas and Emily were arranging for her family to make it on time—Bobbie had offered up the Brownstone for after the funeral. She and Felicia were handling the catering. The only thing Steven and she had to deal with was the funeral itself.

Jason came in from the kitchen, Evie in his arms and Cameron toddling along with him. “Hey, we finished lunch.” He glanced over his shoulder. “We may need a cleaning service.”

Elizabeth laughed and reached for Cam as he put his arms up to her. She pulled him close, cuddling him. Soon he’d be too big for this, too grown up to hug his mother.

“Give me my baby—” Emily wiggled her hands for Evie. “I haven’t seen her nearly as much as I want to since I started my internship.” Jason relinquished the ten month old to her. “Oh, look at your pretty smile!”

“That’ll distract for her an hour,” Nikolas said dryly. He looked at Elizabeth. “Remember our pact.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Got it. Hey, Em, what are you thinking for baby names?”

“Oh.” Emily brightened, grinning at her brother as he took the last remaining seat in the arm chair. “I have oodles of ideas. I can’t decide if I want to go hip and funky or really super classical. I mean, Lila would be the optimum choice, but I don’t know if Grandmother would have wanted us to do that.” She lifted a shoulder. “I mean, she was a lot like Jason. Kids should stand on their own. Mom only named AJ after Dad because she wanted to stick it to him.”

Nikolas rolled his eyes, but Jason frowned. “Hip and funky?” he repeated.

“Yeah. Like River or Apple. I like the idea of a sweet name, so I thought Berry—”

“She’s kidding, isn’t she?” Elizabeth asked Nikolas. “You get a veto, right?”

“Hey!” Emily pouted. Evie blew a raspberry at her, and her aunt giggled. “Jason asked. I told you I was thinking classical. Maybe not Lila, but something that might... I don’t know, honor her. Plus, I want to make sure Elizabeth and I aren’t crossing streams. She might have a girl name she’s saving, or a second boy.”

Elizabeth flushed, and bit her lip, looking at Jason. Though they’d never explicitly remarked on the idea, of course they’d planned to have more children. Somewhere down the line—maybe when Cam and Evie weren’t both still toddlers. “I hadn’t—” She pursed her lips. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Oh. Well. I looked it up,” Emily continued, bouncing Evie a bit on her knee. “So Lila is actually an Arabic name that means play or amusement. Or maybe night. It depends on which book you look at. It’s also a French word for lilac—”

“This is way too much information,” Nikolas said. “Em—”

“You mock me, but this is important. Names follow you. We’ll be screaming this name for the next, like, twenty years.” Emily sniffed at him. “Anyway. We narrowed it down for the moment. So, Olivia or Charlotte with Paige as a middle name for my biological mother. That’s for a girl. For a boy, Nikolas has vetoed a junior—”

“He’ll have it rough enough with a last name like Cassadine,” Nikolas told Elizabeth with a sigh.

“But I think it would be nice to call him Spencer. Because it would drive Lucky crazy, and if Laura were here, she’d love it.” Emily looked at Nikolas. “We’re still arguing about a middle name for a boy.”

“Spencer Cassadine,” Elizabeth mused. “That poor bastard.”

“You didn’t have a girl’s name picked out for Cam before you found out?” Emily asked. “Come on, Liz. We’re all friends here.” She grinned at her brother.

“Well, I guess...if you’re pressing me right now—” And because it was better than thinking about her family or her grandmother, Elizabeth gave in. “I was thinking Juliet Emily if Cam had been a girl. I’d probably stick with it if Jason liked it.” She looked at Jason, who just shrugged. “And you know he doesn’t care about names.”

“Oh, oh, you’d have little girls named Julie and Evie. It’d be awesome. Julie, Evie, and Cam. I love it.” Emily clapped her hands. “And I love the middle name. Very appropriate.” She nodded. “What about boys?”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, but the mirth of the moment was broken as Steven stepped over the threshold, looking wan and exhausted. “Hey, guys.”

“Hey.” Elizabeth set Cam on his feet and stood to embrace her brother. “Father Coates said we could have the church on Tuesday, and Nikolas and Emily took care of all the travel. Everyone will be here. Tired, but here.”

“Great. Thanks.” Steven squeezed her to his side. “I was just with Gram’s lawyer. Apparently, she made me executor.”

“Oh. I hadn’t even thought about her estate.” Elizabeth drew away and perched on the edge of the sofa. “What did he say?”

“Well, it’s pretty—well, surprising, honestly.” Steven rubbed his eyes. “Gramps left her with a comfortable living, some nice investments. There’s a bit of an inheritance. And she split it between you and me for the most part. There’s some provisions for Sarah, Dad, TJ, and Uncle Tom, but the bulk goes to us.”

“Makes sense,” Emily said before Elizabeth could protest. “You guys are the ones who are here. Audrey was always fair.”

“And, Bits, you get the house.”

Elizabeth turned back to her brother at that. “What? The—this house?” She looked around at the home her grandparents had shared, the home where she had spent summers. “Gram left me the house?”

“Her estate will go to probate. It’ll be final in a few weeks provided no one contests it, but there’s no reason to. And the deed will go in your name.”

“I don’t—I didn’t know she was going to do that—” Elizabeth swallowed. “We—we should sell it, right? Divide it among all of us—”

“You should keep it, Bits,” Steven cut in gently. “I don’t know what you and Jason have planned, but you should keep the house. I don’t want it, and none of the others deserve anything more than what Gram gave them.”

He kissed her forehead. “I have to get to work, okay? I’m taking Tuesday and Wednesday off, I need to put in the time. You guys okay here?”

When they nodded, Steven left, leaving Elizabeth still a bit stunned. “Jason—she left me the house. I can’t believe it.” She pressed a hand to her forehead. “Why wouldn’t she tell me?”

“Because you would have told her not to, just like you were about to suggest selling the house.” Emily



snorted. “And giving the money to your family. Elizabeth, what are we going to do with you?”

## **General Hospital: Cafeteria**

Courtney’s spoon clattered to the table as Carly absently reached for a salt shaker, the sleeve of her long shirt riding up as she stretched. “Carly, what happened to your arm?”

Carly blinked and looked down at the bruise. She dropped the salt and hastily drew her arm back, putting it in her lap. “Nothing. I should get back to Sonny—”

“We’re having lunch.” Courtney lifted her chin. “I’ll only follow you if you walk away. What the hell happened, Carly?”

When Carly remained silent, Courtney reached over and dragged Carly’s hand back into view, sliding her sleeve back. Carly struggled, but simply didn’t have the energy to put up any real resistance.

Her arm was covered in several ugly green and purple bruises. In her work at the foundation when she visited shoulders, Courtney had seen this type of bruise before.

“Did—” She swallowed hard, her mouth dry as bone. “Did my brother do this?”

Carly yanked her wrist back and looked away, at the table. “He’s sick. You know that. It’s fine.”

Something had been different about Carly since the moment Courtney had arrived the night before—she’d chalked it up to exhaustion, worry, and fear over Sonny’s condition.

But he’d been upgraded to stable just after Courtney’s arrival and Carly had grabbed some sleep—and yet...Carly’s eyes were dull. She was listless, unable to make eye contact.

She wasn’t Carly. There wasn’t an ounce of fight left in her.

And nothing terrified Courtney more.

“Carly, I know he’s ill. He came to me in New York to see a doctor—”

“Elizabeth told me. He’s being treated for depression. I told his attending doctor,” Carly said, her tone oddly flat. “I also told him I thought Sonny should get a psych consult. Because I don’t know if Elizabeth is right, but I don’t think he’s just depressed.”

Courtney exhaled slowly. Carly was finally on board now—they could get through this if she wasn’t working against them. “Good. Good. The doctors will do something, I’m sure of it—”

“What if they don’t?” Carly looked at her. “What if Sonny fools them the way he fooled the doctor in New York? I don’t know what happened on Friday night, Courtney, but he was shot. And Jason hasn’t been here. Jason—he took over. Sonny’s not...” She closed her eyes. “He’s not in power now. And he’s so angry.”

Courtney knew what it must have cost Jason to push Sonny out, but of course it had to be done. Sonny was an unstable mess who couldn't be trusted with his own children, much less the type of power and control he'd held as head of the organization.

But she'd been doing some reading of her own—and she'd talked to Bobbie who'd conferred with Elizabeth. Everyone agreed Sonny wasn't just suffering from depression. It had to be something else. The bipolar disorder, maybe.

And if Sonny was manic and thought Jason was taking away his power, his control—

"It's good that he's in the hospital," Courtney murmured. "Jason will be able to—he'll have a moment to breathe. And he'll fix this. He always comes through."

"I want to believe that," Carly said softly. "Sometimes it's the only way I can close my eyes at night. But he hasn't yet. I tried to make myself believe it was because of Evie, because Jason wanted to keep her, but that's not true, is it?" She waited a moment. "He hasn't fixed this because he's like us. None of us know what to do."

"But we have a common purpose." Courtney laced her fingers through her sister-in-law's. "We all love Sonny and want him to be well. He's in the hospital now. He'll have a psych consult, and we'll see what happens then. We'll make it through this."

"I wish I could believe that, but I can't. I've been lying to myself for years. I should leave Sonny, you know. I already sent my boys away." Carly tucked a piece of hair behind her ears. "But I can't."

"You can, Carly—"

"Because he'll be alone," Carly continued. "And you know he hates that. I used to love him, I think. It's hard to remember that now, but I tried so very hard to save our life together, so I must have. Or was it just the name?" She blinked at Courtney. "Do you think it was just that I wanted to be Carly Corinthos?"

"Maybe," Courtney said. "But Carly—"

"I even thought I should turn Sonny against Jason," Carly interrupted. "I tried to make Sonny think Jason had gone after Evie deliberately—that he'd known about Sam's trick. Because if Sonny turned against him, he'd take Evie back. And he'd be okay if he had Evie." She pressed a hand to her mouth. "How selfish is that? I sacrificed Jason so I could keep my life. Sonny is so angry at Jason, maybe I did that. Maybe I started it—"

"You can't blame yourself—"

"Who else?" Carly turned her shattered gaze away. "Sonny and Jason started this lie because I'm selfish. Because I rant, and I rave, and I never think about the consequences of my actions. I told Sonny I would take the boys and destroy him if Evie was his. So Jason lied to save them. And Sonny let it go on because he wanted to be with the boys. If not for Evie, if not for losing her, maybe Sonny

wouldn't have gone over the edge—”

“Carly, no, you cannot think like that. What’s wrong with Sonny has always been wrong with him—” Courtney pushed her tea away. “Anything can trigger an episode. Did the situation with Evie make it worse? Maybe. Probably. But, God, Carly, in that moment, what could you have said? Should you have been thrilled your husband’s mistress was pregnant? He’d had an affair and planned to continue it even while you were back together. He shot you in the head and then resented you during the recovery. My brother was an ass to you. And you dealt with it the best way you could. Does he get the share of the blame? How much is his fault, then?”

A tear slid down Carly’s face. “I just want it to stop. I wanted to believe I could fix it. I wanted to believe I could have another baby, and it would be fine. And then I thought if I could be the reason Evie came to live with us, he would love me again, and it would be okay. And then I thought if I could prove to him I could be trusted with his illness, that I could love him anyway—but nothing can fix him. I can’t fix him.”

“No, you can’t.”

“But I can’t leave him either,” she whispered. “I can’t leave him alone. What might he do if he felt completely alone and isolated? I would never forgive myself.”

“Then we will do whatever we have to do to get him help, Carly,” Courtney told her. “We will put him on the road to recovery if it’s the last thing we do. I promise you. I won’t leave you alone either.”

### **Warehouse: Jason’s Office**

Jason strode into his office, a bit chagrined he was the last to arrive as Bernie, Johnny, Max, and Tommy had already arranged themselves at—he blinked. “Is that a conference table?”

“You hate sitting behind the desk when we report.” He gestured to the head of the table where a seat sat. “This way we’re all comfortable.”

Whatever. Jason took the seat. “Sonny’s condition first—was Stan able to get anything from the records?” he asked Bernie.

“Sonny had a gunshot to the upper chest. It was relatively serious, just due to previous damage. His lung collapsed, which could have been worse if treatment had been delayed. He was operated on, and upgraded to stable condition around eleven last night.” The older man hesitated. “And Carly asked for a psych consult.”

Max brightened. “Yeah? Mrs. C is finally coming around?”

“She told the attending—Dr. Ford—that her husband had been diagnosed with depression and prescribed accordingly. She gave him medication. Carly also told him that his condition seemed to be worsening over the last few months.” Now he was quiet for a moment. “And that Sonny had been abusive.”

Jason lunged to his feet. “What? He hit Carly?”

“Explains why she shipped the boys away,” Johnny said to Tommy. “Vinnie said there’d been an argument and shattered glass, but he’d thought Sonny had smashed another mini bar.”

“There isn’t much more information, Jason, but she merely said his temper was dangerous, and she wasn’t convinced about the diagnosis of depression. Dr. Ford said he’d put in the request, but couldn’t promise anything. They don’t normally do them because a family member asks for it—Sonny has to demonstrate behavior to necessitate it.”

“I’ll call my father,” Jason said tightly. “I can pull strings. Make sure it gets done.” He blinked, belatedly realizing he had referred to Alan Quartermaine as his father, but continued, resuming his seat. “How long will he be in the hospital?”

“A week, maybe more, depending on his recovery time,” Bernie reported. “We’ve got some space, Jason. It’s what we needed. He’ll recover, but if we get a psych consult—maybe we get Sonny under control.”

“What do we know about Junior? Max,” Jason looked to the other man. “Did he go to the girlfriend?”

“He called her,” Max told him. “We had her phones tapped. She went to pick him up at Van Ess and Courtland, then took him home. She’s pretty swift for a civilian. She brought a bag of trash in her backseat, opened the door as if she was going to toss it in a dumpster, and he snuck in while the door was open. If we hadn’t been looking for the pickup, we might have missed it. And she took him home. I don’t know the condition, but he was alive.”

“Did he contact Daddy?” Johnny demanded. “Why didn’t we grab the little punk?”

“We got a bug in the apartment,” Max said with an annoyed glare at his colleague. “Johnny doesn’t want to call his father yet. He’s not an idiot—if he tells Anthony what happened to him, Anthony will come at us with guns blazing. He thought about calling him, but Nadine told him about the rumors. And apparently, Jason, because she’s met you and knows Emily, she trusts you. She wants Johnny to lay low a day or two to get his strength back and reach out to you. He called his father to assure him he was okay.

Jason exhaled slowly, dipping his head. Johnny Zacchara was alive and well, and because he’d had the good fortune to hook up with one of Emily’s co-workers, they were going to have a reprieve. They were going to avoid a war with Anthony Zacchara after all.

“We’ll wait for Junior to reach out to us,” Jason said after a moment. “Keep an eye on them, but we don’t need the bug in the apartment. Give them some privacy. Just keep the phone tap and the watch on the building.”

“Thank fucking God for small miracles,” Johnny said, voicing the relief palpable in the room. “Just think of how this could have gone completely wrong. If Junior didn’t have that contact with you in New York, if Nadine Crowell didn’t know your sister, we’d be fucked nine ways from Sunday. Thank

God you hooked up with Elizabeth.”

Jason glared at him. “Johnny. Shut up.” He looked to Tommy. “Give Stefano a call. We know Junior’s been in touch, so we don’t need to give more details. We’re just resolving the situation.” He looked back to Johnny. “You talked to Ramon? Bernie farmed this out to you.”

“I did.” Johnny cracked his knuckles. “I told Ramon that he and his boss better have a damn good reason for Diego Lopez being in our area and going after Anthony Zacchara’s son, and if he didn’t want us to blow up his next shipment, well, then, he’d better give me some damn answers.”

“Real subtle, O’Brien.” Max rolled his eyes.

“And?” Jason prompted.

“And Ramon told me his boss didn’t answer to me or Jason Morgan. Until he was told otherwise, Sonny Corinthos is the head of the organization. He requested some help, Hector supplied it. If we have a damn problem with that, maybe we should solve our own first.”

“He’s got a point,” Tommy said.

“And we’ve resolved it,” Jason said, tightly. “Sonny is under control. Johnny Zacchara is safe. And Johnny, make sure Ramon and Hector Ruiz know otherwise now. Sonny’s not in charge. Tell him if he has any problems with that, he might try finding another route for shipping his guns and other products to Canada. If one more member of his family steps up here without an invitation, we’ll send him home in a body bag.”

“I love when he gets angry,” Max said to Bernie. “He makes you proud to be an American.”

“So things are okay now,” Bernie said. “We can get back to business. Jason, please make sure Elizabeth knows she has our deepest condolences for her grandmother.”

“Yeah.” Jason rubbed his eyes. “But things aren’t okay yet. Until I have Junior in front of me and we can make amends for his troubles, until I know Ruiz and Zacchara aren’t a threat—I can’t pretend we’re at peace. We’re at a stalemate. We’ll see if the psych consult makes any difference. Let’s not pretend things are going to be normal.”

“Normal.” Johnny snorted as he got to his feet. “Sonny’s not in charge anymore. It’ll be fucking Disney World from now on.”

“Johnny. Shut up.”

### **Nadine’s Apartment: Bedroom**

Johnny leaned back against the pillows. Nadine had patched up the nick in his arm where a bullet had grazed it, he’d taken a long hot shower, and she’d ordered Chinese food.

This was the best he’d felt in weeks.

Nadine bit her lip as she glanced out the curtains. “I feel like I’m harboring a fugitive,” she murmured.

“Hey.” Johnny scowled. “I’m the victim here.” But he knew what she meant—until she could arrange a meeting with Jason Morgan, he wasn’t in the clear.

And he wasn’t as convinced as she was about Jason Morgan’s relative trustworthiness, but he was willing to give the man the benefit of the doubt. After all, Sonny Corinthos had been behind his abduction and beatings. He’d never brought in his number one guy, which made him believe Nadine’s rumors.

If Jason Morgan had sanctioned that operation, he would have been carrying it out—not Sonny.

“I’m sorry about all of this,” he told her. “I told you I wasn’t involved in any of this. I wasn’t lying, but—”

“But your last name is still Zacchara.” Nadine let the curtain fall back into place as she turned to him. “You may not work for your father, but you have his name. I get it. I had to leave Ohio because of my sister.”

“Nadine—”

“We can walk away from our family, but we can’t escape it. If I didn’t want to be Jolene Crowell, Angel of Mercy’s sister, I had to go somewhere where her name wasn’t known.” Nadine curled up next to him on the bed. “I’m just so glad you’re okay. I didn’t know what to do.”

“You did fine.” He kissed the top of her head, drawing her closer to him. “My father is not someone you can call on lightly. If you had, he wouldn’t have been kind to Jason or Sonny. And you know, maybe they both suck, maybe only Sonny is the asshole. But they have kids. Families.” He looked at the ceiling. “We’ll talk to Jason in a few days. You’ll need to make the contact—maybe you should track down his fiancée—”

“Her grandmother just died,” Nadine murmured. “The whole hospital is talking about her—she’d been a nurse there for more than forty years—I hate to annoy her right now—”

“But she’s engaged to Jason Morgan. And believe me, if he’s been looking for me, he’ll be glad to set up a meeting. I’m the only thing standing between him and my father.”

“That,” Nadine announced, raising herself up on her elbow and looking at him, “is a sucky place to be.”

“You’re not kidding.”

## **General Hospital: Sonny’s Room**

Sonny turned his head, blinking his eyes to clear the blurriness. Where was he? What the hell had happened?

All he could remember was that little shit Johnny Zacchara knocking him to the ground. How the hell had he gotten loose? Had one of the men from Miami turned on him? Loosened the ropes? Had to be that. No one got the drop on Sonny Corinthos.

He blinked to find Carly sitting in a chair to his side, her legs pulled up in front of her as she absently looked towards the doorway. “Carly?” He coughed.

She turned to him, her eyes not changing. “You’re awake,” she said flatly, letting her legs drop to the floor. “I should get Dr. Ford—”

“What happened—” He managed to reach out his hand, to grab her arm. She winced and he let it drop. “Carly—”

“You were shot,” Carly told him in that dull tone. “I don’t know more than that.” She rose to her feet. “I called in a psych consult—”

“What?” Sonny twisted, tried to sit up, but his vision dimmed in front of him, the pain in his chest so fierce. “Damn it—”

“Something has to change, Sonny.” She folded up her sleeve and he frowned at the bruises. Who the hell had touched his wife? “I can’t do it anymore. I sent my boys away to keep them safe, but I want to be with them.”

Keep them safe? “Who did that?” he demanded. He knew those bruises—he’d seen them on his mother more than once. “I’ll kill them—”

“Look in the mirror.” Carly slid her sleeve down. “But we’re both to blame on that score. I stayed. I thought I could do it alone. But I couldn’t.” She looked at him, her dark eyes blank. “If you don’t cooperate with the psych consult, I’ll file for divorce and an order of protection. No judge is going to let you near the boys when I show them these bruises, when Courtney testifies about the threats you’ve made towards Jason—” Her shoulders slumped. “It’s over, Sonny. Something has to change.”

Sonny turned away. He didn’t know what the hell she was babbling about. He was fine. She was playing him, finding an angle. She knew he was planning to take the boys from her, to walk away. She was firing a preemptive strike. Well, fuck her. He was Sonny Corinthos.

Jason had taken his daughter and his organization, and now Carly thought she could take his boys? Use his sister against him?

“You’re right,” he told her evenly. “Something has to change.”

And as soon as he got out of this fucking hospital bed, everything would.

## **Hardy Home: Elizabeth’s Bedroom**

Elizabeth closed her eyes, the tension sliding from her shoulders. “He’s safe? You know this for sure? Johnny Zacchara is okay?”

“We have men on his building.” Jason sat next to her and drew her into his embrace. “We won’t have to worry about Anthony, I got Hector Ruiz to back off, and with Sonny in the hospital—”

“You have a measure of control now.” Elizabeth pressed her forehead to his shoulder. “Oh, God. Jason, I was so scared. So scared you’d find him dead. Do you think he’ll cooperate? Does he know it was Sonny, not you?”

“Looks like his girlfriend convinced him to give us the benefit of the doubt.” He took in the scent of her hair. “I’m sorry, Elizabeth. I hated not being able to be here for you—”

“You were.” Elizabeth drew back. “Jason—no one could have predicted what happened on Friday—and you were gone only a few hours. You were there when it mattered.” She cupped his cheek. “You were with me when she passed, and you’ve been there every step of the way since. I don’t know how you managed it, but—”

“I delegated,” Jason told her. “And that’s how it’s going to be going forward. I couldn’t put you first that night, Elizabeth. It won’t happen again. I don’t want my life to revolve around what goes on in the warehouse. I want it to be about you, about the kids. About us. I want to be able to travel, to take you and the kids everywhere we ever talked about.”

“Jason—”

“I want you to paint the light in Italy, the mountains in Austria, the water in the Pacific—” He took a deep breath. “And I can do that. I trust Max and Johnny. And Bernie. I mean, there’s still some mopping up. Everything isn’t perfect yet. We don’t know how things are going to shake out with Sonny, but—”

She pressed her fingers to his lips. “I felt alone Friday,” she admitted. “But Nikolas and Emily were there five seconds later. You and I cannot live our lives just for one another. We each have family, friends, and obligations to the outside world. I hated that you had to leave, but Jason, for the first time...For the first time, I could feel that you hated it, too. I know you didn’t want to leave, but I could see that you had, too.”

“I just don’t want you to be sorry you took a chance on me,” he said after a moment. “I know I messed it up last time—”

“And so did I,” Elizabeth said gently. “I should have stayed. I should have screamed at you more. I should have been honest. I should have made you talk to me. We both made mistakes, Jason, because neither of us were ready. I needed to be stronger and you needed to learn how to trust me. We’ve done that. I’m not sorry we didn’t make it last time. We have Cameron, and we have Evie—” She hesitated. “About Evie—”

“I called Diane Miller,” he told her. “And I told her to start the adoption paperwork in November. I’m almost done with my year of guardianship. Sonny will never be stable enough. I promised Sam I would love Evie and protect her. She’s my daughter.”



“She’s ours.” Elizabeth brushed her lips against his. “And that’s how she’ll stay. Jason, we got through the worst of it. And we’re still standing here. I love you. And I know you love me. Nothing else matters.”

# Part Four: Salvation

*Bipolar robs you of that which is you. It can take from you the very core of your being and replace it with something that is completely opposite of who and what you truly are.*

- Alyssa Reyans, Letters from a Bipolar Mother

# Chapter Thirty

*Remember losing hope,  
Remember feeling low,  
Remember all the feelings and the day they stopped  
We are all innocent, we are all innocent  
- Innocent, Our Lady Peace*

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*Tuesday, September 6, 2005*

## **General Hospital: Sonny's Room**

It was simple. Things had to change.

Sonny *had* to take a stand, show Jason he knew there were problems, but that he knew how to fix them. He'd offer Jason a simple deal, Jason would take it, and things could *finally* start to get better.

Jason stepped through Sonny's hospital door that morning, dressed in a dark suit. Sonny furrowed his brow. "What the hell is the suit about?" he demanded. "I'm not dead yet."

Nothing changed in Jason's stoic expression. "Elizabeth's grandmother died Saturday morning," he said blandly. "I'm meeting Elizabeth at the church after this."

Well. All the more reason to wrap this up. Jason needed to be with Elizabeth during this trying time—he didn't need to be saddled with the burdens of this problem any longer. He'd probably thank Sonny for finally having the courage to do what he should have done a year ago.

"We can't go on like this." Sonny lifted his chin. It was hard to look authoritative in a hospital gown, reclining in this uncomfortable bed, but he made his best effort.

Jason's stance remained unchanged, his shoulders tight, his hands resting loosely at his side, but a muscle ticked in his cheek as he slowly nodded. "I agree. Things have to change."

"Good. Good. We're on the same page." His hands were clenched tightly in his lap, but Sonny's voice was even as he continued. "It's ridiculous to think we can change Evie's custody now. She's nearly a year old. She doesn't *know* me. You're her father." He swallowed hard. "And I think it's best if that doesn't change."

Jason's hesitation told Sonny that Jason had already accepted that fact—had *never* intended to utilize it as a negotiation technique. Well, that was hardly unsurprising, so he forged on.

"But it doesn't work when you're in town," Sonny continued. "Having her so close only reminds me of how I failed her and Sam. We should have seen this a year ago. You should take Evie and go."

And this announcement stunned Jason because he took half a step back, his mouth opening slightly.

“Sonny—”

“It’s for the best,” Sonny interrupted. “With Elizabeth’s grandmother gone, there’s nothing keeping you here. You and Elizabeth should take the kids and go. Set up a new life.”

“That’s not—” Jason cleared his throat. “That’s *not* an option, Sonny.”

“It’s simple, Jason.” Sonny paused. “I’m offering you a deal. Take Evie, get out of town and leave the business to me.”

When Jason said nothing for a long moment, Sonny scowled. What the *hell* was his problem? Didn’t he see this was the best solution for everyone? Jason would be out of danger; his daughter would be with him. He’d get the family he wanted. And Sonny would keep the power.

It solved *all* their problems.

And if Jason didn’t see that, if Jason wanted to keep the business and Evie, well, didn’t *that* say something?

“That’s not going to work,” he said finally. “I don’t—I don’t think you’re capable of handling the pressure.”

Sonny tasted blood as he bit down on his lip. What the hell did Jason know? He’d trusted Jason with the business once before and the son of a bitch had handed over to Moreno in less than a year. *He* couldn’t handle the fucking pressure?

He was Sonny goddamn *Corinthos*.

“And you can?” Sonny challenged. “Is that what you’re telling me? You want the power?”

Was *that* it? Had Jason had the taste of being in charge? Were his protests bullshit? Why else wasn’t Jason leaping at the chance to get out of this business, to get his family away from it?

“You’re not stable,” Jason said. “Look at what happened with Johnny Zacchara. What you risked—”

Sonny growled. Little bastard had escaped before Sonny could force him to admit what he’d done. One more day, *one* more beating—he could have paraded Johnny’s confession in front of anyone who doubted him.

He could take on Anthony Zacchara. He wasn’t scared. He could beat him.

“So you’re refusing to give me what’s mine,” Sonny stated. “You could get out of this. You hate it so damn much, but you’re willing to stay? You want to tell me *again* how you don’t want to be in charge?”

Fucking bastard had been planning this for *months*. Pretending to support him but undermining him all the time. Sonny’s men looked to Jason, not Sonny. He’d turned them all against their leader, their

boss.

Jason was a fucking *traitor*.

“I’m doing what’s best for everyone,” Jason said after a long moment. “You’re not stable enough to run this organization. Having this conversation in the open, kidnapping Johnny Zacchara over an electrical fire—” He shook his head. “I wasn’t going to give you custody of Evie, and I already have the business. There’s no deal to be made, Sonny.”

“And that’s your line in the sand, then? Your final word?”

“I’m sorry, Sonny.” Jason stepped back to open the door. “But this is the way it has to be for everyone.”

“Then I guess we know where we stand.”

When Jason was gone, Sonny closed his eyes. He didn’t want to believe his oldest friend, the man whom he trusted more than anything had finally turned on him.

Sonny had forgotten the first rule of this life. Trust no one. Everyone had a price. Everyone was capable of betrayal.

Jason had made his choice.

They would all have to live with it.

## **Queen of Angels: Anteroom**

Would there *ever* be an occasion in her life with Jason where Sonny Corinthos wasn’t at the center? Her engagement had been plagued by his illness. Her grandmother’s death had coincided with his latest stay at General Hospital. And he’d commanded Jason’s attention the morning of her grandmother’s *funeral*. Why not? She hadn’t even been surprised when Jason had set the phone down that morning, turning apologetic eyes on her.

Jason had told her he’d ignore Sonny’s command. That he’d wait until tomorrow, but what would that change?

Her grandmother would still be dead and everything about Sonny would be a disaster. Might as well as keep going as they had been. They were only treading water. She saw that now.

“Bits?” Steven murmured. Elizabeth looked at him blankly. “Father Coates said everything is ready. We can open the doors.” He hesitated, looking around. “Jason?”

“Right here,” Jason said, stepping over the threshold, his face somber in the shadowed room. “Sorry —”

“It’s okay.” She looked at Steven who offered Jason a brief greeting before going inside the chapel.

“Hey. What happened?”

He reached for her hand and drew her into a side room not in use. “He offered me an out,” Jason said, closing the door. He turned to her, his eyes unreadable. “I could keep Evie if I gave the business to him and left town.”

She drew in a sharp breath, unprepared for how much she was tempted to tell him to take the deal and *run*.

They could start over somewhere, just the two of them. He could be out of the business. Away from the violence.

But she swallowed that reaction. It was *never* going to happen. He would always be worried for what was happening here. For the men that trusted him. For Michael and Morgan, and even for Carly.

And Elizabeth could never leave with Emily, Nikolas, and Steven here. With Emily’s new child. These people who would be plagued in a city controlled by Sonny Corinthos.

“You told him no,” Elizabeth said finally. She clasped her hands behind her back. “I don’t suppose that went over well.”

“No.” He hesitated. “Should I have—I—maybe we should have discussed it first.”

“Of course not. Jason—” She closed her eyes. “Yes. My first reaction was to take it. To agree and start over. But we’d *never* be free. We have roots in Port Charles. Family. Even if we could walk away from them, you’d be—you’d be in agony knowing how unstable Sonny is. You’d be worried for the men you work with. Who trust you to keep them safe.” Elizabeth looked at him. “I can see why he offered it. But I know why we have to say no.”

His shoulders slumped. “I thought about it for a minute,” Jason admitted. “We *could* make a good life somewhere else. With just us and the kids.”

“But it’s not just us.” Elizabeth sank onto a nearby chair “How did he take it? What do you think is going to happen?”

“I don’t know.” He hesitated. “He accused me of wanting the power. I don’t. If I thought another man could do the job, Elizabeth—”

“But they look up to you,” she murmured. He’d never admit it, but he was a natural leader. He’d never send anyone to do a job he wouldn’t do himself. The men who worked for him would walk through fire for him. Would take a bullet for him. Some probably already had, but she wouldn’t think about that right now.

“He’ll see it as a betrayal,” she said softly. “Won’t he? You’re keeping his business, his daughter. You’ve turned on him.”

“It’s a possibility.” Jason knelt in front of her. “I’m hoping to figure out what he’s up to before he

leaves the hospital in a few days, but even with him inside, I don't know the contacts he has outside. We're doubling security, and we're probably going to have to move to the new house earlier than we thought. For a while."

Elizabeth nodded, closing her eyes. "I *want* to stay at my grandmother's," she admitted. "But if we're safer—"

"Until Sonny is out of the hospital, we can stay at the Hardy house," Jason promised. "He's not going to make a move unless he's home. He could, but he'd want to be involved. At this point." He scrubbed hands over his eyes. "I hate that we're talking about this today. I hate that *any* of this is happening right now."

"I hate that it's happening at all." She rose to her feet, and he straightened with her. "How sure are you that we're safe at my grandmother's house? Would Sonny come after you there?"

"I just—" Jason closed his eyes. "I just don't *know*. I can't imagine that he would, not with Evie and Cam there. But—"

"We should move to the new house," Elizabeth said after a moment. "Now. You said Sonny doesn't know where it is, and this is the best chance we have at keeping him from finding out."

"Elizabeth—"

"We can have the kids packed up in a day or two so we're settled by the time Sonny gets out." Elizabeth nodded, at peace with the decision. "My grandmother's house will be there when this is over, Jason. It's more important that we keep our family safe."

"I'm sorry—" Jason began.

She shook her head, cutting him off. "None of this is your fault. Even if you hadn't lied about Evie last year, this day was coming. If it wasn't Evie triggering this episode, it would have been something else." She squared her shoulders. "All we can do, Jason, is take this one step at a time, one decision at a time."

But even as they left the room for Audrey's service, she couldn't shake the feeling that somewhere, they'd *already* made a mistake, taken a wrong step—and that this would all get so much worse before it got better.

## **General Hospital: Sonny's Room**

Carly stepped into the room, unsure at the reception she'd receive. Sonny had been running hot and cold since the moment he'd awoken to find bruises on her arm.

He'd been angry the first time he'd noticed them—sure that someone else had hurt her. And furious at her accusation that he'd been the one. Then he'd been devastated, turning all that anger on himself the next time. He'd remembered the fight where he'd grabbed her, when she had fallen.

He'd been contrite then, nearly in tears, comparing himself to his stepfather and Carly to his long-dead mother.

But the very next time they'd spoken, he'd blamed *her*. If she were a better wife, if she hadn't flirted with Alcazar, Sonny never would have shot her in the head.

She'd begged Dr. Ford for another psych consult, but Sonny had already had one. His diagnosis had been confirmed, his medication continued. The chief of staff had pulled enough strings to get her the first one—they weren't going to do it again.

Carly knew Jason had called in his family, had done what he could, but Sonny had convinced another doctor to continue giving him anti-depressants. At the best of times, they did nothing. And at other times, it made everything worse.

Just as Elizabeth said it might.

It wasn't getting better, and in a week, Sonny would be released. Without any true change. She could only hope the manic episode would disappear as quickly as it had arrived, but that felt like asking for a miracle.

And none of them deserved that.

"Carly," Sonny said, his tone flat, his eyes unreadable. This was her least favorite mood—it was as close to lucid as he'd been in months, but he still wasn't her Sonny. She was terrified she would never see that Sonny again.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, settling for the safe question. "Dr. Ford said they were starting to draw back the pain meds. That's a good sign—"

"Worried I'll become addicted?" he cut in, his tone dipping with acid. "*Another* problem for you to fix?"

She took a deep breath. "No, of course not. I was asking—"

"I told Jason he could keep Evie if he turned control back to me and left town," Sonny interrupted. His hands fisted at his sides, his skin dark against the cool white of the hospital linens.

Carly's breath hitched, but she knew Jason would *never* take that deal. There was no reason for him to do so. Jason had legal custody—had held it for nearly a year. Sonny had terminated his rights. Any custody hearing would be an uphill battle with nothing but disaster at the end.

And Jason would never leave the business with Sonny. Not now that he had taken the drastic step of taking control. It had been a decision made as a last resort—to protect the men, to protect them all from Sonny's instability. He couldn't go back on that now.

"And what did Jason say?" Carly said, but she knew. "I'd miss him if he were gone—"



“He declined,” Sonny snarled. “He’s got everything he wants. My business, my men, my power—my daughter. He thinks he can take me on—”

“Maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world,” Carly murmured. “You could focus on your recovery. On—” She swallowed hard, taking an involuntary step back even as she continued. “On your illness.”

“Then you’re on *his* side.” He lifted his chin. “You’ve never been on mine. It’s *always* about Jason with you. Did you plan this together?”

“What? No—”

“Are you screwing him?”

“I can’t—” Carly’s throat closed, as she tried to force the words out. “No. Of *course* not. He loves Elizabeth—”

“He loved Robin. Didn’t stop him then.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She could do this. What did Jason always say? How did he handle it? What had the goddamn pamphlets advised? Stay calm. Stay patient.

“He was different then. *I* was different. Neither one of us knew what it meant to be in love. I love *you*, Sonny. And he loves Elizabeth. It hasn’t been like that for a long time.” Carly paused a moment. “I betrayed him with you. I wanted *you*—”

“You betrayed him, AJ, Tony. Why not me?” His dark eyes burned into hers. “How can I *trust* you?”

“Because I’m still *here*,” she said bluntly. She gestured around the room. “Jason’s not. Courtney’s not. Mike’s not. No one else is standing beside you at the moment. If you don’t trust me, who’s left?”

Sonny’s expression didn’t change but his shoulders slumped a little. “If you’re on my side,” he said, “then you know what we have to do.”

Carly nodded, twisting her fingers behind her back. “I know.”

“I can’t trust Jason anymore.” He waited a long moment. “He’s the enemy. He *has* to go. I want my daughter back. I want my business.”

“I know you do,” she began. Oh, God. Oh, *God*. She’d planned to turn Sonny against Jason, but not like this. *Never* like this.

“And I don’t care what I have to do to get it.” He nodded to the door. “I want to rest now. You can go.”

On shaky legs, her hands trembling as she fumbled with the latch on the door, Carly pushed her way into the hallway and straight to the elevators. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t get air in her throat.

It wasn't until she reached the roof, until she collapsed by the ledge that she could finally let the tears flow.

What the hell was she supposed to do now?

### **Queen of Angels: Chapel**

Elizabeth pressed a kiss to her fingers before placing her fingers against her grandmother's cool cheek. "Do you believe in heaven?" she asked her brother.

"I *have* to," he murmured. "I can't do my job if I can't picture the children I lose in a better place." Steven wrapped an arm around his sister's shoulder. "She's with Gramps, now."

"I know. And Aunt Lucille." She raised her eyes to the ceiling, the tears sliding down her cheeks. "I love you, Gram—"

Her knees buckled then, and her brother braced her until Jason came, and led her back to her seat.

It hadn't hit her until that moment.

Her grandmother was gone. And she was never coming back.

### **General Hospital: Nurse's Station**

Carly pressed hands to her face, the tears burning her skin. "Oh, God. What do I do? What do I do?"

Courtney tried to keep her hands from shaking as she twisted her fingers in her lap. "Carly—"

"He's going after Jason. He wants Evie. He wants to *kill* Jason. He's not going to care about Elizabeth, about Cam—" Carly's voice broke. "I can't let him do this."

"We should tell Jason—"

"I have to stop Sonny. I *can't* protect him anymore." With that, Carly left her at the nurse's station and started down the hall towards his room.

### **General Hospital: Sonny's Room**

Sonny jabbed at the buttons on his hospital phone, his fingers slipping with anger. The third time, he managed to get the right numbers.

"Get me Ruiz!" he barked when someone answered the phone. "It's time to move."

Carly pushed open the hospital door, and stopped as she saw Sonny on the phone. He glared at her as he continued to speak. "I'm not waiting anymore. I don't care who gets hurt. You get my daughter and

you take him out.”

He hung up the phone, his hands at his sides. And behind her, two men stepped up.

Carly turned, her blood draining from her face. These were not men she knew. This wasn't her normal guard. “Sonny—”

“Ricky and Sam will be with you from now on,” he told her. “Until things are settled.” He tilted his head. “For your own safety, of course.”

She'd waited too long to take sides. To make the right choices.

And now it was too late.

### **Queen of Angels: Cemetery**

Elizabeth, clinging to Jason's side, stepped up to the open grave and looked down at the cream-colored coffin resting at the bottom.

“Bits,” Steven murmured. She looked at him, at the devastation in his eyes. He was so worried about her, so concerned and yet—*he'd* lost Audrey, too.

She had to do this for him. She could be strong for her brother. For the ones that mattered. She closed her eyes, then knelt and took in a fistful of cold dirt.

Elizabeth rose to her feet and released the soil into the hole. Her brother did the same, followed by her uncle and her father.

And a chill danced up her spine.

### **General Hospital: Nurse's Station**

Courtney saw the men step into her brother's room, forcing Carly to step inside. Whatever was going on was bad. She reached for her cell.

She knew Jason would be at Audrey's service, but she was truly terrified what might happen to Carly, what Sonny might be capable of.

“Jason? I think Sonny's planning something.”

### **Queen of Angels: Cemetery**

Jason, Elizabeth, and Steven returned to their spots, and waited for Father Coates to finish the service. Thunder rumbled in the distance as clouds moved over the sun, casting shadows across the cemetery.

“It's going to storm,” Jason said quietly. “We should try to get to the car before the rain starts.”

“I don’t think we’ll make it.”

# Chapter Thirty-One

*A spider web it's tangled up with me  
And I lost my head  
The thought of all the stupid things I said  
Oh no what's this  
A spider web and I'm caught in the middle  
So I turned to run  
The thought of all the stupid things I've done*  
- Trouble, Coldplay

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*Tuesday, September 6, 2005*

## Queen of Angels: Outside the Church

Thunder rumbled in the distance as the first few rain drops began to fall. Elizabeth leaned into Jason's embrace as she and Steven said goodbye to the last of mourners as they rushed to the car to avoid the drizzle threatening to turn into an early autumn thunderstorm.

They had declined a reception or a wake, neither of them feeling up to mingling with the members of their own family. Sarah and their parents were already heading to the airport, eager to be on their way back to their lives.

"I can't believe Mom and Dad didn't even want to spend another day," Steven murmured as he watched their car disappear around a corner. "They've *barely* met Cameron—"

"They're not interested in the life I've made here," Elizabeth murmured. She looked at her brother. "Are you stopping by the Brownstone? Bobbie and Felicia wanted to have a few friends over—"

But Steven shook his head, casting his eyes toward the cemetery where their grandmother had been laid to rest next to her beloved husband. "No. I—I scheduled myself into work tonight. Just get my mind off of things." He reached over to touch her shoulder. "You should, though. Or take the kids to be with Emily and Nikolas—"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I just want to spend the day at home with Cam and Evie." She glanced up at Jason, who had remained silent on the matter. "I know you have to go to the warehouse—"

"I don't," Jason cut in. But he was frowning down at his phone even as he said it. She could see the icon indicating he'd had several missed calls.

"I'll see you guys later." Steven kissed his sister on the forehead and waved at Jason as he headed towards the parking lot. "Call me, Bits. Later tonight, okay? I want to check in."

"Okay." When he was out of earshot, Elizabeth turned to face her fiancé. "Jason. I know you have to \_\_\_"

“Johnny and Max—”

“Are not *you*,” she said. “If we’re going to move to the new house tomorrow, there are probably a thousand details you need to deal with. I’d rather you go now and sort out anything you need to so you can come home for dinner and be with us tonight.” She forced a smile on her face. “I’m just going to pick up lunch from Kelly’s and maybe we’ll give Nora the night off so it can be just the four of us. She and I will pack what the kids need for a few days.”

His shoulders slumped. “I don’t want to go—”

“And I know that.” She leaned up on her toes to brush a kiss against his mouth. “I love you. Go to work, and I’ll see you tonight.”

### **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

The rain had dissipated almost as soon as it had soaked the city. Nadine had waited for the sheets of pounding rain to sweep through before leaving Kelly’s. The staff hadn’t been able to pull the tables and chairs in time; the remnants of drinks and food still soaking as she walked past them, sipping her hot chocolate.

She was nervous about today—she was going to track Emily or Steven Webber down at work and ask for Elizabeth’s number. Johnny was strong enough now to take the next step.

And while she was relieved that they were going to finally move forward, part of her preferred the world where Johnny was safe in her bedroom. Where no one with guns or knives could come at him.

As she started for her car in the parking lot, she stopped with a gasp as a car pulled into a free space. A tall, dark-haired man stepped out from the driver’s seat and opened the back door. Elizabeth stepped down, a light gray coat pulled over a black dress.

No time like the present, Nadine told herself, even as her feet felt glued to the cement. As Elizabeth and her guard passed her, she blurted out, “Elizabeth, I have to talk to you—”

The guard immediately stepped in front of his charge, but Elizabeth frowned at her for a moment. “I know you, don’t I? You work at the hospital—” Her eyes widened. “Milo, give me a minute—”

“Miss Webber—”

“Go stand over there for a minute.” She raised her brows at the younger man, who finally acquiesced to standing no more than five feet from her. “You’re Nadine,” Elizabeth said to her. “We met at my opening last winter.”

Nadine nodded, grateful now Johnny had forced that introduction. “With Johnny Zacchara. I need—” She swallowed hard. What if Jason didn’t tell *her* anything? What if Elizabeth didn’t know what was going on? This plan had seemed more reasonable in her room that morning.

“Johnny’s with you, isn’t he?” the other woman’s face softened as Elizabeth reached out a hand to rest

on Nadine's forearm. "I know what's going on. I know that he was missing for several weeks, and that you've been taking care of him after Friday night. He's okay, isn't he?"

Oh, God. Nadine sucked in a deep breath. "He's okay. He just—he wants to talk to Jason. He needs his help, and-and for obvious reasons he doesn't feel comfortable being out in the open—"

"It's fine." Elizabeth gestured to the guard. "Milo, I need you to call Jason and tell him that I'm coming to the warehouse—"

"I don't think that's a good idea, Miss Webber. The warehouse is under construction—"

"Milo," she said in that even tone that had worked earlier. "*This* is Nadine Crowell. She's Johnny Zacchara's girlfriend. She'd like to talk to Jason about him. I think you and I both agree that this should happen."

"But—"

"And I'm going to be there. I just have to call my nanny to tell her I won't be picking up lunch after all." Elizabeth drew out her cell phone. "I want this over. I *want* my life back."

"It's never over, though, is it?" Nadine asked hesitantly. When Elizabeth looked at her, confused, Nadine clarified, her cheeks flushing. "I just mean—there's always going to be something else."

"Yeah." Elizabeth sighed. "But if you're lucky, you can convince yourself it's worth it." She looked to Milo as she raised her own phone to ear. "You're not dialing anything, Milo. Either you call Jason and arrange the meeting, or I'll go with Nadine in her car."

Milo sighed and reached for his phone.

## **Warehouse: Jason's Office**

Jason played Courtney's brief voicemail once more, frustrated with the lack of information. "What do we know? *What's* happening at the hospital?"

"Hard to tell," Max admitted. "There's no one on Sonny's door, but no one has come or gone in the last hour. And we talked to Courtney—she says two men showed up when Carly was inside and no one came back out before she had to go. She's responsible for the boys while Bobbie's having the wake."

"What about Ruiz? Any movement there?" Jason looked to Tommy. "What do we know?"

"Nothing new. If anyone flew up in the last day or so, then he did it on a private flight." The other man hesitated. "Or they were already here and laying low."

"Jase, the kids are secure at the Hardy house," Johnny told him. "Junior's locked up tight at his girlfriend's place. Elizabeth is on her way home, and tomorrow we're moving all of you to the new house which has more security than Fort Knox."

Jason sat down at the end of the long conference table. He didn't know what to do next. He *couldn't* predict the next step. Would Sonny go for him personally? Would he go after the business? How was he going to come at him? Would he wait until he was released from the hospital or would he strike through others?

All these years learning from Sonny—and he had *no* idea how protect the people that mattered. How to keep control.

“No one is coming and going from that hospital unless we know it,” Bernie said, his voice quiet and almost kind. “Maybe we should call Elizabeth and see if we can move the kids at least tonight. You’ll feel better if she and the kids are under lock and key.”

And it was a good idea, but Elizabeth had buried her grandmother today and, damn it, she deserved the opportunity to be in her grandmother’s home today. To have this day, at least, to mourn. That Jason’s life, which had intruded on hers so often in the last year, would take even *this* from her—

“Call Courtney,” Jason said finally. “If she has the boys, I want her to take them to New York with her. I’ll clear it with Bobbie, and if it comes to it, Carly. But I can’t—” Remembering the shattered woman he’d last seen at the hospital, he continued, “I don’t think she’ll argue if we keep the boys out of the line of fire.”

But Evie was still here. And Bernie was right. Moving the kids tonight would be for the best.

His cell phone rang, the shrill tone stabbing into his ears. Jason glanced at the call screen as he picked it up, his muscles seizing as he saw Milo’s name flashing across the screen.

Milo was with Elizabeth. Why would he call and not Elizabeth?

“Is she okay?” Jason demanded as he opened the phone. “Milo—”

The voices in the room went silent at Jason’s question and all eyes were trained on him.

*“We’re all good, Jason,” Milo said quickly. “I’m at Kelly’s with Miss Webber, and she’s on the phone with your nanny. Nadine Crowell stopped us as we came to Kelly’s. She wants to talk about Johnny.”*

“Johnny’s girlfriend tracked Elizabeth down?” Jason asked, a little unnerved by that. “Are you bringing her here?”

*“And Miss Webber,” Milo continued. “She wouldn’t take no for an answer. We’ll be there shortly.”*

Jason hung up and looked back at the room. “Nadine Crowell cornered Elizabeth at Kelly’s. They’re both coming to the warehouse to talk about Johnny.”

“Junior’s smarter than I would have given him credit for,” Johnny admitted, scowling as if he hated to give the enemy any sort of compliment. “Did Sonny know about the girlfriend?”



“He knew she existed,” Jason said. “I never gave him any more information about her.” And now he was *relieved* that he’d kept that close to the chest. He’d not revealed Nadine’s identity to protect her from Sonny sending people to harass her, but now that Sonny was actively trying to kill Junior, it had allowed the younger man to find a place Sonny wouldn’t think about.

“He probably wants to broker a deal so he can get the hell out of the city,” Max said. “Is it smart to involve Miss Webber in this? Shouldn’t you send her home?”

“Elizabeth will keep Nadine comfortable,” Jason said. “As for the rest of it—to be honest...there’s not much Elizabeth *doesn’t* know about this situation,” he admitted. “I had—”

“You had to tell her,” Bernie finished. “It involves Sonny, and it’s not like she’s not personally involved. It’s her life being uprooted, her kids at risk.” He nodded and looked to the rest of the men, as if warning them. “It’s just smart. I never liked the way Sonny kept Carly out of the loop.”

“Miss Webber’s good people,” Johnny put in, loyal to the bitter end. “It’s not like this is business as usual.”

And with Johnny and Bernie solidly behind Jason, Max and Tommy just kind of shrugged in acceptance. Involving women, even on a peripheral basis, wasn’t the norm but nothing about this situation could be considered ordinary.

“What’s the plan? What kind of deal are you gonna offer Junior?” Tommy asked.

“I’ll get him home to Crimson Pointe,” Jason said, “but I want—” he hesitated, because once he said it out loud—once he made this arrangement—there was no going back. “Sonny’s working with Ruiz. That’s pretty clear. I can’t...I can’t take on Ruiz on my own. He’ll pay me lip service, but he’s never cared for me.”

“Not after the Moreno situation,” Max said with a bit of regret. “He never liked you turning the business over to him.”

“Yeah, well...” Jason rolled his shoulders. “I was...” Stupid to think he could get out of this. Naive to think Moreno would stop seeing him as a threat. In this business, you either killed your opponent or you were killed. You didn’t get to walk away.

“Younger.”

“But everyone is terrified of Anthony Zacchara,” Bernie said. “You want Johnny’s help in getting Zacchara on our side—”

“And once Zacchara gets Ruiz to back down,” Tommy cut in, “we’ll just have to deal with Sonny, which is a lot easier when I’m not fucking worried Hector will send Javier and Manny up here. They’re fucking insane.”

“It’s not a bad plan,” Johnny admitted. “It mostly hinges on whether Junior can pull it off.”

There was a knock on the door and a moment later, Milo came in, Elizabeth and Nadine on his heels. The blonde looked as nervous as she had the last time he'd seen her in New York.

Her blue eyes widened in alarm when she stumbled to a stop at the foot of a table filled with hulking, annoyed looking men. She looked to Elizabeth, who put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I don't —"

"They're basically teddy bears," Elizabeth assured her. "Nadine, this is Max and Johnny, two of the best men you'll ever know." She gestured to Bernie and Tommy. "That's Bernie, the smartest man I know, and..." She tilted her head. "I think we only met once—"

"Tommy," the older man said with a nod. "It's nice to see you again, Miss Webber."

"Nadine is a friend of Emily and my brother's from the hospital," Elizabeth said, and Jason had to shake his head as he realized her mission. Treat this moment as nothing more than an ordinary meet and greet. *They* needed Nadine more than she needed them, and if she bolted, Junior might just contact Anthony Zacchara without going through Jason.

Which was the very last thing they needed right now.

"Nadine, you remember Jason from my art show in February," Elizabeth continued. "It feels like that was years ago, doesn't it?"

"It does." Nadine's shoulders slumped a bit as the tension left. Her eyes met Jason's. "You were *so* nice that night. Johnny really respects you. Um..." She twisted her fingers in front of her. "He said he knew you weren't involved in what happened to him because he never saw you there. And-and you have a reputation of not making people do something you wouldn't do yourself. Or something."

"We've spent weeks looking for Johnny," Jason said. "We were worried we might not find him..." In time, he almost added, but stopped himself. "How is he?"

"You know that he's with me?" She bit her lip. "No, I mean, of course you know that. I told Elizabeth, and the guard probably told you, and you're not stupid—I mean, shoot—"

"Nadine..." Elizabeth touched her arm again. "Just tell them what you told me, okay?"

"He's okay," Nadine said. "He was grazed by a bullet—a-and he was pretty banged up, but he's okay. He didn't want to just—he didn't want to just call his dad. He thought maybe his dad wouldn't...I don't know...be understanding about how it happened unless Johnny was in front of him. So he thought maybe you could help him get home to talk to his dad. You know, make this all go away."

"We can do that." But not right away. He had to contain Sonny and make sure his family was safe before he could take Johnny Zacchara out of town, before he could meet with Anthony Zacchara. "First, I'd like the two of you to go to a safe house."

"What?" Nadine frowned. "I thought you'd just go send someone to take him home—"

“It’s not...” Jason hesitated. “It’s not that simple. There’s—we have a security issue, and I can’t leave. And I have to be the one to take Johnny to Anthony. Anthony will accept it better if I deliver him personally.”

“Oh.” Jason could tell Nadine didn’t quite understand, but she was smart enough not to argue. “I mean, okay. We could do that.”

“I’ll go home,” Elizabeth began. “And get out of your way—”

Jason held up a hand. “Wait a second.” He looked to Max and Johnny. “I need you two to go to the house—and do what we discussed, okay? Be ready to be in an hour.” Max and Johnny hurried out.

“Jason—”

“Elizabeth, I hate—” He stopped. “We *have* to move to the safe house tonight. I’m going to ask you to stay here with Bernie and Tommy. With Milo. I’m going to pick up Johnny Zacchara and move him to the safe house, too. And Johnny and Max are going to meet Cody at the house. They’re going to get Nora and the kids.”

“Why can’t I go with them?” Elizabeth asked, color rising in her cheeks. “I can go with them and get the kids ready—”

He crossed the distance between them and drew her over to a corner of the room, lowering his voice so that no one else could hear them. “I don’t want us all to go to the safe house at once, okay? We’re going to stagger it in case one of us is being tailed.”

She swallowed hard. “What happened since the funeral?” Elizabeth asked. Her fingers tightened around his hands. “Is it bad? Are we in danger or are you being overly cautious?”

“I don’t know,” Jason admitted. “There’s—I don’t know exactly, but things are happening. And I *need* to know you and the kids are safe. And the kids...Cam and Evie...” He hesitated, searching her eyes. “They come first, right? As soon as I know they’re safe at the house, I’ll have you and Nadine moved there. Johnny and I will follow a bit later.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “You’re right. Will—can Cody or Johnny call me when they get to the house? Is there some way for me to know they’re okay?”

“I’ll make sure of it.” He drew her in for a quick embrace, brushing his lips against her hair. “I’m sorry. I wanted to wait until tomorrow—”

“No. We need to do what’s safe.” Elizabeth drew back, and some of the hesitation was absent. “If you think staggering our arrivals, if going tonight is safe—I’m okay with it.” She framed his face her hands, the metal of her engagement ring cool against his cheek. “I love you. Be careful.”

After Jason had left, Bernie and Tommy left to check on some business details they weren’t clear on. Milo moved to hang outside the door, and the two women were left in relative silence.

“Are you scared?” Nadine asked softly.

Elizabeth looked at her and sighed. It was useless to pretend she wasn’t. “Yes. I wish—I know why I’m not, but I wish I were with my kids.” She reached into her purse and drew out her wallet as a distraction. “Cameron is...he’s sixteen months now and he...” She laughed. “He gets into everything. He knocks things over and then he just smiles at you like you’re supposed to be proud of him.”

Nadine smiled at the photo. “He looks like you,” she said. “Jason has a daughter, too, doesn’t he?”

“He does.” Elizabeth handed her a photo of Evie, with her sweet and quiet smile. “She’s ten months old this week. She crawls everywhere. Lightning fast. And—” her chest squeezed, thinking of them both. “Evie’s so curious about everything. She just...she’ll sit and look around forever, just taking everything in. And then she touches everything. She likes to know how things feel, how they taste, how they smell...” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “I’m adopting her, you know, but I already feel like she’s mine. I tried not to fall in love with her—”

“It’s impossible not to,” Nadine murmured. “I’m a pediatric nurse and I’ve been working with your brother in pediatric oncology. It’s...” She shook her head. “I try not to love them, especially the ones that I know aren’t going to make it, but they need someone to love them. They’re so scared—” She looked at the photos that Elizabeth passed her. “Is it normal to love someone like Johnny so much and absolutely hate everything about their life?”

“At first?” Elizabeth said. “You’d be insane if you didn’t.” She waited a beat. “When I first met Jason, I always separated him from his job. He’s a person with this job, but it’s not the same thing. They’re barely related. But eventually, I realized that I wasn’t being fair to either of us when I pretended you could separate them. Jason has this life. It’s dangerous. It’s often violent. And in order for him to be good at it—which he is—*he* has to be those things.”

“How do you deal with that?” Nadine asked. “Johnny always tells me he’s not in the business, but he’s always going to be Anthony Zacchara’s son. You don’t leave that behind.”

“I began to understand that the reasons I loved Jason...” Elizabeth tilted her head to the side. “The things I love best about him? They come *from* this life. Jason makes me feel safe. He makes me feel loved. Like I’m the most important person in the world to him. And that’s because Jason focuses. He has to have laser focus when you do the work he does, or he can get in trouble or hurt.” She sighed. “I mean, I guess it’s not being a super empowered female when I say that I like knowing I’m safe when I’m with him, that he can take care of me, but I do.”

“It’s not wrong to want to feel safe,” Nadine said softly. “My dad walked out when I was a kid, my mom died, and my sister—she was a nurse in Ohio who was convicted of killing her patients. An angel of mercy—” She hesitated. “I don’t have a lot of family or friends. I left it all behind to get away from Jolene’s legacy. I knew I could never be a nurse there. I was alone when I met Johnny. He introduced me to his friends in New York. He helped me feel safe again, like I could trust myself, my own future. And now I have this job that I like, and I have friends here. I know I did that stuff for myself, but I guess, I mean, I get it.” She looked out the window where day was slowly giving way to night. “How much longer?”

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth began, but her next words were cut off as the window shattered and she heard that familiar sound of gunfire.

She threw herself across Nadine, dragging them both to floor as the room was riddled with gunfire. Glass shattered around them, and she wasn’t sure if it was just Nadine screaming or if was her as well.

When the gunshots faded, the door slammed open. “Elizabeth!” Bernie’s voice boomed. “Nadine!”

“Bernie...” Elizabeth gingerly got to her feet, but before she could get stable—Tommy was around the table, all but scooping her into his arms. “Tommy—”

She saw Milo grabbing Nadine as Tommy carried her towards the door. “What’s going on? What happened—”

“Shots were fired here and...” Bernie hesitated as they started for the SUV kept inside the warehouse garage. “And at your house.”

“My house—” Elizabeth’s heart seized as Tommy loaded her into the backseat of the car. “The kids—are they okay?”

Bernie’s face was pale. “We don’t know. We just took the call when we had shots here and now—” He exchanged a look of trepidation with Tommy as he climbed into the front of the limo after Milo and Nadine were in the back.

“Now what?” Elizabeth demanded, her voice sounded shrill to her own ears. “What’s going on?”

“We can’t get hold of Max or Johnny,” Tommy admitted. “They’re not picking up.”

# Chapter Thirty-Two

*To escape a world so great*

*Close your eyes now*

*We float away*

*Close to the brink*

*Oh it's so colorful*

*Don't be scared*

*Just take my hand*

- Tomorrowland (All Fall Down), Leon Else

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*Tuesday, September 6, 2005*

## **General Hospital: Sonny's Room**

Carly perched on the edge of her chair, her hands gripping the arms so tightly her knuckles were bone-white and aching from the exertion. She wanted to get up, she wanted to leave.

She wanted to find her boys, get out of Port Charles, and maybe, at this point, never come back.

But the way to the door was blocked. One burly man she'd never seen before stood in front of the door while another stranger was helping Sonny stand and get into some clothing. It was on the tip of her tongue to protest—it had only been days since Sonny was shot—he shouldn't be out of bed.

A darker thought slid through her mind, poisoning her ability to react. If Sonny died, this would stop. It would go away. And maybe it would be for the best.

"I'm checking out of the hospital, and we're going back to the penthouse," Sonny said, finally addressing his wife. His dark eyes met hers and there was nothing there. No sign of man she'd battled, loved, despised. He was empty. "Where are the boys?"

Carly rose to her feet. "They're with your sister," she said, forcing the words through a closed throat. "Sonny—"

"Good, good. You should tell her to take them to New York for a few days," he continued. He slid into a suit jacket, grimacing as he did so.

"I can do that." She hesitated. "I should go with them—"

"You're coming back to the penthouse." Sonny looked at her. "Where I can see you."

*This* was the man she'd married, that she had sacrificed her self-respect for, destroyed her friendship with Jason for. She had never been scared of him before, never worried he might hurt her.

"Let's go." Sonny nodded at the man who'd helped him dress. "Make sure she gets there. Don't make

a scene.”

“Sonny—” Carly began, but the man advancing on her strangled any protest she might have made. There was no choice here, no chance for escape.

She had made her choice long ago, and there was no turning back.

## **An SUV**

It was a twenty-minute ride from the Corinthos-Morgan warehouse to the estate Jason had bought on the outskirts of town, and for every one of those twenty minutes, Elizabeth bit her tongue and sat on her hands.

There was no word from the guards at the house, no word from Jason. And asking wouldn’t change that. Jason had segmented security for this very reason. Elizabeth’s guards would always keep her as a number one priority, while Cam and Evie were someone else’s top concern. She wanted it that way. She wanted Denny and Lyle to only be thinking about the babies.

“Elizabeth,” Nadine tried again. “Why—”

“Because they need to concentrate on the road, on making sure no one is following us,” Elizabeth said as they passed the last of the buildings in downtown Port Charles before the streets opened to the suburban sprawl on the outskirts of the city. “Once they call a lock down, there are no further attempts at communication until we reach our meeting place.”

And she understood that, she did. When Jason had described this to her only weeks ago, she’d thought it made sense.

Though at the moment, it was hard to remember why.

Nadine hands were trembling as they lay in her lap. “You sound like you’ve done this before. Is there some handbook I didn’t get?”

“Security is number one,” Elizabeth managed to force out, her eyes trained on the scenery outside her window. As soon as she could get into the house, she could find out what happened. She could make sure her babies were okay. She just had to wait. “We have two young children and a volatile situation on our hands. Jason and I have talked about security at length.”

All the talking in the world, all the experience in the world—it hadn’t prepared her for the sickening twisting in her belly, the conviction that no news was the worst news, that news of shots fired where her children were would only lead to heart break.

As they approached the wrought iron fence and the guard house at the edge of property, Elizabeth found herself—for the first time and only briefly—regretting the day she had ever met Jason Morgan.

## **Another SUV**

“The kids are okay,” Johnny O’Brien was reassuring Jason from the front seat of the car as they sped down the road leading to the estate. “They’re in the car right behind us.”

Jason was trying not to think about Cam and Evie in the back seat, with their shell-shocked nanny, Denny, and Johnny Zacchara with Max Giambetti at the wheel. He was focused on the bleeding of Evie’s guard, Lyle.

He’d taken a bullet to the shoulder trying to keep Evie safe. Saving Jason’s family. Jason had a towel pressed to the wound, relieved nothing dangerous appeared to be hit. This time.

He couldn’t stand how close they’d come this time—how much they’d nearly lost.

The car stopped by the guard house, and a newer guard stepped out. He looked in the car, and got the code word from Johnny. The gates opened, and the car sped up the drive to the portico entrance. The tires squealed as Johnny braked. Doors were thrown open, Jason and Johnny got Lyle out of the car just as the dark sedan with everyone else screeched to a halt, Max nearly clipping the first car.

There was a mad rush as everyone hurried inside, eager to be away from any eyes. They’d taken a circuitous route from downtown Port Charles to be sure no one could follow them, and at some point the car with the kids had been separated from them briefly. The two minutes before the cars met up again as they approached the house were the longest of Jason’s life.

He handed Lyle to Max, and watched as Tommy and Bernie rushed out of the house. Denny and Tommy took charge of the kids and Nora, but Jason didn’t go inside until he knew everyone was out of the cars and safe.

When he went through the entrance, he saw one of the medically trained guards stationed at the house examining Lyle’s gunshot wound, Bernie looking at Nora’s bruised cheek and calling for an ice pack.

And Elizabeth on the floor, embracing both of the children. When she saw him, she leapt up and ran to him. He swallowed her in his arms for just a moment—he couldn’t afford more than that. Until he’d seen Tommy and Bernie, he hadn’t been sure they’d arrived from the warehouse safely. He’d known there were shots fired—but he couldn’t be sure, couldn’t *let* himself believe Elizabeth had survived it unscathed.

Then he stepped back and leaned down to touch Cam’s face, to brush away the tears the toddler was sniffing. “You guys okay?” he asked Elizabeth, then looking again at Cam and Evie. There were no marks, no signs of injury anywhere.

“Looks like it,” Elizabeth managed. She picked Evie up, pressing her cheek to the top of the little girl’s dark hair, Cameron clinging to her black dress. She looked at Nora, then back at Jason. “What happened?”

He hesitated, looking back at the cluster of men, at Johnny Zacchara who was talking in low tones to Nadine across the room. He had to take a few moments to calm the children, to speak to Elizabeth. He also had to start making some sense of this disaster—he had to take action to fix it.



“Tommy, I need you and Bernie to get a hold of the other guys. Make sure things are okay on their front. Lift the lockdown, everyone’s safe and they need to get back to business to keep everyone calm.” He rubbed his head, then looked at Max and Johnny. “Not that I don’t trust Frankie, but can you get our doctor out here to look at Lyle?” To Nora, he asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she managed, pressing ice to her cheek, but her face was still pale, her pupils dilated.

“Denny, I need you to take Nora to her room and make sure she has anything she needs.” He picked Cameron up. “We’re taking the kids upstairs.”

Elizabeth silently followed him out of the living room into the foyer, then up the stairs.

## **Estate: Nursery**

Elizabeth was relieved to see that Jason had reproduced the children’s nursery from the penthouse, down to the furniture and the types of toys they’d used. Familiar surroundings would help them feel safe, and already Evie was squirming to get down, to investigate the pack of stuffed animals in the corner.

Cam and Evie were released, and they both took off—Evie crawling frantically after the toddling Cameron. “Nora’s hurt,” Elizabeth said softly. “But the kids don’t have a scratch on them.”

She turned back to Jason, who looked as pale as Nora had downstairs. “They said there were shots fired at the house—”

“Nora was already packing for the kids,” Jason said, rubbing his neck. “She was upstairs with them, with Lyle, and Denny was downstairs, Cody was outside.”

Which made sense, Elizabeth thought. A guard for each floor, one outside. It was part of the security design.

“Six men burst through the door,” he said.

Six. “Two for each guard,” she murmured, her blood chilling. Because Sonny *knew* their security. Jason had created similar protocols for Michael and Morgan.

“And a seventh came in after the guards took on Denny and Lyle,” Jason continued, his eyes stark because he’d made that connection, too. “Max and Johnny came then—because I’d sent them to get the kids out sooner. They were trying to deal with the mess downstairs.”

“You came together,” Elizabeth said. “Did you—”

“I’d had a voicemail from Courtney. She’d seen men meeting with Sonny, going into his room. She was worried. She picked the boys up from the nanny and she took them to New York.” He sank onto the small sofa in the room, because he knew he’d have to tell her how close it had come, how precarious the safety of the children really was. “But Monica called after I’d picked up Johnny Zacchara. Sonny had checked himself out of the hospital, and she was concerned—men were with

him she'd never seen before and she didn't like the way they were...escorting Carly into the elevator."

He clasped his hands between his knees and looked down at the carpet. "So we went to the house, and by that time—Lyle had taken a bullet to the shoulder, and Nora was unconscious on the floor. She'd tried to keep that seventh man from taking Evie, but he'd hit her. He was halfway down the stairs when I got there."

"Oh, God—" Elizabeth closed her eyes. If Courtney hadn't put Jason on his guard, if Monica hadn't tipped them off—Evie might be gone to them, taken by men with guns. What assurance did they have that these men who worked for another family would even deliver her safely to Sonny?

And Sonny had sent men to their home, to the place where their children lived—men with guns, ready to kill to carry out their task.

"I got her away," Jason said simply, and she knew he'd *never* tell her the rest. What he'd had to do to guarantee Evie's safety. "Max, Johnny, and Denny overpowered the men that were left. We tied them up, put Nora and the kids in the car and left. We left Cody to deal with the cleanup."

"Oh, God," she repeated. She looked at the kids, to reassure herself that they were okay—Evie was climbing over a humongous pink and orange striped unicorn while Cameron had discovered the stack of blocks. "Oh, God."

"I can't—" He stopped, and her head snapped back at him when she heard his voice falter, even break. "I *can't* protect them. I can't protect you. I thought I could, but—"

"Jason—"

"I would send you away if I could figure out a place Sonny wouldn't think to look," he continued. "I'll get Bernie working on that. We need a place out of the country or far away from Port Charles where I know you'll be safe. This house—it's not in my name—but Sonny has to know we have a safe house."

And wasn't *that* the real terror? There was little Jason could do that Sonny wouldn't figure out. They'd worked together so closely—Sonny knew all of Jason's tricks and secrets to keep people. He'd taught Jason some, had put them to work for himself.

"Whose name is it in?" Elizabeth asked. "How long before he thinks to look for it?"

"It's in Jason Quartermaine's name," Jason finally said. "I've legally changed my name, but I can still go by my birth name on documents dealing in property. I've never used it before, Sonny might not think of it." He rubbed his face. "But it's not far away enough. Maybe somewhere in Europe, where Sonny doesn't know the language. Germany. Poland. I can sign guardianship to you—"

"Jason—" She sank onto the sofa beside him, reaching for his hand. "You're not talking about sending me away temporarily."

“You didn’t sign up for this. They—” Jason looked up, watched the children giggling and laughing for a moment before continuing, “—*deserve* a better choice.”

She hesitated, knowing how important it was to be brutally honest with him in this moment. “I can see now that part of me honestly believed *whatever* Sonny might try to hurt you or me, he wouldn’t go after the children,” she said quietly. “I still believed in his honor, in his innate kindness. But this illness—this disease that’s inside him—it’s taken every flaw Sonny ever possessed and amplified it. He doesn’t see Evie as her own person, as a sweet little baby with shy smiles and a curious nature. He doesn’t know her. She’s property to him.”

“Elizabeth—”

“You should know there is a part of me that is tempted to tell you yes,” Elizabeth cut in. He looked at her then, his expression guarded, his mouth set in a tense line as if he were bracing himself for what was coming next. “Because it’s one thing to sign up for this on my own behalf. I love you, and I want the life we planned together. I’m willing to take that chance for myself. But it *is* another to sign the kids up for this, to sign Cam up for this.”

His shoulders slumped and he nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I know—”

“But if I walk away now,” she interrupted. “If I give you back this ring...” She looked at her fingers where the gem rested. “What does that say about the promises I made? There’s *nothing* happening that we haven’t talked about. I’ve always known the danger involved here. I was there when Nikolas was shot for standing near you. I know what happened to Sonny’s first wife and child. We’ve known for weeks that Sonny was going to do something against Evie. We’ve done what we can to take protect them, and they’re safe. Look at them, Jason—”

“They almost weren’t,” he argued. “He had Evie, he was almost out of the house—”

“And that’s terrifying,” Elizabeth admitted. “Because I don’t know if I trust the men Sonny hired to take care of her. And I know it easily could have been Cam he’d taken in order to force you to surrender Evie. But I have to concentrate on what went right. Sonny doesn’t have our advantages—”

“Advantages—” Jason scoffed.

“If Courtney hadn’t taken the time to call you, if Monica hadn’t alerted you, Evie would be gone now,” Elizabeth told him. “We have friends and family on our side. There’s no one Sonny has left. He had to *hire* men to help him, and God knows what he’s promised them or the man they really work for. He doesn’t have the loyalty you do. Lyle took a bullet for Nora and the kids.”

“Elizabeth—”

“Next time, we don’t hesitate. We move the kids at the first sign of a threat.” She took both of his hands in hers. “I *could* take the kids and go to Germany. We could build a life there. And then I could be hit by a bus. One of us could get sick. There could be a car accident—” She swallowed. “It breaks my heart that Sonny has used everything he knows about you to go after the kids. That he’s exploiting

the same security that protected *his* children. I know that's not easy for you."

"It's not—" Jason hesitated. "That was our rule. The code we lived by. Other men had no honor—they went after women and children, but not us. He's taken everything he taught me and destroyed it."

"Well, that's *him*. We're choosing a different path." Feeling a bit sturdier now, a bit more resolute, she rose to her feet. "We're safe here for now. I'll stay with the kids—you go downstairs and figure out what's next."

## **Estate: Office**

"Cops are crawling over the warehouse," Tommy reported when Jason entered the room, moving toward the desk. "The drive by was called in. Luckily, Francis got the message we left him and was on the scene. He's at the PCPD, but we weren't sure who to call for him."

Francis had gone to the warehouse because Elizabeth and Nadine's presence had necessitated Tommy and Bernie evacuating with them. They never could have gone to the safe house with only Milo for protection. While at times their security protocols could feel byzantine and the men Francis trained in them often groaned—Jason was relieved. They had built contingencies into contingencies, and today—they'd lost no lives. A bullet wound and a minor head injury—he could live with those.

They would take apart, at another time, what had gone wrong, but for now, they had to move forward.

"Call Diane," he said, referring to the attorney who handled his custody issues. He'd noticed she had a penchant for designer clothes and shoes. "Tell her to draw up a retainer agreement and get Francis out of there. What about Cody?"

"Cody says things are clear at the house. What men we left alive have been picked up and moved elsewhere for questioning. So far, all we've gotten from them is information we'd already knew. They're from Miami. They were to take Evie to Sonny, but we did find out—" Tommy hesitated and looked at Johnny O'Brien.

"They were going to put her on a plane to Miami, to Hector Ruiz," Johnny admitted. "'They thought it would be easier to keep Sonny under their thumb.'"

He couldn't let that information terrify him, but he had to take a moment and swallow. "Okay. What about everyone else?"

"Running smoothly. They hit the warehouse to slow you down," Max said. "They had trailed you there, but apparently left before you did. They shot into your office and hit your house at the same time, I guess, figuring it wouldn't be as heavily guarded. You had three men there, which slowed them down."

Because though Sonny had sent two men for every guard they had, he hadn't known the change in the security protocol. One man upstairs who had time to be on guard. To lock Nora and the kids in the room, which slowed them down even more. A man outside, which meant only a few men entered—

“We talked to your guys at the Harborview,” Bernie said, picking up the thread. “Sonny and Carly arrived—Carly hasn’t left the building. We contacted Courtney. They’ve just arrived at her place and we’re sending her two guards. The boys are safe. Bobbie has been informed, but we don’t see any danger to her with the boys gone. Sonny is still at the penthouse, for now.”

“Junior,” Johnny said, with his usual grimace, “has offered to broker a deal with Zacchara. Anthony hates the Ruiz family. He thinks Anthony will leap at the chance to take on Ruiz and Sonny, and Junior plans to make sure his daddy knows you saved his ass.”

He hadn’t though—Johnny Zacchara had rescued *himself*. They were just giving him safe passage out of town, but he supposed not telling Sonny much information about Nadine Crowell had allowed Johnny some security. If he wanted to play up Jason’s actions to his father as something a bit more heroic, it could only help them.

“I’ll go to Crimson Pointe and meet with Anthony and Trevor,” Jason said. “Tommy, Bernie, I want you to work out of this office. The warehouse is going to be off limits, and I don’t want too many people coming and going from here. Lyle and Milo are staying here with Elizabeth and the kids. Nadine can come with us if Junior wants, but I’ll suggest she stays here. Get Francis to send us one or two more guys.”

He looked at Max and Johnny. “I need you guy to get Diane on board and get Francis back to his guys. Get the warehouse secured, relieve Cody. I want him here with Elizabeth and the kids. I don’t want the kids have too many new faces.” He looked down for a moment, the events of the last few hours began to sink in.

“Jason, the men were loyal to you before,” Bernie said gently, “but after *this*? After Sonny went after the kids? There’s not a man in this organization who wouldn’t lay their lives down to protect your family.”

“I don’t want them to have to, but I appreciate it.” He rubbed his eyebrow lightly. “I need to tell Elizabeth I’m leaving. I—I won’t be back here until it’s resolved. I don’t think anyone trailed us here, but if I come and go—”

“It’s less safe. We can take care of things from here,” Bernie said.

## **Estate: Bedroom**

Elizabeth stepped into the sparsely furnished master bedroom, intending to change from the dress she’d worn to her grandmother’s funeral that morning—then realized...

She likely had no clothes. There’d been no time to pack. She was stuck in this black dress until other arrangements could be made.

She sank onto the bed, the black stark against the beige comforter. Had she only buried her grandmother that morning? Had things changed so much just in a day?

The door opened, and Jason stepped over the threshold. “I stopped in the nursery and saw the kids are napping.”

“I fed them and we cuddled a bit on the sofa,” Elizabeth said. “They were both overdue for naps and conked out.” She raised the monitor in her hand. “I just wanted to change, but—”

Jason nodded and moved to the bureau. “I asked Max’s wife to do some shopping for you and the kids. I thought we might have to come here in a hurry, but—” He hesitated, then looked at her. “I *should* have told you it was a possibility, let you put some things here—”

Relieved, she crossed to him and tugged out a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt. “Remind me to send her a very large Christmas present this year.” Elizabeth hesitated then. “You have to go, don’t you?”

“I do,” he confirmed, taking the change of clothes from her and tossing them on the bed. “I’m sorry, but—”

“There’s a lot of things to be done,” she cut in. She returned to the bed. “Can you talk to Steven and Emily? I don’t want them to worry.”

“I will.” He paused. “I’m going to Anthony Zacchara to get his help. And then I’ll be going back to Port Charles. But not here. I don’t want anyone to know you guys are here. The guards aren’t going to come and go, except Cody will be coming soon. The place is stocked with food. I tried to put some sort of studio in for you, but—”

“It’s safer if you don’t come back, I know.” But God, what if he didn’t come home? He was going to take on Sonny, and Sonny no longer cared enough to hold back. “Jason, I—”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen.” He leaned against the bureau. “I’ve made arrangements with Max and Johnny. I’ve talked to Diane. If anything happens to me—”

She wanted to stop him—she didn’t *want* to know, to prepare herself for the worst, but she knew he needed to get this out, to know she was safe. That the kids were.

So Elizabeth said nothing as Jason continued after a momentary pause, “I’ve left a will. Any property I have is to be dissolved unless you want to keep it. I divided everything in three. Cam and Evie have a trust, you’ll oversee it. I left guardianship for you. If something happens, Max and Johnny will come here, and they’ll take you somewhere. I don’t know where yet. Bernie’s working on getting property somewhere, but they’ll get you out of Port Charles. Cody, Milo, Denny, and Lyle are at the house now. They’ll stay with you guys until Tommy says it’s safe.”

She nodded, but she’d never doubted that he’d see to their safety, that he’d see the kids were taken care of. “Okay. I—I know how hard what you’re going to do is. That going against Sonny...” She stood. “And the last thing I want is for anything to happen to either of you. I don’t want *this* to be Sonny’s legacy. I know that with treatment, with medication, we can get some semblance of the man we both care about—we *could* get some of it back. But Jason?”

She stepped over to him and rested her hand against his chest, over his heart. “If it comes down to you or him, *you* come home to me. Do you understand?”

“Elizabeth—”

“The man you talk about, who took you in and gave you a purpose in life?” she continued. “*He’d* want you to come home to your family. To be with your children. And you know that Sonny would understand. As much as I want him to be well, to be a part of our lives, we can’t wait for it to happen that way. Whatever you have to do, *you* come home.”

He covered her hand with his, dipped his head, and took a deep breath. “I promise you,” he said, his voice low but steady, “that I will do whatever I have to do to keep you and the kids safe.”

Which wasn’t exactly the promise she’d wanted, but she knew it was the promise he felt comfortable making, so she nodded, lifted up on her toes and pressed her lips to his. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

# Chapter Thirty-Three

*When darkness turns to light*  
*It ends tonight*  
*It ends tonight*  
*Just a little insight won't make this right*  
*It's too late to fight*  
*It ends tonight,*  
*It ends tonight*  
- It Ends Tonight, All-American Rejects

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*Thursday, September 8, 2005*

## Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

Nothing was going right. *Nothing* was going the way he had planned.

“Where’s my daughter?” he demanded of the man standing in front of him—this moron, this useless piece of trash that he’d depended on.

The man—what the fuck was his name? Fuck it, it didn’t matter. He was a number. A piece of flesh. One as useless as the next. *No* one could get him results. His fucking kid should be back where she belonged—where she should have been the moment her whore of a mother took her last breath.

“The team we sent to get her ran into a few issues,” the man—Ricky? Diego? Oscar?—replied. Was he smirking? Was this bastard standing in his living room, *smirking* at him? Who the *fuck* did he think he was talking to?

“Two days ago?” Sonny demanded. He’d woken this morning and looked at a newspaper—he’d been startled to learn it was Thursday. Hadn’t it just been Tuesday? Hadn’t he just left the hospital? He’d thought...he’d lost track of time, was all. He had a lot on his mind.

“Morgan’s gone underground,” RickyDiegoOscar told him. “And taken the woman and children with him. We’re looking, but we should shift our focus—”

“I *want* my kid back,” Sonny said, his teeth clenched, his jaw aching. Why couldn’t anyone fucking *understand* how it worked? Once he had Evie, once he had physical possession, Jason would crawl out of the fucking ground and he’d deal then. That’s how it *had* to happen.

“Let me take this,” RickyDiegoOscar told him, already removing his ringing cell phone from the inside of his suit jacket. He stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind him.

And something clicked in Sonny’s head then. He could remember now—watching this fucker step in and out of the penthouse on phone calls. He was one of the men Hector Ruiz had loaned him when Sonny’s own crew had betrayed him.



If he and Ruiz were on the same wave length—if they were after the same goal—then why the *hell* did this son of a bitch need to take his calls in private?

Sonny stepped closer to the door, knowing that no one but he and Jason knew that this door—this *one* door was thinner than it was supposed to be. After the man on the door before Max had betrayed them to Alcazar, Sonny had wanted closer supervision. Had wanted to be sure no one could step out and do exactly what this shithead was doing.

“Yeah, Boss? Sorry about the delay. We have a few leads, we’re hoping to put the kid on a plane tonight.” Another long pause before he spoke again. “What about Zacchara? Yeah? When he’s coming around? That doesn’t give us much—okay, okay. I hear ya. Yeah. Got it.”

Sonny stumbled back from door, his pulse racing, his head aching. He couldn’t focus. *Couldn’t* put the puzzle pieces together. Ruiz was supposed to get Evie back so Sonny could negotiate from a place of power. He’d promised Ruiz access to the territory, a cut on the tariffs Sonny usually imposed. But—he swallowed. This *wasn’t* how it was supposed to be. She shouldn’t be on a plane anywhere except —

Oh, *God*.

RickyDiegoOscar stepped back inside and strode past Sonny without looking at him, without speaking. Fucking *dismissing* him. “Senor Ruiz has informed me the deal is off.” He picked up a bag from near the coffee table. “I’ll be returning to Miami, and if I were you, Corinthos, I’d clear out. Morgan made a deal with Anthony Zacchara.”

“A deal with...” Sonny grabbed his arm. “What the *hell* are you talking about? Ruiz is supposed to get me my daughter so I can get my territory back—”

“You’re a fucking *lunatic*—” He shook off Sonny’s arm and sneered at him. “I had orders to put your kid on a plane so Ruiz could deal with Morgan directly. Did you *really* think you could come to us from a sign of strength? Your *own* men turned on you, your partner fucked your woman and who the hell *knows* who the brat belongs to? You’re nothing, Corinthos. You’re the only one who doesn’t seem to *know* it.”

And he was gone before Sonny could even digest half of what he’d said. Evie to Miami? What...

He stumbled up the stairs. He needed Carly. *Carly* had stood by him. She came with him to the hospital, had come back to the penthouse. She hadn’t left him. She was the only one who’d stuck.

He heard her voice before he flung the master bedroom open. It wasn’t until she spun around, the cell sliding from her hand to fall silently against the plush carpet that he even registered the words she’d been saying.

“Jason, he’s still planning to come after the kids. Are they safe?”

His mind went blank as he stared at the phone at the ground, the small screen clearly showing the

name Jason Morgan. He raised his foot and stomped on it again and again, feeling delicious pleasure in hearing plastic snap.

“Sonny, wait—” His wife’s terrified cries broke into the cloud of pleasure. He looked at her then as she backed away from him and started to slide to the door.

She’d betrayed him. They’d *all* turned their backs on him. Didn’t they *know* who the fuck he *was*? He was Sonny **GODDAMN** Corinthos, and it was time they started to show him the respect he damned well deserved.

“Sonny—” Carly began, but he didn’t hear her. He couldn’t hear her. He was *done* listening to her lies, to her poison.

## **Warehouse: Conference Room**

Jason swallowed hard as the connection went dead. He’d barely had a moment to speak to Carly, to assess the situation and figure out how to get her out of there before the interruption.

“Jase?” Johnny O’Brien said. “What happened?”

“She—” Jason set his phone down. “She was interrupted.” Damn it. If Sonny had overheard her calling, reporting in—

Carly had called him for the first time the day before as he driven back from a tense but successful meeting in Crimson Pointe. She’d been frantic for hours, worried about her boys, about Jason and his family—but Sonny had locked her in their penthouse—confined her to the upstairs while men came and went.

She had told him that she wasn’t sure what was going on, but that Sonny was worse than ever. He was losing track of time, losing track of hours and days. His moods were swinging back and forth violently—she knew that glass shattering was a common sound now, she’d even heard the thudding and snapping of wood. She couldn’t imagine what was left of their furniture. The terror had bled through her words, but he’d been powerless in the moment to make it stop.

Jason had assured Carly the boys were safe with Courtney—he’d spoken with his ex-wife and both boys just that morning. Evie and Cam were safe, so was Elizabeth. He was going to get Carly out just as soon as he could.

They’d been planning that for most of the morning—trying to design a lure to get Sonny out of the penthouse, knowing that if Anthony was successful with his threats to Hector Ruiz, the men should be clearing out of the building sometime today or tomorrow. But there wasn’t time to wait now.

“Interrupted how?” Max demanded. “Jason—”

“I don’t know. Do we have eyes and ears at Harborview?” He looked to Francis. “Can you find out what the hell is going on?” But he *had* to act. Carly had risked her life to warn him about Sonny—even if Jason had already known of the continued threat—she had *still* reached out to him.

But Francis' phone was already ringing. He answered it, spoke briefly, then hung up. "Ruiz's men have cleared out. And Sonny—Sonny just left the building. They put a tail on him—"

"But Sonny lost it." Jason sighed, wishing that something would go his way. "He's been ditching tails since he was a teenager. I guess he hasn't lost his touch. Ah. Okay. Okay. Let's...let's try to track him down. Someone call Zacchara to confirm Ruiz's men are clearing out permanently. Max, Johnny—"

"Let's go check on Mrs. C," Johnny said, getting to his feet.

## **Estate: Living Room**

Elizabeth sighed and curled up on the sofa with the view out the large bay windows. It had been two days since Jason had left. Cody had arrived to take over security detail, and Tommy and Bernie were in and out of the office across the hall—but no one was keeping her in the loop and she knew better than to ask.

"I'm not sure if I'm cut out for this," Nadine said from the other end of the sofa. She didn't look away from the daytime soap on the television in front of her, though Elizabeth doubted she knew what she'd watched. Daytime television had been playing mindlessly since their arrival—Nadine wasn't one for silence.

She thought she should say something to support Nadine, to make the other woman feel better, but she couldn't. There weren't any words she could dredge up at the moment to reassure herself, much less someone else.

"It's easy to be strong," Elizabeth said finally, "when the man you love is *with* you. You can look into their eyes; you can justify the sacrifice more easily when they're in the room. When I'm with Jason, when we're with the kids, I can tell myself *this* is a family worth fighting for. That Jason is the best father for my son, that I am the best mother for his daughter. That together, we're going to raise two beautiful and amazing children. And maybe we'll have more because Jason deserves that."

"But when they're gone," Nadine said quietly, "when they're missing, when you don't know where they are, if they're okay—"

"The doubts creep back in," Elizabeth admitted. "I'm not proud of it. I'm not proud that I only feel strong when Jason's here. That I'm only certain when he's with me. I keep telling myself that it's all worth it. That this is just a bump in the road. That we'll get through this and come out on the other side." She rubbed her face. "I walked into this with both eyes open, without any dishonesty, but I think—even after everything I've been there—I'm *still* naive about the men who lead this life."

Nadine bit her lip. "I'm not sure Johnny is going to be able to stay out of his father's business forever, which means I have a decision to make." She looked at Elizabeth. "Are you changing your mind?"

"No," Elizabeth said after a long pause. "No, I can't—I've tried to be with other people. To live a different life. To be a different person. But I—"

She looked down at the ring on her finger, remembering the promise she'd made him, the pure joy she'd felt that night he'd asked her to marry him.

And she smiled.

"All roads have always led me back here. There's no turning back. I've loved him since I was eighteen years old. That's not going to change and I've stopped trying to make it."

At the entrance to the room, Bernie cleared his throat. "Ms. Webber, Ms. Crowell—"

"Bernie," Elizabeth said with exhaustion. "We've been *shot* at together. I think we can be upgraded to first name basis, don't you?"

The older man flushed a bit. "Ah, yes, well, be that as it may—we thought you'd like to know. Johnny Zacchara called. The Ruiz family pulled their men today." He paused. "We haven't...dealt with Sonny yet, so Jason—"

"He won't be here until it's over," Elizabeth finished for him, but some of the tension coiled in her belly had dissipated. Sonny didn't have armed men behind him—he was alone. This was better. Wasn't it? "Okay. Okay. Thank you, Bernie."

"I should be relieved, right?" Nadine said. "Johnny's dad did what he was supposed to do. But—"

"Whatever's happening is just going to get worse before it gets better," Elizabeth murmured. "We're just in the thick of it now." She met Nadine's troubled blue eyes. "No, I don't think relief is the right emotion. Maybe—"

Sonny was alone now, likely feeling betrayed on all sides. Maybe dread would be the better answer, but that was something else better left unsaid.

## **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

The room was dark but they could see the remnants of the mini bar and the broken wood of the coffee table. The dining table and its chairs were strewn across the room. Though Sonny had often shattered the mini bar, the broken furniture was different. A new sign of rage that made Jason all too aware of the deafening quiet.

Just an hour ago, Carly had been speaking to him on the phone before she'd been caught.

They crept up the stairs and down the dim hallway, bypassing rooms Jason knew to belong to the boys, to the nanny before arriving at the master bedroom. With a glance behind him to be sure that the trio of guards were still with him, he gently pushed the ajar door.

The room was destroyed—clothes strewn from open drawers, the closet gaped open, the mirror of Carly's vanity table shattered, the various powders, tubs and pots cracked and broken on the floor around it.

And in the corner, in the small space between the wall and night stand, a figure sat, her knees drawn up, forehead resting against them. The fingers that dug into her legs were scraped and bleeding, a thin line of blood seeped from a cut near her temple, her limp blonde hair was stained with blood.

Jason swore, tucked his gun back into the small of his back and rushed forward. “Carly!”

Her head snapped up, the fear in her eyes almost feral. “No! Stop! I won’t go! *Don’t*—”

Then her eyes focused as Jason knelt in front her, tilting her chin. “J-Jason?”

He checked the wound at her temple—a deep and nasty cut that looked worse than it likely was. There was another cut on her cheekbone and her fingernails were bitten down to the quick. Jesus Christ. “Carly. We need to get you out of here.”

“N-No, if I leave, if he finds out—” She closed her eyes. “No, I *have* to stay. He told me I can’t go. He’ll kill me if I go.”

“Holy shit,” he heard someone say behind him, but he didn’t look to see who.

“He’ll kill you if you stay,” Jason said, for the first time believing down to his depths that Sonny Corinthos had shattered inside—that what had made his former mentor the man he’d been had vanished somehow. “Carly—”

“I deserve this,” she said softly. “I *did* this.”

“No,” Jason said forcefully. He gently pulled her to her feet, leaning her slight weight against him. “No, you didn’t.” She may have exacerbated some of the issues—maybe she hadn’t been much help—but none of this was truly her fault. Not alone.

They’d *all* ignored the signs that Sonny’s issues weren’t just superficial—they’d spent years compensating for his problems, keeping them hidden. How many times that Jason rationalized Sonny’s dark moods? He’d learned how to use them, to work around them.

He’d never bothered to question their existence, to try to and resolve them. Carly had followed his lead. They both shared some of the blame for allowing Sonny to drift so close to the edge all those times without once learning how to keep the edge from appearing.

He motioned for Johnny to come forward. “Johnny is going to take you down to the car, okay?” he told Carly whose initial protest had dissipated. She leaned against the guard, her eyes closed, her face ashen. “I’m calling ahead to the hospital. As soon as they discharge you, I’ll send you to New York. To Courtney and the boys.”

“I tried to stop it,” she told him. “I was calling you. I was going to warn you, but he—” A tear slid down her cheek. “He caught me. He thought I was betraying him.” And then her eyes snapped into focus. “The kids, they’re safe? They’re okay? He was—”

“They’re safe,” he told her, touching her shoulder. “Elizabeth and the kids are safe. Your boys are

safe. Courtney and your mother are safe. Let me make sure *you're* safe.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “Okay.”

Jason watched as Johnny gently led the broken blonde from the room. “Francis, I want someone with Carly at all times from now on.” He drew out his cell phone and dialed.

*“Jason?” his mother’s voice, surprised and a bit worried came on the line. “Jason, oh, I’m so glad to hear from you. We’re so worried. We haven’t heard from you in days—there were gun shots at the house—”*

“Everyone is okay,” Jason said, taking a moment to reassure a woman he knew cared for his family, for him. “I promise. I’m coming to the hospital with Carly. Can you—” he hesitated. “I know it’s not your area, but she needs someone—”

*“I’ll meet you in the lobby,” Monica said. “Bobbie’s working today, should I call her with us? Is Carly okay?”*

“No,” Jason said honestly. “No, but she will be. Thanks.”

## **General Hospital: Conference Room**

“Hey,” Steven said as he entered the room. “You paged me here?”

“Yeah.” Emily faced him, twisting her fingers together. “Jason just called me. He brought Carly to see my mother and he wants to talk to us.”

Steven’s fatigued eyes sharpened. “It’s about damn *time*. The house was shot up two days ago, Elizabeth isn’t answering her phone—”

“I know, I know.” Emily sighed, pressing her hands to her face. “But we’d know if anything – if it was bad. The fact Jason has waited so long—”

“I wish I had your confidence,” he muttered, collapsing into one of the chairs. “I encouraged her to go for things with Jason. Was I wrong? Should I have told her to run?”

“Others have tried,” she said simply. “*She’s* tried. You don’t always get to choose the path you take in life. You can shape it, but you don’t pick it. She tried to live a different life, to love a different man. My brother’s life may not be safe, but—”

“When I saw her in California, after Cameron was born...” Steven dipped his head, focused on the table. “She wasn’t the little sister I remembered. She’d lost a piece of herself. I know she was better after therapy, because when she came home, she’d grown up so much.” He looked at Emily. “Ric, Lucky, the son of a bitch who raped her—they *broke* something inside. I guess I have to decide if that’s worse than the external danger Jason brings to the table.”

“Elizabeth is the only one that can answer that,” Emily said quietly, but she’d be lying to herself if *she*

hadn't asked herself that question. As much as she loved the idea of her best friend forming a family with her brother—could she live with herself if something happened to Elizabeth and the kids?

The door opened then, and Jason entered. He looked as tired as Steven did, his shoulders a bit slumped. "Emily—"

She rushed across the room to embrace him tightly. "I've been *so* worried since you sent the guards to the mansion, since I heard about the shooting at the house, at the warehouse—"

"Everyone is fine," Jason told her. He drew back, rubbing her upper arms and looking at Steven. "The kids and Elizabeth are safe. I can't tell you where they are until..." He stopped and took a deep breath. "Until I figure out how to keep them safe permanently."

"Until Sonny Corinthos is no longer a threat," Steven said evenly. "You promise me my sister is okay? That Cam and Evie are safe?"

"I do," Jason said. "No one was hurt, but I need them out of the public eye for now." He looked back at his sister. "Will you and Nikolas stay at the mansion until this is over? With my men and the security Edward has there, you should be safe. I don't think you or Steven are in danger, but—"

"The guy can stay at the apartment," Steven cut in. "I don't want to be someone you worry about. Someone *Elizabeth* worries about. We should both be okay at the hospital." Emily shot him a grateful look. Steven might not be on board with all of this, but he knew how to be a team player when it mattered.

Jason took a deep breath and continued. "I talked to Monica and Alan to make sure things are good here. I'm satisfied with the security."

"How's Carly?" Emily asked. "Mom said she'd been hurt. Did—" she swallowed hard. "Did Sonny —"

"She tried to call me, to warn me Sonny was still planning something," Jason admitted. He stepped away from her, letting his hands fall to his side. "He caught her while we were talking. He—" He stopped, swallowing as if the words were stuck. "He hit her, he threw her into her vanity table—it's mostly cuts and bruises. Bobbie's with her now, and I'm having one of my men take her to New York where Courtney has the boys."

"Jesus," Steven murmured. "What the hell happened to him? I thought he had some sort of code—"

"A psychotic break," Emily supplied when Jason had nothing to offer. "It happens sometimes with bipolar disorder. I talked to Lainey, and she said that one of the side effects of someone with a bipolar disorder being treated with anti-depressants is that it helps them remain level during the low points of the cycle, but when they're going to have a manic episode—"

"It makes it worse," Steven supplied.

"It amplifies everything that's bad inside you, every flaw you have, and makes it the worst thing about

you. Sonny's always been paranoid, always sure someone's coming after him—especially since Brenda.” Emily bit her lip, looking at her brother. “Jason, if you come across Sonny like this—”

“I know it might be bad. I know—” Jason looked away, the words unsaid but they all knew what action he was preparing himself for.

“You might still be able to reach him,” Emily said. “I’ve been trying to read about this—I want everyone to come out of this okay—”

“Emily—”

“And if okay isn’t an option,” she continued, “I’ll settle for alive. This isn’t Sonny’s fault. Not really. He isn’t himself, and I don’t want *you* to have to live with yourself if you have to—” She stopped. “Look, if it’s severe—which it clearly is—Lainey said the best thing you can do is to talk to him calmly, but don’t play along if he’s delusional. As soon as you find him, you need to call the authorities.” She fished in her lab coat for the card she’d been holding. “Lainey is ready for you to call. Sonny needs help.”

Jason accepted the card. “I can’t make any promises, Em—” His phone rang. He answered it, turning away from them. When he returned, the fatigue had disappeared, his shoulders were tight with tension. “I have to go.”

“Be careful.” She leaned up on her toes and kissed his cheek. “Take care of yourself.”

She watched him go, conscious of the fact that it might be the last time she saw her beloved brother alive. “Em?” Steven asked, his hands on her shoulder. “How are you feeling? Should I call Nikolas?”

“I’m fine,” she murmured, pressing her hand to her abdomen, thinking about the child she was going to bring into this world. “We should get back to work.”

## **Warehouse: Offices**

“He got here just after you left for the penthouse,” Francis told Jason as they walked from the back of the building towards the charred coffee storage rooms and packing areas. “We did what you wanted—we hung back, made sure he was alone. I don’t think he knew we were here.”

They stopped before the double doors into the primary storage room, a bit charred from the fire. Jason reached behind him and pulled his gun from his waistband, checking the ammunition. “What was his mood like?”

“He was rushing when he first arrived,” the other man answered. “Breathing hard, gun out—he went right for your offices. Looking for you, I would imagine. He was inside his office for a long time. I was going to call then—no one showed up to back him up. He’s been here almost an hour. Nothing.”

Francis caught his arm just as Jason started to ease the door open. “Jase, he was quiet when he came out, but you and I both know Sonny. Quiet isn’t always *better*. I think I prefer him in a pissed off rage.”



“Yeah.” Jason handed him the card his sister had given him. “You come in with me, but stay behind. I’ll give you a sign—you leave, you call this number and you tell this woman to send an ambulance.”

“Jase—”

“I don’t want to kill him,” Jason said, his throat tight. “I *don’t*. He’s sick. You know that, Francis. He’s always been paranoid, always been selfish, reckless. But he’s sick. And if there’s a chance—”

“No one wants this to go down like that,” the older man told him, his voice rough with a mixture of anger and despair. “We all came up under Sonny, we *all* promised him loyalty. But, God, do not make me go to that safe house and tell Elizabeth—”

“Francis—” Jason hesitated, before exhaling slowly. “Let’s just...let’s just get this over with.”

When the guard nodded, Jason eased the door open and crept into the large room, with its ceiling still a series of gaping holes, the only light coming from the fading streaks of sunlight as the day slid into twilight, wind rustling through.

Sonny was across the room, near the open door to the loading dock, sitting on a discarded crate. The light spilling in from the moon and the faint lights in the truck yard beyond the next room only revealed his presence—Jason couldn’t quite discern his facial expression.

His foot scuffed over a broken plank from the fire as Jason neared him. He stopped as Sonny started. The older man turned towards him, his face dimly lit by a shaft of moonlight. “Jason?”

His voice sounded weak, even tired. The anger that been so prevalent these last few weeks was absent. Had the psychotic break cleared? Had he returned to himself?

“Sonny...” Jason lowered his weapon, but didn’t put it away. If this was just a ploy, just an act—if something happened to him—Elizabeth and the kids would still be in danger.

“I hurt her,” Sonny said, his voice so weak it almost disappeared in the sounds of the lake behind them. “I never thought—”

“Who?” Jason asked, stopping roughly fifteen feet away, conscious that Francis still stood behind in the shadows where Sonny couldn’t see. “Who did you hurt, Sonny?”

“Carly,” he sighed the word. “You ever step outside yourself, Jase? Rise above your body and watch yourself do things? Commit horrible acts? Say terrible things?”

“Is that what’s been happening to you, Sonny?” Jason asked. Be calm, Emily had told him. He could do that. He’d done that for years.

“I don’t know, maybe...” Sonny closed his eyes. “She wanted to leave.”

Jason frowned, stepped closer. “Sonny—”

Sonny raised the gun Jason hadn't seen until then. Jason froze in his tracks as his former friend pointed the barrel at him, the aim at point-blank range. "But then I thought...maybe you should be the one to go."

# Chapter Thirty-Four

*They say it's what you make  
I say it's up to fate  
It's woven in my soul  
I need to let you go  
Your eyes, they shine so bright  
I wanna save that light  
I can't escape this now  
Unless you show me how*  
- Demons, Imagine Dragons

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*Thursday, September 8, 2005*

## Warehouse

Sonny stared at the gun in his hand, not entirely sure how it had come to this. How he could be standing in a room, pointing a gun at his best friend? At a man he'd considered his brother?

Didn't it make sense? If Jason were gone, wouldn't it be *over*?

"Sonny," Jason said, his voice even. Calm. The same tone he always used. "You don't want to do this."

He didn't, but he couldn't quite make himself lower the gun. He'd changed his mind already, hadn't he? "I came here," Sonny said slowly, shaking his head slightly, trying to remember why he was standing here. *Why* the gun was pointed at Jason.

Jason had a gun, too. He had it in his hands, but the barrel faced the ground. Not at Sonny. Why couldn't he think straight? "I came here," he repeated. "Because this can't keep happening."

"I know that," Jason said. "But we can stop it."

"I can." He remembered now. He remembered how this was supposed to happen. "I came here to get rid of you. Without you, I get my business back. I get my daughter. But—" Where had that gone? Why didn't he feel like that anymore? "You weren't in your office. Or any of the others."

He'd gone into his own office, flipped on a light. Looked at the room where he'd made so many decisions, where he'd held the power.

And he had *remembered*.

"Elizabeth."

Jason's eyes sharpened slightly and the hands holding his gun raised just a little, maybe two inches.

“What?” he demanded. “What about her?”

“I remembered her.” And that day she’d tried to save him. When she had convinced him he wasn’t okay. When she had convinced him he *could* be himself again. “I tried to be the man she thinks I was. I *tried*, Jason. I took pills.”

“I know you did.” Jason swallowed. “Sonny—”

“If I hurt you, if I killed you—” Sonny squinted. It had made *so* much sense before. He’d had an epiphany standing in his empty office, remembering that day in July when she’d come to him. Remembering all the other days she’d been there for him.

“I remembered how she was with Lucky,” Sonny continued. “She was like my mother; did I ever tell you that? Wrapped her life up in a man, couldn’t live without him. Turned herself inside out to keep him.”

“Sonny—”

“*That’s* what I thought that day in my office. That she looked like my mother. I wished my mother could have had her courage, her backbone.” He swallowed, remembering the woman who had raised him. “I’m like *him*.”

“Like—” Jason frowned, shook his head. “Who?”

“Deke.” The son of a bitch who broke his mother, who had *killed* her. Ruined everything. “I tried to be someone else. I tried to be better. I’m not. Carly.”

And now he remembered his wife, her tears. The look on her face as he’d thrown her across the room. The shatter of the mirror as her body had hit it. Then she’d slid to the floor, a cut on her face from the glass. He knew that look. That glazed primal fear.

“I hurt Carly. I broke her. If I—” His fingers flexed on the trigger as he struggled to ignore the small voice whispering in his ear. *Pull it. Pull it. It all goes away.* “If I do this, I break Elizabeth. Like I did Carly. Like Deke did to my mother. I can’t—” He swallowed. “I can’t do that. I can’t live with myself.”

“Then put down the gun,” Jason said, his voice quiet but firm. “And we’ll talk about this. I know you think it would make it easier—”

“I couldn’t save my mother,” Sonny interrupted. He wasn’t listening to Jason—those words weren’t important. Just the conviction creeping past the insidious voice trying to convince him that it was *better* to pull the trigger. “I couldn’t save Carly.”

“She’s okay, Sonny. She’s at the hospital—”

“I couldn’t help *them*,” Sonny whispered. “But I can help Elizabeth. The way she did for me. I can do that. I can be that man.”

“Sonny—”

“It has to be one of us.” Sonny looked at Jason, meeting his eyes. “We can’t keep doing this. It’s me or you, Jason. And it *can’t* be you.”

“Sonny—” Jason stepped forward, but Sonny had already changed the angle of the gun.

With the cool metal touching his temple, Sonny closed his eyes. It had to be him. It was the *only* way to make it all stop.

The gunshot was deafening, echoing into the room as the sound bounced against the walls before disappearing through the open roof.

A searing pain speared through Sonny’s hand as he sprawled to the ground, his gun flying across the room. He laid on his side, clutching his hand, watching almost with disinterest as one of his fingers seemed to just be...gone.

Voices—shouting—he could hear it from far away, but the only thing he could really bring into focus was Jason as he knelt next to Sonny.

“It should have been over,” Sonny managed, the pain traveling up his arm, spreading into his chest. He closed his eyes again. “It should have been over.”

“It will be,” he thought he heard Jason say, but he was already surrendering to the sweet darkness beckoning him.

## **Estate: Nursery**

“Really, Miss Webber,” Nora said with a smile, her eyes a bit tired. “I’m feeling so much better, you know? I wasn’t hurt that much—”

“You had a *concussion*,” Elizabeth cut in. “Nora—”

“You don’t have to tip toe around me.” Nora lifted Evie into her arms and accepted a fierce hug and kiss from the toddler who’d recently discovered people liked it when she did that. “I took a job with Jason Morgan. I take Denny and Lyle with me every time I leave the house with the kids—”

“*Knowing* and actually going through what happened are two different things,” Elizabeth said, folding her arms. She waited for Nora to set Evie back on her unsteady feet. Evie dropped into a crawl and scampered to the tower of blocks Cameron was building.

“Yeah.” Nora exhaled slowly. “It was scary. We were just—we were packing and Lyle was upstairs with us. The kids were playing just like they are now. I knew things were tense—I heard fighting downstairs and I—” She blinked. “I was terrified, to be honest. I was going to take the kids and take them into the closet with me—I was going to keep them quiet, to try and protect them—and then Lyle was shot and—”

Elizabeth put a hand on the younger woman's shoulder. "I know you protected them, and God, it means the world to me."

"They always tell you not to get attached, you know?" Nora bit her lip. "As a nanny. I mean, they're not my kids, and when they go off to school, you won't need a full-time nanny, which is *fine*, but—" She dipped her head. "I've been with Evie since the beginning almost, and I love her. And Cam is so much fun—we're in a routine and they're almost really like brother and sister, like they've always been..." She looked away, toward the kids, and smiled. "It was scary, but we're *okay*. And I know Mr. Morgan will protect us. To be honest, if I'm with the kids, with the guards, I'm probably safer than I would be crossing the street."

"Yeah, you're not wrong there." The mob didn't have a monopoly on danger and violence. "All right," Elizabeth said. "I'm going to check on Nadine—" Her phone rang then and her heart skipped a beat when she saw the name on the caller screen. "I'll be back."

She hurried down the hall, answering the phone as she did. "Jason? Oh my God, are you okay?"

"*Yeah.*" His voice was quiet. "*Yeah, I'm okay.*"

She went into the master bedroom, closing the door behind her. "What happened?"

"*Uh.*" There was a long pause. "*We...we got Sonny. He's...he's in the psych ward here at the hospital.*"

She sat down hard on the bed, unsure what to say next. She really hadn't expected to hear those words. Sonny was at the hospital. Which meant he was alive. "What does that mean? Jason—"

"*I can't...*" He paused again, and she could hear the fatigue in his voice, the weariness. "*He tried to—he tried to kill himself. It was—he had a fight with Carly, and he—he hit her. We just got to the hospital—they're still waiting to talk to me about—*" He stopped talking to her, and she could hear faint voices in the background. After another moment, he returned to her. "*He's under lock and key, Elizabeth. For now. They're holding him for seventy-two hours. I'm not sure what's going to happen after that.*"

She closed her eyes. "But he's talking to doctors—"

"*Yeah, and he's being held because he's a danger to himself and others. I think—*" He stopped again, and she could again hear faint conversation on his side of the line. Finally, he said, "*I'd like you and the kids to stay out there until the seventy-two hours pass. Until I know what happens next*—"

"And I guess you won't be coming out here," she murmured.

"*I—*"

"It's fine, Jason. You're right. It's safer to stay where we're out of the way." She leaned against the bedroom door. "The kids miss you. Cam asked for you last night."

*"I miss them, too. I wish—"* But he stopped and she could almost see him shaking his head, standing in a hallway at the hospital. *"This is going to be over. One way or another. If they release him, Elizabeth, I promise—"*

"I know." She sighed, closing her eyes. "I love you."

*"I love you, too."*

She slid the phone back in her pocket, bit her lip, and then went downstairs.

Bernie was by himself in the office, murmuring to himself as he made a notation before going back to the computer and squinting. He looked up at her entrance and offered her a warm smile. "Miss Webber—"

"Have you heard from Jason or anyone in Port Charles?" she asked. She sat in a chair in front of the desk, twisting her fingers in her lap.

"I have. Jason called a bit ago, and I think he was going to call you next." Bernie set his pen aside. "It's good news, don't you think?"

"I guess." She looked down at her fingers, at the ring Jason had given her all those weeks ago. "Is it wrong that—" She sank her teeth into her bottom lip so hard she tasted blood. "God, Bernie, this sounds so *horrible*—"

"You're not exactly relieved to learn that Sonny is in the hospital and alive," the older man said gently. "After what happened to you, to your children, knowing everything you do about the situation—I'm not sure anyone could blame you."

"I mean, it's the better outcome," Elizabeth said. She raised her eyes and looked past Bernie to the trees in the yard, focusing on the brilliant reds and orange of the coming autumn. "Jason doesn't have to live with himself, and I *wouldn't* wish it on him."

Bernie looked at her lap, watched her twist her ring again and again. "Miss Webber—"

"Please, please—" She closed her eyes. "Call me Elizabeth. We've been shot at together, I know Jason left you and Tommy here for added protection."

"Elizabeth," Bernie said again. "We all respect you. We know how you've stood by Jason, and to be frank, many of the men who work with Jason were relieved by your presence. Your relationship with him, the children—they *forced* him to take control when in the past—"

"He's patched Sonny up for the next time." She nodded. "This isn't me having doubts, Bernie. Not about Jason. It's just—" She sighed and tilted her head up to look at the ceiling. "I think I really expected something final. A resolution that felt like the answer to our problem, and God, that's so selfish of me. To wish that the man I love more than anything killed a man I *know* to be ill, to have a mental illness. But I've talked to Nora, and I saw the bullet wound Lyle's recovering from. I can't ignore what he did. I should. Because I know it wasn't him—"

“It was the *worst* part of him,” Bernie corrected gently. “My brother and I have worked for Sonny for many years, and before him, Frank Smith. I watched him come up in this business and I’ve found a lot to respect about him. But he’s *always* had the capability to be cruel and violent. He’s no different than the other men who work with us. Not in that respect. But Sonny had honor. And he had a code. Whatever is in his head—the man who sent armed thugs to take Evangeline by force—that man *is* inside of Sonny. He always has been.”

“I’m scared,” Elizabeth murmured, “that Sonny might find another treatment that works for a little while, and Jason’s loyalty will make him forget that—”

“—and put him back in charge. The way he always has.” Bernie nodded. “I can’t tell you that won’t happen or that Jason won’t consider it. I just—I don’t know. You know Jason—”

“He’s not one for opening up.” Elizabeth sighed and nodded. “Yeah. Thanks, Bernie. I think I just—I needed to let myself...admit how scared I am that this isn’t the end. Because it’s something Jason and I need to discuss.”

Bernie looked as though he wanted to add something, but Tommy strode in then, followed by another guard leaving Elizabeth to excuse herself quietly.

*Saturday, September 10, 2005*

### **General Hospital: Carly’s Room**

She couldn’t quite focus on the woman standing in her hospital room explaining Sonny’s course of treatment. Lainey Winters had been speaking for several minutes, she could hear her sister-in-law responding, even asking questions

But Carly couldn’t quite lift her head to look at the doctor. Couldn’t quite make herself focus. Hadn’t been able to in days. She would be released from the hospital this afternoon, but she didn’t think she’d leave.

This room, this bed—this was *safe*. Jason had a man on the door. No one could come in.

“Carly?” Courtney’s soft voice drifted into the haze. “Do you have any questions for Dr. Winters?”

Carly turned her head, blinking at Courtney before looking at the pretty young woman with the sober eyes standing at the foot of her bed. “Could I have stopped it?”

“Mrs. Corinthos...” Lainey Winters bit her lip. “I don’t think that’s a productive—”

“I knew he had dark moods,” Carly continued forcing the words through her raspy voice. “I knew it was getting worse. *Could* I have stopped it?”

“It’s hard to say...” She paused. “Maybe you could have reached out to health care professionals, but to be honest, Mrs. Corinthos? Based on my meetings with your husband so far, I don’t think he would have agreed to see us. To take any of this seriously unless he’d had a break. Until he had no choice.”



Carly closed her eyes. “I couldn’t have stopped it, then. But maybe...” A tear slid down her cheek, chilling the skin as it slid down to her jaw. “Maybe I still should have left.”

“Carly,” Courtney murmured. “You did the best you could.”

“Yeah...” She turned her head back. “And maybe if we *both* say that enough, we’ll believe it.”

“Mrs. Corinthos,” Lainey said, her voice closer and...kind? Carly opened her eyes to find the doctor perched at her bedside, her eyes open, warm. “Family members are often in the line of fire. You cannot force someone to get help. Not unless they present a clear and present danger. And walking away, leaving—is often just as difficult. When your sister-in-law says you likely did the best you could, I don’t think she’s being facetious.”

“Maybe.” Carly could feel her jaw tremble. “But she wasn’t there *every* day. I did things. And I made choices that were calculated. Maybe I couldn’t have stopped it, I’m willing to concede that. But I made it *worse*. I thought about myself.”

“Carly—”

“No!” Carly fisted her hand against the white blanket. “I told myself it was about making Sonny better. If he had Evie, if Jason would fix it, if he would just save the day—then Sonny would be okay. But that was a lie and I knew it then. I wanted my life to be okay. I tried to give him another child to preserve *my* life, not his.”

Lainey drew a card from her clipboard. “I know you might now agree, but I think you should consider talking to someone. Sonny didn’t go through this alone. You and your boys did as well.”

When Carly didn’t reach for the card, Courtney did. “I think that sounds like a good idea. Thanks, Dr. Winters.” The woman nodded and left the room.

“You heard Dr. Winters, didn’t you?” Courtney asked. “Sonny will be in Shadybrooke for a while. You should come with me to New York. With the boys. A fresh start—”

“You don’t even *like* me,” Carly said sullenly. She closed eyes, trying to drift away, trying to return the haze, but Courtney wasn’t having it.

“You think *you* made it worse?” Sonny’s sister demanded. “I knew what was going on. I knew Sonny was in a difficult place, I knew Jason was lying about Evie. I knew you and Sonny were torturing each other. But I *left*. I ran away and left it to you and Jason. I abandoned my brother when I should have stuck. You’re not the only one who feels guilty, Carly. I should have stuck by you, by my family.”

“So, now you want to make yourself feel better?” Carly retorted. She took a deep breath. This wasn’t helping. “I’m sorry.”

“Look, maybe we don’t like each other all that much,” Courtney admitted. “But this last year—these last two years have been stressful. Difficult. I think we both deserve a chance to do better. To be better. I love my nephews. I think they need a fresh start. If it doesn’t work out, then fine.” She

squeezed Carly's hand. "Like it or not, we're family. I didn't do right by my brother. *Please.*"

"Okay." Carly nodded. "I can't—I don't want to be in Port Charles anymore, so maybe...you're right. The boys and I could be okay in New York. Thank you."

*Sunday, September 11, 2005*

## **Hardy House: Living Room**

Elizabeth stepped inside her home with Evie in her arms. She moved to one side as Cameron came barreling in, a laughing Nora following and Denny, Lyle, Milo, and Cody holding up the rear.

She hadn't seen the wreckage—hadn't seen the remnants of the fight, of the violence that had nearly seen the little girl in her arms lost to her. Despite Cody's assurances, she'd been bracing herself to see her grandmother's home in disarray.

"It looks the same," she murmured as she sat Evie down—the squirming baby immediately crawling after her brother. She barely saw as Denny and Lyle started to help Nora up the stairs with their meager luggage, as Milo moved to take up position outside. "I thought—"

"With you coming back today, Jason wanted to make sure you..." Cody hesitated. "Well, that everything was okay. He wanted to be here—"

"I talked to him before I left the estate," she murmured, stepping down into the living room. She drew off her light coat and set it on the sofa. "They're moving Sonny to Shadybrooke today and he wanted to be there to make sure the paperwork was signed." Sonny had agreed to commit himself after the seventy-two-hour hold, but there was always a chance it would fall through.

Jason hadn't even given her the go ahead to come home until two hours earlier—he'd been worried it would fall apart at the end. She'd been horribly jealous when Johnny Zacchara had shown up at the estate the day before and Nadine had been allowed to leave. To return the world.

But she was home now. All of that was behind her.

"I'll be outside with Milo if you need anything," Cody began, but Milo opened the door, revealing Nikolas Cassadine on her front porch.

"Nikolas!" Elizabeth smiled, genuinely pleased at the first normal face she'd seen in days. When he embraced her tightly, she let herself relax for a moment, knowing that with *him*, she didn't have to put on a facade, didn't have to pretend.

"We'll be outside, Ms. Webber," Cody said.

"I know Emily said you were okay," Nikolas said, drawing back and kissing her forehead, "but you'll forgive me if I couldn't let myself believe it until I could see you."

"I know, I'm so glad to be home." They sat on the sofa and Elizabeth kicked off her shoes. "Emily is

trying to get tomorrow off so she can come over, and my brother is hoping to come by after his shift.”

“But you and the kids are okay?” Nikolas asked, squeezing her hand. “I don’t have to tell you how worried we were—”

“We’re okay.” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “And I think it’s going to be okay moving forward. Sonny’s...he’s going to be in Shadybrooke until the doctors let him out.”

“And after?” Nikolas prompted, his eyes dark with concern.

“We haven’t ironed everything out yet—”

“Elizabeth—” The exasperation in his tone wasn’t particularly surprising, but she tensed anyway. “They might release Sonny in a week. *A month*. As soon as his medication is working. And then what? Do you *know* how often mentally ill people stop taking—”

“Nikolas...” She took his hands in hers. “There’s nothing you’re saying that I’m *not* thinking. That I haven’t considered. I don’t have the answers. I just know my children and I can’t stay locked away forever. What happens when Sonny is released—Jason and I will cross that bridge when we come it.” She bit her lip. “When I first heard that Sonny was in the psych ward—that Jason had stopped him from killing himself, I wanted to *scream*. Because it could have been *over*. Definitely. Without reservation.”

“Exactly—”

“And I know that Jason wouldn’t blame me for feeling that way initially.” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “But having Sonny dead, having it be either Jason do it or stand by while Sonny killed himself—the man I love would have had to live with that for the rest of his life—our lives. You know the burden of having someone in your family that others wish dead—” She offered a wry smile. “And yet, your grandmother keeps breathing.”

“You’re not playing fair when you involve the Cassadine crazy.” Nikolas waited a moment. “I just—I worry, Elizabeth. It’s who I am.” He took a deep breath. “Okay. I’ll try not to harass you—”

“Hey, I need someone who will call me out.” She squeezed his hands. “We used to be that for each other. Before it all got messed up. I will *never* resent you for worrying about me, about my family. I only get annoyed when you don’t accept my decisions. I love Jason, and yes—what happened this week was terrifying and I had to reexamine my choices again. Do you think Jason hasn’t tried to give me an out? That he didn’t try to pull away?”

She hesitated. “But I know what I’m getting myself into. Even better now. There are dangers, yes. I rationalize it by saying that life isn’t really all that safe. Maybe I’m increasing the odds, I don’t know. I can’t know that.”

“Elizabeth—”

“But I’ve *tried* it the other way. I’ve left him. I’ve built lives with other men, and you know what?

Here I am again. I have a responsibility to myself and to my son to give him a good family. To be the best mother I know how to be. And I think Jason and I are better together than we are apart.”

“You sound very sure.” Nikolas tilted his head. “I can remember when you would tell me you loved Lucky. That you were committed to that life, to that dream and I don’t think I realized until now that you were trying to convince yourself, too. Because I can hear the difference now.” He laughed. “When you came home last year, that day you found Jason on the docks—Emily came to me. She was sure that this was the future—that it *should* be.”

“Yeah, she wasn’t that subtle.” Elizabeth snorted. “Opportunity creator, she called herself.”

“But she was.” Nikolas rose to his feet and Elizabeth followed suit. “She just made sure you and Jason were in the same room together, because she saw what I ignored for so long. What you and Jason tried to forget. Some things...the best tings...they’re just meant to be.”

### **Hardy House: Elizabeth’s Bedroom**

It wasn’t that late when Jason finally managed to return to the house—but it was past dinner and the time Evie and Cam would be fast asleep in their cribs, so he went straight upstairs.

It was the first time he’d been back in the house since Wednesday, and it was hard for him to walk down the hall, to look at the door to the kids’ bedroom, remembering the last time he’d stood in this position.

A man had been rushing towards him, a screaming Evie in his arms. There had been shouting—he’d arrived to the sound of gunshots from the upstairs.

If he had been even a *minute* later—

“Jason?”

He looked to the right, to the doorway where Elizabeth stood, swathed in blue silk that looked flimsy to his tired eyes, and held up by thin, nearly invisible straps. She reached out a hand to him, and he took it, drawing her into a tight embrace. He hadn’t seen her since that day—since he’d left to meet with Anthony Zacchara, and part of him hadn’t expected to ever look at her again. To hold her, to feel her skin warm beneath his.

“Hey,” he murmured into her hair. “I’m sorry I wasn’t home earlier—”

“It’s okay, you called.” She drew away, framing his face with her hands, her skin warm against his cheeks. “I *wish* you’d tell me what happened that day—”

Jason shook his head. He didn’t want to think about any of that anymore. He wouldn’t. There was still some clean up to be dealt with, some issues to be resolved, but for all intents and purposes—the crisis had passed.

And she was still *here*, their children asleep down the hall.

“I don’t want to talk about any of that,” he told her softly, backing her slowly into her bedroom and closing the door behind them. “Or anything at all.”

He took her hands in his, lacing his fingers with hers before pinning them behind her own back. He kissed her, her lips soft and open at his touch. He wanted to be in this moment, to drink it in, to immerse himself into her taste, her scent, her soft skin.

When she tugged slightly at his grip on her wrists, he released her hands. She reached for the hem of his shirt, her breathing shallow and coming faster. “I’ve missed you,” Elizabeth murmured as she dragged the fabric up and over his head, tossing it behind her.

He hooked his fingers under those flimsy straps and slid them down her warm shoulders. “Elizabeth—”

She shook her head, offering him a wicked smile. “Don’t tell me,” she murmured, pressing her lips under his jaw. “Show me.”

“Did you go to Shadybrooke with Sonny?” she asked, her voice drawing him back from a light doze. The moonlight drifted through the window, touching her bare shoulders as she propped her head up on an elbow, her eyes still in shadows.

“Yeah.” He slid a hand under his head, looking up at the ceiling. “I wanted to make sure the room—that it was big. And I wanted them to use some of the furniture from the penthouse so he’d feel more comfortable.” What pieces that hadn’t been destroyed. “The doctor thought it might help.” He looked at her. “I met with him. He was...he was better.”

“Yeah?” Her finger lightly traced a pattern on his chest. “The new medication is helping?”

“So far. He was lucid. Like when he came home from New York that first time.” He hesitated. “But I’m not...I don’t trust it. I *can’t* trust it.”

“Jason—”

“I’m glad he’s going to get better. For his sake. For Michael and Morgan. And maybe one day, he can have a relationship with Evie.”

“Okay—”

“But I can’t ever put him in charge again. I can’t risk it.” He exhaled slowly. “This—this is going to be permanent, Elizabeth. I’m going to stay in charge. I know it might have started as a temporary—”

She brushed her lips against his. “I never thought that, Jason. And I know you didn’t either. Even if Sonny were cured, he wouldn’t get back the loyalty. The respect. He’d have to use terror and fear to make people follow him. Like Anthony Zacchara. He wouldn’t want that. And you don’t.” Elizabeth tucked her head in crook of his shoulder. “So what happens after he’s released from Shadybrooke?”

“He’s thinking of going to the island for a while. Of running the casino there. With a doctor.” He

closed his eyes, turning his head slightly so his lips rested against her hair. “I don’t know. Whatever he does, it won’t be *here*.”

“Okay.”

“I—I wish I had done something,” he admitted. He opened his eyes, looking out into the darkness of the room. “Years ago. When it started. If we had...”

“You know better, Jason.” She raised her head slightly. “You can’t think about what ifs. We all could have done a thousand things differently. We didn’t.”

“I know. I know that. I—” He hesitated. “He was angry at first. When he woke in the hospital. Because I stopped him from killing himself. He wanted to die. To make it stop.”

“Jason...” Elizabeth looked down, looking at her hand on his chest. “At first, part of me wished that you had. Because, God, it *would* be easier. And I’m sorry for that. And I’m sorry you were ever in that position.”

“I couldn’t—”

“If you had,” she cut in, her voice hushed but forceful. “We both would have had to live with it. If you had, we both know it wouldn’t have been for him, it would have been for us. To make *our* lives easier. And I think it might have destroyed us in the end. I’m glad you’ve given him this second chance. Letting him pull that trigger? Letting him end it—” She shook her head. “That’s not who you are, and it’s not the man I love.”

He said nothing, because he didn’t know what to say to her. Her unconditional support, her belief in him—there were no words to tell her what it meant to him to know that she accepted him, had understood his choice—

“We’re going to help Sonny rebuild his life because *that’s* who we are,” Elizabeth continued. “We’re going to raise Evie to know Sonny, to know about Sam. And we’re going to do it together. You did the right thing, Jason. The best thing. I don’t know that anyone else would have. Or *could* have. I am so proud to be a part of your life, to raise my son with you.”

“Elizabeth—”

“It’s over,” she told him gently. “The worst of it. That’s the first time I’ve said it and truly believed it. We made it to the other side.”

He rolled over, tucking her beneath him so he could look in her eyes. “I love you,” Jason told her, hoping she would hear everything in those words that he could never quite manage to say. Everything that those words could never possibly encompass.

“I love you, too,” she murmured. Elizabeth laced her fingers in his hair and drew him down to her.

**THE END**



# Author's Note

So here we are at the end. Nearly twelve years since I thought about what would happen if Sam died and Jason ended up with her daughter. Two years since I started actually writing it.

It's been an amazing journey, and I've really tested myself by telling this story from Jason and Sonny's POV more than Elizabeth. I tried to make Sonny sympathetic, tried to make Courtney and Carly interesting characters you could sympathize with. I had initially planned to have Jason kill Sonny, but for me, this ending works better.

Thank you for your patience as I wrote this. I couldn't have done this without your support, without Cora's great feedback.

I'm not sure where I go from here. I've started graduate school this semester and haven't quite worked out the balance of work yet, so I'll keep you posted. Sign up at my site (linked in my profile if you're reading this at Fanfiction.net) for updates on what's to come.

If you've read this story at any point, if you've followed for the last two years, please drop me a line to let me know what you think after all of this.

<3 Melissa