

*To anyone who was reading at The Canvas in the summer of 2002.*

*I started posting there in late July, having fallen in love  
with Jason and Elizabeth while recovering from foot surgery.*

*I've been writing fanfiction since then — half my life!  
Those original readers who responded to Deserving and  
anything else I wrote are the reason I kept writing.*



## Inspiration

Once upon a time, in August 2002, I wrote my first Jason and Elizabeth story called *Deserving*. And then I decided to rewrite in the most asinine fashion—it became *The Sisters* and has sat on this site for many many years gathering dust while I stared at it, wishing it were a person I could punch. I know I'm usually pretty hard on my older stuff, but this particular piece is particularly putrid and I've known it since the beginning.

I've always had a yen to go back to the summer of 2002 before the Jason and Elizabeth storyline went off the rails, before Brenda's return decimated all the other storylines, before Courtney turned into whatever the hell they decided she was going to be. So really, my inspiration comes from just wanting to fix the worst rewrite I ever did. I actually don't even have the original version of *Deserving*, which makes me sad. Pieces of it survived into *The Sisters: Sweet Revenge*, but not the good pieces—if those ever existed. I just lifted scenes rather than attempting to actually rewrite it. I can't...understand what I did back then.

## Timeline

So in this rewrite, rather than simply returning to Summer 2002, I'm actually going back much further. After roughly about December 2001 and the Liz and Lucky wedding that never was, I'm rewriting the first half of 2002. Here are the major changes and the basic story set up for the opening.

For the most part, the months between December 2001-April 2002 will be filled in during the first few chapters as backstory so I won't harp too much on those changes.

I did tweak the way Sonny and Carly's divorce happened. Carly did her betrayal stuff in April 2001, and she and Sonny separated that summer. Their divorce was final in the fall of 2001, the two of them have mostly gone their separate ways.

We start in April 2002. Christ, I was still in high school then. Wow. Let's not even discuss that. As I mentioned, I've moved the timeline back to late 2001 — Lucky and Elizabeth didn't get married, but Gia also broke up with Nikolas, annoyed with it all. Sonny didn't adopt Michael, but still put AJ on a meat hook. Courtney showed up, married AJ who was disowned by the Quartermaines, etc. Other than that, I think most of it speaks for itself.

A note on characterization: I've chosen to portray Sean Kanan as AJ, Lucky as Jacob Young, Nikolas as Stephen Martines (or Coltin Scott, which I think he was using as his professional name back then), and whenever you hear about Carly, it's Sarah Brown.

A note on Courtney: She is going to be a major character in this story. I've taken her back to the very beginning — the girl I used to like quite a lot in the beginning. A bit naive, sweet, and believes the best in AJ. I hope you guys will give her a chance.

## Chapter One

*Get up, get out, get away from these liars  
'Cause they don't get your soul or your fire  
Take my hand, knot your fingers through mine  
And we'll walk from this dark room for the last time*  
- Open Your Eyes, Snow Patrol

---

*Sunday, April 14, 2002*

### Vista Point

After a long shift at Club 101, there was nothing Carly Corinthos loved more than taking her brand-new convertible racing along the high hills that bordered the north side of Port Charles. She'd shake off the frustrations of her day, letting them dissipate into the cold night air.

Spring had come early to upstate New York that year—the days were warm and sunny, the cherry blossom trees lining her mother's street had bloomed nearly a week ago, but the nights still held the bitter chill of winter.

But Carly wasn't thinking about the ice in the wind as she whipped around another corner. Everything in her life was finally just as it should be. She had her beautiful son, a great relationship with her mother, a cordial relationship with her ex-husband, a satisfying career—

She was even considering moving into her own house, but Michael loved the Brownstone and the quiet neighborhood with the park nearby. He liked being around his grandmother, around his uncle Lucas, and he liked when Elizabeth looked after him or picked him up from school. Her son was thriving for the first time in months, and Carly wasn't ready to rock the boat.

But soon, maybe. Or perhaps she'd ask her mother to rent the last empty apartment, even though it was across the hall from Marcus Taggert. It would give her some privacy, some space to herself and keep Michael in the same environment, with the same people.

She whipped around another corner and began to slowly decelerate, easing up on the gas and slowly tapping the breaks. Her brief free time was over, and it was time to get some sleep before having Sunday morning breakfast with Michael.

This was going to be year of Carly Corinthos and—

She took the last corner—the final one before she began the descent from the cliffs towards downtown Port Charles—but a flash of headlights blinded her vision. She jerked to the side, her car grinding against the guardrail that separated the road from the edge of the cliff.

There wasn't time to scream, wasn't time to think—There was a loud screech of metal, a grinding as a car slid past her.

Then her car was through the rail, teetering over the edge. Her hands shaking, she slowly reached for the car door—

Then everything went black.

### **Brownstone: Elizabeth and Gia's Apartment, Kitchen**

Elizabeth raised the carafe of coffee to her nose, wrinkling as she looked at her scowling roommate. "Did you stay up all night again, Gia?"

"Finals," came the mutter from the dining table that had never seen a plate of food. The last four months had seen it put into use as a double desk—Gia for her political science and psychology classes and Elizabeth, who was struggling with art history and business.

"I know, but you could have at least cleaned out the coffee pot for me." Elizabeth rinsed the carafe before setting it back on the pot. "I *could* make the argument that if you hadn't spent the majority of the semester flirting with your classmates, you wouldn't have to put in so much effort now—"

"But you value your life, so you won't." Gia Campbell lifted her head from her studies and frowned. "Why are you up at—" She blinked blearily, trying to focus on the wristwatch on her arm. "Shit. Five o'clock?"

"Morning shift at Kelly's. I have to open." She stifled a yawn. "But I was up late working on a paper about Monet's use of color."

"None of that means anything to me—" Gia broke off her smart remark as a cell phone rang shrilly. "Ugh. It is too early for that nonsense. You need to change that ring tone—"

"I'll get right on that—" Elizabeth fished in the pocket of her robe and blinked at the caller screen. "Why is Lucas calling me—" But she had flipped it open before finishing her question. "Lucas—"

*"Can you come downstairs? Right now?"*

"Is Bobbie okay? What's wrong?" Elizabeth asked, already heading to her bedroom.

The phone cradled between her ear and neck, she slid out of her pajama shorts and found a pair of jeans.

*“Carly—she had an accident. Mom’s freaking out. She wants to go to the station, but she’s in no position to drive. We need you to come downstairs and watch Michael. Can you?”*

“Ah, yeah. I’ll be right down.” Elizabeth closed her phone and dragged over a pair of sandals to slide her feet into. “Gia, can you call Courtney and ask her to open this morning? Carly had a car accident, Bobbie’s freaking out—”

“How bad?” Gia asked. “Elizabeth—”

“I don’t know, but it must—” And then Elizabeth stopped, her face pale. “Bobbie wants to go to the police station. Not the hospital.”

“And Carly should have been home from the club hours ago. This is bad, isn’t it?”

“And it’s about to be worse,” Elizabeth sighed. “Because Courtney—”

“Is married to AJ, which means the Quartermaines—”

“God, I hope she’s okay,” Elizabeth murmured, grabbing her keys, her purse and the phone. “Can you call her?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

### **AJ and Courtney’s Apartment: Bedroom**

The shrill ring of their land line was a harsh wake-up call. Courtney Quartermaine jerked out of a deep sleep, blinking at the offending plastic piece of junk at her bedside.

“What the hell?” her husband AJ demanded at her side, his words slurred. “I had the second shift—”

And she’d closed the night before and hadn’t been able to fall asleep until nearly one. Still, phone calls at—she looked at the clock—five-ten in the morning were never a good sign.

“Hello?” she all but yawned into the phone.

*“Hey, sorry to call so early,” Gia said, “but there’s some kind of emergency. Carly was in a car accident of some sort, so Bobbie needs Elizabeth to look after—”*

“Oh, no. Come on, Gia. I just closed—” Then the implications slid into Courtney’s sleep-fuzzed mind. “How bad was the accident?”

“What accident?” AJ asked. “Was it Elizabeth? Is that why you have to go in?”

*“I don’t know how bad, Courtney, but Bobbie’s going to the police station, not the hospital, and they waited to call her until now when Carly should have been home almost three hours ago.” Gia sighed. “Elizabeth wouldn’t ask, but Penny is still being trained, and—”*

“I’m the only one who’s trained for the opening shift, yeah.” Courtney sighed. “I’ll be there, but I might be a bit late.”

*“I highly doubt Bobbie is going to care if Kelly’s opens at all, so it’s not going to matter.”*

Courtney hung up and looked at her husband. God, this was the last thing she wanted to tell him because she knew the devastating implications if Carly didn’t survive. “Carly didn’t come home from the club last night apparently, and the cops called Bobbie this morning.”

“They waited—” AJ closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “That’s not a good sign.”

“Gia didn’t think so. Bobbie’s going to the station to get more information, I guess she’s too upset to drive, so Lucas is taking her, and Elizabeth is going to watch Michael—”

“So, you need to open.” AJ swung his legs over the side of the bed. “I should get to the mansion—”

“Do you really need to?” Courtney asked, shoving the comforter back. “It’s so early, and maybe they won’t know yet—”

“When Grandfather finds out that Carly has been in a bad car accident, the first thing he’ll do is find a lawyer to challenge Bobbie for custody. I have to head him off.” He hesitated. “Because we don’t know anything yet. If we go after Michael now before Carly’s condition is clear, then we risk alienating the family court judge.”

“And if it’s the worst-case scenario?” Courtney asked softly. “AJ—”

“I don’t know what’ll happen,” he admitted. “But I have to head off my family from making this situation worse.”

### **Harborview Towers: Corinthos Penthouse, Living Room**

The news trickled to Sonny almost two hours later, when Max knocked on the door to the penthouse. Sonny paused at the foot of the stairs, two steaming cups of coffee in his hands. “Yeah?”

“Uh, Boss?” Max stepped over the threshold, his face hesitant. “Benny’s here. And there’s—there’s some news.”

If his business manager was here this early, this couldn’t be good. Maybe it was

fortuitous that his lawyer was currently warming the sheets upstairs—though Alexis would be mortified if he fetched her now.

“Benny, what’s up?” Sonny crossed the room, setting the coffee on the table as he met the older man at the desk, his hangdog expression so much more pronounced.

“Benny?”

“There was a car accident around three this morning,” Benny said. He set his briefcase on the desk. “We’ve spent the last few hours piecing together what the police know.”

“Man, not one of our guys—” He stopped. “Three this morning,” he finished.

“A witness called in a report—he saw a car swerve off the road, crash through the guardrail, and go over the side. He was on the phone with 911, calling in the make and model and the license plate when the car went over.”

“God.” Sonny closed his eyes. “Not the stupid red Porsche she bought with the divorce settlement—”

“By the time the authorities made it to the scene, by the time the Coast Guard was called in—” Benny stopped, exchanged a glance with Max, who stood solemn and silent. “Sonny, it’s the same part of the road—I mean, it’s where—”

“Where Brenda died,” Sonny murmured, remembering the reports back then. “Jax saw the car go over the cliff, but the currents there are so strong that the car was swept away. The depths of the lake in that region—”

“The Coast Guard is still searching,” Benny reported. “Mac decided to wait until morning, until he had something definite to tell Bobbie before waking her. When the Coast Guard realized the search would be extensive, and that it was unlikely she survived—he called her about five.”

“Damn it,” Sonny murmured. A pit formed in his stomach. “Ah, tell our source at the PCPD to keep us informed. I wanna know if it’s—if it was an accident. Find Cody and Milo. I want them over at the Brownstone. Um—” He stopped. There were steps to take, things to be done, but he couldn’t—

He couldn’t think.

“Cody and Milo are already on their way. Bobbie and Lucas were at the station for a while, but Felicia drove them both home about thirty minutes ago. Elizabeth was with Michael. She’s staying with them until around noon. Courtney’s been stuck at Kelly’s with Penny and Don by herself.” Benny looked at Max. “Everything is good here?”

“Ah, yeah, yeah it is. We got it under control, Mr. C,” Max told him.



“Thanks.” He dismissed them both and returned to the coffee mugs, only lukewarm now. He stared at them for a moment, wondering if he ought to dispose of them.

Alexis Davis stepped around the landing, dressed in the business suit he’d peeled off her the night before. “I heard.” She cleared her throat and came down the second flight of stairs. “I’m sorry, Sonny.”

“Ah, yeah.” Sonny looked at her, blinking. “I—”

“I think we should just chalk last night up to a mistake.” Her cheeks flushed as she refused to meet his eyes. “It didn’t—it never happened.”

“Alexis—” he began, but she rushed past him and out the door. He thought about going after her, but he didn’t have the time.

He crossed back to the desk, reached for the phone, and started to dial. It was time to track down Jason and bring him home.

### **Oasis Strip Club: Back Office**

“You’ll like the Paradise,” Dominic Savarolli—Nico to his friends and intimates—told his protege. “It’s not as refined as things here at the Oasis, but you won’t have to compete with Coleman for the girls.”

Zander Smith leaned back, a bottle of Rolling Rock clasped in his hands. “I’m not much interested in the girls who work here,” he told his boss. “But I like the idea of being in charge.”

Nico grinned. “Yeah, I’ll bet you do. I’ll talk to Sonny, but he’s a rubber stamp at this point. He don’t care who runs the crews as long as we make them money. He wants me to expand to Las Vegas, he’s gonna have to let me put who I want in charge of the bookies and games here.”

“Sonny’s never cared much for me,” Zander admitted. “After I dealt drugs for Sorel, he only let me live because I was useful.”

“True, true,” Nico replied. “But he put you to work with me instead of removing you permanently. You’ve done good work for me. And Sonny trusts me. I’ve been in the business through four bosses, I know talent when I see it.”

And Zander was banking on Sonny deferring to Nico under those circumstances. His boss was in his early forties and had been running the Oasis and several clubs of its kind as fronts for gambling casinos for the better part of two decades. He’d started as a runner under Frank Smith and had managed to survive the rough transition between Moreno and Sorel.

When Sorel had been offed by his own kid, Nico had elected to toss his support behind

a merger with Sonny rather than backing the upstart Mickey Roscoe.

Zander had briefly considered going to Roscoe. Mickey liked him better—they had worked the rave scene together for a few months, Mickey as the supplier and Zander as the guy on the scene. But Mickey didn't have the balls or head for this game, and now, all these months later, only accounted for a handful of bookies and a single holding company on Pier 52. He didn't have the juice to take on Corinthos, so Zander—ever the opportunist—had stuck with what he knew.

And now Nico was prepared to hand over the lucrative Port Charles gambling trade, so he could concentrate on the casinos in Atlantic City, the Caribbean, and a new one in Las Vegas. It was exactly the opportunity Zander had been counting on.

The door opened, and Nico's long-time right hand entered. Lenny Hauptmann's thin face looked drawn. "We got ourselves a situation, Nicky."

Nico grimaced, but Lenny had almost two decades on him and had watched him rise up in the ranks. Lenny liked the money and the girls—occasionally dipped in the product Nico still ran in the clubs under Sonny's nose—but he didn't want the power. He was happy to see his Nicky enjoy the fruits of their combined labor.

"What's up, Len?" Nico rose from his desk. "Ollie didn't report in? He's got his boys tracking down the last the money owed from the Super Bowl—"

"It's not business, Nicky. The boss's ex drove herself over the cliff last night. Or something. No one knows exactly what's going on, but her car is somewhere in the lake."

"Carly?" Zander asked. "She's dead?"

"They don't know that yet," Lenny reported. "But word on the street is they're not holding out much hope, what with the currents this time of year and the location of the crash. You know what this means, Nicky."

"Yeah." Nico rubbed his eyes. "Call the boys. Start flushing out the product."

"What's going on?" Zander asked. "Nico—"

"Carly's dead, her boy is up for grabs. Jason Morgan is gonna come back, and he ain't gonna let us get away with dealing the product. Sonny don't care as long as the books balance. Jason? He's funny about this kind of thing."

"Jason Morgan? No way. He hasn't been around for a year. He didn't even come home when his sister was in the accident." Zander felt the usual twinge when Emily entered his thoughts, but he'd put her out of his life.

He'd been a different man for her, but she hadn't wanted him. Fine. He had his own

life to lead.

“Nicky’s right, Smith. Morgan’s gonna come back, even if it’s to settle the estate. No way that dumb bitch didn’t leave the kid to him. I remember when Moreno almost blew the kid up. Pure accident, of course,” Nico murmured. “But Morgan nearly took him apart. And then walked away. He loves that boy like a son. He’ll be home.”

“Ah, Morgan doesn’t really...” Zander coughed in his hand. “He doesn’t care for me much after everything that happened with his sister.”

Nico shrugged. “He knows you’re working for Sonny. Morgan ain’t never involved himself in low-level decisions. I’ll get Sonny to sign off on it without Morgan in the room. Don’t worry, Zander. Sonny wants me to go make money in Vegas, he’s gonna have to let me do it my way.”

Zander wished he could have the confidence of the man behind the desk, but he had a sinking feeling that if Jason Morgan did return to Port Charles, any chance of his rising higher than bone-cracking thug had died along with Carly Corinthos.

### **Quartermaine Estate: Family Room**

AJ was convinced that the best decision he’d ever made was to walk away from this family two months ago. He’d had moments in the ensuing weeks as he and Courtney had struggled to pay bills on her tips until he’d completed training as a forklift operator and started working at the waterfront.

It was backbreaking work and he often fell into his bed at night, exhausted from the manual labor. But he knew he was making it on his own, and he hadn’t had the urge to drink in in weeks.

He had one now as he stood in the estate’s family room, just steps from the mini bar. His mother was at work, but his father and grandfather were debating the merits of one family law attorney over another. Alan wanted to stay local, while Edward wanted to bring in the best in the state. If not the world.

“They haven’t even declared her dead yet,” AJ muttered as he sat in the sofa and put his head in his hands. “Jesus, Grandmother.”

“I’ll talk to your grandfather, my love, but you know how he can be,” Lila Quartermaine said in her soft, gentle voice. “I agree with you.”

“How can you?” he demanded. “They haven’t even asked me *what* I think yet.”

“Because I know your heart, AJ.” Lila reached for his hand and squeezed it once he placed it in her palm. Her grasp was not as strong as it had once been, but the comfort was there. Here was a woman who, even at the depths of her disappointment in him, believed he could do better.

“If she is dead—” And there was a surprising swell of grief for the thought that his nemesis and one-time friend had departed this world. “If she is dead,” AJ began again, “I can only imagine what Bobbie’s going through. I can’t—how can we tell her now that she might have lost a second daughter, we want to take her grandson?”

“They’re not considering Bobbie. They only see a chance to have Michael in their lives—”

“To shape him, to make him into the kind of Quartermaine they think he should be,” AJ muttered, the resentment all but swallowing him whole. “Their chance at a new generation.”

“I suppose that is one way to consider it.” Lila said. “But I think they’re attempting to get ahead of the situation.”

“Because Jason will be coming home,” AJ said, leaning back. “Sonny never adopted Michael, and I would bet anything Carly left Jason guardianship. It’s not Bobbie we’ll have to deal with. Carly would never leave this up to her. She’s too close to the family.”

“And if they can file a suit before Jason arrives, they hope to fast-track and present a *fait accompli*.” Lila focused her soft blue eyes on her grandson. “But you would prefer to wait. To give Michael time to adjust. To allow Bobbie space to grieve.” She smiled at him, pride shining in her gaze. “And that’s exactly what we’ll do. You leave it to me.”

*Mumbai, India*

### **Hotel: Jason’s Room**

It was two days after the accident by the time Sonny’s myriad of phone calls finally tracked Jason to a hotel in Mumbai, India, where he’d been spending the last few weeks.

Jason had taken in the news—including the fact that there had been no update and Carly was all but declared dead—and promised to be home as soon as possible.

Neither of them had spoken of the complications created by Carly’s death or his return—that custody of Michael would be a pitched battle, that Sonny would have to create space for Jason to come back to his job—because his rivals would assume Jason would be back at Sonny’s side whether he was or not.

They spoke of none of these things—only that Jason would catch the next flight out of India. He threw his things into a duffel bag, checked out, and headed home.

## Chapter Two

*Last time I talked to you  
You were lonely and out of place  
You were looking down on me  
Lost out in space  
We laid underneath the stars  
Strung out and feeling brave  
I watched the red orange glow  
I watched you float away*  
- Somewhere Out There, Our Lady Peace

---

*Friday, April 19, 2002*

### **Brownstone: Living Room**

The room didn't look any different than the last time Jason had been here—the same comfortable pieces of beige furniture, the first fresh flowers of spring, the photos of Bobbie's family on the mantel.

There were a few signs that an active five-year-old boy resided here: a set of crayons and coloring book on the table. A small activity table set near the television.

Jason stood in the middle of the room, feeling awkward. Out of place. His chest was two sizes too tight to hold his lungs. Carly's mother—Bobbie Spencer—sat on the sofa, looking pale, a bit lost and faded.

It would take some time for the courts to deal with the legalities—it would be a few weeks before a funeral service could be held. Though there would be no body to put to rest, Carly would have a marking stone a few paces from BJ, the adopted daughter Bobbie had buried eight years earlier.

"I'm just not sure what to do," Bobbie murmured. "She's only been in my life for, what, six years? And barely four as my daughter..." She closed her eyes. "What do I do, Jason? How do I raise that little boy?"

"The same way you raised Lucas and BJ." Jason took a seat next to her, almost perching on the edge of the sofa. "Bobbie, I don't know what Carly wrote in her will—"

"She'll have left everything to Michael, in a trust. Alexis wrote a will for her after they settled the divorce." Bobbie's eyes met his, some warmth in them. "You and I are

the executors, but guardianship—she’s left that to you.”

Which didn’t surprise him at all, but it was a terrifying prospect nonetheless. “I don’t intend to change his living arrangements,” Jason told her. “I know he’s been with you the better part of the year. The last time I spoke to Carly, she said Michael was doing well in kindergarten, that he loved being here.”

“It’s been a good year,” Bobbie murmured. “The divorce was difficult on them both. Sonny managed to get AJ to terminate his rights, but I think they were right to stop the adoption. If Carly was ever going to have a life away from Sonny, a chance—” She stopped, her eyes closing again. “But she won’t now. It’s over.”

“Bobbie—”

“I’m okay.” She took a deep breath. “I know the coming months are going to be difficult. I’ve had some guarded conversations with Alan at the hospital, Edward stopped by to offer his condolences—Elizabeth stopped him from speaking to Michael.”

Jason put that information aside for the moment. “I’m surprised they haven’t filed anything yet. It’s been almost a week—”

“Lila convinced them to give me space. She sent a lovely note of condolence.” Bobbie patted his hand. “I don’t know how long she’ll be able to hold them off, so you should be prepared.” She hesitated. “Elizabeth is close to AJ’s new wife, Courtney. She might be able to give you a better idea as to whether AJ intends to follow his grandmother’s dictate.”

Jason wasn’t entirely sure he was ready to see Elizabeth, not this soon. He knew that something had happened on New Year’s Eve—that rather than marrying Lucky as planned, she’d left him at the altar and moved into the Brownstone with Bobbie. But he’d never pressed Sonny for details. Whatever he might have shared with her was over. She’d made her choice.

A reluctant choice, he knew. One made out of obligation and loyalty, not love. But a choice nonetheless.

But Bobbie was had a point—Elizabeth might be able to give him some insight into AJ’s plans, and that was worth taking the risk of seeing her again.

“Is she at work?”

Bobbie frowned and looked at her watch. “Yes, I’m almost sure. She had some morning classes, but she’s working the lunch and dinner shift at Kelly’s today.” She rose to her feet. “I don’t know what I would have done if Elizabeth hadn’t moved in a few months ago with Gia. She was here that morning when we found out. She stayed with Michael until Lucas brought me home from the station.”

“She’s always been reliable,” was all Jason could offer. “If you need anything, Bobbie —”

“I know where to find you.” Her smile was wobbly and faded almost as soon as it appeared, but it had been there. “Thank you for coming home, Jason. We needed you.”

### **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

Elizabeth grimaced when she saw AJ Quartermaine step through the arch connecting the courtyard to the parking lot. Courtney wasn’t working today, and it was past the usual lunch shift for dock workers—

Which meant AJ likely had a purpose for coming here that didn’t include a burger and fries.

“AJ,” she murmured as she stacked several dishes into her tub. “You’re a bit late for lunch.”

“I have a guy covering for me. I was hoping to catch you after the lunch rush.” He gestured toward the table she was cleaning off. “Do you have a minute?”

Against her better judgment, Elizabeth sat, resting the tub of dirty dishes in her lap. “AJ, I really don’t want to talk about Michael—”

“I know, and I don’t want you to feel like you’re in the middle. I just—” AJ sat and raked his fingers through his dirty blonde hair. “Look, I know how good you are to him, how much you mean to Bobbie. I just—I wanted to know if you’d heard from Jason.”

Elizabeth raised her brows, her heart beating fast at the name. She knew Jason would be arriving any day now—his travel plans hadn’t been stable, Sonny said. “Sonny talked to him. He’s coming home. He wasn’t sure when.”

AJ nodded. “That’s what I figured. Look, I just—I wanted to make sure you knew that I don’t intend—I’m not going to be like my father or my grandfather. I don’t see Carly’s—” A grimace passed over his face. “I don’t see Carly’s death as an opportunity to get my son back.”

Elizabeth tilted her head to the side, not trusting him. “That doesn’t mean you’re not going to use it. AJ, I know Courtney loves you, but in your own way, you’re as ruthless as any of the other members of your family. You want your son.”

He scowled. “Does that make *me* the villain then?” AJ demanded. “I never got the chance to screw up. I had him for exactly one year and he was fine—”

“I’m not involved in any of that,” Elizabeth cut in, but she could admit he had a

point. Jason and Carly had had their reasons, but AJ had never had a choice in the matter. She even suspected some blackmail or other illegalities had been in play when he'd unexpectedly terminated his parental rights last fall.

"I know, I'm sorry." AJ drew back and took a deep breath. "Look, Elizabeth, I know how much your friendship has meant to Courtney. You've gone out of your way to make her feel at home here. She loves you."

At the mention of his wife, Elizabeth bit her lip. "And I love her, too. She came into my life when I needed someone new, and I've been happy to extend friendship to her. Honestly, AJ, the fact that you had the good sense to fall for her is the reason..." That she didn't think AJ was a complete waste of space, but that didn't mean she trusted him.

"I get it. I do. I just...yeah, I want my son. I don't think that makes me a bad person. But I don't want to make anything more difficult for Bobbie or Michael. They need time, they need space. I've told my family that. I can't control them, I can't be sure they won't file a suit on their own. My grandmother is doing what she can to hold them off—"

"But it's like holding back a freight train," Elizabeth sighed. "What do you want from me, AJ? Is this just a friendly warning?"

"I don't want to bother Bobbie right now. I thought if you could pass the message for me—"

"Some things never change."

They both looked up at the interruption, the tone familiar and annoyed. Elizabeth rose, blinking in surprise as Jason stepped away from the shadow of the arch which had hid him from their view. "Jason? When—"

"Jason, I—" AJ began.

"You're still getting someone else to do your dirty work." Jason folded his arms, his stance tense. "You think you're a good guy because you're not going to drag a grieving mother into court the minute she buries her daughter?"

"Jason," Elizabeth began. "AJ was just—" But his scathing glance cut off her words in mid-sentence. He didn't often look at her in anger, and she wasn't sure she appreciated it now. What the hell did he even know about this situation?

"I was just telling Elizabeth that I'm going to do what I can to keep Grandfather out of this," AJ said, waving a hand at Elizabeth as if to tell her he would fight this battle. "But make no mistake, Jason. You're not going to keep me from my son. Not this time."



AJ looked at Elizabeth, apology in his eyes. "I'll see you around."

When he was gone, Elizabeth turned to Jason, scowling. "Was that necessary? How long were you standing there?"

"Long enough to hear him try to con you," Jason retorted. "Don't you know better by now? AJ is always playing an angle—"

"I'm not an idiot," she shot back. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and reminded herself that this feud between the brothers was bitter, long-lived, and had nothing to do with her. That Jason had likely been traveling for days, was dealing with the death of a close friend, with acquiring the guardianship of a little boy he loved more than life. "I don't want to fight with you, Jason."

His features smoothed out a bit and he dipped his head. "I'm sorry. I just—"

"See red when the topics of AJ and Michael come up, yeah. That's not news to me." She reached for the tub of dishes and perched it on her hip. "When did you get in? Sonny wasn't sure—"

"This morning. I stopped at Jake's to get a room." Jason held the door open for her, then followed her inside. The diner was relatively deserted—their main fare at Kelly's were the dock workers and high school students. A couple sat in the back, nursing some milkshakes and a college student was pouring over a biology textbook with a large mug of coffee at his side.

She dumped the dishes behind the counter and nodded to Don. "You can take your break. I'm all done in the courtyard for now." To Jason, Elizabeth said, "Did you want some coffee? Something to eat?"

"Ah, sure." Jason sat on the stool, his elbows on the counter. "I saw Bobbie. She looks...all right, I guess."

"Because she can keep busy." Elizabeth set the mug of black coffee in front of him. "She's planning the services, signing papers for the trust Carly set up. Fielding calls from reporters, dealing with the cops—"

Jason frowned. "The cops? Wasn't it ruled an accident?"

"It's still ongoing, according to Mac and Taggart. I mean, I can't see how it would be anything other than accident. Sonny told Bobbie there's nothing to worry about, but you know the PCPD and the newspapers—"

"Yeah." Jason scrubbed his hands over his face. "Yeah, I know." He hesitated. "AJ. Earlier—"

"Let's..." Elizabeth took a deep breath. Better to set the boundary lines now. "If AJ

says something to me, I'm comfortable passing it along, even without him saying so. We're not friends, and I've never pretended otherwise. But Courtney *is* my friend, and unless she gives me the okay—"

Jason held up a hand. "I get it. I have no problem with that—"

"AJ didn't really say anything more to me than you than you overheard. He's planning to give Bobbie some space, I guess wait for Michael to, I don't know, adjust to not having Carly, but—"

"He'll be filing for custody." Jason exhaled slowly. "Yeah, I guess that's not much of a surprise. I guess he thinks he's being the hero for giving Bobbie five seconds to mourn her daughter."

"By Quartermaine standards?" Elizabeth arched her brow. "Considering I've already had to chase your grandfather and father away from the Brownstone more than once?"

At his scowl, she rolled her eyes. "Look, you don't have to be friends with them, but you're about to go in front of a judge to argue why you need to keep Michael with you. The fact you are, technically, his biological uncle, *is* going to be a point in your favor —"

"They're not my family," Jason said darkly.

"Jason—" She sighed. "No one is asking you have Thanksgiving with them, but if you walk into that court room and talk about how they're not your family, you're going to look petty. Immature. I can't imagine it'll reflect well on you."

He was quiet for a moment, before grimacing and shaking his head. "If I go into a court room with AJ on the other side—"

"Hey..." Elizabeth reached across the counter to touch his hand, hesitant at first. This wasn't part of the plan, but she couldn't stand that look on his face. "Look, don't worry. You'll have Alexis on your side—"

"I lost before—"

"Because—" She bit her lip. "Because Carly was in the picture then. And she and AJ —"

"Were a united front." He nodded. "Okay, I get it. I just—Michael's been through so much."

"I'm confident, that between you and Bobbie, you'll do right by Michael." Their eyes met. Held. After a long moment, she released his hand and stepped back, feeling her cheeks warm. "I wanted to say how sorry I was about Carly. She was doing so good

these last few months. You would have been proud.”

“She sounded good the last time we spoke.” He finished his coffee. “I need to stop in to see Sonny.” He reached into his wallet and dropped a twenty next to the coffee mug. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “I didn’t—I don’t want to fight with you.”

“It’s fine.” She paused. “I don’t want to fight with you either, Jason.” And because she needed to say it—for both their sakes, she continued, “I want us to be friends.”

He looked at her, tilting his head slightly in that way she’d always loved, then nodded as if he’d heard the words she’d left unspoken. “So do I. I’ll see you around, Elizabeth.”

When he gone, she picked up his empty mug and tucked the twenty into her apron. She managed a smile as Penny Reyes arrived for her shift.

“Hey, Liz!” the pretty Filipino girl said with a bright smile to match the vibrancy of the new pink streaks in her dark hair. “Sorry, I’m late but I was at the salon.”

“No problem, Penny. We’re dead, anyway. I like the hair.”

“Thanks—hey, was that Jason Morgan I saw leaving?” Penny tied her apron around her trim waist. “He looks even sexier than the last time I saw him. Some men age like fine wine, and man—” She wiggled her eyebrows. “Didn’t you used to date him?”

“Not exactly,” Elizabeth murmured. She often forgot that most of the town believed she and Jason had had a brief affair during that winter in her studio when he’d been shot.

“If I were you, I would get me a piece of that.” Penny picked up the carafe of coffee and moved to refill the biology student’s cup.

“Well, you’re *not* me.” Elizabeth reached under the counter for the receipts from the morning shift and headed to the back table to update the books.

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

This was not the way he’d hoped his old friend would finally return home.

Sonny offered Jason a bourbon—an offer that was often extended, but rarely accepted. Today, however, Jason took the tumbler. “Is there any chance this wasn’t an accident?” Jason demanded.

Sonny sighed and, bourbon in his hand, crossed to the window. Though the building’s name boasted of its view of the harbor, Sonny had chosen to live in the penthouse that overlooked downtown Port Charles.

From his vantage, he could see the park, the ritzy neighborhood that held wealthy

families like the Quartermaines—he could see General Hospital, the way the Port Charles Hotel still towered over most of the skyline—though some of newer apartment buildings and office buildings were starting to compete.

Port Charles had been changing, growing for more than a decade. Sonny had encouraged it, invested in it. The larger the city was, the less time the police had to focus on him.

Now he wondered if it had grown too large to control. He'd merged his territory with the swath of town Sorel and Moreno had controlled, folding their men into his, taking over some of the piers and holding companies they had utilized. There were pieces he didn't know as well, areas he hadn't been personally involved in.

But Jason was home now. He could take a breath. He could depend on Jason.

He turned back to Jason. "Accident investigators didn't find any evidence," Sonny said finally. "Bobbie hounded Scott Baldwin and Mac Scorpio. She refused to give up, even when the Coast Guard had declared it impossible. An expert from the state agency finished up his own look yesterday." He sighed. "Our source got it to us. Carly was taking the corners too fast, she didn't brake in time—"

"But you looked into it anyway, didn't you? Anyone could have messed with her brakes," Jason said. "Sonny—"

"Without her car to look at, to confirm..." Sonny tilted his head back. "Yeah, I wondered. I have our guys looking into Mickey Roscoe. He's the only holdout from the merger. Seems to think he can take me down. He doesn't have the backup. There's nothing to be gained from taking out Carly. It'd be suicide for him."

"Right, but—"

"I thought about the Quartermaines," Sonny cut in. He turned back to meet Jason's eyes. "After I...convinced AJ to terminate his parental rights, he was livid. He... convinced my sister to run away with him, told me that if I didn't make sure he got his son back, he'd..." He chuckled. "He'd marry her."

Jason exhaled slowly. "Not much for revenge, I guess. He's not a..." He waited a beat. "That's probably as villainous as he could get. I can't see him—or anyone else in the family—going after Carly. It might get an obstacle out of the way, but Alan and Monica—they're close to Bobbie. And as ruthless as the old man is—"

"Outright murder isn't their style. I mean, I'm not saying they wouldn't ever arrange an accident—I've heard some stories about them—particularly Alan—that would turn your hair white. I'm saying I can't pin this on them."

"So, an accident," Jason said after a moment. He tossed back the rest of the liquor, grimacing.

“We’ll keep our eyes and ears open, Jase.” He hesitated, looking down into his glass. “Carly was a fighter. I can’t stand to think—” He stopped. Neither of them needed the image of Carly’s death in their heads.

They were both quiet for a long moment, remembering the woman that had changed both their lives so drastically.

Sonny cleared his throat. “I imagine you’ll be sticking around.” He settled himself at the dining table, feeling exhausted down to his bones. “With Michael involved—”

“AJ already made his intentions clear.” Jason joined him, his hands clenched in fists as they rested on top of the table. “I found him pleading his case to Elizabeth at Kelly’s. He’ll give Bobbie some time, but he’s going after him.”

Sonny pursed his lips. “Yeah, I can see where he’d think she would be his best bet. God knows, she’s too nice for her own good. Probably hoping she’ll put in a good word with Bobbie.” He eyed his friend. “Or you.”

“She knows better,” Jason muttered. He looked away. “She’s still living at the Brownstone?”

“Did you think she would be back with Spencer by now?” Sonny asked. When Jason didn’t answer, he continued, “Yeah. Lucky’s not too fond of his aunt—maybe if Elizabeth had been stuck at Kelly’s, she might have drifted back. But Bobbie gave her and Gia a place to stay and as far as I know, a clean break from all of that.”

“She looked better than the last time I saw her,” was all Jason offered. “I got a room at Jake’s for now. But I’m sticking until Michael’s custody is settled. Probably longer.”

“Yeah, the Quartermaines will still be hassling Bobbie for visitation until *Michael’s* children are in college,” Sonny muttered. He considered a moment. “I’ve been expanding certain areas of the business. Considering some legitimate options here in Port Charles, looking into beefing up the Atlantic City casino. Maybe even going into Las Vegas with one of the guys out there.”

Jason hesitated. “You might be stretching yourself a bit thin, Sonny.”

“Not if I have the right guys in place,” he replied. “I’m concerned that some of the men I inherited from Sorel and Moreno aren’t exactly...game players. Dominic Savarolli, do you remember him?”

“Yeah, didn’t you two come up together with Frank Smith?” Jason squinted. “He ran numbers for Frank, then Moreno. He stuck with Sorel until he didn’t have a choice. You don’t trust Nico?”

“I’m concerned because he’s pushing the expansion,” Sonny clarified. “And he’s been

pretty vocal. Maybe you look into Nico and his crew. That's where most of Sorel's men are. Johnny and Tommy didn't want them, and you know Francis prefers to hire his own guys to train." He shrugged. "If I expand, and maybe you don't want to stick around Port Charles, you can always go deal with things out west."

"Yeah, maybe." Jason handed him back the tumbler. "I'll give Benny a call and get some background. Thanks, Sonny."

### **Brownstone: Kitchen**

Bobbie set a cup of tea in front of her...well, in front of the only daughter she had left. Elizabeth had come into her life as a terrified victim, someone her nephew wanted to look out for. To protect. And for the love of her nephew, Bobbie had stepped in to provide support. That special, sweet boy was gone, but Elizabeth...

Elizabeth had remained, claiming her own spot in Bobbie's heart, to the point she had faced down that same irate nephew after the disastrous wedding. And now, with the loss of Carly, she was clinging to this makeshift family she'd constructed in the Brownstone with Lucas, Michael, and Elizabeth.

"Did Jason stop by Kelly's?" Bobbie asked, casually, as she took a seat next to Elizabeth with her own cup of tea. "I meant to call you."

Elizabeth offered a half smile. "No, you didn't."

"No, I didn't want to warn you," she admitted. "I thought it might be more awkward if you were expecting him. You haven't said much about the fight you had last year, but I know it's pained you. I hope you and Jason can work it out."

"Nothing to work out," the brunette responded. "We're friends. That's it. He's worried about you and Michael, and it didn't help that he got to Kelly's at the same time AJ was telling me he was going to give you some space before he filed for custody."

Bobbie closed her eyes. "Oh, those boys. They never do anything the easy way. I'm sure Jason was livid."

"It certainly wasn't the best reunion they could have had." Elizabeth hesitated. "I know it's none of my business, but I don't think keeping AJ out of Michael's life is going to be as easy as it's been in the past. When AJ asks for custody, I think a court might seriously consider him."

"So do I," Bobbie sighed. "He's been sober for the better part of a year. He has a good, stable, and steady job. His wife works, and we both know Courtney is lovely. She'd be a wonderful stepmother. When you add in the fact that technically AJ voluntarily surrendered his parental rights—at least as far as the court is concerned—"

"Would it be so bad?" Elizabeth asked. "I mean, look, I wasn't around when Carly was

pregnant, when she was keeping Michael from AJ. I don't know what she went through then. I only know AJ through Emily and Courtney, and to be honest, while I've always seen the destructive behavior, I've never—"

"You've never seen AJ as the villain my daughter painted him to be." Bobbie leaned back in her chair. "I loved Carly, I did. I saw myself in her, which is why I think I was able to look past the worst of her behavior. She was so...terrified of being rejected first, of being hurt—"

"So she put up a wall," Elizabeth cut in. "A brittle facade that looked indestructible to others, but when it came right down to it, was easily shattered." She stared down into her tea, her an empty expression in her eyes, but Bobbie knew better.

She sighed, tilting her head toward this young woman who, God help her, reminded her so much of herself. "Elizabeth..."

"Why *did* Carly work so hard to keep Michael away from AJ?" Elizabeth asked. Her eyes were warm now, as if the brief moment hadn't happened. But they would have to come back to this—Elizabeth wasn't ready to talk, and Bobbie wasn't one to push.

"Carly," Bobbie continued, "was not concerned in the slightest about AJ or his drinking when she was pregnant. She just knew...she saw what we all saw—Tony was hanging by a thread then. He'd lost BJ, he'd let himself be seduced by a younger woman. He'd talked himself into a life with her, this baby was his second chance. And I think Carly wanted the stability Tony offered. The idea of a family."

"And AJ was an obstacle to that family."

"He was. So, she schemed to keep him from learning the truth, but then he...he threatened to take her to court. To demand a paternity test. And Carly panicked because she thought the Quartermaines would take her baby. She went to Jason, who was struggling after the accident in his own way. He promised to protect her and the baby from his family, because he saw them as ruthless and amoral. This was never about AJ."

"But it is now," Elizabeth said. "After Carly lost her son—" She hesitated. "I never believed he pushed her, you know? I can see them arguing, I know he was drunk at the time, but still—"

"I think Carly made herself believe he pushed her, because then she didn't have to blame herself. I think she lost her balance and fell. It's a twisted, horrible situation, Elizabeth, and I'm not sure anyone will be happy with the outcome."

"Is anyone ever?" Elizabeth lifted her brows, her expression a mixture of wry humor and resignation. "You know, I'm here if you and Michael need anything."

"I know." Bobbie leaned over to squeeze her hand. "And I'm so grateful to have you."

### Chapter Three

*Well, you can say what you want  
But it won't change my mind  
I'll feel the same  
About you  
And you can tell me your reasons  
But it won't change my feelings  
I'll feel the same  
About you*  
- Say What You Want, Texas

---

*Saturday, April 20, 2002*

#### **AJ and Courtney's Apartment: Living Room**

The last person AJ expected to see when he answered his door on a Saturday morning was his erstwhile younger brother.

But there Jason stood at his threshold, dressed in his characteristic jeans, t-shirt, and leather jacket. His expression was flat and without emotion, as always.

AJ sighed and stepped back. "Do you want to come in and yell at me, or do you want to do it from the hall?" he asked.

Jason hesitated a moment, then stepped into the room, standing by their small sofa. "I came to tell you I don't want you to bother Elizabeth anymore. She doesn't have anything to do with it."

AJ shut the door. He hadn't expected this particular complaint, but maybe he ought not to be surprised. He'd known there was a connection of some sort, a friendship between Jason and Elizabeth—he just hadn't thought about it when he'd gone to see her. "I disagree. She lives with Michael, she takes him to school sometimes. She's friends with my wife, with my sister. Elizabeth, whether you like it or not, is involved."

"She isn't going to be the one making the decisions about Michael." Jason's expression or stance didn't change, but he drew in a breath and released it before continuing, his fists tight at his sides. "So leave her alone."

"Again, I have to disagree. When I file for custody, she'll likely be called as a



character witness.” AJ folded his arms. “She’s friends with my wife—she can testify that Courtney would be an amazing stepmother, she knows the family, she knows *I’m* sober—”

“For now,” Jason retorted. “But how long is that going to last?”

And coming from Jason of all people, this was something AJ couldn’t easily refute. He, more than anyone else, had a reason to doubt AJ’s sobriety—had seen the damage that could be done. Had been a victim of it. “I go to AA meetings twice a week,” he told his brother quietly. “And sometimes, when I’m frustrated, when I get angry, I go again. There have been weeks when I’ve gone just those two times, and others when it’s been seven days.”

Jason didn’t respond to that. Maybe he didn’t have an answer.

“I’m an alcoholic, Jason. I’m *always* going to be one,” AJ continued. “I can’t ever change the things I did to hurt the people that mattered. After the accident—I didn’t just hurt you, you know. I devastated my entire family. They’ll never look at me the same way. If I had been sober the night Carly fell down the steps, maybe it would have been different. I didn’t push her, but that doesn’t make me any less responsible.”

Some of the tension left Jason’s shoulders, but still his expression remained stoic. “You think it changes anything? Now that you’ve admitted what you are?”

It did for AJ, but maybe Jason would always seem him as that screw up. “Is Michael what changed between us?” he asked quietly. “After the accident, you didn’t really give a damn about me. You hated that the family covered for me, you thought I was pretty useless, but you didn’t hate me. You do now.”

Jason looked away and swallowed, his Adam’s Apple bobbing lightly. “This isn’t about what happened before—”

“Isn’t it?” AJ demanded. “You protected Carly before Michael was born because you didn’t give a damn either way. But after—when Carly was gone, and you were forced to be his father—he became someone else to protect. You started to wonder if he’d be next person in the car?”

Jason pressed his lips together, took another deep breath. “I didn’t come here for this—I just want you leave Elizabeth out of it—”

“What I did to you, what I did to my family—I’ll have to live with it for the rest of my life, but I have to forgive myself, Jason. Even if no one else ever can, I have to,” AJ retorted. “Because it’s the only way I’ll have a reason to stay sober. I love my son. And I have a right to be his father. I’m not going after him right now because he’s just lost his mother, and Bobbie’s devastated. But don’t mistake my compassion for

anything else. When the time is right, I'm going after him, and I'll use whatever tools at my disposal to win. Including Elizabeth."

Jason's snapping blue eyes met his, lit with anger. "And the only way you'll step near Michael is over my dead body," he said, his tone ice cold. He stepped towards his brother. "You've destroyed everything you've ever touched."

He yanked the door open and stalked out. AJ silently closed it behind him, wishing like hell he could hate Jason for keeping his son from him.

But Jason wasn't wrong. As much as AJ loathed the idea, Jason loved Michael like his own, and he *was* protecting him. Jason might be the only person in Michael's life who had ever put him first and kept him there.

AJ hadn't, but would going forward. He was sober, he was married to a wonderful woman—he had his life back, and now he wanted to share it with his son.

### **General Hospital: Nurse's Station**

Bobbie made a note in the scheduled rotation for the pediatric ward, grateful that Audrey Hardy's retirement at the end of December and her subsequent promotion to the head of the nursing program at the hospital allowed Bobbie to sink her mind into work and not think about what was going on in her life.

Her grandson was at home with Lucas, still bewildered and lost over his mother's absence. Michael might be able to understand the concept that some people die—that they went away and didn't return, but he couldn't apply it to Carly. Mommies didn't die, Michael had told her. They couldn't.

So, Lucas was attempting to keep Michael busy through a combination of video games and sugar until either Bobbie or Elizabeth could pick him up. They were going to reintroduce Jason slowly to him—he'd been out of Michael's life for almost four years, and Jason didn't want to upset Michael any more than he already had been.

Her life often felt like she was juggling chainsaws—if she took her eye off of one, if she allowed herself to be distracted—one might fall and slice off a limb.

"Aunt Bobbie!"

Bobbie glanced at the grating tones of her nephew, instantly feeling annoyed at herself for hating his voice. This was *Lucky*, their miracle returned them.

Except she had trouble reminding herself of that. The young man in front of her wore Lucky's face, spoke with an older version of his voice—but Lucky hadn't come home. Not in any way that truly mattered. And she could never quite forgive him for what he'd done to Lucas, even though he'd been under Helena's brainwashing.

“Lucky.” Bobbie pulled over a chart and scrawled her signature at the bottom. “I hope you’re not ill.”

“What?” He blinked. “Oh, no. I’m here to treat you to lunch—”

“I’m quite busy, Lucky. I’ve missed a few days.” Bobbie met his eyes evenly. “And you’ve barely spoken to me since Elizabeth moved in—” And nothing more than a perfunctory visit when the police had declared Carly dead.

“There’s no point in holding that against you, Aunt Bobbie. Not now. Elizabeth made her choice. Her loss.” Lucky folded his arms, leaning on the counter of the nurse’s station. “We’re worried about you, Aunt Bobbie. Losing Carly and all.”

To her knowledge, Lucky had never shown much more concern or even awareness that Carly was part of the Spencer family, so she knew there had to be an ulterior motive for this conversation. “Lucky, why don’t you skip the buildup and get to the point?”

“Dad and I wondered if maybe you were up to the fight you’re going to have wage against the Quartermaines to keep Michael,” Lucky admitted. “After losing Carly, after everything you’ve been through, why put yourself through it?”

“There haven’t been any decisions made regarding Michael’s custody,” Bobbie said coolly, “and your father likely doesn’t care.” She arched a brow. “Interesting that you’ve suggested this after *Jason* came home.” God, Spencer men. Idiots.

Lucky scowled. “I don’t give a damn about him. He has nothing to do with this—”

“Elizabeth is close to Michael. She looks after him, she picks him up occasionally. Any proximity she has to Michael puts her in closer contact with Jason.” Bobbie leaned forward. “You need to let this go, Lucky.”

“I don’t give a damn about either of them,” Lucky all but growled. “She can screw whoever she wants. *She* walked away from *me*—”

“Because you didn’t love her anymore. Because you were going to marry her out of obligation. I’m proud of her for making that choice, for taking the hard road.” Bobbie gathered her charts. “I don’t know what happened to you while you were with Helena, Lucky, but you need to do some deep, hard thinking about who you want to be. Because the Lucky I buried would never treat her like this.”

“Well, maybe that’s the problem,” he said flatly. “You all think I should be *that* Lucky. No one gives a damn about what I’ve gone through—”

“You’re alive, aren’t you?” Bobbie snapped. “That’s more than either of my daughters can say. Thanks for your concern, Lucky, but I’m content with the situation as it is.”

After her nephew had stormed away, she heard a throat clearing behind her. She turned to find her ex-husband standing there. “Don’t start, Tony.”

“He’s not wrong, Bobbie,” Tony Jones remarked as he scribbled signatures on a stack of charts. Not bothering to raise his head to meet her eyes. “The Quartermaines are going to fight tooth and nail for their grandson. It’s a losing battle.”

She pursed her lips and took a deep breath. She and Tony had managed to find a balance between them—a common ground to raise their son. But Tony was part of the reason any of this was happening. If not for his affair—

“I know it’s difficult to lose Carly,” Tony said, this time looking at her. There was warmth in his eyes now—a deep sadness as they both remembered the other child they had shared once. “To a car accident of all things. Bobbie, I am sorry for your loss. But—”

“Michael’s custody will work itself out,” Bobbie said, turning back to her own work. To the mundanity of schedules and charts. “Thanks for your concern, Tony, but I can handle it.”

### **Corinthos Warehouse: Conference Room**

“I understand what you’re telling me, Nico.” Sonny passed him a snifter of brandy. “But I don’t know if I’m ready to give Zander Smith so much responsibility.”

“And I think you’re letting personal problems get in the way of profit,” Nico replied, his expression pinched and arms crossed. “You don’t care for him personally, I get it. Had a few rough run-ins—”

“He kidnapped Jason Morgan’s sister and took her on the run. Held a gun to her head —”

“And then she dated him,” Nico cut in, throwing his hands up in the air. “You can’t hold that against him—”

“Look, Nico, I’m not saying no. I’m not saying never. I’m just saying not right now. He’s worked for us less than a year—”

“He’s worked with some of my guys for nearly three. He has a head for this, Sonny, I promise you that—”

“He’s worked for *me* for a year,” Sonny clarified, hardening his tone. “That’s not long enough for me to trust him. I know you want to expand into Vegas. You want to beef up Atlantic City, I get all of that. But I want to be sure. It’s not worth it to me to pick the wrong guy so we can make a bit more money.”

Nico scowled at him. “You don’t trust my judgment?”

“Nico, why you pushing me on this?” Sonny demanded. “I told you—I’m not ready to give Zander Smith that kind of power. He’s a hothead who already flipped on one of his bosses because it was convenient for him. Until I’m convinced his loyalty is to me and not himself, he doesn’t move an inch.”

Nico set the brandy down with a clunk. “You’re costing us money. Every day I have to worry about two-bit bookies and mom and pop gambling parlors here, we’re not raking in the real money in Vegas—”

“And that’s the way it’ll be. That’s it, Nico. *Don’t* push me on this. I let you take over my clubs when you came on board. You told me you trusted my judgment, that you wanted to work with me because you were tired of supporting the wrong guy. I gave you a chance. I didn’t have to keep you in power or give you even more access.”

Nico raised his brows. “And I didn’t have to throw my support to you, bring you my resources. You want to wait on expansion until you feel all warm and cozy about my guy? Fine.”

No way Sonny was going to promote anyone in Nico’s crew until he was satisfied that they weren’t working with Mickey Roscoe. The general peace and quiet of the last year was fragile, but Sonny wanted to preserve it. Thank God Jason was home—he’d be objective and settle things once and for all.

### **Kelly’s: Dining Room**

Courtney filled Elizabeth’s coffee mug for the second time that day. “How long does it take to do the books anyway?” she asked.

“When you hate math as much as I do?” Elizabeth murmured, frowning at the invoice for coffee beans. Sonny should really be giving them a better discount. “Forever. At least two more cups of coffee.”

“Glad I’m not the manager.” Courtney disappeared out the front door to serve some of the straggling breakfast diners in the courtyard. With school still in session, the dining room itself was mostly deserted, leaving Elizabeth in blissful silence for a change.

She had been happy to give Bobbie a hand with managing Kelly’s—it had given her something to fill her mind when she’d turned her back on Lucky in December, and she’d been grateful to do something nice for Bobbie after she’d likely given Gia and Elizabeth a huge break on rent for their apartment.

But days like this—when she had to make the numbers even out, had to figure out exactly why they went through so many cartons of eggs when their orders didn’t always match—

It gave her a slight headache.

“Earning your keep for a change?”

Elizabeth looked up, scowling. She hadn’t heard Zander trudge down the steps, much less sit down at her table. He’d moved into her old room after she’d departed, and she preferred to keep their interactions limited to the rent payments he paid her each week.

Emily had dumped him—best decision she’d ever made—so as far as Elizabeth was concerned, her relationship with the bastard had ended there.

“Zander, if you want something to eat, Courtney’s serving in the courtyard.”

He shrugged and reached for the coffee Elizabeth hadn’t yet touched. “I’m good, thanks.”

She set the pencil down. “Is there something you want?”

Zander dumped a spoonful of sugar in the mug and stirred. “Just wishing someone would take a machine gun to your boyfriend.”

Elizabeth blinked, leaning back. “Is Lucky bothering you?” Not that it was about Lucky, but she wanted him to say it. To put his cards on the table.

“I’m not talking about Spencer.” Zander lifted the mug to his lips, his dark eyes meeting her eyes. “I’m talking about the other one.”

“Jason—” Elizabeth bit off the denial regarding her relationship with him. Zander was in a mood, and she wasn’t going to add any fuel to whatever dumbass fire was lighting up his butt. “I would have thought since you and Emily aren’t together anymore, he’d barely notice your existence.”

“Oh, you mean like everyone else?” he retorted. “No. He’s fine with rolling back in here like he owns the place and ruining everything I’ve worked for.”

Elizabeth bit back a nasty remark about Zander working for anything and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry to hear that, Zander. I know you like your job with Sonny.”

He scowled at her. “Don’t do that. You don’t give a shit about me.”

Jackass. She rolled her eyes. “Fine. I don’t particularly, no,” Elizabeth admitted. “But if you’re sitting down and harassing me in hopes that I’ll pass it on to Jason, so you can start a fight with him...” She closed her accounting book and stood. “You’re out of luck. I’m not an errand girl. You have a problem with Jason, take it up with him.”

“He should watch his back.” Zander lifted his chin. “People liked things the way it was. He’s just gonna make a mess for himself.”

She rolled her eyes and picked up the books, moving towards the counter. “Again,

this is none of my business.” Elizabeth arched a brow. “Unless you’re threatening me personally, Zander. And I can’t think that’s the case.”

“Why? So you can tell Jason that and have me dumped in the harbor by sundown?” he retorted.

It was starting to sound like a worthwhile plan, but she just sighed and poured herself another cup of coffee. “Zander, you and I don’t have a problem. We weren’t particularly close when you were dating Emily, we’ve barely spoken since you broke up. If it means you’ll leave me the hell alone, I’ll be happy to tell Jason you’re annoying me.”

Anything to get him out of her face.

The door to Kelly’s swung open then, as Jason held the door open for Courtney lugging a tub of dirty dishes. She stopped when she saw Zander with Elizabeth at the counter. “Oh. Hey.”

“Jason, Zander has something he’d like to share with you,” Elizabeth said with a bright smile. Why did he always seem to show up on the tail end of conversations with men he hated? Was she a goddamn drama magnet?

Jason scowled at the sight of his sister’s ex-boyfriend, as if he hadn’t really been expecting him to still be around. Maybe he’d hoped someone would have shot him in the last year or so. Certainly, Elizabeth wouldn’t have minded.

“Go to hell,” Zander muttered. He shoved away from the counter and stalked out through the kitchen door.

“Was he bothering you?” Jason demanded as Courtney followed Zander’s path into the kitchen. He closed the distance between the door and the counter in seconds. “Elizabeth—”

“He’s a mosquito, Jason. Annoying, but hardly dangerous.” She shrugged and opened the books again. “He wanted to annoy me enough to pass it on to you. I guess you’re cramping his style or something. I don’t know. I’m not getting involved.”

And didn’t it feel like she’d said that about a *hundred* times in the last few days? Maybe if she said it enough, it would be true.

She just wanted to live her life—to go class, go to work, have fun with some friends—and just be Elizabeth Webber. She was finally figuring out who *that* was supposed to be, and she didn’t appreciate people mucking it up.

“I don’t want you involved,” he muttered, taking a seat. “I didn’t want Emily involved with him either, but not like she listened.”

“She did eventually,” Elizabeth offered with no small amount of sympathy. She’d never quite cared for the drug dealer turned ally, particularly after he’d drugged her at that rave and had kidnapped her best friend with a gun to her head, holding her hostage.

“Yeah, but not soon enough. I’m stuck with him.”

She flipped his mug and filled his coffee cup. “He asked to rent my room when I moved out in January. In retrospect, I should have refused, but...” She laughed to herself as she picked up her pencil to attack the books again. “I know Lucky hates him more than anyone except you, and it seemed like a good way to stick it to *him*.”

Jason offered her half a smile, but she could see him hesitating. Almost as if he wanted to ask her something. And because there was no point in pretending this conversation wouldn’t happen eventually. Better to get it over with before he heard another version from someone else. She arched a brow. “Or didn’t Sonny mention that the breakup was pretty bad?”

“He didn’t really elaborate,” he admitted, taking a sip. “Just that you called off the wedding and moved out.” Of course, he wouldn’t ask specifics. Why make it easy for her?

“Well.” Elizabeth reluctantly set down her pencil. It was necessary to tell him this—to make sure Jason understood that she had a new life now. One she’d worked hard for and didn’t plan to give up for anyone. “I mean, it was already a disaster. You saw it. You were the only one who did, but I was miserable and too stubborn to admit it. I mean, who turns their back on a miracle?” She sighed. “Long story short, I was already regretting saying yes, but I thought it would get better. You know, love isn’t always easy, yada, yada.”

Jason waited a beat, frowning when she didn’t continue. “So, what tipped the scale?” he asked. “Sonny said you got to the altar, then walked away.”

“Well, first, I found out that the last time Helena did her brainwashing, she actually...I don’t know, erased Lucky’s feelings toward me.” She bit her lip, deciding to gloss over the worst of it. “He wasn’t in love with me anymore. Gia overheard Nikolas and Lucky talking about it and immediately came to tell me. I was already halfway out the window—I was standing there in a wedding dress I hated, about to marry someone I wasn’t even sure I *liked* anymore—” She shrugged. “Gia’s thing was the icing on the cake. I only walked down the aisle so no one would ever doubt that it was *my* choice to end things.”

He just stared at her for a long moment. “She erased his feelings for you?” he asked.

“Yeah. I guess. So he said. Anyway.” Elizabeth wiggled her shoulders. “I don’t want really to talk about it anymore. I feel like I’ve spent the last three years talking about



Lucky Spencer. It's over. I lived it, and I'm done with it."

He waited a moment, then tipped his head toward her accounting books. "You need some help with that?"

"Oh, thank God." She shoved the whole mess at him. "Free coffee for life if you can figure out how I screwed this up."

## Chapter Four

*Though these wounds have seen no wars  
Except for the scars I have ignored  
And this endless crutch, well it's never enough  
It's been the worst day since yesterday*  
- Worst Day Since Yesterday, Flogging Molly

---

*Wednesday, April 24, 2002*

### Quartermaine Estate: Family Room

"I don't know why you insist on delaying the matter!" Edward thundered as AJ rubbed his eyes. "All the best family attorneys tell me that your chances of getting Michael are excellent—"

"At *what* cost?" AJ retorted, tired of having this damn argument. "His mother died less than two weeks ago. I'm thinking about what's best for Michael. Putting him first —"

"What's best for Michael is to be here, with his family," Edward interrupted, wagging his finger in AJ's direction.

"That's never been best for anyone," Ned murmured from his relatively silent vantage point at the breakfast table. AJ scowled at his cousin, though he conceded his point.

"I'm supposed to go to Bobbie when her daughter isn't even declared legally dead yet—the second child she's lost to a car accident, mind you—and tell her I want to take her grandson?" AJ demanded. "Let's not forget Jason's made it clear there's not going to be any peaceful out of court settlement. He's going to fight me every step of the way."

"That degenerate doesn't deserve—"

And some things would *never* change. "Just stop, Grandfather." AJ held up his hand. "I've talked to Kevin Collins, and he agrees that giving Michael some time and space to deal with his mother's death is for the best. He doesn't know me." When Edward just scoffed at that, AJ continued. "He *doesn't*. His entire world is at the Brownstone, with Bobbie and Lucas. With Elizabeth—"

“Oh...” Ned raised his head and shook his head. “Oh, no, *don’t*—”

But it was too late. Edward, clever and quick, had changed gears. “*Elizabeth* is going to be the key to getting him back,” he said, ignoring Ned. “She’ll plead your case with Jason, won’t she?”

That was AJ’s hope, but there was no way in hell he was going to harass her into doing it. Even if she didn’t complain to Jason, it would only put her back up about the whole thing. No, he just had to keep doing what he’d been doing for the last two months since his marriage to a friend of Elizabeth’s. Be sober. Be mature. Be an adult.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I do hope she’ll make a good character witness at a hearing, but that’s—” He saw the unholy gleam in his grandfather’s eyes. “Oh. Oh, no. Grandfather, the *last* thing we need to do is antagonize Elizabeth Webber.”

“Who said anything about antagonize?” Edward pressed a hand to his chest, blinking with an innocence that the bastard hadn’t possessed since childhood. “Did I? I simply suggested she might be useful. Didn’t she date Jason briefly?”

“I don’t know, and that’s not important.” If Jason caught AJ anywhere near Elizabeth during the next few weeks, he’d rearrange AJ’s face—his little brother had made *that* painfully clear. “I’m not going to ask her to plead my case, to take my side. She’s Courtney’s friend, but she’s also important to Michael. I’m not doing anything jeopardize that—”

“You *need* to start acting like that boy’s father—”

“I think Junior is doing an admirable job of it for once,” Ned said idly, as he folded his newspaper and rose to his feet.

Both men stopped and just stared at Ned as he continued. “While Grandfather might want to make a hasty decision, AJ is going to look much better in the eyes of a family court judge. Any custody suit is going to require Michael to speak with counselors and lawyers. It’s upsetting at any age—but when he’s lost his mother?” He shrugged. “Giving him space and time to deal is going to impress people. I’m sure Bobbie is already appreciative.”

Edward pursed his lips before considering his eldest grandson. “I hadn’t looked at it in quite that light, I suppose. Bobbie has always been good to this family. More than Elizabeth, I think *she’d* be an impressive ally.”

AJ didn’t give a damn about any of that, but he was grateful to his cousin for steering Edward away from the edge. For now. “I just want to do what’s right for my son,” AJ said quietly. “This isn’t the time, Grandfather.”

“We’ll table this discussion for now,” Edward finally decided. “But not forever.”

And while the old man may not have intended that statement as a threat, AJ was certainly going to consider it that way. Edward had been put off, but he wouldn't be denied for much longer. Time would only tell when, where, and how the old bastard would make his move.

### **Gia and Elizabeth's Apartment: Living Room**

"Maybe I should go to school," Courtney declared as she tossed aside one of Gia's study cards and reached for the bottle to pour herself another glass of wine.

"Look, we've seduced her with our glamorous lifestyle," Elizabeth snickered to her roommate as she sipped her own wine and flipped the page in her macroeconomics textbook.

"No, seriously." Courtney squinted at Gia's book on constitutional law. "I could be smarter. Or something."

"How much wine has she had?" Gia asked. "Courtney—"

"If I were smarter," Courtney said after a moment of trying to remember if this was her third or fourth glass before deciding it really wasn't important. "If I were smarter," she repeated, "maybe the Quartermaines would think I was good enough for AJ."

"Oh." Elizabeth bit her lip. "Courtney, you could be a Vassar girl and the Q's would still look down on you."

What was a Vassar girl? Damn it. "But I'm not...whatever that is. I'm a white trash kid from Atlantic City. My mother is a waitress, my dad—"

"They didn't pick you," Elizabeth continued. "You're not *their* choice." She hesitated. "Though I guess..."

"It matters." Courtney stared at the dark red wine swirling in her glass. "They're always telling him how to live his life. He had another argument today about Michael."

"That has nothing to do with you," Gia told her. "In fact, if AJ gets Michael, it'll be because *you're* awesome."

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose, but Courtney ignored the brunette's general discomfort at the topic of Michael's custody. "What happens when he gets him?"

Gia tilted her head. "I don't follow."

"He'll have his son. He won't need me anymore." Courtney sighed and put her head down the table. "He married me because I'm Sonny's sister. He keeps me around because I'm nice. Because I'll look good for his case."

“Honey...” She heard her glass slide away. But no one continued or picked up on Elizabeth’s half-hearted defense. Because they’d said it before her vows. Before she’d run away to marry the scion of the Quartermaine family. Everyone had said it.

And Courtney had ignored them all.

“Listen, whatever your reasons for getting married were,” Gia said after a moment, “what does that matter? You’re happy, right?”

Courtney lifted her head slightly. “That’s not you denying anything.”

“Well...” Elizabeth drawled. “It’s not like you can complain he *wasn’t* up front about how much he hates your brother and wants his son.” She tapped her pen against her notebook. “And besides, what leverage could marrying you really get AJ in the long run? He was never going to really challenge Carly for custody. Sonny was out of Michael’s life—”

“True.” Courtney sighed. “You’re right. It doesn’t matter. I’m sorry. I just thought...” She bit her lip. “He fights with Edward all the time, Elizabeth. Like...even before Carly’s death. It’s always about Michael. I just...what happens when the dust settles, and Michael isn’t a factor?”

Elizabeth opened her mouth, but Gia snorted. “Ha. Like that’s going to happen. Tell her, Webber. Jason is going to fight this in court until they’re little old men with crooked backs. And even if AJ gets custody, Jason will just appeal. Relax, babe. Michael is always going to be a factor.”

“That’s not true,” Elizabeth shot back. “Jason isn’t going to drag Michael in and out of court. That’s not like him.”

“Oh, you mean, you’ve talked to Jason for longer than five minutes?” Gia batted her lashes. “*That* would be different.”

“Last Saturday—”

“You had him fix the books and spent five minutes telling him about Lucky so that he wouldn’t hear it from someone else.” Gia snorted. “Other than that?”

“Listen—”

“Denial,” Gia sang as she turned a page in her text.

“Gia,” Courtney said with a blink because they’d changed topics and she wasn’t sure how that had happened. Or why her head was buzzing. “So what if Elizabeth doesn’t talk much to Jason? I mean, they’re not best friends. They—” She squinted at her brunette friend. “You didn’t *actually* date.”

“Exactly,” Elizabeth said. “I’m under no legal or moral obligation to talk to him. He’s

part of a different life. A different Elizabeth—”

“With the same tendency to deny, deny, deny,” Gia cut in.

“I’m starting to remember why I hated you for so long.”

“Same goes, babe.” Gia sat up and squared her shoulders. “I didn’t say you had to bounce with him in bed or share long walks on the beach or bond over your love for *pina coladas*—”

“Gia—”

“I *said* that you were in denial about *why* you weren’t doing those things. You don’t want to bang the hottie, that’s your prerogative—”

“Then what the hell—”

Gia leaned forward, her dark eyes intense. “But I’m *not* going to let you sit around and pretend about the reason. *No one* said shit to you last year. No one ever challenged you when you lied to yourself. I’m not that kind of friend. I don’t care what the hell you do, Elizabeth. I care that you’re lying to yourself. *Again*.” She slammed her text shut and got to her feet. “Whatever. You do you.”

“Gia,” Courtney protested as Gia stalked out of the room. A moment later, her bedroom door slammed shut. She looked at Elizabeth. “What—”

“She’s not wrong,” her friend said sourly as she tipped the contents of her glass down her throat. She set it down with a clunk of glass against the cheap wooden dining table. “I *am* lying to myself. Just like you are.”

“Maybe,” Courtney admitted. “What happens when you stop?”

“I don’t know.” Elizabeth sighed. “I’ve never been able to stop. Even when I tell myself I will...” She closed her eyes. “I just want to be safe. And happy. Why is that so much to ask?”

Courtney had no response to that, so she retrieved the wine Elizabeth had taken from her and drank.

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

“Initial background checks come back good,” Jason told Benny and Sonny. “Doesn’t look like there’s any reason to worry. No one’s making more money than they’re bringing in.” He hesitated and rose from the sofa. “I only found one thing that... concerns me.”

“Oh, yeah?” Benny asked, raising his brow.

“The Oasis and the Paradise Lounge? Their take so far since the merger is up double from last year,” Jason said. “They’re recording more in liquor sales, but—”

“Their inventory doesn’t match those sales,” Benny finished with a grin, reminding Sonny of a proud father. “You missed your calling, my boy. Shoulda been a forensic accountant. You got a mind for numbers—”

“You knew about this?” Sonny cut Benny off with a scowl. Damn accountant would go on for hours about training Jason for a regular profession if he didn’t stop him. “Why didn’t *you* say anything?”

“I only just saw the numbers myself a few weeks ago,” Benny responded. “I wanted to get a second opinion. Jason’s my second opinion.”

“I have a bad feeling I know where the extra money is coming from,” Jason said. “Nico Savarolli? Some of his guys used to work the streets under Moreno and Sorel. Selling coke and heroine. Pills. Anything they could get their hands on.”

“No, Nico knows my code. We’ll move the product through the territory, but none of it hits the streets in Port Charles. That’s the rule.” Sonny rose to his feet. “Anyone caught dealing is out—”

“Yeah, but—” Benny hesitated. “You gotta admit, Boss, that it’s been a rough year. We’ve been shuffling around the organization. We had to redistribute some of Jason’s responsibilities—we put it off the first time he left, but—” he glanced apologetically at Jason. “With the merger—”

“No, I get it, Benny.”

“And now we’re thinking about expansion. We just haven’t had the chance to put in any real oversight. I would have seen these numbers eventually, but—”

“Not until Nico had moved his new guy in to take the fall.” Sonny nodded. “He’s been pushing me to put Zander in his place.”

“Zander?” Jason repeated. “In charge of all the gambling in town? Is it possible we’re still talking about the same punk who dealt drugs to kids at raves?”

“My point exactly. And he was shoving pretty hard at it.” Sonny touched his chin. “I told him no, that I wasn’t sure Zander was ready. To be honest, I’m not wild about putting anyone else who worked for Moreno and Sorel in a position of power. Nico—I kept him on because *I* know him.”

“He might be turning a blind eye to it,” Jason offered, but Sonny knew he was just offering an excuse. Nico had pushed Zander’s promotion hard. Too hard. Too fast.

“I wonder what he’d do if I told him there’s no way in hell I’m ever going to let Zander

Smith move up in this organization.” Sonny looked to Benny. “What are you thinking about this?”

“Without Jason to take over some of this paperwork, if you’d listened to Nico and promoted Zander or someone else—we would have started *more* paperwork. There’s a lot to go into development in Vegas. I’d be spending time there, I’d probably have to do some inspections in Atlantic City...” Benny hesitated. “To be honest, Sonny, I can’t promise I would have caught these numbers any time soon.”

Sonny sighed—he’d been overworking his loyal business manager. Time to deal with that. “Nico wanted to get his fall guy in place and push the expansion. His income was starting to outpace what he could cover in other areas. He’s not able to hide the money he’s making from dealing anymore, so he’s trying to get out while he can, and he’s setting Zander up for the fall.”

“We could let him,” Jason suggested. “Let Nico think he’s getting away with it. He might think we’re sloppy—”

“He hinted at moving some people around to free himself for Vegas,” Sonny murmured. “I didn’t get a name or specifics until—”

“Until Jason came home.” Benny tapped a pile of paperwork. “He needs to gum up the works fast. Because if things go at this pace—”

“There’ll be more eyes on him.” Sonny pursed his lips. “Bastard.”

“Tell him Zander’s gone as far as he can with us,” Jason said after a moment. “If Nico pushes someone else immediately, that’s a sign. There’s no way he’s got two guys at the same level and only moving one up. If he hangs back or continues to argue the point, then maybe there’s another angle.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Sonny looked to Benny. “I think it’s time you ask your brother to come on board. I can’t keep depending on you to do this by yourself. I’m sorry—I should have seen.”

Benny managed a smile. “I should have said something. I’ll give him a call.”

After a few more points of business, Benny left to do some more paperwork, but Jason remained.

“What’s up? You got a look on your face,” Sonny asked as he poured himself some bourbon. “Carly’s will reading is in a day or two. You thinking about Michael?”

“No.” Jason shook his head. “No. I talked to AJ, and while he’s definitely going to file for custody, I—” He sighed. “I believe him when he says he’s going to give Bobbie time. He may not be able to hold off the old man, but—”



“It’s first lick of common sense that jackass has shown yet.” Sonny wiggled his shoulders. “So, what’s up then?”

“A few days ago, I went to Kelly’s,” Jason said slowly, “and Zander was there with Elizabeth. She was annoyed with him, and he looked pretty hostile. She didn’t tell me much about what he was saying, just that he was harassing her in hopes she’d pass it on to me. Zander stormed out when I got there.”

“He must smell blood in the water.” Sonny leaned against the arm of the sofa. “He’s not stupid. He knows you’re home, he knows you hate the living shit out of him. The only reason he’s alive is because of Emily.”

“Elizabeth has nothing to do with any of it,” Jason muttered. “Why the hell is he going after her?”

Because Zander had heard the same rumors other men in the organization had. Knew the way Jason had reacted when Sorel had simply spoken to Elizabeth. Zander had harassed Elizabeth to annoy Jason, and it had worked. “Well, once I tell Nico that Zander’s promotion is permanently off the table...he’ll either leave her alone and come after you directly or—”

“He’ll harass her even more.”

Sonny crossed to his desk. “I’ll make the phone call. You may want to warn her that Zander might step it up. She ought to evict him. They still have the at-will week to week leases at Kelly’s, don’t they?”

“I don’t want to involve her any more than I have to.” Jason hesitated a moment, rubbing the back of his neck. Sonny set the phone back on the hook.

“What’s going on? I would have thought the two of you had cleared the air.” At the very least—Sonny thought the two might be back on the track Lucky Spencer’s return from the dead had derailed. Or hoped they would be. He liked the two of them together.

“Nothing.” But Jason looked away. “I don’t know. I get the feeling that she...” He waited a moment, and Sonny said nothing because he knew how hard it was for Jason to talk about what was going on inside his head. “She’ll sit down, and she’ll talk to me, but it’s not because she *wants* to.”

“Like she’s doing it to be nice.” Sonny muttered a swear under his breath at the stubbornness of idiots. Morons. The both of them. “Look—”

“And she’s already in the middle of this mess with Michael. I don’t—I know she’s juggling a lot with Kelly’s and school. I don’t want to make it worse.”

“I’m sure she appreciates your concern, but I think she’d rather be warned that

Zander's hostility might go up a notch. She's a tough woman, Jase. Not much gets her down. Not anymore." Sonny lifted a shoulder. "You'd be proud of the crap she's spit back at people who don't approve of her. Give her a heads up. She'll appreciate it." He lifted the phone. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a call to make."

If they were going to dance around each other for the next eighty years, Sonny might have to murder them both.

### **Oasis: Back Office**

When Nico called him into his office, Zander had a feeling that this was gonna suck. He'd been expecting something shitty since news had filtered back that Jason had arrived home as expected.

Sonny might have trusted Nico's judgment, might have let him move up—but Jason would *never* forgive or forget what Zander had done to Emily. Or that he'd once dealt drugs. And after the run-in with Elizabeth Webber at Kelly's—well, fuck he might as well as have cut off his own head. He knew better.

But he'd seen the brunette and his annoyance had boiled over—a mistake in retrospect. Harassing her might as well have been the last straw in his career, though it had already been on life-support. He should have avoided her. Should have gone upstairs and ignored it all.

He'd seen her sitting there, and he'd been reminded of the gossip about her and Jason—their affair several years ago, the suspicions they'd continued carrying on under Lucky's Spencer nose—

Elizabeth was Emily's best friend. She was Jason Morgan's woman, even if neither of them had quite acknowledged that. She represented everything he was *never* gonna have in his life.

And he'd lost it.

"Listen Zander," Nico said, his features twisted in an expression of compassion that Zander didn't believe for a damn minute. Bastard worried about himself first, second, and last. Forever. "I just talked to Sonny—"

"No promotion for me," Zander said blandly. "Shocking. Do I still even have a job?"

"For now." Nico raised a brow. "You think you can stop harassing Elizabeth Webber? Because we both know that's why you're in this position." When Zander frowned, his boss continued. "I'm not an idiot, Smith. Don't ever think there's not eyes on you. In this business, someone is always watching."

"I'll leave her alone," Zander muttered. "It was stupid—"

“You’re damn right—” Nico scowled. “Lay low for a few weeks. Sonny is gonna need someone to step up if this expansion to Vegas is gonna work, and we got too much money on the line for you to fuck it up now.”

## Chapter Five

*These feelings won't go away  
They've been knockin' me sideways  
I keep thinking in a moment that  
Time will take them away  
But these feelings won't go away*  
- Sideways, Citizen Cope

---

*Thursday, April 25, 2002*

### **Brownstone: Kitchen**

"I loved my daughter," Bobbie murmured, "but I'm not sure I ever understood her." She stirred her tea a bit restlessly. "To set up a scene like that—"

Elizabeth bit her lip, her heart aching for Bobbie, but she was unsurprised to learn that the reading of Carly's will had been a disaster. Carly had designed it for shock value — in the event she passed before Michael was an adult, she asked that Edward and AJ be invited to the reading of her will along with Jason, Sonny, and Bobbie.

Not there had been any surprises—Even Elizabeth knew Carly had set up a trust for Michael with Jason and Bobbie as executors, that Jason had been left guardianship, but...

"I know Edward can be difficult," Bobbie continued. "He's cantankerous, stubborn, arrogant—but he didn't deserve what she wrote. What she said about him."

"Is Jason legally bound to what Carly wrote?" Elizabeth asked. "To state that Michael is to never have a single piece of contact with anyone in the Quartermaine family before his eighteenth birthday—can that even be enforced?"

"No, not likely." Bobbie shook her head. "Jason and Alexis are meeting about it today, but it just makes this situation more tense. AJ hasn't filed yet, but I know he wants visitation at the very least, and truthfully..."

"You've considered it," Elizabeth murmured. "You know that's why Carly didn't leave you guardianship."

"I'm too soft, she used to tell me. But, yes, I'm sure she knew that my loyalty isn't hard and fast. I often tried to get her to soften her stance on the Quartermaines." She

touched Elizabeth's hands. "But I'm worried that Jason may dig his feet in the sand over this. Has Emily spoken to you about the fallout after his accident?"

"In some ways, but I know Jason..." She bit her lip. "He'd never admit it, but I think he felt rejected by them. They kept looking at him, wanting him to be this other person. Wanting him to be *their* idea of who Jason used to be. And the more they pushed, the more he drew away."

"When you add in the fact that the one trait all Quartermaine men possess is their stubborn nature—it's just become worse since Jason went to work for Sonny. Edward saw him denying all the advantages their family offered. And when this business with Michael happened—"

"It made everything even worse." Elizabeth bit her lip. She didn't want to be involved. She didn't want *anything* to do with this, but she could feel herself being sucked in anyway. "Bobbie—"

"I feel awful asking this, but I don't think Jason will listen to *me* about this."

"Bobbie—"

"You have influence with Jason. You may not want to see it, but—"

"No, not—"

"You do." Bobbie squeezed her hand. "Jason *has* to see that a long drawn out custody battle isn't in anyone's best interest. He may drag Michael through this and lose—"

"I can't ask him to change his mind about AJ," Elizabeth cut in, her tone sharp. "*Don't* ask me to use what little connection I have with Jason to do that. I know AJ isn't a bad person, I *know* how much he's worked on himself, but I can't pretend Jason's fears aren't real—"

"I just want Jason to be realistic about his chances. Elizabeth, if you care about Jason—"

"I have to get to work." Elizabeth got to her feet. "I'll talk to him, Bobbie. But this has to be his decision." She bit her lip. "Did you tell Jason that you wanted him to make a deal with the Quartermaines? Does he know this is how you feel?"

"I mentioned it at the reading," Bobbie admitted. "Just...be his friend, Elizabeth. He needs someone on his side."

The trouble was, Elizabeth thought as she left the kitchen and grabbed her purse from the front room, that she couldn't very keep her distance from Jason and preserve a light, superficial friendship with him if she was constantly feeling pressured to be more.

And it was *important* that she stayed light and easy this time. Like the first few months of their friendship—she couldn't afford anything more.

Not now. And not ever again.

### Alexis's Office

"You don't think I'd win in court," Jason said after a long moment, tossing his copy of Carly's will on Alexis's desk. "You agree with Bobbie."

"I have to be honest with you," Alexis said, her eyes understanding. "I think it depends on the next few weeks. At the moment, AJ is sober, with a good, steady job. A stable marriage to a perfectly lovely young woman. He comes from a well-respected family. Yes, he's had issues with alcohol before but nothing on his record. You can bring up the accident, but that's six years ago and he was never charged."

"Because the Quartermaines covered for him—"

"When you add in the fact that AJ voluntarily surrendered his parental rights in order to give Michael a stable life after not being involved for so long, it makes him look like he has Michael's best interests in heart. He hasn't filed yet, he's giving Michael space—"

"And the next head he bashes into a rock might be Michael's," Jason said, his teeth clenched. "Only *he* might not ever wake up. Is that a risk you want to take?"

"What we do have on our side is that AJ did agree to give up Michael a year ago. He *did* allow Carly to have full custody after the divorce. He's only been in his son's life for about eight months out of five years." Alexis hesitated. "However—"

"They'll mention that first year I was lying about Michael's paternity, which isn't going to look good for me." Jason rubbed his face. "Even if we tried to spin that—"

"AJ could ask Robin to come in from Paris and testify to exactly what you told her about why you were lying. It'll show you knew." Alexis bit her lip. "What about character witnesses? Elizabeth Webber lives at the Brownstone. Does she have anything to offer about AJ not being suitable? The two of you are friends, aren't you?"

"We haven't really talked about it, but she's also friends with Courtney, and I think —" He was pretty sure Elizabeth half-agreed with Alexis and Bobbie. She might even think AJ was a good person. She had a soft heart.

But good people didn't destroy lives.

"Jason, I know how much you care for Michael, and I want to do right by you. I just—I'd be giving you *bad* legal advice if I told you we had a slam dunk on our hands. We

have to hope AJ screws up before this comes to court. Or you have to come to another agreement with him. Supervised visitation—”

“No, I’ll—I’ll figure something out.” Jason rose to his feet. “Thanks, Alexis. I know you didn’t like Carly much, but—”

“I like you,” Alexis said after a long moment. “You’ve always been a good client, Jason. I’ll do my best for you and Michael.” She bit her lip. “And I hate to admit it, but this time—”

“It might not be enough,” he finished. “Yeah, I’m getting that.”

### **Kelly’s: Dining Room**

The beauty of having an actual best friend who knew all the dark places inside, who argued with you when you were lying to yourself was that somehow, she was always on your side.

Elizabeth sighed as she finished relating the conversation with Bobbie to her best friend and hoped they weren’t going to argue again.

“So, what are you going to do?” Gia folded her arms and leaned over the counter. “I mean, Bobbie’s *not* wrong. There’s, like, no way Jason can win in court. He’s the biological uncle, yeah, but he doesn’t exactly scream stable father.”

“Jason was a great father when he had Michael,” Elizabeth retorted. “Michael should be so lucky—” She stopped and shook her head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“I challenged your man’s honor. I got what I deserved,” Gia said with a wicked smirk. So maybe they weren’t going to argue today, but Gia would still get her licks in.

“I really hate you.” Elizabeth poured water into a coffee pot as she considered for a moment. “I don’t know. I mean, Jason’s getting the same spiel from Bobbie and Alexis. What could I even add? Am I supposed to make it worse?”

“You’re supposed to be his friend,” Gia said. She tilted her head. “You *say* that’s all you are now, but you’re not exactly acting that way. Friends get involved when people are about to get their lives shattered. If Jason goes to court, if he loses, that’s it. AJ will never let him see Michael.”

“I know.” And if that happened, not only would Jason lose Michael to AJ again, he’d feel guilty about letting Carly down, about not protecting Michael. And if something happened to Michael because of it...

“You’re going to have to stop pretending you’re going to be able to stay neutral,” Gia continued. “There is no neutral. You can be with AJ and Courtney—and that’s fine. You can be with Jason, that’s fine, too. But you can’t be on both sides.”

“Why can’t I be on *Michael’s* side?” Elizabeth asked, exasperated. “No one is one hundred percent right here, you know? I think AJ would be insane if he kept Michael from Jason. That’s a connection, a link to Michael’s mother that’s necessary. Important. And Jason’s not wrong for being worried that AJ might not stay sober. That Michael might be put in danger. But—”

“But maybe Jason isn’t thinking about Michael.” Gia shrugged. “AJ’s never hurt Michael as far as we know. Or anyone else, not really. Other than himself. You know who he did hurt? Jason Quartermaine. He killed his brother. And the man in his place has spent his *entire* life so far knowing he’s only here, that he’s *only* in existence because AJ crashed that car. When he pictures what might happen to Michael, he’s thinking about that—about rebuilding *his* life from the bottom up.”

Elizabeth bit her lip. “I know that people might think Jason is being unreasonable—”

“Who said that?” Gia lifted her brows. “First of all, I think Jason has a fantastic reason to never want to lay eyes on his brother again. Did you not hear the part where I said AJ *destroyed* Jason’s life? I’ve only lived in Port Charles for five minutes, but I see the way people talk about Jason Quartermaine. It’s the way my mother always talked about Marcus. Why couldn’t I be like my brother? He was smart, kind—*he* was going places.”

“The way my parents treated Sarah.” Even now, after all these years, she knew Alan and Monica Quartermaine hadn’t really reconciled themselves to the son they had now no matter how much they tried.

“Exactly.” Gia jabbed a finger at her. “It’s easy to look at Jason and only see the hot guy with a fast bike and a lot of money. But he worked his ass off to be someone else. Do you remember when Tony came over the other day and tried to talk Bobbie into cooperating with the Quartermaines? It’s not the first time they had that conversation, based on how much yelling we could hear upstairs. But the way he talked about Jason—the words he used—”

“Tony’s an ass,” Elizabeth muttered. She could still hear the rage, the bitterness in Tony’s voice as he’d called Jason a brain-damaged thug. A nothing. A nobody. Whatever sympathy Tony had had for Bobbie was clearly not as fervent as his hatred for Jason. He would always loathe the man who had stolen Michael from him. “Gia—”

“I know the way my brother talks about him. He makes him sound like nothing. Anger Boy, right? From before Jason figured out how to control himself.” Gia shrugged. “Jason Morgan has been around for six years, and for *every* one of those years, he’s been seen as less by the people in this town who should have had some damn compassion for him. I don’t blame Jason for wanting to protect Michael from that. I mean, is he overreacting? Maybe.”



“But, in his heart, he’s still Michael’s father, and that’s his job,” Elizabeth murmured. “Damn it.”

“You’re going to have to get involved, Webber.” Gia arched her brow. “What are you so scared of?”

Elizabeth bit her lip and sighed, because it was pointless to keep pretending there wasn’t more behind her desire to keep her life simple, and Gia knew that better than anyone. And it didn’t serve either of them for her to lie about it anymore. “I think you and I both know the answer.”

“That you’ll find yourself broken and have to rebuild from the ground up all over again for, like, the twelfth time? Yeah. I get it.” Gia leaned forward, a wicked glint in her eyes. “Aren’t you tired of playing it safe?”

“Not even a little bit.” Elizabeth offered her friend a half smile. “I’ll do what I have to do, but it stops there. Jason wants to protect Michael, and I’ll help him do that. But I have to protect myself. No one else will do it for me.”

“As long as you know you’re doing it. I don’t care if you stay away from Jason, Elizabeth. I care if you’re lying to yourself. You’re not doing that, so we can shelve it for now.” Gia reached in her bag, “Now excuse me, I have my last final tomorrow, and I might survive it if I have enough coffee.” She stopped and looked at Elizabeth. “*Don’t* think this conversation is over. You can play it safe all you want, but you know that’s not going to work for long.”

“Gia—”

“But I do have a final tomorrow, and I have to go worry about my life for bit. I’ll come back to yours when the semester is over.”

### **Quartermaine Estate: Living Room**

Edward Quartermaine was flirting with a heart attack as he raged at his two eldest grandsons. He was berating AJ for ever getting involved with that damned floozy, for Ned for talking him out of filing his own custody suit and just having the temerity to be in this room and not out there fighting for Michael—

“Mark my words, if we wait much longer, Jason will take him out of the country and that will be the end of it,” Edward jabbed his finger at AJ.

“Jason isn’t going to do that,” Ned said, his tone calm. Even disinterested. AJ wondered how his cousin managed to stay detached from Edward’s bullshit. Because *he* hadn’t grown up in this house? Is that why Ned seemed to escape the worst of the poison?

“Why the hell not?” Edward demanded. “He’s done everything he can to keep that

boy from this family—he has legal guardianship—what’s stopping him?”

Ned hesitated and looked to AJ. AJ shrugged. He didn’t know how to explain his own conviction that his brother didn’t intend to steal Michael away in the night. Since the moment the truth had come out, Jason had done everything by the book. He’d gone to court to keep custody, yeah, but when the time came to surrender it, he’d done so.

Except when he’d blackmailed AJ into giving Carly full custody after the divorce, but AJ had himself to blame for that after setting the warehouse on fire. He had deserved that punishment.

It had been Sonny that hung him on the goddamn meat hook and threatened his life for no other reason than Carly wanted him out of Michael’s life for good. But Jason had never threatened AJ’s life.

“Grandfather, I just don’t think Jason would do that,” Ned continued when AJ had nothing to offer. “He wouldn’t do it to Bobbie for one thing.”

“Oh, I’m counting on the kindness of thugs—” Edward dismissed this theory with a wave of his hand.

AJ had heard that phrase, or a variation of it, a thousand times since Jason had gone to work for Sonny. Thug. Criminal. Degenerate. Worthless. And yet, somehow, in this moment—he couldn’t listen to it anymore. He’d reached his boiling point.

“Don’t call him that,” AJ said.

At his grandson’s quiet command, Edward broke off his rambling rage, blinked, and looked at him. “Excuse me?”

“Thug.” AJ swallowed. “*That’s* why we’re in this mess. Because you—because *we* drove Jason away. All of us. I may have destroyed Jason Quartermaine, but the reason Jason *Morgan* isn’t part of this family has very little to do with me.”

“Oh, hell.” Ned closed his eyes. “Here we go.”

“Say that again,” Edward demanded. He strode toward AJ. “Blame *me* again for this mess—”

“You drove him away. You rejected him. If you hadn’t treated Jason like garbage, if you hadn’t made him feel damaged and like *nothing*, then maybe he would have told Carly to go to hell when she wanted him to lie—” AJ pressed his lips together and swallowed. “Jason didn’t think much of me back then, but he didn’t *hate* me. Not me. Not then. It was this family. This house. This suffocation. The constant pressure to be someone we’re not—”

“You and your brother had potential!” Edward boomed. “I just pushed you, tried to

make you reach it—”

“You’ve *never* let me forget that I killed my brother! That I destroyed him! I drank to shut all of you up! And I killed the only member of this family who ever gave a damn about me—” He closed his eyes, his throat tight. “And now that same brother can barely stand to look at me. I’m done looking for your approval. For wanting to be part of this family.”

“AJ—” Ned said, holding his hand out. “Hey. Listen—”

“Why the hell have I tried so hard?” AJ demanded. “What’s the point? You know, I may not agree with the way Jason lives his life, but I sure as hell understand the direction he took. *Away*. And that’s where I’m going to go.”

He turned on his heel and stalked away, telling himself it was the last time he was ever going to pay lip service to his grandfather. He’d get his son back, and he would make sure Michael knew every day of his life that he was loved just for who he was, and not for who he might be if *only* he were a better person.

His son would be a better man than his father if it was the last thing AJ did.

### **Gia and Elizabeth’s Apartment: Living Room**

“This isn’t even English,” Gia declared as she slammed her book shut in disgust. “How am I supposed to absorb this in time for a test next week?” Before Elizabeth could open her mouth, Gia stabbed a finger at her. “And do not tell me that if I had kept up with my reading and notes all semester—”

“Hey, I don’t seem to have your problem and *I’m* a double major,” Elizabeth said sweetly as she highlighted a passage in her textbook. “You think learning the principles of finance in this country is fascinating? You picked your major, suck it up.”

“I don’t even remember why we’re friends,” Gia muttered. She grabbed her coffee mug. “You need a refill?”

“Nah, I think I’m switching to some herbal tea.” Elizabeth rose. “I’ll make it.”

Just as Elizabeth set the tea kettle to boil, there was a knock at their door. Gia scowled. “Didn’t we warn everyone in existence that we were studying this week? I will have someone’s head—”

She yanked open the door and blinked. “Oh. Jason. Hey.”

“Hey.” Jason hesitated as he took in Gia’s pajama pants and tank top. “Is this a bad time?”

“Well, finals are next week and as your friend and mine loves to remind me, *I’ve* spent

too much time partying and not nearly enough with the books.” She sighed. “Webber? You got a visitor!”

“Oh.” Elizabeth bit her lip as she stepped out from the small kitchen area into the living room. “Hey, Jason. Gia and I were just—”

“I should have called,” he said after a moment. He shifted his weight from one foot to another, looking uncertain. “But—”

“No, I was gonna—” Elizabeth said. She glanced down at her jeans and t-shirt before handing Gia a fresh mug of coffee. “Mind if I bail on you?”

Gia waited a beat, wondering why people worked so hard at making themselves miserable. She could see the way Jason was looking at Elizabeth, trying not to let his interest show, and she saw how Elizabeth flushed and avoided his gaze. Idiots. Well, she was going to do her part and kick them out. “And not have you smugly sailing through your study guides while I drown in reading? By all means, abandon me to educational psychology and constitutional law.”

“You mind if we go outside?” Elizabeth asked Jason as she took her purse and a light jacket off a chair.

“Ah, no.” Jason stepped back to allow her to leave the apartment in front of him. He looked once more at Gia. “Uh, good luck?”

“I’m going to need it,” was the reply as Gia closed the door, but she flashed a smug smile of her own.

Jason followed Elizabeth down the steps and out the side entrance of the Brownstone. She slid her jacket on and turned to him. “What’s up?”

“I didn’t mean to bother you,” Jason said, his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket. “I know how busy you are—”

“Hey. You don’t show up on my doorstep at eight at night without a reason, Jason. We’re friends,” Elizabeth said. And she meant that. She might want to avoid any emotional entanglement with the man, but she would *never* pretend they didn’t have history.

And she liked that Jason could count on her. She didn’t have so many friends left in the world that she could afford to jettison a loyal one.

He tipped his head toward the road where his bike was parked. “You want to take a ride?”

Elizabeth bit her lip, and almost said no. Talking here, outside her warm, safe home —*that* was smart. Protected. Climbing on that bike, wrapping her arms around his

broad chest, riding close to him—

But he looked concerned, and she knew he was dealing with a blow after losing Bobbie's support earlier that day, so she swallowed her misgivings. What was the harm in one ride?

### **Vista Point: Cliff Road**

Elizabeth was unsurprised that Jason was taking the turns with a bit less recklessness than she remembered. These were, after all, the last roads Carly had traveled before plunging to her death. She trusted Jason's driving—she knew he'd never be truly reckless with her along, but still she could feel the difference as they leaned into the final curve before reaching the summit at Vista Point.

But instead of revving the engine to make the last climb, the bike began to rumble and slow. He pulled to a stop in front of the mangled guardrail, and turned off the engine.

Silently, they both climbed off the bike and Jason pushed down the stand, taking the helmet from her.

"You haven't been back since you came home, have you?" Elizabeth asked softly, her words nearly disappearing in the winds and sound of water rushing as the lake currents swirled below.

"Couldn't." Jason turned and looked at the guardrail. At this evidence that Carly hadn't merely disappeared, but had, in fact, died.

"Bobbie told me about the will reading." Elizabeth wrapped her arms around her torso as they walked toward the dusty shoulder where Carly's car had, presumably, hung on the precipice. "I'm sorry."

"It wasn't anything I didn't expect." Jason braced his hands on the guardrail and looked out over the harbor. "Carly hated the Quartermaines. It was just like her to try to one up them even when she wouldn't be here to see it."

Elizabeth bit her lip "Bobbie wanted me to talk to you," she said.

"I thought she might." Jason turned, and they continued their silent walk. He'd stopped just short of the turn off for the parking lot for Vista Point's summit view and park, but neither of them suggested they climb back on the bike and take it to the top.

"I'm supposed to, I don't know, make you see that it's going to be painful and there's no guarantee you'll even win." Elizabeth sighed. "I'm *not* gonna do that, Jason."

She heard him sigh as they crossed the highway, empty now as it usually was this

time of night. There was nothing up this way save for the views at Vista Point, and it wasn't a popular location anyway. It wasn't high enough to be truly impressive, and there were more majestic views of the lake and harbor elsewhere in town.

So, she wasn't surprised to find the parking lot deserted or the see empty benches and walkaways that dotted the summit of the hill.

He was quiet until they sat on one of those benches, the view of the harbor comforting to her even with the Gothic mess of Wyndemere looming out of the mists of Spoon Island.

"Why not?" he asked. "You're not wrong. Alexis has described in great detail that I'm not likely to keep the guardianship intact when AJ challenges it."

That thread of defeat, even resignation in his tone, stirred her. *Jason* didn't quit. He didn't give up. "Bobbie means well, and you know Alexis is on your side."

"What about you?"

She didn't answer at first, because she could feel, maybe for the first time, that maybe she *did* have influence over Jason. What if she told him right now that he should give in? That AJ wasn't all bad, and maybe Jason was being too protective?

"I think you have to do what's right for Michael," Elizabeth said carefully. "He's what matters."

Jason leaned back against the wooden slats of the bench, stretching his arm along the side. "You've spent time with him. What do you think is right?"

He *would* have to ask the difficult question. "I don't know," she said. "He's a bright little boy, you know? He loves living with Bobbie. He loves Lucas. I mean, the kid is his uncle technically, but Michael looks up to him like an older brother. And Lucas is *so* good with him. He never had much use for Carly—I can't blame him there—but he's been kind to Michael. Whatever happens, I hope Bobbie and Lucas can remain a vital part of his life."

She waited a moment. "But that's not what you want me to tell you. You want me to tell you're right to keep Michael from AJ. That you should fight tooth and nail to keep custody."

"I want you tell me what *you* think," Jason said. He looked at her, his eyes sober and steady. "I've been home two weeks, and I've seen you. I know you spend time with Michael. That you care about him. But I know you're friends with Courtney, that you know AJ as her husband and not just—"

"Emily's older brother." Or the devastating drunk, but that she left unspoken. Elizabeth hesitated, considering her words. "I can tell you honestly that the AJ I've

known since Courtney came into his life is the *best* version. I haven't seen him slur his words, there's no hint that he's drinking. I know he fought with Edward, Alan, and Monica after he married Courtney and stopped going after custody. Courtney isn't sure, but she thinks that they left the mansion because he wouldn't leave her. They found an apartment with his savings. He studied hard to get a license to operate a forklift, and as far as anyone knows, he's doing well at his job.

"But," she continued, "I'm worried he married Courtney to dig at Sonny. That his motives weren't altogether pure. He's been good to her, he treats her well, but I worry that it's a smoke screen. That if his marriage falters, it might change things. I honestly don't know, Jason. I worry that his sobriety is temporary. That he still struggles with the Quartermaines. I think we both know they're a heavy trigger in his drinking." She leaned against the back of the bench, propping her elbow on the top, and sliding her fingers through her hair. "I honestly can't tell you what I think should happen."

"A court may still decide to give him custody."

"They might," Elizabeth admitted. "I don't have a lot of experience with this, but Gia's been asking some friends of hers who intern in a family law firm. With Carly gone, and without any good reason, a family court judge might err on the side of the father. She said that courts also don't...they don't appreciate when one parent goes to extreme lengths to cut a biological parent out of their life, and—"

"Carly did that in spades. Yeah, Alexis mentioned that, and the fact that I helped—" He scrubbed his face. "How long do you think AJ will wait before he files?"

"Honestly? Maybe until Memorial Day. Michael finishes his school year then, and I know part of the reason he's waited is to give Bobbie space and keep Michael's life relatively stable. Not having to move during the school year would be a good idea." She bit her lip. "I'm sorry, Jason. I don't feel like I'm being much help."

"You are," he assured her. "And I'm not mad at Bobbie or Alexis. If I make AJ take this to court, then Michael gets dragged into counseling, into court rooms. He'll spend weeks talking to people. It'll upset him. If I do any of that, it has to be for the right reason. I can't—I can't do that to him just because I—"

Because he wanted to keep him, Elizabeth finished, but she offered another suggestion so Jason wouldn't have to admit how much he just *wanted* to be Michael's father. "Because it's what Carly would have wanted."

"This is harder than I thought it'd be," Jason admitted. "I thought—when I found out Carly was gone—I knew she'd leave me custody, but I always intended to leave him with Bobbie. I mean, I'd be around if he needed me, but I didn't expect—" He hesitated, but this time Elizabeth didn't step in to finish his thought. She had a

feeling he was struggling towards a conclusion he didn't want to admit, but it would be the best thing for him if Jason was the one to articulate this.

"I didn't expect AJ to be..." He paused again and looked at her, but she wouldn't do this for him. "Doing well," he finally managed, which was close enough to the truth.

"You have time to consider this," Elizabeth told him. "As long as AJ waits to file, you have time."

"Yeah." Jason exhaled slowly. "There's—there's another reason I came over tonight. Why I wanted to see you."

Despite herself, her heart began to race slightly. "Oh?" she asked, hating how breathless her voice sounded. "What's up?"

"Zander," Jason said, his face tightening. "The other day at Kelly's—"

"We talked about it," Elizabeth said dismissively, feeling a mixture of relief and disappointment that it was a mundane reason after all. "He's an ass."

"Who might be getting worse," Jason told her. "I can't give you many details, but until I came home—Zander was—" He hesitated, probably trying to think of how to explain something illegal to her in a way that wouldn't *sound* illegal. "He was up for a promotion."

A smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "Oh, yeah? A corner office with a view of the harbor?"

Jason, despite himself, offered a half smile. "Something like that. It would have—it would have been lucrative for him. I shut it down. I don't trust him, and I don't want him in a position to do more harm."

"Okay," Elizabeth drawled. "So that explains why he was pissed at you." She sighed, sitting up straight and tucking her leg underneath her. "Let me guess, he can't come at you directly for derailing his climb up the ladder, but harassing *me* is a handy way to deal with his annoyance."

"He didn't know yet for sure that I was...going to block him," Jason told her. "He probably suspected it, but now he knows for sure."

"Which means he might amp up his annoying behavior." Elizabeth pursed her lips. "Yeah, I don't have time for that in my life. We have a week to week tenant lease on most of the rooms at Kelly's, except for Lucky, because he's Bobbie's family. But I can give Zander a week's notice." She looked at him. "Or should I not evict him? If he's at Kelly's, you know where he is. You can keep an eye on him."

"I'd rather he be anywhere but Kelly's," Jason admitted, "and I was gonna suggest



you might kick him out, but I don't know if I like giving him a concrete reason to dislike you. Not when he's already going to be pissed at me. Don't—don't do anything about it yet. I'll put some eyes on the diner. You'll let me know if he bothers you?"

"I can handle him, Jason," she started to protest.

"You shouldn't have to when it has nothing to do with you," Jason told her, holding up a hand to stop her. "I know he's not likely to do any serious harm to you. He's an idiot, but he has enough street smarts to know—" He stopped short, but she wondered at what threat he might have leveled to Emily's ex-boyfriend if it became necessary. Better she be left in the dark.

"I'll let you know," she said finally. "I should be getting home. I have an early class."

## Chapter Six

*Some people out there  
Are always talkin' around  
Seems they're never really happy  
Unless they're puttin' somebody down  
You know the thing they fear the most  
Is that someone's gonna see right through  
Their thin disguise and made-up lies  
It's sad, but true*  
- Heard Ya Talkin', Jeremy Kay

---

*Thursday, May 2, 2002*

### **Queen of Angels: Chapel**

It was strange to stand with Bobbie and Jason as part of the receiving line, but Bobbie had asked Elizabeth to stay with her when Lucas had balked at attending. He'd elected to stay home and hang out with Michael, and Bobbie had thought it would be the better use of his time. So, Elizabeth stood there next to Bobbie as people offered their condolences.

She wondered when she saw the large crowd how many of them were there because they'd genuinely liked Carly—and how many had attended out of love for Bobbie?

There was a tense moment as she spied AJ and Courtney in the line. She saw Jason's muscles bunch—could feel the irritation, the annoyance rising off him as if it were steam rising from a pot of boiling water.

"Bobbie," Courtney said with a smile, as she came to the older woman first. She leaned in and kissed Bobbie's cheek. "I'm so sorry for your loss. Carly and I didn't know each other well, but she was so full of energy. I'll miss her drama at the diner."

"Thank you," Bobbie managed, as Elizabeth gave her friend a grateful smile. The blonde's words had been some of the few genuine offers of sympathy. Many likely thought Bobbie was better off without the tornado of Carly Corinthos.

"Bobbie, if there's anything you need," AJ said, as he carefully avoided looking to Bobbie's right. "You call me."

"Yeah, anytime you need me to cover," Courtney said to Elizabeth. She bit her lip

and looked at Jason. Good manners won over her innate shyness as she offered her hand to Jason, who accepted it. “Elizabeth has told me so much about you and Carly. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks,” Jason said. Courtney hesitated then stepped forward, moving past the line.

AJ cleared his throat as he considered his brother. Elizabeth could hardly breathe. Surely—they wouldn’t cause a scene here. But AJ *was* a Quartermaine, an unpredictable breed at best.

“No matter our difficulties,” AJ said finally, “I know Carly mattered to you.” Which, Elizabeth supposed, seemed the safest way to describe the strange relationship his brother had had with AJ’s ex-wife. “Losing a friend is never easy.”

He offered his hand, and Elizabeth could feel the eyes of everyone in the immediate area drawing in a collected breath.

But not Elizabeth. She knew Jason better than that and knew he’d let AJ set the tone for this scene. Whatever trouble they had, she hoped Jason would see the sincerity in the older man’s eyes.

So, she wasn’t surprised when Jason accepted the hand and shook it. “Thank you,” he replied, his voice devoid of any expression.

AJ and Courtney moved on, the crisis averted. Elizabeth sucked in another breath when she saw Edward and Lila at the end of the line—the last Quartermaines in the room.

Alan and Monica had elected not to come, Bobbie said, having offered their condolences at another time. Ned had been through already with Alexis, and his sympathy had been genuine, his interactions with Jason civil, but Ned had always been the most mature member of the family.

“Don’t worry,” Jason murmured to Elizabeth as his grandparents drew closer. “Grandmother won’t let him start anything.”

True enough, Lila’s gentle presence had forestalled any attempt Edward might have made to antagonize Jason. There had only been a stray comment about family being important, and Edward being willing to do whatever was good for that family, but Elizabeth paid little attention to it.

Bobbie thanked Elizabeth profusely for standing by her at the viewing and in the receiving line, but then she left with Felicia and Mac in order to head to the reception at the Brownstone.

Elizabeth had driven to the church with Gia, but her roommate had had to leave immediately after the service for a study group session, which left Elizabeth with the

option to either walk to work or...

"Do you have a ride?" Jason asked.

She had a feeling Gia might have had an ulterior motive when making plans to abandon to her at the church. She'd *known* Elizabeth was scheduled to work, that Bobbie wouldn't be able to take her home. She sighed and looked at him. "No, I—I'm supposed to be at Kelly's—Penny and Don have been there all day—"

"I'll take you," Jason told her. "I'm in the parking lot." And because she could think of no reason to refuse that didn't sound insane and petty, she nodded.

They left the shadowy anteroom of the church and moved into the brilliant sunshine of the early May afternoon. Elizabeth shaded her eyes with one hand as she rummaged one-handed in her purse for her sunglasses. "I already miss winter," she muttered.

"There's sun in the winter," Jason said blandly as he touched the small of her back to propel her toward the parking lot. She ignored the tingles of his warm skin as they brushed the thin fabric of her black dress and increased her speed, leaving those fingers behind

"Well, if you're going to be literal," she began as they passed through the thin black fence, but she cursed herself when they all but crashed into a trio of people she'd been trying to avoid.

Damn it. She was usually more aware of her surroundings, but no—today of all days

---

"Well, I'm not surprised to find you sniffing after her already," Lucky said, ignoring Elizabeth and directing his disgust at Jason. "It's only been, what? Five minutes since we broke up?"

"Oh, for Christ's..." Elizabeth huffed and shoved the sunglasses up over her forehead. Even if they were only in the parking lot, this was still a church, she reminded herself, and Sarah was still her sister. So, she plastered a smile on her face and took a deep breath. "I didn't see you three inside."

"We caught Bobbie before the ceremony," Nikolas said, his expression dark with disappointment. Likely in her, for her choice of friends. Jackass. "I thought it was best we didn't cause a scene."

She didn't have a damn clue what kind of scene they might have caused, so she ignored his comment and started past them.

"Lizzie, do you need a ride somewhere?" Sarah asked, even as she wound her arm through Lucky's. Elizabeth blinked at it for a moment, trying to figure out why the

movement bothered her so damn much.

“Let’s just go,” she finally said to Jason. “It’s like talking to a brick wall.”

“Lizzie, you’re not going to get on that bike!” Sarah protested as Jason and Elizabeth rounded the trio and closed the short distance to the motorcycle. “You’re in a dress!”

“Cool it, Sarah. You know there’s no talking to your sister,” Lucky said, bitterness lacing his retort. “Why aren’t you with my aunt?”

Elizabeth ignored them as Jason handed her the helmet and straddled the bike. *Don’t give in, don’t give in. Don’t look at them—*

“You really know how to cut and run when it gets tough, don’t you?” Lucky managed to call over the engine. Stunned by this attack, Elizabeth looked at him then, seeing the misery, the anger in his expression. What the hell was *his* problem?

“Elizabeth?”

She turned back and looked at Jason, his brow lifted. “If you want to stay,” he began, using a resigned tone that she remembered too well.

And she remembered all the times she’d walked away from Jason and stayed with Lucky. Every *single* mistake she’d made. Jason was hurting today—he had said goodbye to a friend, he was facing a difficult custody battle. And now he was looking at her with that same understanding.

Maybe she didn’t intend to pursue her feelings for him, but she’d be damned if she let him for one more minute think that she was contemplating leaving him for Lucky.

“Can you take the long way to Kelly’s?” she asked, climbing behind Jason and tucking in her skirt so it wouldn’t fly up. “Penny and Don can wait. I want to be *anywhere* but here.”

### **Brownstone: Kitchen**

The reception had waned by the time Jason arrived—Bobbie was in her kitchen, picking at a sandwich he was sure someone had put in front of her.

With the memorial done, Bobbie had nothing left to plan. There was no next step, nothing to focus on. He worried that she might fall apart now.

But she surprised him with a genuine, if sad, smile as he pulled out a chair to sit with her. “I wondered if you would stop by once people had started to leave.”

“I took Elizabeth to Kelly’s,” he told her. And had stayed for lunch to be sure that if Zander stopped by, he’d be there to give him a warning in person. He hadn’t, and Jason had felt a mixture of relief and disappointment. He wouldn’t mind having

Zander's face to punch today.

"Oh..." Bobbie leaned back. "I didn't even think—she drove with Gia, but Gia had to leave." She pressed a hand to her forehead. "I should have made sure—"

"No one expects you to take care of everyone. Elizabeth is an adult."

"I know, but..." Bobbie sighed. "I just...it struck me as I sat here with my dearest friends in the world. No one misses her."

Jason blinked. "Bobbie—"

"No one genuinely misses Carly's presence save for you, me, Michael, and perhaps Sonny, but he holds his grief inside. Everyone else?" Bobbie looked away, toward the backyard where Jason realized he could hear a rumble of voices and the thump of a basketball hitting a hoop. "They feel sorry for me, but I imagine many of them think I'm better off."

Jason started to protest, but found he couldn't. Carly had not endeared herself to many in her few years in Port Charles, and had actively sought to antagonize most. Her absence might even bring relief to some.

"I know people think Carly was destructive. Conniving. Manipulative. And she was." Bobbie's smile was warmer now. "She came by it naturally. I gave her away to give her a better life, but *I* wanted one for myself, and I did whatever I had to do to get the life I thought *I* deserved. I schemed. I lied. I had an affair and destroyed my marriage long before she came to town. Once I was past the shock, the sorrow that my child had not had a good life, I could see everything we had in common. *Everything* that I had passed to her." She sighed and met Jason's eyes. "I can only hope she's found peace now."

She rose and crossed to the coffee pot. "Can I make you some coffee?"

"Sure," he said, because it would give her something to do and he could see she needed that now. "About Michael—"

"I hope you're not angry with me," Bobbie cut in as she filled the pot with water and turned it on. She looked at him. "It's not that I don't want him with you. I remember how good you were to him. I've always wished he *was* your son. It would have made everything easier."

"But he's not," Jason murmured. "And wishing doesn't take away the problem we have. I spoke with Elizabeth."

"Oh." Bobbie drew her brow together. "Oh. I forgot I had asked her—I feel awful about that. I know she doesn't want to take sides—"

“I needed someone to be honest with me about AJ,” Jason said. “If Michael ends up—” He couldn’t articulate the possibility, so he just stopped. “Anyway, it’s not important. I just—I’m listening to what you and Alexis are telling me. I know the odds aren’t in my favor. I haven’t decided yet what to do. Elizabeth thinks we—that I have still have time.” He hesitated again because it wasn’t in his nature particularly to pry, but — “We ran into Lucky as we left.”

Her expression changed, distaste creeping in. “I’m sure *that* was pleasant,” she said, acid dripping from every word.

“She told me a little bit of what happened,” Jason continued. “I know that she left him at the altar, moved in here with Gia. I’m not—” He waited. “I don’t know what I’m asking. I guess I just—”

“You’ve noticed the changes.” Bobbie poured the coffee into a mug, then set it in front of him. She returned to her chair. “I’ve known Elizabeth since she moved to Port Charles. I can remember the brash, irresponsible teenager Aunt Ruby kept on at the diner even though she was pretty hopeless. She was flighty, vibrant, clever—”

Bobbie sighed. “Ruby always said she was reminded of me at that age. I wasn’t much older than Elizabeth when I—” She bit her lip and looked away. She didn’t have to clarify what she left unspoken. Jason knew she’d been a teenager when she’d started as a prostitute in Florida.

“Anyway.” Bobbie coughed, and continued, “Ruby kept her at the diner to keep an eye on her. She saw so much of herself, of me, in Elizabeth.” She tilted her head. “And then, one day, it was gone. All the promise, the bright shining light—extinguished in an instant.”

“I know she was...” He couldn’t say it, hated thinking it. He could remember Emily divulging the truth to him at the garage after Tom Baker had held them hostage in his studio, and while it had saddened him then—he hadn’t really understood it until he spent time with Elizabeth, had seen the scars the attack had left on her soul. It wasn’t abstract any longer, but a real horror that had happened to someone he cared about. “I know what happened to her.”

“I watched her battle back from that, putting herself together piece by piece. It was a struggle,” Bobbie admitted, “but I—I was so proud of her...for finding a new sense of herself. I could see the woman she was going to be emerging. The flightiness—her superficial nature—that had deepened into a bottomless well of compassion, of caring. I could see her shining again, and I could see my nephew shining with her. She didn’t just put herself back together that year, Jason, she kept my fractured family together and didn’t even know it. Lucky was going to leave Port Charles, but she kept him here. And he and Luke were able to patch things up.

“She used to tell me that Lucky fixed her,” Bobbie continued, a tear sliding down her cheek. “I could never understand why she wouldn’t see what she’d given *him*. Just when I thought she’d battled herself completely back—” Her throat closed. “Well, you were there the night of the fire. You know what she lost. What never came home.”

“Bobbie—”

“The changes you see, the ones I’ve seen since January—” Bobbie cut in, shifting the topic back to the present. “I see that vibrancy returning, but she’s...” She bit her lip, frowning as if searching for the right words. “She’s guarded. In a way I haven’t seen in a long time. I worry that she’s so focused on protecting herself that...”

She looked at Jason. “I can’t tell you much about what happened with the wedding beyond the brainwashing. I think it was merely the final straw. Elizabeth doesn’t like to speak about it. I know that she was unhappy before you left, that she was almost miserable in the months that followed. I wasn’t sure getting married was the right idea, but Lucky had pushed for it, and Elizabeth seemed to...” Bobbie pursed her lips. “I don’t know. I can’t explain it. She seemed to swallow herself up and disappear entirely into Lucky. Until the wedding. And then she woke up.”

Bobbie shifted and leaned back. “Lucky was upset, Laura was beside herself—she’s been in denial about the boy who came home as much as anyone of us, but she put so much *pressure* on Elizabeth. If Elizabeth could just wait a bit longer, love him a bit more, maybe Lucky would be okay again. They both wanted me to talk to her, but I was relieved when she called off the wedding. Gia broke up with Nikolas at the same time. They asked to rent an apartment, they went back to school—” She lifted her hands. “And that’s what I know.”

And it told him very little, but he should have expected that. And what did he really want to know? That Lucky was out of her life? Did he want that to be the truth?

“If you care about her, Jason,” Bobbie said, softly, “then give her some time, some space. I would never call her delicate or fragile, but—”

He almost laughed at that and saw similar humor fill her dark eyes. “No, that’s definitely true. Bobbie—” He stopped when he couldn’t find the words to say. She leaned over and squeezed his hand.

“I think of her as part of my family,” she told him. “Just like you. I know you’ll do right by each other.” She rose to her feet. “I should call the hospital and check in.”

“Thanks, Bobbie.” Jason stood. “I should be getting to work anyway.”

## **Kelly’s: Dining Room**



Elizabeth offered Sonny a sad smile as the mobster took a seat at the counter and flipped over his coffee cup. “Hey.”

“Hey.” He waited as she poured the thick, dark liquid into the porcelain mug. “Was it okay? No one made any scenes?”

“It was...” she murmured, searching for the right words as she returned the carafe to the hot plate. “It was quiet. Reserved.”

A small corner played at the corner of Sonny’s mouth. “She would have hated that.” He hesitated as he stirred a bit of sugar. “I think I thought...I really thought she’d show up to her own funeral.”

Because they hadn’t found a body. Because Carly would always be at the bottom of the lake. Trapped in her car. Her stomach swirled at the thought.

“It would be her style,” Elizabeth replied. “But not this time. No one showed up at their own funeral.” She smiled at him. “Not that it means anything. Lucky didn’t come to his either and...well...you know.”

“True enough.” Sonny sighed. “A funeral should feel more final,” he said after a moment. “Like closing a book and putting it on a shelf. I can’t...” He shook his head slightly. “I can’t stop thinking about those cliffs. About Brenda’s accident at the same place.”

“Sonny...”

“I worry for Jason,” her friend said, cutting her off. “The Quartermaines...they’re just lying in wait.” He grimaced, lines shadowing the dimples in his cheeks. “I should have adopted Michael. I just...”

“It made perfect sense at the time.” Elizabeth closed a hand over his. “Carly started a new life. No one saw this coming. And it’s not like AJ has always been a prime candidate for fatherhood. It’s just...it’s bad timing, Sonny—”

“He’s not saying much about his chances in court, but I can imagine...”

“They’re not good.” Elizabeth sighed, dipping her head as she concentrated filling a sugar canister. “Sonny—”

“Jason mentioned you two don’t see each other often,” Sonny cut in. “Are you...are you mad at him?”

“Mad?” Elizabeth jerked her head up. “No. No, of course not. Why would I—God, it should be other way around, Sonny...” She sighed. If Jason had mentioned something to Sonny, it must be really be bothering him. “I just...all of that is behind me. That person. I made stupid decisions, I said and did awful things—”

“Elizabeth, you were in a difficult—” Sonny stopped and took a moment, as if gathering his thoughts. “I married Lily. You know this about me, right? My marriage to her.”

“I do—”

“I married her because...well, let’s just say it wasn’t my first choice.” He hesitated. “And I loved Brenda. I never stopped. I was going—I was going to leave Lily for Brenda, but then...Lily was pregnant. And I wanted to give that family—” He closed his eyes.

Hating that he was going back to that time in his head, Elizabeth winced. “Sonny, really—”

“I stayed with Lily out of obligation. Because I thought it was the right thing to do.” He paused. “And maybe it would have been okay. She would have been a good mother. I would have been faithful, loved my children. But it wouldn’t have been what either of us deserved.”

“I get it,” Elizabeth said before he could go on. “And I know I was with Lucky out obligation. I do—”

“You’ve got Jason wrapped up in all of that, Elizabeth. You made yourself miserable trying to be someone else, to want something else. And none of that had anything to do with Jason or how you two felt about each other.”

“That’s...” She closed her eyes. “It’s not just about trying...to be a better person, Sonny. I can’t...” Her throat thickened, and she could feel the pressure behind her eyes. “Yeah. It’s about last year. And how I hurt Jason. And how I want to get as *far* away from being that person as I can. But if it were just about that, I think I could...I could just...be okay.”

“It’s about fear,” Sonny murmured. “Fear that when you open to yourself to someone, they take a piece of you. And you never get it back. I get it.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t want to tell you how to feel or what to do about those feelings. You got enough of that from my former partner and his idiot son.”

Elizabeth laughed then as one tear slid down her cheek. She swiped at it. “I know, Sonny. I’m—I’m terrified that the next piece I give away...” She couldn’t quite articulate it, but he nodded.

“Yeah...” He dropped a fifty next to his empty coffee cup. “So, let’s just leave it at this. I think Jason needs a friend. Someone who will care about what happens to Michael as much as he does, but someone who won’t lie to him. Someone who has his best interests in heart.”

“I...” Elizabeth bit her lip. “Sonny—”

“If that can’t be you for whatever reason,” he continued gently without any judgment in his eyes or voice, “then you need to make sure he’s clear on that. You need to let him go to find someone else.”

*Friday, May 3, 2002*

### **Oasis: Parking Lot**

Jason slid off the bike and eyed the clump of men outside the club. He hated the strip joints Sonny still controlled, but the only thing they could do was be sure they were run fairly and that the women working there were taken care of. Nico had used the Oasis as his headquarters since Frank Smith had put him in charge a dozen years ago, so Jason wasn’t as familiar with this place as he was with the Paradise Lounge.

He recognized only one of the trio smoking cigarettes in front of the entrance. Zander Smith sneered as Jason approached. “Look who’s slumming.”

Jason just stopped and leveled a stare at the idiot. “I’m here to pick up the books from Lenny,” he said. “He inside?”

“I’m not his fucking secretary,” Zander shot back. One of the men looked at the other with an uneasy expression.

“He’s waiting for ya,” the shorter man said, elbowing Zander in the gut. “Knock it off.”

Jason ignored them both before heading toward the entrance. He had the door halfway open when Zander called out again. “How’s your girlfriend, Morgan? Still got her legs glued shut?”

“Fucking death wish this one’s got,” he heard one of the men mutter.

“Smith,” the other hissed. “Shut the fuck up!”

Jason turned, debating what to do, if anything. If Zander had been alone, Jason might have simply ignored him. But to let a slur pass against Elizabeth was to send a message to the men next to him—to anyone who worked on Nico’s crew—that she was open game.

She may not be his girlfriend, but no one in this organization was going to treat her like trash.

Calmly, Jason strode toward Zander and was unsurprised when the scum began to retreat rather than hold his ground. When Zander was against the wall of the building, Jason’s hand shot out and pinned him there by the neck.

“I’m sorry,” Jason said coolly. “Did you say something to me?” He squeezed a moment, feeling the satisfaction as Zander’s dark eyes, seething with hatred, bulged slightly, his cheeks flushing with the effort to breathe.

“Go to hell,” Zander managed.

“Go get Lenny,” a voice behind Jason hissed.

“What was that?” Jason demanded. “You want to try again? What did you say?”

“Nothing,” Zander muttered finally. Jason released him, and the younger man collapsed to the ground, panting.

“Tell Nico and Lenny that they can send their books to the warehouse,” Jason said, turning the man who remained. “And they should rethink their welcoming committee.”

Without sparing a glance for his sister’s ex-boyfriend, Jason returned to his bike and climbed on. Maybe it was time to do something more permanent about their Zander Smith problem.

### **Saint Andrews Academy**

When Michael trudged out of the double doors of his private school, Elizabeth stepped away from the parent whose small talk had threatened to bore her to death. His small features were etched in misery, his book bag dragging behind him.

“Hey, kiddo.” She flashed a smile at the teacher’s aide who returned the gesture before turning to the next kid she was handing off to a parent or guardian. “Have a bad day?”

“Hey, Liz,” Michael said. He blinked up at her, his dark brown eyes shaded by the blond hair they’d forgotten to trim. She slid her hands through it to brush it out of his eyes. “Grammy had to work?”

“Yep.” She reached the bag at his side and slung it over his shoulder. “We’re going back to the Brownstone to have snacks and hang out until she gets home. What do you want for dinner?”

“Nothing.”

She eyed him carefully as they crossed the manicured lawns back to her beat up car, but let it go for now. Michael, despite the turmoil of his life, was generally a good-natured kid. If something was bothering him, eventually he would cough it up. They had several hours before Bobbie’s shift ended.

She tossed his back in the front seat and checked to make sure his booster seat was firmly attached. “How about a movie?” she offered. “We can stop on the way home and rent something.”

“I guess,” he replied with a sigh.

“Video games then?” She slid into the driver’s seat and started the car. “I’m sure we can get Lucas to set up his Sega or Playstation downstairs.”

“Maybe.”

Elizabeth bit her bottom lip. “Michael, did something happen at school? Did you have a fight with someone in class?”

“No.” But after a moment, he spoke again. “Liz, am I too much work for Grammy?”

Elizabeth drew up to a red light and glanced at him in her rear-view mirror. “Of course not. She loves you. We all do.”

“Cause I don’t wanna be a burden.”

“Burden?” she echoed. What the hell? How did a five-year-old even know what that word meant? Who the hell was talking to him? “Michael—”

“He said he was my grandfather, and I was gonna live with him soon. I don’t wanna leave Grammy, Liz, but maybe she don’t want me anymore.”

Elizabeth pulled over at the next parking lot, and twisted in her car to face the sullen boy. “*What* happened at school today?”

## Chapter Seven

*I don't know where I am*

*I don't know what I've done*

*I just go over it and over it again and again and again*

*I can't sleep at night*

*I can't breathe*

- Numb, Airborne Toxic Event

---

*Friday, May 3, 2002*

### Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

Sonny scowled, closing the folder of a business plan from Benny he'd intended to ignore anyway. He rose to his feet. "The little punk said what?"

Jason's expression was tight, the muscles in his shoulders bunched with an unleashed fury. The pragmatic side of Sonny's brain was relieved Jason *hadn't* strangled Zander in broad daylight in front of witnesses when their peace was fragile.

But most of him wished Zander was lying at the bottom of the cold dark Port Charles Harbor. He'd been right to hold him back, right to test him. Goddamn bastard.

"One little setback and this is how he reacts?" Sonny shook his head. "Hothead. No goddamn common sense. Instead of doubling down, trying to prove himself, he mouths off." He crossed the room the mini bar, but poured himself a glass of water instead of the bourbon he wanted.

He'd found himself turning to liquor more often than not, and while he rarely drank to excess, it struck him as a crutch he couldn't afford.

He turned back to Jason. "You warn Elizabeth that Zander's on the warpath? I don't want him harassing her."

"I talked to her." Jason waited a minute. "I had Francis give me a guy to hang out at Kelly's when Elizabeth works. That's where Zander would likely catch her. She can handle herself, but—"

"He's been warned," Sonny cut in. "He shouldn't need *another* damn warning. He shouldn't have needed on in the first place. Every man in the organization knows—" He stopped, took a breath. "Jason, you know that anyone who's been around for a few

years, they think Elizabeth is—”

“I know.” Jason looked away, but Sonny caught the faint hint of red at his cheeks. “They still think I was—that winter I was shot—”

“When Nikolas Cassadine announced it at the Christmas party, after the bomb in her studio—when it became clear you were staying there—” Sonny tilted his head. “After I put a guard on her after you left. We never made it clear she wasn’t—” He paused. “What I’m telling you is, Jason, that I can talk to Francis, to Johnny. They can spread the word discreetly. If you want it known that she’s not—”

“Would it matter?” Jason asked. He met Sonny’s eyes, then shifted away. “If—if we say anything, it just draws more attention to her. We don’t go after women. It shouldn’t matter who they are. If he’s talking about Elizabeth that way—can you imagine how he’d treat the women who work at the clubs Nico wants him to run?”

“Yeah.” Sonny exhaled slowly, taking note of the fact Jason had declined to clarify Elizabeth’s status. She would remain linked with Jason unless they changed it. That relationship would carry weight with most of their men. And might prove dangerous to those who would use it against them. “We’ll send him a message. And those who work with Nico in general.”

He crossed to his desk, picked up the receiver. “Right now, Zander collects money for Nico. He doesn’t do any of the physical work, but he keeps the rest of the guys in line, particularly for some of the more lucrative bookies. He’s done with that now. I want him back on muscle. Any trust I had is gone now, and I don’t reward dumb fucks.”

“He’s gonna be pissed about that,” Jason said. “Might make it worse.”

“There were witnesses that heard him go after a woman under my protection. Mock you, challenge your authority. I don’t give a shit about Zander’s personal feelings. He wants to come at me? Let him.” Sonny scoffed. “He won’t. He’ll keep coming at weaker targets because he doesn’t have the balls. You let him live once. He crosses us again, we’re not so nice the next time.”

### **Oasis: Back Office**

“God damn it, Zander.” Nico pounded his fist on the table. “You got a fucking death wish, you little shit?”

Zander scowled, slumping in his chair. “What, I’m fired now?” He expected no less after Jason Morgan had nearly strangled him. He’d known it was suicide to insult Elizabeth to his face, but he couldn’t resist the temptation—he knew insulting that bitch would crack Morgan’s legendary cool.

But it hadn’t. Oh, yeah, Morgan had shoved him against the wall, but he’d done with a calm expression. As if he were swatting a fucking fly. Fucker. He hated that

bastard. He'd pissed Jason off, but not enough to lose it.

"No," Nico retorted. "But you're back to cracking heads and busting knees." He huffed. "I'm gonna have to find someone else to take over for me when I go to Vegas," he told Lenny. "I thought this fucker could be fixed—I thought if I gave Sonny some time, but no." His eyes were like laser slicing through him when he looked back at Zander. "You got a thing for this bitch? Is that why you can't keep away?"

"What?" Zander demanded. "No!"

"I got eyes on you, you moron. I know you went after her at that diner you live at. I know you harassed her—that's why Sonny called last week." He lit a cigarette. "You didn't tell me that happened."

"It wasn't important—"

"You ended your career, you dumb shit. You fucked up your life over a whore so I hope you at least fucked her first," Nico muttered. He sucked in a long drag, then exhaled, the wispy smoke disappearing into the dimly lit room. "Is that what this is about? You wanted her, she wanted Morgan?"

"I don't—" Zander stopped, took a deep breath. "No," he said, a bit more calmly. "I don't care about Elizabeth Webber. I shouldn't have said anything about her. Or to her."

"Little late for that." He looked at Lenny. "Call Ollie. Tell him to send me Paulie." Nico tipped the ash of his cigarette into a ceramic ash tray at his side. "You can go work for Ollie. Paulie will take your place here. He's due to move up."

"Damn it, Nico—"

"If I want Corinthos to give me the go ahead on Vegas," Nico said, his tone tight, "I gotta toe the fucking line. I already put my neck out for you once, you piece of shit. I ain't doing it twice." He leaned back, considered him a long moment. "You play your cards right, Smith, you let Morgan cool off, and you stay away from this woman—maybe when I get to Vegas, I can convince Sonny to send you out to me. But get your head together. Women aren't worth losing money and power."

It hadn't been about a woman. Nothing to do with her. Just what she represented. Who she was to Jason Morgan. The man had everything, but hell if he'd let anyone else get a toe up in this world.

One day, someone was going to put a bullet between Jason's eyes, and Zander was going to raise a toast in celebration.

**Gia and Elizabeth's Apartment: Living Room**



Courtney refilled her glass of Moscato—her third of the evening, and she had a feeling it wouldn't be the last. "I could learn to hate the Quartermaines." She could still remember the way they'd looked at her, judged her. Found her wanting. They didn't care much for AJ, but they sure as hell didn't think she was good enough for him all the same.

"I'd ask what Jason thinks about all of this," Gia said, swirling the liquid in her wine glass as she reclined on the sofa, "but I'm not an idiot. You haven't told him yet."

Elizabeth snorted, curling up at the other end of the sofa. "I tell Jason that Edward Quartermaine is harassing Michael at school, and I won't have to worry about being in the middle of a custody battle. I'll be bailing Jason out of jail for assault and battery." She blinked. "You think he'd get bail?"

"Well, as long as he doesn't murder the dumb bastard," Gia considered, "I think he'd be in clear. They usually only withhold bail for serious felonies." She lifted her glass in a mock salute. "You start sleeping with him, you're really going to have start boning up on your criminal law."

"Haha," Elizabeth muttered darkly.

"She didn't deny it this time," Courtney pointed out to Gia. "Good sign, I think."

"I don't see the point in wasting my breath." Elizabeth sighed and set her wine glass on the coffee table. "I should tell him."

"Uh, like yesterday," Gia said. She flicked her fingers at Courtney. "This one is going to tell her husband, I'm sure."

Elizabeth turned stricken eyes to Courtney. "You're going to tell AJ?"

Courtney swallowed and shrugged. "I kind of have to, don't I? I mean, AJ had a huge fight with his grandfather a few days ago after the will reading. And if you're telling Jason, I think AJ should get a chance to defend himself. What if Jason thinks AJ put his grandfather up to it?"

"Did he?" Gia raised her eyebrows.

"No!"

"Courtney." Elizabeth bit her lip. "I just—I want to do the right thing. Maybe I shouldn't say anything to anyone. You don't tell AJ, I won't tell Jason—"

"Well, that's just a stupid reaction." Gia huffed. "Elizabeth, you *have* to tell Jason. He's Michael's legal guardian, and Edward Quartermaine is screwing with the kid's mind. I mean, I'm sure he means well, but trying to get in good with the kid behind everyone's back just screams manipulative."

"I know, I know. I just—" Elizabeth pursed her lips. "I don't know. It's been...almost normal. Michael was starting to bounce back a bit. When I tell Jason, his first instinct is going to be to go after Edward. I don't want that. I don't want Jason to have to deal with that. He has enough grief with the Quartermaines."

"It's cute how concerned she is about a guy who's not her sex toy," Gia told Courtney. She looked back at Elizabeth. "Listen. You can't *not* say anything. You're gonna feel guilty. And if you keep quiet, Edward Quartermaine is just going to keep going to Michael's school. They won't turn him away—too much money. Too much influence. He's gonna keep confusing and upsetting Michael, and eventually, it's going to come out that this is happening, and that you knew."

Elizabeth dipped her head. "Yeah. Yeah, I know. I just—" She bit her lip. "I don't know. It's stupid to think I could stay out of this—I just don't want to fall into bad habits."

"Bad habits?" Courtney echoed, but Gia was shaking her head.

"You know telling someone is the right thing. You know it, because you've always been a goody-two shoes—"

"Oh, shut up—"

"Gia," Courtney tried to break in, because she didn't like the tone in either woman's voice or their flushed cheeks. But it was if she wasn't there.

"So, you wanting to remain silent is about this stick you have up your ass about Jason. You think I haven't noticed you pretending you're going to keep him at arm's length? You're doing the same bullshit now you did last year, only you don't have Lucky to blame anymore."

Elizabeth shot to her feet, her eyes dark with anger. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means," Gia began as she carefully got to her feet, "that you're still telling yourself you don't want Jason that way. You're being his friend, but you're sending the same damn signals you sent last year. I watched you when he came to see you a few days ago. He's giving you the same looks, and you're not shutting it down—"

"That's not true—"

"What the hell are you so afraid of?" Gia shot back.

"Gia, come on," Courtney murmured, standing. She didn't want them to fight like this. She touched Gia's arm. "Don't—"

"You have no right—" Elizabeth stopped, and closed her eyes. "Gia—" Her voice broke, and so Gia's face softened.

"I don't know how we ended up being friends or roommates," Gia continued, "but here we are. I don't want to be like the idiots who pushed you at Lucky last year. That's not what I'm trying to do, Elizabeth. I just—" She bit her lip. "You were *miserable* last year going after that modeling job, dating Lucky. You were pretending to be someone you're not. When you left Lucky, when we decided to do this new life thing together, what did you tell me?"

"I—" Elizabeth sighed and sank onto the sofa. She closed her eyes. "That I didn't want to pretend anymore. I didn't want to be someone I wasn't."

Gia sat next to her. "If you really don't want anything romantic with Jason, that's fine. But you're sitting here, contemplating not telling him something about Michael you know he *has* to know, and you're doing it because you can't pretend when you're with him. As long as you don't see him, you can play this game."

"Elizabeth," Courtney said, a bit uneasy. "I don't know everything that happened with Lucky, and I don't expect you to tell me. I just—I think Jason should know Edward is around Michael. I'm going to tell AJ, so he can do something about it. Jason and AJ want to put Michael first. We should help them do that."

"I know." Elizabeth lifted her wine glass to her lips. "Hand me my cell phone." She looked at Gia. "That's why we ended up friends. You're the only one who ever called me on my bullshit. Once that stopped scaring me, I realized how important it is." Her lips twitched. "Bitch."

"Skank." Gia handed the silver phone over to her. "I won't wait up."

### **Brownstone: Front Step**

When Jason pulled up, Elizabeth was sitting at the top of the steps.

"I'm sorry to call you so late," she said, shifting a bit to the side to make room.

"It's okay," Jason responded as he climbed the steps to take a seat next to her. "You said something was wrong."

"I wrestled with telling you this for a lot of reasons," Elizabeth said. She twisted so that she was half facing him, her back against the cool stone. "Most of them aren't important, but I mostly just...I know it's going to make everything worse. You're going to be so angry..."

"Elizabeth..." He leaned forward, trying to capture her eyes but she kept them down, looking at her lap. "Did something happen? Are you okay?"

"It's not about me," Elizabeth replied. "It's...I pick Michael up during the week. Two days, sometimes three. Today, he was in a bit of a mood. Not a bad one, just...quiet. He's been quiet since Carly...but it was different today. It took some prying—Jason,

Edward arranged for Michael to come to the headmaster's office."

Jason sat up, his shoulders tensing. "He harassed Michael at school?"

"He told Michael it was going to be their little secret. His way of getting to know him before Michael came to live with them. So, he wouldn't be so scared." Elizabeth shook her head, her voice thickening. "When Michael said he wanted to stay with his grandmother, Edward told him it would be easier at the mansion. More family. It wouldn't be such a burden to look after him."

"A fucking *burden*?" Jason repeated. He lunged to his feet. "He told Michael he was a burden to Bobbie?"

"Jason..." Elizabeth stood. "I know you're angry, and I'm sorry. I just—you needed to know this was happening. I didn't tell Bobbie yet. I wanted to see how you wanted to deal with it—"

Deal with it? He was going to go to that damn house and throw Edward Quartermaine into the fucking lake. What the hell was he thinking? "Carly's only been gone for a few weeks," Jason managed through a clenched jaw. "He couldn't wait —"

"Jason..." Elizabeth sighed and wrapped her arms around herself. "I know, and I know you think confronting him is the right thing to do, but—"

"It won't solve anything," he muttered. "It'll make me feel better, but that's not the point." He sat back down and dragged his hands through his hair. "What did you tell Michael?"

"I told him that Bobbie loved him, that you loved him. That he was home with her and no one was taking him anywhere." Elizabeth dropped next to him. "I know I probably stepped out of line, I just didn't want him worrying that he might—he's been through so much during this last year. Leaving Sonny's, losing him out of his life. Coming here. Carly working, then when she died...he can't handle more instability. He shouldn't have to." She hesitated. "I told Courtney and Gia. Courtney is telling AJ about it."

"Why?" Jason demanded. "He probably put the old man up to it—" He looked away even as he said it.

"You know that's not true," Elizabeth murmured. "I don't want to champion him because, well, I don't know anything for sure, but if AJ were behind it, he wouldn't send Edward as his emissary."

"No," Jason muttered. "He wouldn't. He would have gone himself." He waited a moment. "I'll have to talk to Alexis again. I want her to be ready to challenge any suit they bring my way. Edward might not wait for AJ to file on his own." He shook

his head. “Michael’s staying with Bobbie. He’s not going anywhere near them—” He glanced over, then frowned. “What? You look like you want to say something.”

“Edward going behind everyone’s back—it looks bad for him. But if AJ wasn’t involved—that’s not going to change his custody case.” Elizabeth asked softly. She closed her eyes. “Jason. I hate this. I *hate* that I have to say this—but I think you’re running out of time to make a decision.”

Jason flinched. “AJ can’t be trusted. You said so yourself—”

“I know that,” Elizabeth said. “I just...I don’t know, Jason. Maybe you *should* talk to AJ. Come up with a third solution. I don’t want Michael to go through a custody hearing, have to talk to doctors and judge and watch you and AJ fight over him only for you to lose.”

“You want AJ to have Michael?” Jason demanded. “After everything he’s done—”

“I’m not saying that. And I’ve *never* said that,” Elizabeth retorted. “And I’m not in any position to judge anything anyone else does, okay? I don’t know. I just—I want what’s best for Michael. I’m just—” She bit her lip.

“Spit it out, Elizabeth.”

“I know all the reasons you don’t want AJ to have custody,” Elizabeth said finally. “And you know I agree with them. Jason, I’m just so scared that a judge isn’t going—he’s not going to take them seriously. If you and AJ fight this out, if you force a judge to rule—” She swallowed. “Jason...”

“I know.” He exhaled slowly, and looked away, looked straight ahead to the other row of brownstones across the street. “Thanks for telling me about AJ. I know—I know you’re not comfortable telling me anything Courtney says to you.”

“Well, I figured it was fair warning.”

Jason hesitated. “Why else?”

She blinked at him. “Why else what?”

“You said you struggled with not telling me for a lot of reasons,” he said slowly. “I can’t—I don’t think they were all about Michael.”

“Jason—” She bit her lip. “No, I guess they weren’t.” She rubbed hands over her denim clad knees. “I just—I don’t want things to be like they were before. I want us to be friends, I do. I just—” She tilted her eyes to the sky. “I’m not sure we can be.”

He sucked in a sharp breath—he hadn’t expected that. “Elizabeth—” He exhaled slowly. “Why can’t we be friends?” he asked. He almost scowled at he saw a tiny smile flit across her petite features. “What? What’s funny?”

“Nothing...it’s usually...I’m used to being the one asking that —” Elizabeth sighed. “Why were we friends in the first place?”

“What?” He lifted his brows. “When? Last year?”

“Ever. You felt sorry for me and gave me a ride. How did...” She looked at her fingernails, painted some sort of dark shade he couldn’t make out by the light of the street lamps. “How did that turn into everything else?”

“I—” Jason hesitated. He’d never really thought about how they’d become so close. They just...they just were. Or had been. “I don’t know. I guess you were just...you were someone I could talk to.”

“Maybe it was that morning I found you in the snow. Maybe that’s when it changed.” She sighed. “I always felt like I took advantage of you. Like...you were there because I saved your life once and you just...”

“We weren’t friends because I felt obligated,” Jason finished her thought. “That’s not what I do. Yeah, after that winter—after you dragged me to your studio and forced soup down my throat, sure, if you’d needed something, I would have done it. You saved my life. But that’s not why—” Not why he’d been so scared the night the bomb was in her studio. Why he’d felt as torn about cutting things off after that...

Why saying goodbye a few weeks later had hurt so much.

“Why does it matter?” he said instead. “Do you need to know why I care about you?”

“Because I *did* take advantage of you last year,” Elizabeth said.

He shook his head. “I don’t see it that way—”

“Oh, come on...” She rolled her eyes. “Don’t—don’t do that. Don’t pretend I didn’t—” She bit her lips. “Anyone else would have called me a tease or something worse—”

“I’m not anyone else.” He took her chin in his hand, forcing her to look at him. “And you don’t get to tell me what happened last year. I was there, and I know what you were going through—”

“Jason—”

“And you can’t keep punishing yourself. Is that this is about?” He released her and got to his feet. “We can’t be friends because of what happened?”

She stood. “Because there’s no place in my life for you.”

He took the hit and didn’t flinch. “If that’s true, Elizabeth, then I can respect that. But I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t get to tell me how to feel,” she shot back, echoing words he’d once spoken to her. “I can’t go back. I can’t do any of that again—”

“Any of what?” he challenged, feeling the frustration crawl up his throat. “Damn it, Elizabeth, what did I do—”

“I’m never going to be broken again, do you *get* that?” Her voice cracked, a tear slid down her cheek, iridescent in the pale streetlight. As soon as the words left her mouth, her shoulders slumped, the anger slid out of her posture.

Jason closed his mouth, because he didn’t know how to respond to that. How to argue with that. He didn’t even know why he was pushing this except— “I—”

Elizabeth sighed and scrubbed her hands over her face. “I’m sorry. I don’t—you didn’t—I did it to myself. I let people tell me how to feel, how to live. I let them direct my life. I’ve worked my ass off for the last five months to be the person I was supposed to be. I can’t...I can’t go back. I can’t be that person again. After the rape, after losing Lucky, after the wedding—I keep starting my life over again. I can’t do it again. I just *can’t*.”

“I’m not asking you to. I just...” Wanted to see her. Be around her. Take her to the cliff roads. “I just—”

“But it hurts too much...” A tear slid down her cheek, glinting in the dim light. “It all hurts, and I can’t stand it. I hate this. I hate that when I see you, it’s like nothing has changed—”

He took her by the elbow and drew her in closer. “Elizabeth—”

“Even the way you say my name—” Her voice broke and she dipped her head, leaned into him. “I just want to be...” She trailed off, as if she didn’t know how to finish that.

“I want you to be whoever you want to be,” Jason told her, running his hand from her elbow to the top of her shoulder then back again. “You’re still putting pressure on yourself. If that’s because of me—”

“It’s because of me...” Elizabeth sighed again and stepped back. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m making things into a huge deal. What did you used to say? A solution doesn’t have to be complicated to be right? Maybe...I just have to stop.”

“There’s no law that says we have to do anything or be anything,” Jason told her. He tipped her face, so their eyes met. “You keep telling me you’re a different person now.”

“A better one,” she said with conviction. “And maybe it’s time I show you.”

He tilted his head toward the street. “How about a ride?”

“Perfect.” As they started towards his bike, she asked, “What are you going to do

about Michael? About Edward?"

He sighed, as he handed her the helmet strapped on the back of his bike. "I don't know. I suppose I'll call Alexis in the morning to see what she recommends. I might want to go..." Yell at someone, break something... "But it won't solve anything. I have to do what's good for Michael."

Though if Edward making this move at Michael's school was the reason Elizabeth had finally started to tear down the walls between them, well, maybe he might even find room to be grateful to the old bastard.



## Chapter Eight

*I came in like a wrecking ball  
I never hit so hard in love  
All I wanted was to break your walls  
All you ever did was wreck me  
Yeah, you, you wreck me*  
- Wrecking Ball, Miley Cyrus

---

*Saturday, May 4, 2002*

### Quartermaine Estate: Foyer

AJ stormed through the door and into the foyer, ignoring the protests of Alice the maid as he bellowed for his grandfather. His pulse was racing, his muscles quivering—he couldn’t remember the last time he had been quite this goddamn *livid*.

Instead of Edward, Ned stepped out from the front parlor, a sheaf of papers in his hand. “Junior, having a bad day?” he asked dryly.

“Where is he?” AJ demanded, his hands so tightly fisted at his side that they ached. “Where the hell is our grandfather?”

“Taking a meeting at ELQ,” came the quiet and gentle tone of Lila behind them as Reginald wheeled her in from the conservatory. “And you’ll use a decent tone when you’re in my home.”

“Well, it’s Monica’s—” Ned began the old refrain, but AJ cut him off with an annoyed glance. “Sorry. Reflex.”

“I’m sorry, Grandmother, but he’s gone too far this time,” AJ said, struggling to keep his tone even.

“That may be, but he is still your grandfather, AJ.” Lila lifted her chin, but her eyes were somber. Resigned. “What’s he done now?”

“He went to my son’s school,” AJ told them, still reeling from Courtney’s revelations. “I don’t know how he managed to convince the headmaster, but he’s been meeting with Michael for the last few days. Telling him he’ll be coming here to live, that he’s a burden on Bobbie—”

Ned closed his eyes and shook his head. “That’s a new low. Even for him.”

“AJ—” Lila attempted.

“You should be grateful that *I’m* here and not Jason. Elizabeth, I’m sure has told him by now, and if you think I’m angry—”

“He’ll raze the old man to the ground,” Ned said. He looked to their grandmother. “You need to speak with him. If Grandfather upsets Michael, it might hurt AJ’s chances in court.” He hesitated and looked at AJ. “For what it’s worth, I’ve tried to talk to him. I knew he was angry after the will reading.”

“I know.” AJ dipped his head. “I was, too.” And hurt that Carly had tried to reach out from the grave to devastate him and his family. And what had they done to her but love Michael and want to be in his life? “I know Grandfather just wants to be part of Michael’s life. I love him, Grandmother, but I can’t let him ruin my chances.”

“I understand, AJ. And I will speak to him.” Lila pursed her lips. “Reggie, I’ll need to you to contact Jason—”

“Let me—” AJ waited a moment, taking a deep breath. “Let me speak with him. I need him to know that I wasn’t part of this, that I don’t condone it. If it comes from you, it won’t mean as much.”

“Fair enough.” Lila tilted her head. “I hope that you and Jason can work something out. I’d hate to see this dragged into court.”

“It’s not my first choice, Grandmother, but I’ll do whatever has to be done.”

### **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose as she spied the older man striding towards the courtyard from the parking lot. This was all her day needed.

“Ah, Elizabeth, just the young lady I wanted to see.” Edward offered her a broad smile, with a bit of chagrin in his eyes. She sighed. She should have known.

“I’m not running interference with Jason,” she told him as she scooped another set of dirty plates into her plastic tub. “You did the crime, Mr. Quartermaine, you do the time.” She paused and looked at him. “Has he found you yet?”

“Ah, no, but I spoke to my wife...” Edward cleared his throat, straightened his shoulders. “It’s a *crime* to see my great-grandson?”

She closed her eyes and cursed herself. Why did he have to do this? Why did he have to put that note of hurt, of despondence into his voice? She was such a sucker.

“It’s a crime,” Elizabeth said, setting the tub down and turning to him, “when you tell a five-year-old boy who’s just lost his mother that he’s a burden to his grandmother.”

At that, Edward did look slightly embarrassed. “I’m not saying I haven’t made mistakes—”

“I’m not talking to Jason for you,” Elizabeth said. “You’re wasting your breath—”

“This isn’t about Jason. I wanted—” He hesitated. “When AJ files for custody, it’s likely you’ll be called—”

“And you’d like me not to talk so much about what Michael told me.” She rolled her eyes. “You’re wasting your breath. If I end up having to testify, even if I wanted to omit it, Alexis would ask.”

“Elizabeth, I’ve always thought of you as one of the family,” Edward with his smile firmly in place, even if his jaw was slightly more clenched. “You’ve always been so good to Emily. And you’ve been close with Jason—”

“I’m going to do what’s best for Michael, Mr. Quartermaine.” Elizabeth picked up her tub of dirty dishes and discarded food. “I think it’s about time someone started putting him first.”

“But—”

“Goodbye, Mr. Quartermaine.”

## **Elm Street Pier**

Jason slowed his steps when he saw AJ on a bench at the bottom of the steps. Other than another member of the Quartermaine family, AJ was might be the person he wanted to see least in the world right now.

But he’d promised Elizabeth last night that he’d give AJ the benefit of the doubt when it came to Edward bothering Michael. He wasn’t convinced AJ wasn’t working with the Quartermaines to get custody, but he had to admit—it didn’t exactly seem like something AJ would do.

“Jason.” AJ got to his feet when Jason stepped off the bottom of the steps. “Hey. I was hoping to catch you on the way to the warehouse.”

“Is this about Michael?” Jason asked bluntly.

“I know Elizabeth told you that Grandfather was...that he was harassing Michael at his school.” AJ looked away, his skin mottled with suppressed anger. “I can imagine how angry you were when you found out, because I was, too. I still am.”

Jason looked out over the harbor. “Elizabeth said you didn’t have a hand in it.”

“She’s right. Look, I want my son. I think I’ve been up front about that. I haven’t pretended for a second that I don’t intend to use everything I can to get that done.

Including asking Elizabeth to testify—”

Jason swung back again with a glare. “I told you. Leave her out of it—”

“I don’t want to have this argument with you again,” AJ cut in. “I just want to make it clear there’s no way in hell I would ever allow Grandfather to say those things to Michael.” He looked down at his hands, and for the first time, Jason could see the thick calluses that had developed, an indication of the hard labor AJ now did as a forklift operator. “You don’t remember our childhood—”

“I don’t want to talk about—”

“I wish I *didn’t*,” AJ cut in. “The last thing I want is Michael to go through what we did. Every little thing was measured, considered. If we brought home art projects, we were judged on them as if they were candidates for a museum. Every grade, every test was agonized over. The pressure to be the Quartermaines Grandfather wanted, that Mom and Dad wanted—” He swallowed. “I crumbled under the weight of it. I wasn’t strong enough to drown them out. I drank to make them stop. You went with the flow. You were smarter than I was—”

“That’s not who I am now,” Jason said roughly, for the first time recognizing the pain in the older man’s expression. “I’m not Jason Quartermaine—”

“No, you’re not,” AJ said quietly. “But you were once. And I’m afraid that if Grandfather has his way, Michael will grow up with that pressure. With soul-crushing expectations. I’m sure Michael is as smart as you were—as you are now—*don’t* shake your head, Jason. I know what you do for a living, and you don’t do it for long if you’re an idiot.”

“AJ—”

“I want to be a father to my son,” AJ told him. “But I promise you, Jason, if I have that chance, I won’t let Grandfather do those things to him. I’ve talked to Grandmother. I’m making it clear that I won’t participate in any custody suit he files on his own, and I won’t allow Grandfather anywhere near Michael if he continues to act this way.”

Jason dipped his head, taking a deep breath. He wasn’t sure what to do with this information, with this insight into a man he preferred to ignore. But he knew AJ was being honest with him, and if there anything Jason respected — it was honesty. “I called the school and told them if I found out Edward met with Michael again, I’d have Alexis sue them.”

“Good, good. Uh...” AJ scratched the back of his neck. “I have to get to work. My shift starts soon.” He started down the pier, but then stopped and turned back. “I hope—I hope we can come to some sort of agreement about what’s best for Michael. It’s all I’ve

ever wanted.”

He left then, not waiting for Jason to answer. Not that Jason knew what he would say. In less than three weeks, everything he’d taken for granted about the uselessness of the man who was technically his brother had shifted and changed.

And he didn’t know what the hell to do about it.

### **Jake’s: Bar**

“This day.” Elizabeth tossed back a long swig of her beer, then wrinkled her nose.

“Oh, man. Who suggested the cheapest beer?”

“The girl who wanted to go on a Caribbean vacation this summer, which means we have to save every penny.” Gia shrugged and considered the thick dark liquid in her pint glass. “Not sure this is worth it. Next time, we just get the big bottle of wine.”

“But then we’d miss all this atmosphere,” Courtney said with a bright smile as she gestured toward the rest of the room, filled with dock hands and men playing beer. The trio of girls were the only females—save Jake behind the bar.

But no one approached them or gave them a second look. Courtney was Sonny’s sister, Gia was a cop’s sister, and Elizabeth...

Elizabeth decided not to think about why men who worked for Jason and Sonny were ignoring her.

“So, how did telling the boys about Granddaddy Q go?” Gia asked, folding her arms on the table. “You worked all day—”

“You didn’t come back last night after telling him?” Courtney raised her eyebrows.

“Do we have something else to put on the agenda?”

“No,” Elizabeth drawled with a roll of her eyes. “It was okay. He was pissed as hell, like I’m sure AJ was. I talked him out of going right to the mansion, but it was a close call.” She lifted a shoulder. “We talked, and then we went for a ride.” When Gia started to wiggle her eyebrows, she laughed and punched her roommate lightly in the shoulder. “No, I mean on the bike. I don’t know what’s going to happen next, but I’m done pretending that we’re just...friends.”

“Thank God.” Gia raised her hands in the air. “Hallelujah!”

“AJ looked ready to kill this morning,” Courtney said. “He went straight to the mansion to confront his grandfather.” Her mouth twisted in a slight grimace. “I suppose I don’t have the influence on him that you do with Jason.”

Elizabeth winced, but shook it off. “He must have talked to Lila, because Edward showed up at Kelly’s. I’m not sure if he thought I could make peace with Jason or he

could talk me out of mentioning any of it at a custody hearing, but I told him no way.”

“Even if you wanted to leave it out,” Gia said, “Alexis isn’t going to let this slide. She’d use it against AJ as a sign the Q’s are demonic, but yeah, there’s no way this isn’t going to be a thing.”

“It’s insane. How did he think Michael was going to keep this to himself?” Courtney asked with another sigh. “I hate that Edward might have messed with AJ’s chances, but you’re right. This is a mark against the Quartermaines.”

“They’re never more dangerous than when they’re trying to help,” Elizabeth said with a rueful smile. She grimaced. “Damn it. Why does he have to be here tonight?”

Zander emerged from a clump of men that had been at the pool table. He grabbed a chair from another table, turned it around and straddled it. “Slumming it tonight, ladies?”

“Who asked you to sit down?” Gia demanded, but Zander ignored her, focusing his gaze on Elizabeth who met his eyes dead on. She wasn’t intimidated by him.

She could take care of herself, and moreover, this was Jake’s. The bartender had given them a friendly wave when they’d arrived, and the bar itself was full of men who worked for Sonny. She’d like to think after all the problems Zander had had at his job lately, he’d show some common sense.

But clearly that was too much to hope for as Zander’s eyes narrowed. “You talk to your boyfriend lately?”

She lifted one eyebrow. “Why? You looking to pass another message to him? I’m not interested.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so.” Zander smirked. “He’s not walking around like a man who’s satisfied. Maybe Gia’s more his speed.”

“Are you kidding me right now?” Gia demanded.

“I mean, I merely suggested yesterday that maybe he needed to get laid,” Zander continued, ignoring her. “And he nearly put me through a wall.”

“I wish he’d throw you over a cliff,” Courtney muttered.

“I wondered what those bruises were from,” Elizabeth said sweetly as she gestured toward the dark marks at Zander’s neck. “I heard you weren’t measuring up at work.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Yeah, well, maybe if Jason was getting what he needed at home, he wouldn’t be so bitchy at work.” He tilted his head, a wicked light in his eyes. “Or maybe you’re too frigid.”

Elizabeth fisted her hands in her lap, her blood beginning to simmer.

“Zander, you should probably go,” Courtney said. She leaned away from the table, looking in a different direction. “I think maybe—”

“Yeah, Emily told me you had a hang up about sex,” Zander continued, leaning in. “I guess no one can measure up to that first time—”

“Oh, that is it—” Gia got to her feet, but Elizabeth had already beat her to it. She picked up her glass and without even blinking, tossed it in his face.

Zander scowled and grabbed Gia’s beer.

Elizabeth gasped as the cold liquid splashed her face. Without one more thought, she lunged to her feet and launched herself across the table, tackling Zander and clawing at his face with her nails.

Gia rushed in to help, but the bar had already exploded. Men were trying to separate them, jostling each other. One man took exception to a bump from another, punched him in the face, then had a chair cracked over his head by someone else from the guy’s group.

Courtney neatly sidestepped the whole thing and moved a chair out of Jason’s way, as he closed the last distance between him and the melee at the table.

She’d spied him several minutes earlier—and after all, hadn’t she warned Zander to leave?

Elizabeth felt herself being lifted up by the waist and kicked out wildly until she realized it was Jason. He set her down next to Courtney, grabbed Zander by the throat and lifted him up as well.

“When the hell did he get here?” Elizabeth demanded, wiping blood from her nose. Courtney winced, then bit her lip as she watched Jason drag Zander towards the back of the bar.

“Uh, where’s he taking him?” Courtney asked.

Gia joined them, holding her hand to her cheek. “Fucking wastes of space,” she snarled. “Someone punched me in the face.”

“I better go out there before Jason kills him,” Elizabeth managed before taking off. After a moment, Gia and Courtney followed.

### **Jake’s: Back Alley**

But Jason wasn’t going to kill Zander Smith. He didn’t know why Zander had thrown the beer at Elizabeth, but when he had, he’d seen red and didn’t quite remember

closing the distance between the stairs and the brawl. Fucker was lucky Jason didn't separate his head from his body.

Though it felt good to finally be using his fists against Zander's face the way he'd always visualized, Jason saw the back door open out of the corner of his eye. Elizabeth and her friends piled into the alley, followed by Jake.

When he was sure Zander wouldn't be able to get back up and do any more damage, Jason let him slide to the ground, landing on his back, coughing up. His face was streaked with grime and dirt from the alley, along with scratches from Elizabeth and Gia's nails—and blood from the broken nose he'd made sure Zander would suffer.

He'd seen the scumbag punch Elizabeth in the face. Zander Smith was lucky to be walking away with his ability to breathe intact.

Jason planted his motorcycle boot on Zander's chest and leaned down. "You get up and you go away," he told him in a low voice. "The next time I see you, I might not let you leave alive."

Zander coughed again and spit to the side, the saliva mixed with blood. "Fucking bitch needs you to fight her battles—"

"Call me a bitch again!" Elizabeth snarled, but Gia grabbed her elbow to keep her from striding forward. "I don't need *anyone* to take care of me. I knocked you on your ass, you piece of shit—"

"Who *are* you and what did you do with Elizabeth?" Courtney hissed.

"Get up and go away," Jason told him again. "Don't look back. You're done here." He stepped back.

Zander stumbled to his feet and spat again. "*You* don't get to decide that," he snarled, but he didn't press the point. He disappeared down the alley. Jason turned to the quartet at the back door.

"Just wanted to be sure you wouldn't kill him," Jake said blandly. "I'll go in and turn on the sprinklers."

Elizabeth was breathing hard from the exertion of the fight, her pulse was racing as she watched Jason stand several feet away, breathing just as hard, his muscular chest rising up and down beneath the black t-shirt he wore.

"We should—" Gia grabbed Courtney by the arm and yanked her through the door.

"Should we leave them alone?" Courtney asked. "He looked pretty angry—"

"Girl, those were mating pheromones," Gia told her. "Let's help Jake clear out the bar."



“Um, we weigh like a hundred pounds,” Courtney replied, but followed her friend. “I don’t think we’re going to be a lot of help.”

Back in the alley, Jason and Elizabeth just continued to stare at one another. Should she go inside? Say something? But her throat refused to produce sound and her feet were glued to the sidewalk.

He strode forward then, slid his hand around her neck and drew her up on her toes. And then he kissed her.

She’d been kissed before—by Lucky, mostly. Once, uncomfortably by Nikolas. A few times on dates with Gia’s annoying friends—but never like this. He consumed her. The world around her melted away, and the only thing she knew was the taste of his mouth, the slight tang of beer as his tongue slid past her lips. The way his hands felt as they slid beneath the thin camisole she wore and touched her skin, scorching a trail up her back.

She could feel the cool stone of the building behind her as he backed her against it, taking his lips from hers in order to kiss her jaw, taste the skin at her collarbone, the nip of his teeth at her throat. It was everything she’d ever thought it might be, but somehow more. Everything was brighter, more vibrant.

A bottle smashed somewhere nearby and Elizabeth jerked away, drawn back to reality by the sound. She pushed Jason back a little, suddenly uncomfortable with how fast and...how consuming the moment had been.

His fingers touched the swelling at her cheek. “You’re going to have a black eye,” he murmured, with none of the aggression he’d shown just moments earlier. “I should have hit him harder.”

“I’m pretty sure he’ll have scars from me and Gia,” Elizabeth replied with a sauciness she hadn’t felt in months. “I appreciate the assist, but I had it under control.”

“I know.” He grinned then, stepping back, giving her some space to cool down. “I just finally had a good excuse to kick his ass. You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that.”

She knew her own smile must be as wide. God, Gia and Courtney had been right. She *needed* this electric feeling, this—sensation of being alive. She could feel all her nerve endings standing on end. “I have a pretty decent idea.”

He tipped his head toward the door. “I should go in, make sure Jake cleared the bar. You need a ride home?”

“Even if I didn’t,” Elizabeth said, arching a brow, “I’ll take one.”

**Port Charles Harbor**

It was just after dawn when a yacht sailed into the harbor as some of the locals were beginning their morning shift in the warehouses that lined the docks.

It had left Caracas, Venezuela two weeks earlier and had initially been scheduled to arrive the week before. But a storm off the coast of Massachusetts had delayed its northward progress, and traffic down the St. Lawrence River from the Atlantic had been congested now spring had arrived and wealthy residents were taking their own pleasure cruises from the Great Lakes to the ocean.

The yacht sliced through the murky blue water of the Elm Street Pier and slid into a slip that had been reserved for the summer. Its crew set down the anchor, and some of workers at a nearby warehouse part gaped at the large vessel. Yachts were common in Port Charles, and wealth was not a new sight—they had their own island just outside the harbor complete with a Gothic mansion.

But this yacht was unusually large, with swarthy Columbian crew, and a name scrawled in Spanish across the bow, *La Venganza*. Some of the dock workers who spoke the language remarked on naming one's boat after revenge, but everyone knew rich people didn't have much imagination.

Several hours later, a man strolled out to the bow of the boat where the pier met Elm Street. He had a decent view of the harbor and, in particular, Pier 52. He lit a cigar and took a long pull, enjoying the bitter, smoky taste as it rolled down his throat.

"Let the games begin," he murmured, before turning to meet with his first business associate, his grin wide and enthusiastic. "Ah, *Senore* Roscoe, thank you for meeting with me..."

## Chapter Nine

*Promises mean everything when you're little  
And the world's so big  
I just don't understand how  
You can smile with all those tears in your eyes  
Tell me everything is wonderful now  
Please don't tell me everything is wonderful now  
- Wonderful, Everclear*

---

*Sunday, May 5, 2002*

### **AJ & Courtney's Apartment: Bathroom**

Courtney wrinkled her nose and examined the circles under her eyes in the mirror. "Ugh."

"Your first bar fight?" AJ asked with a smirk as he reached past her for his toothbrush and toothpaste. "They get easier."

"I'm not planning to make a career out of it," she muttered. "I warned Zander to knock it off. He just *had* to push Elizabeth." She perched on the edge of the bathtub as her husband began to brush his teeth. "He made some crack about Jason, and she just—she literally lunged across the table at him. I didn't know she could *do* that."

"She's probably feeling it today." He rinsed the toothbrush and placed it back in the holder. "I'm just glad Jason was there before it got worse." He frowned. "That sounds weird to me."

"Are you and he...maybe getting along better?" Courtney asked, trying to keep the hope out of her voice. If they could co-exist, then things could just...stay the same. They might have to move to a bigger apartment which they might be able to swing. Bobbie still had a two-room apartment available at the Brownstone which would work great—

"We're not at each other's throats." AJ sighed and leaned against the cabinet. "You know I'm still planning to file for custody."

"I know." She looked down at her fingers. "And that was fine before."

"Before?"

“Before Jason came home. I think Elizabeth cares about him.” She chewed her bottom lip. “Can’t you.... just avoid her testimony? Like can’t—” But he was already shaking his head. “AJ—”

“I’m sorry. I know it puts her in an awkward spot. I do. But she lives with Michael. She’s one of the people who is in his life. Even if I didn’t call her, a judge would subpoena her. Courtney—”

“I just...she was so upset by your grandfather’s visits to Michael. I don’t know everything she’s been through, AJ, but I was here for the wedding. I know she and Jason have a history. I just hate asking her to do anything that...” She sighed. “But that sounds stupid and whiny when I think about the outcome. I know how important Michael is to you—”

“Hey, it is *not* stupid and whiny.” AJ tugged her to her feet. “You just moved to town. You found your father, your brother. You got married five minutes later. I know how much Elizabeth and Gia’s friendship has meant to you. It is not stupid to avoid messing with that.”

“But it doesn’t change the fact I have to.” Courtney sighed and went into the bedroom to change. She pulled out a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. “Because you’re right. Elizabeth is stuck in the middle. It’s not like I put her there.”

“Being friends with Bobbie, knowing my family—yeah, she was kind of already there.” AJ leaned against the doorway. “She’s not just going to be there for me. You know Alexis will use her for Jason’s side. She’s about as close as a person comes to being neutral.” He hesitated. “The last time Jason saw me talking to her—”

“He flipped, yeah, Elizabeth told me.” Courtney tugged the denim over her hips. “I guess you want me to run interference—”

“I don’t like asking—”

“But it’s for the best.” She picked up her brush. “What should I tell her? The custody battle is still on? That she should get herself ready?”

“I don’t know.” AJ looked away. “I’m sorry, Courtney—” He broke off. “Maybe she can talk to him. I don’t want to drag Michael into court. I’ve talked to lawyers—I have a good shot—”

“I’ll talk to her.” Courtney shot him a half-smile. “It’s not like she doesn’t know this is coming.”

### **General Hospital: Nurse’s Station**

“Bobbie, can you see about scheduling a few more scrub nurses tomorrow?” Alan asked as he handed her the surgery schedule for the afternoon.

“Sure,” Bobbie said, her tone clipped. The last thing she wanted to see right now was a Quartermaine male. Not after the conversation she’d had with Elizabeth the day before.

Alan frowned and tilted his head to the side. “We don’t have enough nurses?” he asked, puzzled.

“We’re fine on the numbers,” Bobbie said. She picked up the schedule and turned to begin plugging it into the computer. “Did you know?” she asked when he didn’t walk away.

“Know about what?” Alan asked. “Bobbie—”

“About your father visiting my grandson and telling him I saw raising him as a burden,” Bobbie snapped.

“Oh.” Alan’s cheeks reddened. “No. I knew my father was upset, but Bobbie—”

“I don’t know where your family gets the nerve in thinking your claim to Michael means any less than mine,” she continued, jabbing at keyboard keys. “He’s my grandson every bit as much as he is yours. I know you haven’t been in his life. I *know* my daughter was unfair—”

“Bobbie—”

“It’s not like I don’t get it. It’s not like I don’t feel sympathetic, but you know how hard-headed Carly is—” She cleared her throat. “Was,” she managed to say. “She was stubborn, and she was petty. I couldn’t have changed her mind no matter what I said \_\_\_”

“I didn’t know, Bobbie—”

“Any chance I had of trying to get Jason to settle this amicably with an outcome we could all support—that’s gone.” She snorted. “You’re just lucky he didn’t throw the old bastard off the roof—”

“Now, wait just a minute—” Alan slapped a hand on the counter. “I didn’t know what my father was up to, Bobbie. I never would have supported it. But he is my grandson, and AJ deserves a damn chance to be his father. He’s never had a fair one—”

“You think I don’t *get* that?” Bobbie demanded, unfazed by his show of temper. “You think I haven’t told Jason that? I’ve talked to him until I’m blue in the face, but no matter how sober AJ is now, no matter how good he’s doing now, Jason is never going to forget the damage AJ is capable of when he drinks. You’re asking Jason to put an innocent little boy in the hands of someone who destroyed his life—”

“How long is AJ supposed to pay for that?” Alan shot back. “Jason’s life is fine now. He

thinks it's better. He doesn't want to be a Quartermaine, fine. But Michael is one—" He cut off when Bobbie laughed, the sound harsh and bitter.

"How long is AJ supposed to pay for that accident? Are you kidding me? If you or your father thought you had a prayer to get Michael on your own, you wouldn't be standing here spouting off about AJ's rights." Bobbie snatched up a stack of charts. "You tell your father to stay away from me or I will make it my life's mission to make sure he never sees that little boy again."

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Sonny lifted his brow when Jason arrived that morning, a black eye blooming on his face. "Rough night?" he asked, reaching for the carafe of coffee resting on a table warmer. He poured his partner a mug of their signature roast. "What does the other guy look like?"

"Zander Smith." Jason accepted the coffee. "I want him gone."

"That's not news," Sonny said as Jason joined him at the breakfast table. "What's changed?" He frowned as Jason's mouth thinned. "Did you get into a fight with him?"

"He was at Jake's last night," Jason said, his tone clipped. Angry. "Harassing Elizabeth, Courtney, and Gia. Elizabeth wouldn't say how it started, but he said something to her, she threw a drink at him, he threw one back, and—"

Sonny blinked. "Elizabeth started a bar fight? Our Elizabeth? One hundred pounds soaking wet?" He grinned at the thought. "I would have liked to see that—"

"She started it, but he punched her in the face."

Sonny set his coffee down, his demeanor deadly serious now. "He fought back?" It was one thing for Zander to defend himself—the drink had been too much, but you didn't hit a woman in Sonny's organization. Even one who hit you first. "He put his hands on her? What about my sister?"

"She stayed out of the fray. I don't think she has Elizabeth or Gia's temper." Or Jason's, Sonny thought, as a muscle ticked in his partner's cheek. "I don't have the authority to fire him outright," Jason continued, "Nico doesn't answer to me."

"But you want him gone." Sonny sighed and leaned back. "I don't blame you, Jase. But we generally don't fire guys for getting into bar fight. I'm not happy, but if Elizabeth hit him first—"

Jason leaned forward, his eyes like ice chips. "I want him gone."

"I get that, and part of me wants to leap there." Sonny took a sip of his coffee, taking a moment to choose his words carefully. "We've discussed this, Jase, as it's not the first

time Zander has harassed Elizabeth. I told you that the people who work for us have a certain view of Elizabeth. I never discouraged it, and you didn't want to either. But we get rid of Zander Smith—outright fire him—over a barfight—you're crystalizing that view. There's no going back."

Jason placed his hands on the table, the fingers curled into fists. "I know that."

"You broke up the fight?" Sonny asked. "How bad was it?"

"I took him out to the back alley—he probably has some bruised ribs. I told him to get lost, but the order needs to come from you." Jason hesitated. "I'm not—I can't make the statement you want me to make about Elizabeth. We're—we're not there yet. But I can't let this pass. She's gonna have a black eye and another swing—he'd have broken her nose. If Elizabeth hadn't followed me outside..." He shook his head.

"Jason..." Sonny leaned forward. "Look, we've been pushing Nico and Zander as it is. I know Nico's skimming money. I don't know how, I don't know how much. He wanted to use Zander as his fall guy. I already demoted the punk once for messing with Elizabeth, but I could do that because it wasn't about her. It was about you and your authority."

He rubbed his jaw. "I'm just worried if we cut him loose now—it pushes Nico the wrong way. Maybe he makes a mistake and we can move in faster. But maybe he doubles down. I don't know, Jase. Is this a risk we want to take over a bar fight where Elizabeth threw the first punch?"

"She was provoked," Jason said shortly. "Zander went after her at Kelly's, trashed her in front of Nico's crew, and last night—our guys are at Jake's. He sat down at a table with Elizabeth and your sister. With a cop's sister. And he said something to Elizabeth that pissed her off so much she threw a drink at him. What's Nico going to think if we do nothing?"

"Yeah, you've got a point there. We've demoted him for less lately." Still, Sonny hesitated. "I'm just—I'm not sure you really get what you're saying when we start firing guys for looking at Elizabeth the wrong way. We stalled his promotion because you didn't trust him, we demoted him when he challenged your authority. Most of the men already view Elizabeth as off limits because of your past relationship, because she's a friend of mine. We could give Zander another warning, we could let Nico make the final decision—"

"He sat down at her table and goaded her into picking a fight," Jason said, tightly. "Because he wants to piss me off. It's not about her for him. It's about me. And it's always going to be about me as long I work for you. Why are you fighting this, Sonny? Is it about Nico? About finding out how bad he's skimming?"

Sonny pursed his lips and took a minute. "Elizabeth matters to me. My sister

matters. I'm glad you were there last night. That it didn't get too bad. We have to think about the bigger picture. At the moment, Elizabeth's reputation has more to do with what happened three years ago. You make this statement, you fire someone who was technically defending himself—you don't get to take that back. You're saying something about her."

When Jason hesitated, Sonny continued. "If he'd hit her outright, we'd have a better argument. He talked to her. She threw beer at him. She hit him first. There are a lot of guys who are just going to think she was asking for it."

"They can say whatever they want," Jason said, his tone calmer now, but his eyes were still hard. "She's off limits. No one touches her and gets away with it."

"Fair enough. As long as you go into this with your eyes open." Sonny reached for his phone. "I'll make the call."

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

"Yes!" Courtney threw her first in the air as the last dock worker disappeared through the doors. "Lunch rush is officially over!"

Elizabeth smirked. "You'd think you didn't like this job much." She winced. "Smiling hurts."

Courtney laughed as she slid onto the stool. "Yeah, I thought you might be in pain today. You don't look too bad for your first bar fight."

"Hmm..." Elizabeth gingerly touched the side of her face, where a bruise had bloomed large, dark and purple that morning when she'd woke. "Yeah, I didn't feel it last night."

"Yeah, I bet pain wasn't the main feature." Courtney offered a wicked smile. "I noticed you didn't hurry back inside and I left with Gia, so..."

"So Jason gave me a ride home." Elizabeth bit her lip to suppress a smile at the memory. Of that moment in the alley, feeling the brick against her back, Jason's hot skin—

"I'll bet he did."

Elizabeth tried to scowl at her, but failed because she just couldn't stop smiling today. She knew all the reasons she'd stayed away from Jason—all the reasons she'd avoided a moment like last night, but...maybe it was time to stop being scared.

To stop running.

"Um, since you're in a good mood," Courtney said slowly, "I—I talked to AJ this morning. I hate this, Elizabeth, I do, but—"



Elizabeth sighed. “Well, at least I got the whole morning.” She poured herself a glass of water. “He’s going to subpoena me, isn’t he?”

“Yeah. I mean, well, that’s the plan. But...” The blonde laced her fingers together. “He thought maybe you could help keep this out of court.”

Elizabeth stopped. Looked at her. “Courtney.”

“I’m sorry, I *hate* this—”

“The only way to keep this out of court is if Jason agrees to give AJ some sort of visitation, some sort of custody agreement. You’re asking me to convince...” She stopped, shook her head. “You can’t ask me that—”

“I can.” Courtney straightened her shoulders. “C’mon. I know AJ. He’s not going to back down. He’s going to court if he has to. You know Jason. Do you think he’s not going to do the same? They both think they’re protecting Michael.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I didn’t know AJ when he was drinking,” Courtney continued, “but I know about the accident. I know about the fight with Carly when she had the miscarriage. I know he’s said and done horrible things when he drinks—”

“And that’s why I can’t support him. That’s why I can’t tell Jason he should give in, even a little,” Elizabeth said sharply. “Because I *have* seen AJ as a drunk. His sister was one of my best friends—I know his triggers, I know how destructive AJ can be. I am relieved beyond measure that you’re happy with him, that he’s done so well for so long. I can only hope it continues, but you’re asking to put a little boy that I love in that situation. Forget that Jason loves him as his own son—I love Michael, too. And I’ve seen the hell he’s been put through—”

“Why is AJ the only one who doesn’t get a second chance?” Courtney demanded. “You know how he lost custody in the first place, don’t you? Carly lied to him. Jason lied. And then Jason blackmailed him. Sonny threatened to kill him—”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together and took a deep breath. “I’m sympathetic, Courtney. I am. I *know* AJ never got much of a fair chance.” Elizabeth sighed. “Courtney—”

“AJ is going to file after Memorial Day,” her friend said bluntly. “And we’ve talked to family lawyers. Once the judge finds out the way Jason lied when Michael was born—he’s going to get custody. Michael is going to be forced to talk to doctors. To lawyers. To the judge. Is that what Jason wants?”

“*Jason* isn’t putting him through anything,” Elizabeth retorted. She slapped her hand against the counter. “That’s *your* husband. That’s the Quartermaines. Damn it,

Courtney. Stop making this black and white. Jason loves Michael. I love Michael. I want that kid to have the best chance he can, and forgive me if I'm not entirely sure your husband is the answer."

Courtney shoved off the stool. "You're going to be subpoenaed whether we like it or not. Is that what you're going to tell a judge?"

"Courtney—"

"You know AJ is sober, that he's been working hard." The blonde's blue eyes pleaded with her. "You *know* that we're happy together, that I'd be a good stepmother. I would protect Michael." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I don't want to fight with you."

"I don't want to fight either." Elizabeth bit her lip. "Jason is aware that his chances in court are minimal," she said softly. "He hasn't decided what he wants to do about that, because he doesn't want to put Michael through all of that if it's not going to change anything. Beyond that—I don't know, Courtney. I promise, if I end up on the stand, I'll be honest. I know how hard AJ has worked, I've told Jason that too."

"But..." Courtney sighed. "You don't trust it."

"No," Elizabeth admitted. "Because he drinks to escape the Quartermaines, and I think, at the moment, he's just running from that problem. He hasn't solved it. Do I think he would ever hurt Michael on purpose? No. The fact that he's given everyone space—" She tapped her fingers on the counter top. "I can talk to Jason again, but—"

"I hate this." Courtney grimaced as customers came in. She slid off the stool. "The last thing I want to do is make things worse, Elizabeth. I know we're on opposite sides here, but I—"

"I'm not going to let it change our friendship," Elizabeth said, lifting her chin. "We're just...we're both looking out for Michael."

Courtney flashed her a smile as she went to wait on customers, but neither of them were quite convinced.

### **Oasis Strip Club: Back Office**

Nico was already muttered when he tossed his cell phone back on the desk. At one the tables, counting money, Lenny glanced up with an arched brow. "Corinthos call with bad news?" his right-hand man asked sourly.

"That little fucking idiot got himself fired, that's what." Nico stalked across the room and poured himself two fingers of whiskey. "I knew his shit with Morgan was going to be a problem, but then he went and got himself fired over a fucking woman—"

“Not the same—” Lenny straightened. “Nicky—”

Nico tossed back the entire glass, the harsh liquid pouring a trail of fire down his throat. He’d poured time and energy into Zander Smith, hoping he would be the perfect patsy to take the fall for the drug trade in Port Charles once Nico was safely ensconced in Vegas. He’d be the perfect suspect since he’d dabbled in the product before—had come up on the rave circuit.

But no, the piece of shit had to go and make personal enemies with Jason Morgan, who was notorious for his ability to focus, to find problems where no one else could see them. Like he needed the fucking extra eyes on him right now.

“The bar fight?” Lenny’s dark brows furrowed. “I thought the bitch took the first swing—”

“Yeah, that *bitch* is Jason Morgan’s woman. It doesn’t matter if she broke his nose and ran him over. He’s not allowed to touch her. I told him to leave her alone, didn’t I? I warned him not to push Morgan after last week, but he couldn’t help himself—”

“I told you he was a hothead.” The older man shrugged. “He ain’t got a head for this business.”

“Yeah, well, he knows too much about how we run things here.” Nico reached for his cell phone. “I gotta neutralize him, keep him on my side. Maybe I can set him up somewhere for a while until this cools down—”

“Why not get rid of him?”

“And make Corinthos look in my direction more?” Nico demanded. “Fuck that. Why go to the trouble when I can buy the little shit—” He stopped when Zander picked up on the other line. “Smith, get the fuck over here. Now.”

### **Kelly’s: Back Alley**

Elizabeth leaned against the brick and tipped her head up to the sky, closing her eyes and wishing like hell she’d never given up cigarettes three years ago. What she wouldn’t give right now for the rush of nicotine right now...

The heavy metal door to the back of the diner swung open and she heard the heavy steps of boots rather than the light squeak of sneakers she had expected. She opened her eyes to find Jason’s concerned gaze on her.

“Hey,” he said, tilting his head. “Courtney said you were on your break.” He hesitated, and she knew his eyes were on the bruise at her cheekbone the way they narrowed. “You okay?”

“About last night? Yeah. Other than the bruise, I feel fine.” She took a deep breath,

reached out and grasped a fistful of his maroon shirt, pulled him closer and kissed him. She'd spent hours last night thinking about that embrace at Jake's, about the way his mouth had moved against hers, the heat of his fingers against her skin—

His hand cupped her jaw, tipping her head back. Jason moved closer, his other hand sliding around her waist, his skin searing where it met the small of her back.

She winced when his fingers brushed against the bruise on her cheek, and he drew back, their breathing a bit shallow. "I forgot," she murmured with a half-smile.

"Yeah..." Another light touch of his fingertips against her cheek bone before he stepped back. "About Zander—"

"Look, I probably shouldn't have gone after him," Elizabeth said quickly. "He just—he said..." She looked away. The last thing Jason needed to know was Zander making cracks about her rape. They'd never find his body. "He said something that I should have let go, I just—I didn't. And I'm sorry. I know things are tense with him at work —"

"I had him fired," Jason cut in. "And I'm hoping you'll evict him from Kelly's."

She closed her mouth, blinking at that. "You..." Fired him. "Because of the bar fight?"

"It was the last straw." He pressed his lips together. "If you take away his room, and we take away his job—"

"He might leave town." She nodded. "Okay. I can do that. It's not like I love him living upstairs anyway. Still, I'm sorry if I caused trouble last night—"

"Zander never should have sat down and talked to you. Anything that happened after that is on him." He rubbed the back of his neck and looked away, down the alley that led to the parking lot. "I don't get what my sister saw in him."

"Emily has a soft heart," Elizabeth murmured, missing her old friend. Wondering if she and Emily would still be close now with everything that had happened. "She sees the best in people, and for a while, I think there was something in him worth saving. That's not true anymore." She bit her lip, hating to rock the boat but... "Have you talked to any of the Quartermaines about what happened? With Michael?"

He looked back at her, squinting slightly at the change in conversation. Finally, he said, "AJ said he didn't do it. That he tore into Edward about it." Jason leaned against the building, their shoulders brushing. "I don't think he was involved."

"Yeah..." Elizabeth sighed, hating this whole thing but knowing she had a responsibility to do what Courtney had asked. For Jason and Michael's sake. "AJ is planning to file after Memorial Day. You'll be served the first week in June."

Jason's cheek twitched, but he had no change in expression otherwise. "You know that for sure?"

"Yeah, Courtney and I—" Argued about it, but Elizabeth didn't want to say that much. "She and AJ—they don't want to go to court."

He looked at her, his blue eyes guarded. He straightened. "Elizabeth—"

"She asked me—AJ doesn't want to drag Michael through all of it—" She trailed off and swallowed. She could almost see the wall go up. "Jason, we've *talked* about this. You've said exactly the same thing—"

"You think I should give him custody?"

"No!" Elizabeth scowled. Damn it, this wasn't the first time they'd broached the subject of settling this out of court. Did he think this whole thing would go away? "Jason, nothing has changed, okay? There's nothing happening here that you didn't know about it. I *told* you AJ was going to file at some point, I suspected it would be when Michael finished school—"

"AJ told *me* he plans to subpoena you," Jason cut in, with voice almost a growl. "What are you going to say when you're asked where Michael should live?"

Oh, no. "Jason—" Elizabeth shook her head. "Don't make this about me. I didn't create this situation, I'm just trying to survive it—"

"What are you going to say?" he repeated.

"Exactly what I've told you," she shot back. "AJ's sober. His marriage is solid. His wife is amazing and would make a great stepmother—"

"So you think Michael should go with him—"

"I'm not sure a judge would let me testify about my worries, about my fears that AJ's sobriety might be temporary. I'm not an expert." She threw up her hands. "What do you want me to say? Should I go in there and lie?"

"Elizabeth—"

"I also hope I get to the chance to say how much Michael loves being with his grandmother, with his uncle. That I've seen firsthand how much you love him." She fisted her hands at her side. "I hate this, Jason. Don't put me in the middle."

His cell phone rang, cutting off any response he might have made, but his eyes were lit with irritation, his shoulders tense. "I have to go," he said after looking at the screen. "We'll talk about this later."

Jason left then, his boots echoing down the alley. When he'd turned the corner,

Elizabeth swore and kicked the side of a dumpster. This was why she'd been holding herself back. Staying away from him.

One step forward, eight thousand back.

### **Courtland Street**

Zander kicked at the gravel as he trudged past away from the strip club, passing increasingly broken and patched buildings. So what if he'd popped that uptight bitch in the face? Hadn't she had it coming? He'd have scars on his face from her nails. Typical. Women could land the first punch, but fuck if you couldn't return the favor.

This was all Jason Morgan's fault. He'd come back to town like he owned the damned place and ruined everything. Why the fuck did Morgan have to have a stick up his goddamn ass about letting Zander move up? Hadn't Zander helped them? Gone to the police about Sorel? He'd tried to change, to be a better person for Emily.

Sweet Emily, who'd thought there was something worth saving inside.

She'd been wrong, but he'd tried for her. He would have done anything for her.

But she'd left. Just like his high society father who'd knocked up one of his whores and walked away without a backward glance when she'd looked for money. His mother had wasted away on heroin first, then crack when the money ran out. She'd been dead for the better part of a decade, and he'd spent that time on the streets of New York.

He deserved to have his own crew, his own club. To collect his own money. Make his own small part of Sonny's empire. He hadn't lusted for the top spot—too much scrutiny, too much effort was required. Zander hadn't been greedy or ambitious. He'd worked his fucking ass off under Sorel, then Corinthos. So what if he'd worked for Sorel? So had more than a dozen men in Sonny's organization. Hadn't they merged the fucking territory?

Fucking hypocrites. Holding him back. Well, he'd show them. He'd go to Miami, get hooked up with a sweet job and enjoy the sun, the water, and the bitches in bikinis. He was done playing the game in Port Charles. Done trying to be something he wasn't.

A dark car rolled to a stop just next to him on the street, a window rolling down in the backseat. "Zander Smith."

He stopped and squinted at the car, but he couldn't attach a face to the voice. "What?" he snarled.

"I hear you're looking for new employment."

Zander scowled, but then the window rolled down fully. “Holy, shit. Mickey! What the hell are you doing?”

Michael “Mickey” Roscoe, once the right-hand man to Joseph Sorel and an enforcer under Anthony Moreno, grinned at his old comrade and pushed open the door. “Get in, kid. I got a business proposition for you.”

## Chapter Ten

*I'm in a daze stumbling bewildered  
North of gravity head up in the stratosphere  
You and I roller coaster riding love  
You're the center of adrenaline  
And I'm beginning to understand  
- The Best Thing, Savage Garden*

---

*Sunday, May 5, 2002*

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

Courtney winced when Elizabeth stalked in from the kitchen and snatched the white apron from behind the counter. "I guess Jason found you," she murmured as she gently set the carafe of coffee back on the hot plate. "Elizabeth—"

"I told him," her friend snapped. "And of course, it's all *my* fault. What am I supposed to do? Ignore the situation? Maybe I could run away for a year and just pretend everything is exactly the same when I come back—" She stopped and closed her eyes. "Jason," she continued without opening them, "isn't thrilled that I don't plan to sandbag AJ's character on the stand if I'm asked."

"Oh." Courtney bit her lip. "I mean..." She looked at the counter, focusing on a small crack in the laminate surface. "I'm sorry—"

"Why?" Elizabeth asked. "*None* of this is your fault. You married AJ, Courtney. You get to take his side, particularly when, you know, he's not wrong." She hissed through her teeth as she yanked out the ledger and reached the receipts from the lunch rush. "Michael *is* his son. AJ's not wrong to do whatever he thinks is best."

"But Jason isn't wrong to be concerned," Courtney said. "I'd be lying if I said I were one hundred percent convinced AJ will never take another drink." And God, didn't she feel disloyal admitting that? But this was Elizabeth. The first friend she'd made in Port Charles. Her best friend.

"I guess I just..." Elizabeth closed her eyes. "I don't know. I thought—I thought if I took that step forward. If I...let myself feel those things for Jason again—"

"Or admitted that you already did."



“Semantics.” But Elizabeth smiled, a slight shift in the curve of her lips. “I thought if I took that leap—he’d be there waiting. That...it was me holding us back.”

“But—”

“It’s not. It’s him, too.” She waited a moment. “He doesn’t trust me. Not where it counts. He can’t see that I love Michael, that I want what’s best for him—”

“I think he’s scared—” Courtney lowered her voice when a customer wandered in. “Elizabeth, you’ve said it yourself. He still loves that little boy like his own son. That doesn’t go away. You never stop protecting your children. Maybe the reason Jason is so angry is because he knows you’re right, and he doesn’t want to admit—”

“What am I supposed to do with that?” Elizabeth cut in. “I spent two years of my life running after Lucky, fixing his problems—” she shook her head. “No, this—this is a sign. It’s not enough to care about Jason. It’s not enough that he cares about me. We don’t work. When the rest of the world gets involved—”

“And *that* is a cop out,” Courtney interrupted, slapping her hand over the ledger, forcing Elizabeth to stop writing, to look at her. “What would Gia say if she were here?”

“Oh, God...” Elizabeth rolled her eyes and sighed. “Courtney—”

“This situation with Michael? Where you’re in the middle? This doesn’t go away if you stop...if you pull away from Jason again. What changes, Elizabeth? Nothing.”

Elizabeth exhaled slowly. “Courtney—”

“But maybe that’s not the point. Because if you walk away from what you feel this time, if Jason lets you—” Courtney shrugged, stepped back, and let her hand fall back to her side. “Maybe that’s for the best. Because if you let something that has *nothing* to do with who the two of you are together—if you let something that’s not even about you get in your way—maybe you were right. Maybe it’s just lust. Residual. Unfinished business.”

“That’s not fair,” her friend managed, her voice weak, even a bit shaky. “He doesn’t trust me—”

“You don’t know that.” Courtney took a deep breath. “I love you. I don’t know Jason that well, but I do see the way he looks at you. I think, before you write this off, before you let fear get inside your head—you owe it to both of you to give it a chance.” She hesitated, but decided to press her advantage. “You both love Michael. AJ loves Michael. I want the chance to love him. We are all good people, Elizabeth. Good people should be able to find a way to make this right.”

**Quartermaine Mansion: Family Room**

AJ scowled at the sight of his grandfather standing by the fireplace. “Grandmother —” he cast disapproving eyes at Lila, who sat serenely in her wheelchair. “I should have known—”

“Your grandfather has something he would like to say to you,” Lila said simply. “But I will stay right here to ensure that he doesn’t try anything.”

“Lila,” Edward said, a hand over his heart. “After all these years—”

“Stuff it, darling.” Lila arched an eyebrow, still managing to rule the room even in her weakened state. Her husband scowled, but then turned his attention to AJ, who was no less annoyed but unable to say no to Lila.

“Well?” AJ prompted when Edward remained silent. He folded his arms. “I’m waiting.”

Edward scowled. “Boy—”

“Goodbye,” AJ said, turning back to the door.

“I’m sorry,” Edward bit out. “I was...I was impetuous.”

“Impetuous,” AJ echoed with a scoff. “Let me remind you that you convinced Michael’s headmaster to allow you to meet with him. The fact that you were allowed contact with him on school grounds—Let’s set that aside.” He lowered his voice, his blood still running hot at the very thought of what Edward had done.

“You told my son—a five-year-old *child*—that his grandmother saw him as a burden. That he was going to come live here soon—a house he doesn’t know full of people he doesn’t know—”

“It was wrong, I know.” Edward huffed. “And if Elizabeth Webber didn’t have an ounce of sympathy for me, a judge is going to have even less. Everyone knows she’s a soft touch—”

“Oh, God. You talked to—” AJ pressed a hand to his forehead. What were the chances that Jason hadn’t heard about *that*? “You stay away from Elizabeth. Jason will take you apart—”

“Come now, AJ. I think you’re overreacting,” Lila murmured. “Elizabeth can take care of herself—”

“Yeah, I know that, and you know that—but—” AJ stopped. If Edward didn’t want to heed his warnings, if his grandmother didn’t see danger—he wasn’t going to waste his breath. “I had to do damage control, Grandfather. Any progress I’d made with Jason—it’s gone now—”

“I don’t know why you give a damn. You’ll win in court, and Jason will have to come

crawling to you—”

“I don’t *want* that—” His hands dived into his hair as AJ struggled to not to howl with frustration. “Michael has a family that he cares about. He has Bobbie, Elizabeth, Lucas. And Jason. He’s lost his mother. The last thing I want to do is anything that changes that. I want to be a *part* of his life. Add myself. Not take his family away.”

“And it’s the right thing,” Lila murmured. “Darling, I know you and Jason will work this out—”

“Jason doesn’t trust me,” AJ said tightly. “I don’t blame him. I only just managed to convince him I had nothing to do with Grandfather’s mess, but I know that’s because Elizabeth believes me. I need you to stay out of this. I can *do* this.”

Edward snorted but Lila silenced him with a glare that might have cut glass. “Edward,” she snapped. “You will let this boy handle this. Michael is his son. Jason is his brother. I think they can work this out.”

“I don’t want to go to court. I don’t want Jason to lose,” AJ admitted. “That doesn’t make anything better. Grandfather—”

Edward looked at his wife for a long moment before taking a deep breath. “I don’t want to do anything that ruins your chances,” he said, gruffly. “If you think you and Jason can work things out, well, then I...I’ll give you that chance.”

Which meant he would give AJ space, but for how long?

### **Elm Street Pier: Yacht**

Zander, with some trepidation stepped onto the yacht, before glancing back at Roscoe. “Mickey, what the hell are we doing here?”

“My partner wants to meet you.” Roscoe shoved him forward, toward the stern of the luxurious yacht where a man was seated at a table, a cigar and a martini in front of him on the glass-topped table.

His hair was dark, his skin olive in complexion. His eyes reminded Zander of a snake as the partner squinted at the two in the sunlight. He bit down on his cigar and beckoned for the duo to join him underneath the shaded awning.

“Mickey, this is your secret weapon?” he asked, a tinge of something South American in his accent. Zander bristled as those dangerous eyes looked him up and down, and then looked away.

Dismissed. Fuck him. He didn’t need this shit. He’d put his cards on the table, and if he didn’t like the pitch, he was out of here.

“Mickey says you want to destroy Sonny Corinthos,” Zander said before Roscoe could

say a word. “But you haven’t been able to do dick about it. His men are too loyal to turn, and those who aren’t are too fucking scared of Jason Morgan.”

The man raised his eyes. “And you’re different from them?”

“I don’t give a fuck about loyalty,” Zander retorted. “I did everything that son of a bitch wanted me to and he still tossed me out like a dog because Jason Morgan took exception to my treatment of his property.”

“His girlfriend, you mean.” The man sat up. “Perhaps it’s time we introduce ourselves, and I’ll be requiring your real name, not the alias Corinthos and Morgan were satisfied with.”

Zander hesitated, but if getting his revenge meant surrendering a secret, then he was game. “Alexander Jerome. From New York City. Bastard son of Victor Jerome.”

“What the fuck, Smith...” Roscoe thumped him in the shoulder. “You’re shitting me —”

“It’s a useless name. Jerome’s been gone nearly a decade and he never acknowledged me. He didn’t care for my mother’s *antecedents*,” Zander sneered. “There’s no currency in the name, so why fucking bother using it?”

“Fair enough.” The man set down his cigar. “Alcazar. Luis Alcazar.” After a moment, he continued. “Now why don’t you tell me why you’re of any use to me?”

“Because Morgan isn’t gonna touch me. I used to—” And here Zander hesitated, because the moment called for crude talk, for frankness, but to use her this way, it was uncomfortable. She was the only sweet, bright spot in his life. “I dated his sister for a while. And Morgan loves his sister.”

“Fair enough. But the fact that you’re breathing doesn’t make you valuable—”

“You’re never going to destroy Sonny Corinthos until you eliminate Jason Morgan,” Zander told him. “And you’re gonna have a fucking hell of a time doing that.”

“He’s got weaknesses,” Roscoe scoffed. “The girl? He’ll do anything to keep her safe—”

“You think you can go after Elizabeth Webber and break Jason that way?” Zander snorted. “You don’t *get* it. You kidnap her, you kill her—doesn’t matter. Jason will put his emotions in a little box inside his head, hunt you down and tear you into little pieces for touching her. He’s not Sonny. Sonny falls apart when threatened. *He* survives because of Jason.”

Alcazar picked up his cigar and examined it for a long moment. “We’d considered kidnapping Elizabeth Webber in exchange for control of some piers. In Mickey’s name, of course.” His smile was nothing more than an upturn of one corner of his

mouth, but it seemed to be in response to a joke that neither of them were privy to. "I'm a silent partner."

"I think you overestimate Morgan," Roscoe began.

"I can't stand the son of a bitch," Zander replied with a dark scowl. "*He's* the reason I'm here. That bitch insulted me, clawed at my face, and I got fired for defending myself. But you're a fucking moron if you don't give him credit, Mickey. You know I'm right. When Sorel sent that bomb a year ago? Jason Morgan hunted down the explosives experts, the courier—he took them apart. He doesn't react to attacks the way you think he will. I'm telling you, you're not going to get anywhere with Sonny Corinthos unless Morgan is gone."

"So we kill the right-hand man. Simple," Alcazar said. "A drive-by—"

"Good luck." Zander shrugged. "You won't be the first to go after him and you won't be the last."

"Well, how would you suggest we take care of the problem?" Alcazar demanded, his patience finally dissipating. "Or are you telling me Sonny Corinthos is indestructible?" He sat up, put down his cigar. "All I'm hearing is what I *can't* do."

"The closest anyone ever came to killing Jason Morgan was the ambush when Moreno died," Zander returned. "His sister told me he was shot and nearly died. You ambush him with more guns, make it impossible for him to escape. And when he's gone, you can start taking Sonny Corinthos apart, piece by piece. He has a sister he's not close to, but he's not gonna put up with any threat to her. He likes Webber well enough, and he'll feel obligated to protect her once Morgan is gone. You make him fail in that, you put his ex-kid in danger? He'll self-destruct on his own."

Alcazar exhaled slowly before looking at Mickey. "It's not a bad plan."

"How do you lure Jason Morgan into an ambush?" Roscoe demanded. "He's got lightning reflexes—"

"You get someone to lure him to place where he thinks he's gonna be safe. That's the hard part," Zander said. "You're gonna need to turn someone else. Someone he trusts. Or trick them. He'll go anywhere Elizabeth asks him to, but she's not an idiot either, so good luck with that."

Alcazar smiled then. "Oh, I think I can take care of that. A few more weeks to allow certain things to fall out the way I expect them to, and I'll have the perfect candidate." He flicked his eyes to Roscoe. "Good job, Mickey. He's not a bad secret weapon. I've learned more about Corinthos and Morgan in the last ten minutes than I have in the last three months."

Zander started at that pronouncement—Luis Alcazar had been targeting Sonny for

three months and was only now making his move? What the hell was going on here?

He was gonna have to watch his back. Zander and Roscoe went back a way, but Luis Alcazar didn't give a shit if he lived or died. He was on his own. Nothing new there.

### **Jake's: Upstairs Hallway**

Elizabeth closed her eyes and took a deep breath before knocking on the door. She had to...she had to do this. To talk to him. To just...make sure that walking away was the right decision.

Courtney was right—if something that had nothing to do with who they were together could affect their relationship, it wasn't strong enough. It was smart to stop now. To get out before they ruined each other.

She hadn't been smart before. She'd hung on, clung to the dream so long that there had been nothing left but ashes when she'd finally woken up.

Not this time.

She raised her hand to knock before it was yanked open, and Jason appeared, about to step over the threshold. He stopped, obviously not expecting her. "Elizabeth—"

"Oh." She chewed on her lip, taking in the jacket he wore and the keys in his hand. Reprieve. "You're—you're leaving. I can—"

"I was going for a ride." He shifted back, stepping to the side so she could enter. When Elizabeth didn't move, his hand tightened on the edge of the door. "Elizabeth—"

And now that she was standing in front of him, ready to call the whole thing off—

She couldn't.

"I'm a good person," she said, softly. He furrowed his brow, opened his mouth to respond. "And you're a good person."

"Elizabeth—"

"And so are Courtney and AJ."

He sighed and dipped his head. "Elizabeth, don't—"

"Good people should be able to work together." She swallowed hard. "I love Michael, Jason. I tried to stay out of this, I did. But I can't. Because Courtney is my friend, and I've known AJ for years. And I love that little boy. We are good people who want the best for that little boy—I have to believe that we can work together—"

He looked away and shook his head lightly. "Elizabeth—"

“Because I care about you,” she said in a rush of words. “I always have, but I mean—I just—” She licked her lips. “If this were before, if this was Lucky—” He scowled, but she continued. “I would have done whatever he asked. Whatever made him happy. Because that’s how I judged my life. If Lucky was happy, if I did what he wanted—I can’t *do* that anymore—”

“Elizabeth—” Jason’s voice was quiet, but there was anguish there. “That’s not—I’m not—” He stepped back. “Come in. Please.”

Hesitantly, she stepped over the threshold and waited for him to shut the door. He dropped his keys on the dresser and looked at her. “I’m sorry about today.”

“I’m not trying to box you in. To convince you to give up—”

“No, I know.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “You weren’t saying anything you haven’t before. Nothing Alexis or Bobbie hasn’t said. My chances in court are next to nothing, and dragging Michael through it would just...”

Her throat felt raw as she forced the words out. “Jason—”

“But you *never* have to tell me what I want to hear, or do anything because I—” He sliced a hand through the air. “I don’t want that from you. I saw—” He stopped and looked away, swallowing. “I saw you do that before. Last year, I watched you twist yourself around to be what Lucky wanted. I would never—”

She exhaled slowly. “And I know that. I do. Here.” She gestured at her head. “It’s just...it’s hard to believe it everywhere else. I have a lot of...damage from before—”

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” he cut in, his eyes fierce. “Elizabeth—”

“Baggage then,” she continued, with a hesitant smile at his complete faith in her. At least one of them had it. She bit her lip. “It’s there. And I can’t pretend it isn’t.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

She could do this. She could be honest with herself, with him. About anything. This was Jason. He was safe.

Elizabeth stepped forward until she stood just before him, tilting her head up to meet his eyes. “Last night, in the alley—today—”

“If you’re not ready—”

“It felt right,” Elizabeth interrupted. “And it felt good. And I wished—” She shook her head. “No. No regrets. If it had happened last year, I wasn’t ready to do anything about it then. I am now. I want to be with you.”

She hesitantly reached out, her fingertips brushing the soft cotton of his black shirt.

She flicked her eyes back at him. “And not in some...abstract sense. I mean...” She pressed her hands against his chest, his skin warm under the cotton. “Now. Tonight.”

“Elizabeth—”

She slid her hand up slightly to cover his heart. She’d felt it before—could remember checking it during that winter in her studio. He slept so soundly, so little movement, she would often lean over at night to check his heartbeat.

And it was quicker now, his breath had changed. She had never really let herself believe a man like Jason would want her—would find her attractive, but he did. She could see it in his eyes, feel it in the way his body had tensed.

“But maybe you would rather go out for a ride,” she teased as she slid up on her toes and pressed her mouth to his quickly. “You know I like the bike—”

She moved, as if going towards the door, but he laughed, the sound low and rumbling through his chest as he lightly tugged her back, letting her almost stumble into him. Her answering grin was swallowed by his mouth as he dipped his head, speared his hands in her hair and kissed her.

This. This feeling, this sensation, this dizzy, intoxicating sensation—this was why she had to give this a chance. She wanted to drown herself in him, in his touch, in the way everything just ignited inside her when he was with her. Elizabeth slid her hands up his chest again, moving under his jacket so she could shove the leather from his shoulders.

She fisted her hands in his shirt, pulling him backwards toward the bed. Jason hesitated when her knees brushed the edge. His hands resting at her hips, his thumbs brushing the skin just under her shirt, he raised his head and licked his lips. “Elizabeth—” he began, his voice a bit rough. “We don’t—”

She raised a brow, and swiftly turned so that she could lightly shove him on the bed before climbing on top, her denim-clad thighs straddling him on either side. “Do you know how long I’ve been thinking about this?” she asked, her tone idle as the tip of her fingers lightly danced on his abdomen, on the bared skin where his shirt had tugged up.

His eyes were dark in the dimly lit room as he braced himself up on his elbows. “Not as long as I have,” Jason managed.

“I should have felt guilty,” Elizabeth mused with a smile that felt wicked even as it slid across her face. “I mean, you were hurt and I was supposed to be taking care of you, but every time I changed your bandage...” Her fingers traced the scar that bullet had left. “I had this crazy thought about just...” She bit her lip, but what the hell? “Licking you.”



He didn't laugh at her, didn't even smile at the thought of that silly girl thinking such naughty thoughts about a bullet-ridden older man in her care. Instead, Jason sat up, tugging her closer, bringing her into closer contact with all of him. Her breath caught—she could feel him, even through two layers of denim. “If you had,” he began, but stopped and shook his head. “I want this to be right for you,” he said, finally, his lips feathering along her jaw.

“Being with you makes it right,” she murmured. “You are—this is what I want.” She rocked back lightly, heard his breath hitch. “I’m not going to pretend anymore.” She leaned down, nipped at his mouth. “Are we done talking yet?”

He answered with a light growl that had her giggling as Jason dipped her to the side, her back against the mattress. “I think we’ve talked enough,” he told her with a wicked grin before he took her mouth again.

## Chapter Eleven

*I can't really tell you  
What I'm gonna do  
There are so many thoughts in my head  
There are two roads to walk down  
And one road to choose  
So I'm thinking over  
The things that you've said*  
- Thinking Over, Dana Glover

---

*Monday, May 6, 2002*

### Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

Nico leaned back on the sofa, sipping his bourbon. "I know it goes against tradition," he told Sonny as the other man lounged in the arm chair. "But I figured if I set Smith up in Miami, he'd be more likely to get out of town and stay out of trouble."

Sonny nodded and glanced at Benny. "You talk to Hector?"

"I did," Benny said with a nod. "It checks out."

Nico hissed, sitting up. "You think I was lying?"

Sonny shrugged. "You were pushing Zander pretty hard, and you were angry when I shut down his promotion."

"Angry at the little shit," Nico bit out. "He ruined everything. Now I gotta groom another bastard to take over. I don't belong here, Sonny. I belong in Vegas. I belong in the big-time." And if Sonny didn't trust him, damn it, how was he going to get out from under him?

"I'm sure that's true," Sonny said evenly. He set the tumbler of bourbon on the coffee table and took a cigar from his pocket, offering it to Nico, who shook his head. "You never made a grab for this job, though. I wonder."

"I want the money," Nico retorted. "Not the power. I can make all the money I want in Vegas. Casinos are a cleaner way to make money, and I can run more bookies out of them—" He shook his head. "You get shot at too much."

"He's not wrong, Boss," Benny said with a half-smile.

"I told Smith to stay away from Morgan's property," Nico said. "I told him to stop fucking with Morgan. But the kid is a hothead. I didn't know how much he hated Morgan. Probably for the best that Morgan's home, so I could see what a little bastard the shit turned out to be. Saved me from making a huge mistake."

Fuck that, he'd been *counting* on Zander's temper to get him killed when the bad numbers were caught. He'd had the perfect fall guy, but the very thing that had made him so right for the job had made him a catastrophe waiting to happen. Damn that bitch Carly for driving off a cliff and forcing Jason home.

"It's not personal, Nico," Sonny said. "The kind of power you were pushing at him—" He sighed. "I mean, maybe I should have made it clear when you came on board that I kept Zander working for me because I wanted him where I could see him, but I never had any intention of moving him up. He's only loyal to himself."

And *that's* what made Sonny soft. Thinking anyone had more loyalty to Corinthos than they had to himself. Nico would wager even Jason Morgan had his limits when it came to blind obedience. Not that anyone had discovered that particular off switch—even Corinthos fucking Jason's woman years ago hadn't been more than a blip.

But Sonny was living in the stone age. No one valued the organization above themselves. Not anymore. And Nico was ready for a change.

He'd play along as long as Sonny needed him to, but once he was in Vegas, he'd make his move and be free of the bastard for good.

### **Alexis's Office**

"Thanks for meeting with me," Jason said as he took a seat across from Alexis the following afternoon. "I know I didn't have an appointment—"

Alexis held up her hand to stall him. "Hey. I'm on retainer." She cleared her throat. "I actually expected to hear from you sooner. After I found out about Edward and his visits."

Jason hesitated, tilting his head. "Who told—" He sighed. "Ned."

"Yeah. He mentioned it. AJ stormed over a few days ago, angry at Edward. Lila talked them both down, but I can imagine how angry you are. Ned called to give me a heads up." She tapped a pencil against her desk. "You have a pretty solid case against the school, and you might convince a court that Edward isn't good for—"

"I don't want to go to court," Jason cut in. He swallowed, knowing he was breaking every promise he'd ever made to Carly.

But she was gone now, and he had to deal with the situation as it stood now.

“I know my chances would be slim, and I don’t want to drag Michael through something when I don’t—” He paused again. “When I don’t even believe in what I’m fighting for.”

He looked past her, at the window that held a view of downtown Port Charles. “You know, in the beginning...I lied because the Quartermaines would have taken Michael from Carly. They had the clout, the power. She was nobody to them. And I didn’t—no, I *know* AJ would have let them control Michael’s life. To prove himself, to get their acceptance.”

He didn’t remember being Jason Quartermaine, but something in AJ’s words about their shared childhood had rang true. And he’d seen the pressure they exerted first hand.

“I don’t want to go to court,” Jason repeated. “But I don’t want AJ to have sole custody. Not yet, anyway. I’m not sure—I’m not convinced—” He dipped his head.

“There are things we can offer,” Alexis said. “We can suggest visitation at first, so Michael can adjust. He doesn’t remember the year he spent with AJ, I imagine. But he knows Courtney, which should help.”

Jason rubbed the back of his neck. “Can we.... try supervised at first? I mean, it doesn’t have to be me. I trust Bobbie, Elizabeth, or I guess, Courtney. I don’t know her well, but Elizabeth does—”

“We can ask. I’m sure it’ll help Michael become more comfortable with AJ.” She was quiet for a moment. “I know how difficult this is for you, with Carly just...with everything happening so suddenly. It’s been less than a month since she died. Everything’s changing so fast.”

“I just want to do what’s best for Michael,” Jason said firmly. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted. Dragging him into court—that’s not best. I could...I mean, hypothetically,” he said when he saw Alexis’s brows lift. “I could talk to people. Give some money. But one day, Michael—” He shook his head. “Michael will grow up, and I’d have to answer for it.”

“I’ll draft an agreement. I don’t know who AJ is using for representation, but I’ll ask Ned if he knows.” Alexis leaned forward. “When that day comes, Jason, you won’t have anything to be ashamed of.”

### **Kelly’s: Dining Room**

“He’s meeting with Alexis today?” Courtney asked, dumping the remnants from a table into her tub of dirty dishes. It was finally closing time and she just wanted to finish this shift, go home, and soak her aching feet in a hot bath.

“Isn’t that, like, the opposite of keeping things out of court?” Gia interrupted before

Elizabeth could open her mouth. “Why involve lawyers at all?”

“Gia, don’t help,” Elizabeth retorted as she tossed aside a pile of receipts and frowned at the ledgers. “Son of a bitch.”

“I imagine he’s talking to Alexis about drawing up a legal agreement that protects them all. It’s an out of court settlement.” Courtney shrugged. “I doubt AJ will care as long as it gets him Michael.” And then what?

“Jason didn’t really say anything about the specifics...” Elizabeth trailed off, muttering under her breath. She flipped back to the preceding page. “God damn it.”

“You know,” Gia said, ignoring their friend who had surely forgot to carry a number in the ledger and would spend fifteen minutes swearing at the inanimate objects, “she didn’t come home last night.”

“Really?” Courtney moved through the archway into the kitchen and dumping the dishes into the sink. She wrinkled her nose. “Hey, why did we decide to let the kitchen staff go early?”

“Because I’m going to do the dishes,” Elizabeth called back to her. “Jason isn’t picking me up for another hour, and...” She sighed.

Courtney emerged from the kitchen in time to see the brunette slam the books shut. “Hey, now that you’re sleeping with him, maybe he should take over the books.”

“I can do this,” Elizabeth insisted. “I’m majoring in business, so I can take care of this place better. I just...” She huffed. “I don’t know how we go through so damn many cartons of eggs—”

“I need to get more exciting friends,” Gia decided. “We should be out a club, but nope. We’re balancing books in a greasy diner.” She sighed. “I was fun once.”

“And a blackmailer, but let’s not quibble,” Elizabeth mused as she dug through the invoices, probably looking for the receipt for the stupid eggs.

“Fair point.” Gia propped her chin up on her hands across the table from Elizabeth. “So was the sex good?”

Courtney snickered as she dumped the last bit of coffee into the sink and put the carafes into another tub. “She was twenty minutes late for her shift this afternoon.”

“I had to go home and get clothes,” Elizabeth said with a delicate sniff. “I don’t kiss and tell.”

“Ha, that’s because there was nothing to kiss and tell about,” Gia said with a snort. “Before, no one gave a damn about your sad sex life. It was nonexistent. Now...” She wiggled her eyebrows. “He has long fingers, you know.”

"I hate you all so much," Elizabeth muttered.

"It was probably really bad," Courtney said in a mock whisper. "You know, high expectations—she was probably rusty—"

"That's not going to work," Elizabeth replied. "You're not going to break me."

"He looks like he'd know what to do with those hands," Gia sighed. She perked up. "The sex is good with AJ, isn't it?"

Courtney just raised her eyebrows. "What, you think because they're brothers there's some of relation there?"

"Why not—"

"Did Lucky and Nikolas have anything in common?" Courtney challenged slyly. Take that.

Gia frowned, closing her mouth and then looking at Elizabeth who looked back at her. "Huh. Never thought about it." She pursed her lips. "I'll tell you...he wasn't very generous, if you know what I mean. Not much build up, and you know, if he was done first..." She lifted a shoulder. "He'd just roll over and go to sleep."

Elizabeth opened her mouth, and then bit her lip. "I don't think we should—"

"Oh, by all means, Elizabeth," came a drawling and mocking voice from the staircase. The three women looked over to find Lucky standing at the foot, one arm braced against the railing. "Tell them how I stack up against your new fuck buddy."

"Oh, here we go." Gia rolled her eyes. "Look, pal—"

But Elizabeth held up her hand to cut off her friend. Courtney glanced between Lucky and Elizabeth, uncertainly. She had seen the blowout arguments after the wedding had been called off—Nikolas had had to physically restrain Lucky from going after Elizabeth the day she'd moved out.

Not that anyone thought Lucky would hurt Elizabeth, but he'd been so angry...

"What happened between us," Elizabeth said coolly, "is no one's business. Like my life now is no one's business." She sent Gia a hot look. "Right?"

"Right. I'm sure Lucky is a dynamo in the sack."

Elizabeth rose to her feet. "I don't appreciate you eavesdropping, Lucky. There's a private entrance to the rooms upstairs after hours. You're not supposed to use the restaurant or come here after closing."

"You only have this job because of me!" Lucky shot back as he released the railing

and strode into the dining room proper. “Don’t forget that *my* aunt gave you this job because she felt sorry for you.”

“Hey, let’s just finish closing,” Courtney said with a weak smile. “We’re all tired, I’m sure Lucky had a long day—”

“No one asked you,” Lucky retorted, with searing glance in her direction. “You’re just Elizabeth’s latest project. Take it from someone who knows—she’ll move on to someone more pathetic.”

“Is that what this is about?” Elizabeth demanded. “You’re mad because I moved on—”

“You *know* what this is about,” Lucky retorted. He took another step towards her, and the anger in his eyes had Courtney slipping her cell phone from her apron and opening it to AJ’s contact information. Just in case.

“I really don’t. We’ve been over for months.” Elizabeth crossed her arms. “And you damn well know we’ve been over for longer than that. You’re just pissed because I walked away first.”

“Actually,” Gia drawled, “it sounds like Sparky is pissed because you took so long to walk away.” She walked towards Lucky, putting herself in between him and Elizabeth. “Seems like he’s finally woken up to what we’ve all known for ages. You stayed with him out of pity—”

“Gia, that’s not what happened—”

“Gia,” Courtney protested. While she loved Gia, the woman had a penchant for stirring up trouble just to see what would happen. “Come on—”

“No, that’s exactly what happened.” Lucky eyed Gia with a mixture of relief and bitterness. “She saw it. My brother did. My parents. Aunt Bobbie. Everyone but me. You were fucking Jason back then—”

“I wasn’t—”

“You *wanted* to,” Lucky cut in.

And Elizabeth closed her mouth at that, her cheeks flushing. “That’s not how it happened, Lucky—”

“And now you’re shoving him in my face again—”

“No different from you screwing her sister,” Gia said calmly, causing all eyes in the room to look at her. “You think I haven’t seen you two here? Around town? You’re sleeping with her sister and still giving Elizabeth grief. She did you a favor, Jackass, by walking out of that wedding. You’re just too dumb to admit it.”

Lucky scowled. “Whatever. You can all go to hell.” He brushed past Gia and stormed into the courtyard. Gia walked over and firmly locked the door behind him.

“You didn’t have to make it worse,” Elizabeth said, but her words were weak. She sat down. “He’s right to be angry. *I’m* still angry at the mess I made—”

“Hey, no one forced *him* to stay.” Gia looked at Courtney with her brow raised. “You can put your phone away.”

Courtney flushed. “I just...AJ’s finishing up his shift, you know? He was only a few minutes away. I thought...if it was like that day you moved out, Elizabeth—”

“I appreciate it.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “I guess I should be grateful it doesn’t happen more with me working here and him upstairs.”

Courtney shoved her phone in her apron pocket and rounded the table. “All the same, I think—maybe we should stay here until Jason picks you up.”

“Lucky isn’t going to hit me.” Elizabeth reached for her invoices. “That’s not who he is. He’s just...he’s angry at how his life turned out.”

“And he’s too weak to do anything to change it.” Gia lifted his chin. “I don’t blame him for being pissed. I was pissed when I realized what Nikolas was going to do to you. What he would let his brother do. You were pissed when you figured it out. But we didn’t sit around waiting for someone to change it. We got gone. It’s his own damn fault he’s wallowing in his own misery. He wants someone to blame, Elizabeth. Stop letting it be you.”

“I’m not innocent in all of this,” Elizabeth insisted.

“Last year, no. You were cruel to stay with him when your heart wasn’t in it,” Gia said coldly. Courtney gasped, but the other woman continued. “And you knew it, too. You knew it was different, but you lied to him and yourself—”

“Gia—”

“And the sooner you forgive yourself, the sooner you’ll stop letting him walk all over you when he takes his bullshit out on you. You were wrong last year,” Gia stressed, “but you made it right. Maybe it was later than it should have been, but you got yourself together and out of that mess. He’s just pissed because he didn’t do it first.”

“You don’t have to be so mean,” Courtney protested, but Elizabeth held up a hand.

“No, this is—” She took a deep breath. “*This* is exactly why we’re friends now. It’s nothing less than what she told me at New Year’s, Courtney. I knew it was true then, but I didn’t want it to be. I need someone who won’t lie to me. Even if it sounds harsh.”



“You worked hard for this new life,” Gia said, sympathy replacing the anger. “You deserve this chance with Jason. But it’s never gonna work if you can’t let go of what happened before.”

“I’m working on it. I promise.”

### **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

Jason stepped into the courtyard and paused when he saw AJ leaned against the doorway, a cigarette in his hand. He lifted his brow. “When did you start to smoke?”

AJ offered a half-smile. “When I needed a way to deal with stress. This—” He held up the cigarette. “It might cause cancer, but it’s a hell of a lot less dangerous than alcohol.”

Jason nodded and started towards the double doors but paused when he caught a glimpse of the women inside. Some sort of music was filtering out, and he could see Elizabeth and Courtney dancing and singing to each other while Courtney filled the sugar canisters at the counter and Elizabeth mopped. Gia was nursing some sort of drink at the counter, a grin stretched across her lips.

“I thought they’d be done by now,” Jason said after a moment.

“They do this sometimes,” AJ replied. He flicked his ashes at the ground. “Listen. Courtney told me that she and Elizabeth—that they were fighting about all of this. I don’t...” He looked away and shifted, standing straight up. “I want my son. I want a chance to do right by him, but Courtney’s my wife. And her happiness matters, too. Elizabeth—*their* friendship matters—”

“I know.” Jason exhaled slowly. “And I know how much Courtney matters to Elizabeth. I don’t want either of them in the middle.”

“I wanted to keep the peace,” AJ admitted. “I thought if I asked Courtney to talk to Elizabeth—it would keep us all from arguing, but I was wrong.” He met Jason’s eyes. “It’s tempting to let someone do the dirty work. To take the risks. It’s a weakness to avoid confrontation, and I’m working on it.”

He didn’t *want* to respect AJ Quartermaine. He wanted to remember all the horrible things AJ had done, but at the moment, Jason couldn’t seem to make any of them worse than what Jason had done. Or what Sonny had done. Or Carly. No one was innocent.

He approached the window a bit closer and watched Elizabeth with her friends for a moment. She might want to think she was damaged from everything had happened over the last few years, but the way she danced and laughed with Courtney and Gia—she was so *happy* in there. With those women. With her friends.

He didn't want to be the reason Elizabeth was unhappy.

"I don't want to argue with you," Jason said, finally. "I know what my chances are in court. I know if I dragged Michael through it all, I'd probably lose. I know that." He turned and faced his brother. "That doesn't change the reason I would do it."

"To protect him." AJ nodded. "Yeah. I know. And I wish to God I could give you guarantees, but I'd be lying. I'd be making promises I don't know if I could keep. I can't promise to never take another drink. I'm *always* gonna be an alcoholic."

He dropped the butt of his cigarette and ground it with the heel of his work boot. "And I won't lie and say that sometimes I miss it—the way everything falls away, the way my problems disappear. Living like that—in a constant haze—" He swallowed hard. "It makes some things easier. I don't have to care about how much I disappoint people."

"Listen—" Jason shifted, uncomfortable with how direct the older man was being, how vulnerable he was making himself.

"I have to be honest about why I drank the way I did," AJ said, holding up a hand. "Because if I don't recognize the triggers, I'll never be able to avoid them. Some people drink just to make their problems go away for a few hours. Alcoholics drink to keep them away. But they never leave. I don't want to ruin Michael's life the way I nearly ruined mine."

"Look." And because if nothing else, Jason respected honesty, he said, "I believe you. I've seen you since I've been home. And I trust Elizabeth. I've met your wife. I know you're trying. I know you're sober. You don't have to keep—" He shrugged. "You don't have to keep telling me this, okay? It's not just—I made Carly a promise," he admitted. "She was selfish to ask for it, and I was wrong to do it, but I promised her—"

"Yeah. Well..." AJ rubbed the back of his neck. "She's not here anymore. I wish she was. I never wanted her out of the picture. I just...I wanted to be in it."

The door opened then, and the music poured a bit more clearly as a flushed and slightly apprehensive Courtney stood in the door way. "Um. Hey. We—we just noticed you." Her blue eyes flicked back and forth between them. "So, um, what's up?"

"Everything is fine," AJ said leaning over to kiss wife's cheek. "Jason and I were just enjoying the show."

"Oh." Her flush deepened. "Um. You—" She pursed her lips and whacked his shoulder. "You're kind of a jackass sometimes." She looked back inside. "Hey, are we done?"

"You are," Gia said as she joined Courtney at the door. She handed the blonde her purse, her own under her arm. She eyed Jason for a long moment, a cool look in her

eyes. “I know we don’t have to talk about what I’ll do to you if you mess with her. I’ll break you into little pieces.”

Jason merely raised an eyebrow at this threat, but said nothing. While Elizabeth seemed to like Gia now, he was still reserving judgment. He remembered the other woman as an opportunist and wasn’t entirely convinced by the turnaround.

Gia followed AJ and Courtney out of the courtyard while Jason went into the diner to find Elizabeth sighing over ledgers and invoices as she packed them away in her bag. “You use a calculator, don’t you?”

“I do,” Elizabeth said with a scowl as she shoved the last folder of invoices in the bag. “Which is why I can’t understand why I screw it up so much.” She wiggled her shoulders and leaned up to kiss him. “I thought you’d never get here.”

“I got hung up at the warehouse.” He cupped her jaw in his hands and kissed her again, slowly this time. “What’s wrong?”

Elizabeth sighed and rested her forehead against his chest after he’d let his hands fall down to her shoulders. “You know, I used to think it was great how well you knew my moods. Now it’s a pain in the ass.”

“You don’t have to tell me—”

“No, I just—” She glanced at the stairs. “Can we just go? I want to get out of here.”

“Okay.” Jason reached for the tote bag with the ledgers. “You want to go to Jake’s?”

They paused at the threshold of the diner as Elizabeth turned off the lights and locked the doors. “Eventually, but can we go for a ride first?” She looked at him. “I don’t want to think about anything for a little while.”

## **Vista Point**

Elizabeth sat on the bench overlooking the harbor and eyed Jason for a long moment, wondering if she should tell him about the fight with Lucky earlier.

She hated that Lucky was still a factor in her life—she didn’t want him to be a part of this new experience—this step she’d taken with Jason.

But while she didn’t think Lucky would actually hurt her, she had been relieved Courtney and Gia had hung around as long as they did, and that Courtney had asked AJ to come pick her up in case Jason was late.

“I think I’ve made it clear that the wedding—” Elizabeth bit her lip and looked down at her fingers. “When Lucky and I broke up, it was bad. Really bad.” She peeked up at him.

Jason had turned away from the guard rail, leaning against it, but he remained quiet.

She sighed and continued. "I'm not sure—I think maybe he thought he could convince me to forgive him, to go back. I guess he had reason to think that—I mean, I always had before." She bit her lip. "But I was done this time. I'm angry at myself for letting it continue so long, you know? I mean, I knew..."

Elizabeth shoved herself to her feet. "I knew what you said last year was true, but I wasn't—I don't know. I couldn't face it. I didn't think I was strong enough to be alone. But I was standing there that day, staring at myself in the mirror, in this wedding dress, and I knew—I knew even before Gia came in to tell me the truth—I knew I couldn't do it."

"Okay," Jason said when she was quiet for a moment. "So, what happened after you walked out? Sonny—he just told me the wedding was called off. He never said—"

"I knew if I was going to make it stick, if I was going to respect myself, I had to make a clean break," Elizabeth continued. "Gia was so angry at Nikolas and they were already on the rocks because of the stupid plan—" She shook her head. "Bobbie was pissed, too. At Luke and Laura because they wanted me to change my mind. They thought—this latest brainwashing—that I could fix it. That I was the key to bringing their son back to him, and I was...I was just staying with her at first, and Bobbie eventually had to throw them both out of the house. She stood up for me." Elizabeth closed her eyes. "And I know it cost her. But she told me I had to do what was right for me and to hell with everyone else."

She folded her arms across her chest and joined him at the rail, looking towards the water. "So, Gia and I decided to rent the other apartment, and Taggart said he'd make sure to keep Lucky out." She saw Jason scowl slightly next to her and managed a weak smile. "Taggart was pissed about what we'd put Gia through, but you know, he's always had a soft spot for me. I hate the way he treats you, but—"

"Yeah, I get it." Jason shook his head. "Did Taggart need to keep Lucky out?"

"When I moved my stuff from Kelly's—" She closed her eyes, remembering that. "We were in the hallway, and I had my bag with me. Nikolas was there—he was trying to talk to Gia, to me. She'd given him back the ring, and I'd given him mine to give to Lucky—when Lucky showed up. And he just...he lost it when he saw me with my stuff. Without the ring."

A muscle ticked in Jason's cheek. "Did he—"

"He didn't. I don't know if he would have. Once, I would have said he'd have thrown himself off a cliff before hurting me or any other woman. Before. You knew him then."

“Elizabeth—”

“I think one of the hardest things I’ve had to accept these last few months is that... that Lucky...my Lucky...” Her eyes burned, but she held the tears back. She’d shed too many tears for Lucky Spencer. “He died that night, and he never came back. I wasn’t in love with the man who returned, and he wasn’t in love with the woman I grew up to be. And we hurt the hell of out of each other pretending otherwise. The man he is today? I don’t recognize him. And that man...” She bit her lip. “He might be capable of hurting me.”

She cleared her throat. “Anyway. After that day, he came to the Brownstone a few times early on, but Taggert and Bobbie kept him away from me, and he started to avoid Kelly’s altogether once I took over managing it in February.”

“Okay,” Jason said slowly. “Then what changed tonight?”

“He came down after closing. He’s not supposed to—Bobbie made it clear to the tenants that they should use the private entrance as often as possible, but well... Lucky thinks he’s exempt.” She sighed again, sick and tired of thinking about Lucky. “He found out we’re...” Elizabeth glanced up at him. “That we’re seeing each other. And he’s angry at me. He’s angry because I moved on, and *especially* that I moved on with you. Gia thinks he’s more pissed at himself for not walking away first, at me for taking so long, for staying with him when I didn’t love him. It’s all bad, and it just.... I can put it out my head most of the time, but every once in a while...” She lifted a shoulder. “It sneaks back up on me.”

“Elizabeth—”

“It’s not just the fight with Lucky,” Elizabeth cut him off. “Yeah, it worries me that he’s still angry. Because I don’t know what he’ll do. But it’s me. I haven’t...I haven’t really forgiven myself for what happened. For what I did to him—”

“You didn’t—”

“I did,” She interrupted again. “I stayed with him when I knew I didn’t love him. And I did it out of obligation. God, Jason—” She closed her eyes. “Last spring, I wanted to go with you. I wanted to run after you. I nearly did. And I thought about finding you a thousand times, begging you to forgive me—”

“Hey—”

“And every time I did that—*every* time I wished I were anywhere else with, with you—and I stayed with Lucky—I was lying to him. To myself. And it was wrong. And it was weak.”

“Okay.” Jason nodded after a moment. “Okay, yeah, I get that.” He tilted his head. “But you’re done with that.”

"I am. But I don't trust myself all the time," she admitted. "When I came to your room last night—I was going to walk away. Because it would be easier to do that than to take a chance on myself again."

He reached for her hand and took it in his, letting his thumb rest in her palm. "But you didn't."

"Because I'm tired of taking the easy out," Elizabeth said, raising her eyes to his. "Every time I kept my mouth shut and didn't tell you how I felt. Every time you nearly kissed me, and I didn't let you—even though it was the only thing I could think about. When I let you walk away last year. When I tried to push you away when you came home. I've spent most of my life being afraid. Letting fear rule my life—" She shook her head. "I'm not going to do that anymore. I can't. I have to—" She swallowed hard. "But I'm not sure I know how to stop. I might still—I might still do it. Sometimes. I wasn't going to tell you about the fight with Lucky."

"Because you don't want to talk about Lucky anymore," Jason said. "Because of everything that happened before—" He touched her chin. "He was a part of your life, Elizabeth. Good, bad—he helped shape who you are. Like Robin and Carly did for me. You never have to worry about that. Not with me."

She felt the coolness of a tear as it slid down her cheek. His thumb caught the second one. "Jason—"

"You never—ever—" he stressed, "have to hide from me. I want you just the way you are."

She kissed him then, this miracle of a man who had seen the worst of her, had been the victim of her cowardice and selfishness—and had still stood by her.

And for the first time in years—she began to believe she deserved the happiness she felt right now.

Their mingled breath was shallow as she drew back, letting herself slide back down his body and rest on her feet. "Let's go," she murmured, kissing him again. "I want to be with you. I want to feel your hands on me. "

His hands slid down from her hair, framing her jaw, his eyes—she could drown in them— "Elizabeth—"

"What did you say last night?" she asked, warmth spreading all over, her lips curling into a smile. "I think we've talked enough."

## Chapter Twelve

*If we can make it through this storm  
And become who we were before  
Promise me we'll never look back  
The worst is far behind us now  
We'll make it out of here somehow  
Meet me in the aftermath*

- Aftermath, Lifehouse

---

*Thursday, May 9, 2002*

### Kelly's: Courtyard

AJ looked up from the contract at his brother. "It looks good. What do I have to do?"

Jason shifted and cleared his throat. "Alexis wants you to get it okayed by a lawyer of your own—"

AJ held up his hand, shaking his head. "I trust Alexis, and I trust you." When Jason's eyes widened just slightly, AJ understood. This new era of civility was nice, but it was...discomforting after so many years of discord.

But AJ wasn't interested in anything more than what was fair. "This is exactly what we talked about the other night, Jason." He tapped the paper. "Increased visitation. I never wanted—I can't imagine demanding that Michael come live with me full-time right now. That's not fair to anyone—particularly to Bobbie and Michael. He doesn't know me, and he'll need time."

Jason exhaled slowly. "You're not angry about the supervised—"

"You have no reason to trust my sobriety, Jase." AJ looked at the pen in his hands, twirling it. "I'm not always sure I do. I've done the steps, you know? I go to the meetings. I've been honest about why I drink. But..." He hesitated, but Jason—more than anyone else—deserved the truth. "I've seen guys like me there. With families and everything to stay sober for. And one little set back—one stupid thing—and they take a drink. And have to start over again."

Jason said nothing, so AJ continued. "When Carly—when I heard about the accident, I wanted a drink." His hands still shook at the memory—at the fierce longing for that

dark, bitter taste of whiskey as it slid down his throat.

“The family was fighting again, looking at me to go after Michael, pressuring me—they wanted me to act right then—they were ready to do it without me. I just...I wanted their voices to go away. I drove to a liquor store. And I sat outside for ten minutes, arguing with myself.”

“AJ—”

“You need to know this, Jason,” AJ cut off Jason’s uncomfortable protest. “You *need* to know that I’m aware of my weaknesses. No one has ever put Michael first like you. You had legal visitation and you walked away to make his life easier. I can’t—” His throat tightened. “I don’t know if I could make the same sacrifice. So, you need to know that I still think about it.”

“Okay.” Jason waited a moment. “What stopped you?”

“You,” AJ said simply. “And Courtney. Thinking about what I’d be giving up. How disappointed she’d be if I went in that store. How much I would hate seeing your face and knowing how much better you were—”

“It’s not about being better—”

“It is for me,” AJ interrupted. “And that’s something I’m working on. I don’t want to measure myself against you. I’ve done that all my life. Our parents—Grandfather—they’ve always looked at the two of us and wished—” He looked away. “You think they’re disappointed in how you turned out? Christ, at least *you* have the accident to blame. I don’t have that. I had all the privileges in the world and I threw them away.”

“It isn’t a contest, AJ.” But Jason looked a bit...uncertain. “But I guess—between Carly and Michael—I can see why you think that way.”

“I don’t have to be better than you to be okay,” AJ said after a long moment. “I know that. I don’t always remember it. And if sometimes—if wanting to be better than you is the reason I don’t take a drink that day, well, I guess that’s not the worst thing in the world.”

“I guess not.” Jason turned in his chair, so that he could see through the glass panels of the door to the dining room where Elizabeth and Courtney were laughing together.

“I didn’t marry her for the best reasons,” AJ said after long moment as they watched the women they cared about fill sugar canisters. “But I got lucky. Because Courtney is the best thing that ever happened to me, and that’s the other reason I don’t take a drink. I never want her to be sorry for a minute she took a chance on me.”

Jason slid the contract closer to AJ. “Take this to a lawyer. I know you trust Alexis,



and I'm—I trust you, too. But we need to do this by the book, right? So that Michael is protected. I don't want—" He hesitated, as if searching for right words. "I want us all to be on the same page."

"Fine." AJ hesitated. "Thank you. For giving me this chance."

"You earned it," Jason admitted with a bit of a grimace. He stood immediately. "I have to get back to work." He went inside the diner, where AJ watched him talk to Elizabeth for a moment before disappearing through the back, likely to the alley where he had parked his bike.

Courtney emerged from the diner, a hopeful smile on her face. "Did it go well? We didn't hear any shouting."

"It—" AJ tilted his head, considering the custody agreement in front of him. "It went better than I could have hoped for." Maybe...he and Jason could be better than civil strangers. He wouldn't hope they'd ever be brothers, but...he'd settle for friends. Maybe.

## **Yacht: Study**

"I think we should get to know the plan," Zander said as he took a seat in front of a heavy mahogany desk in the dark paneled room.

"In good time, Smith." Alcazar drew in a deep drag of the cigar. "You talk to Dominic Savarolli?"

"Yeah, yesterday." Zander shifted slightly. "He's pretty pissed at me about how I got fired, but he's got no love for Corinthos or Morgan. He's looking to move out to Vegas, and Morgan gummed up the works when he came back."

"So, the word on the street is right — Nico's still dealing and Corinthos doesn't know shit," Roscoe said, with a grin of satisfaction. "He's a dumb fuck, always has been—"

Zander didn't roll his eyes, but came close. *This* was why Moreno and Sorel had fallen apart—why *no* one got close to overthrowing Sonny Corinthos. Refusing to participate in the drug trade was the primary reason Sonny had charmed the citizens of Port Charles—and it was a handy way to test the loyalty of one's soldiers.

"Nico's been all right funneling the profits through the strip club because Sonny's business guys didn't notice the extra money," Zander said, ignoring Mickey. "But lately, there's too much profit to hide cleanly. And everyone knows Jason Morgan has a head for the numbers. With him back, it's just a matter of time. Nico wanted to get to Vegas and dump the crap on me."

Alcazar lifted his brows in surprise. "You knew you were to be the scapegoat?"

"I'm not an idiot," Zander muttered. "He wants to put me in charge of all the gambling in town? I mean, it's not Vegas or Atlantic City, but it's not nothing either. *And* he'd be leaving me with the drug trade. I got nothing against dealing—people are gonna do it whether I give it to them or not. I might as well make money from it."

He lifted a shoulder. "I figured he was gonna leave me holding the bag. I had a plan. Go to Sonny as if I had just figured it out. Sonny rewards whistle blowing. I might not be able to stay in charge, but I was willing to gamble it'd be good for my career." Lot of fucking good it did him now. He'd waited Nico out, let the son of a bitch set him up, and now Zander was out in the cold looking for a pay day.

Nico would pay for fucking him over. When the time was right.

Roscoe eyed him now. "So, Morgan's back to act as a fancy auditor?" He snorted. "Some lethal—"

"Shut up, Mickey." Alcazar leaned forward, stubbed out his cigar in the ashtray. "Morgan's looking into the books?"

"Yeah. Benny Abrams is the best in the business, but he's got his hands full with all the expansion and merger shit Sonny's been dumping on him. He handles the legitimate stuff, and he's gotta make sure it all looks clean. He don't got time to make sure everyone is dotting the I's and crossing the T's. Jason's always been his back up. Used to do the books for a bunch of Sonny's stuff when he was starting out. At Luke's and the warehouse when they first opened it."

Alcazar nodded. "You say Nico's on board?"

"He wants to get rid of Morgan as much as the rest of us," Zander replied. "He says whatever you need, he's got you."

"Good. Good." Alcazar nodded. "I'll be wanting to cause trouble for them. Nothing... too drastic. Test their reactions. Find the weak spots in their network. I have...an idea for luring Jason into that ambush, but I still have to...work out what comes after."

"I don't know why we don't just pick Sonny Corinthos off," Roscoe muttered. "He's an open target—"

"Because then Morgan tracks you down and tears you into small pieces," Zander said, disgusted. There was a reason Moreno and Sorel hadn't had patience for this dick head. "And then he takes over, and then you're *really* shit out of luck. Most of the higher ups—they like Sonny fine. But some of them would walk through fire for Morgan."

His elbows propped on the desk, his fingers steepled in front of his face, Alcazar considered Roscoe for a long moment. "I want you to keep your ears to the ground. I

want to know how Corinthos operates. How he handles mistakes. Who his men are. Not just the ones likely to defect, but those who won't. We need to know the most loyal soldiers, who to take out first. You'll be the point man with Nico."

Alcazar said nothing further, and it was clear he intended those words as a dismissal to Roscoe. The other man muttered something, but left the room.

Zander considered the man for a long time. "You want Nico as the fall guy, don't you? When you take out Jason, you want to make sure all roads lead to him."

"Nico has already done that for me. He's made it clear he's desperate to get out of town, and there's little doubt Morgan has found the extra money. Nico already made himself a target." Alcazar offered a cold smile. "He's not loyal to Corinthos or Morgan. Nico did you a favor, setting you up in Miami. You'll be comfortable there, working for my old friend Hector Ruiz. If Corinthos looks further for an accomplice, well—Roscoe won't be hard to find." He tilted his head. "It's possible Nico might name you, but you'll be alibied by Hector Ruiz."

It was just crazy enough to work, but Zander wasn't going to bet his life on a clean getaway. "About that Miami thing—"

"You'll need to stay gone for a few weeks, and Ruiz is a good connection to make," Alcazar cut in smoothly. "You've done what's necessary for now. I may need you in a few weeks, but for you to stay useful, you need to stay above suspicion."

Zander had his doubts about any of this working—not because Alcazar hadn't taken his advice or was an idiot. But Alcazar wanted his hands clean and to achieve that, he had to put major portions of his plans in the hands of others. Anything could go wrong.

Zander would just have to stay one step ahead of all of them in order to get out of this, but oh—if he succeeded...if he could watch Corinthos fall apart after Morgan was taken out—

That was worth any risk.

*Saturday, May 11, 2002*

### **Quartermaine Mansion: Family Room**

It was not often that Edward Louis Quartermaine apologized—in fact, Ned could only count perhaps three or four times in his living memory that the old bastard had allowed the words "I'm sorry" to leave his lips—and usually, his grandmother was poking at him.

But this time, Lila Quartermaine had not had to work her magic.

AJ had stopped by to see Ned, to tell his mother that he would finally have his chance—he and Jason had arrived at a custody agreement that put Michael first, but allowed AJ the opportunity to be Michael's father.

Edward had taken the news with a bit of silence, and Ned had watched the old man with curious caution. How would Edward absorb the news that AJ had solved the issue on his own?

"It seems you knew best after all," Edward finally managed gruffly as he skimmed the agreement. "You had your own lawyer look at this?"

"Yeah, Alexis gave me a list of a few who specialize in child custody. I called one. She said it was good." AJ cleared his throat. "She called Alexis, and we all decided—we're going to file it with the courts. Along with reinstatement of my rights. So legally, I'm—" he hesitated, and he swallowed hard.

"Legally, you're his father," Ned finished. He looked at their grandfather. "Junior did good, huh?"

"I'm sorry..." Edward hesitated. "I'm sorry I tried to—" He returned the custody agreement to AJ. "I just—I wanted to know him."

"I know." AJ folded the paperwork. "And I know that you have no reason to think I can do this, that I can stay sober, but—" He dipped his head. "In a few months, I'll get my one-year chip. I've never—I've never made this long before."

"The girl you married—Courtney..." Edward hesitated. "She's part of it. She's...she's been good to you."

"Yeah." AJ managed a smile. "She saw something in me, and I want—I want to make sure I live up to that." He rose to his feet. "I want to build a good life for us, for Michael. For the children I want with her. We're on our way to doing that now. I have a good job."

"I'd like—" Edward also stood. "I'll release your trust fund. I shouldn't have taken it from you, and—"

"I appreciate that, Grandfather," AJ said, holding up a hand. "And I'll likely to dip into it so Courtney and I can move somewhere bigger, somewhere for Michael to have his own room. But it doesn't—I can't come back to ELQ. Or this house."

Edward pressed his lips together, but his eyes were sad. Not angry. "I trust you to know what's best for your sobriety, my boy. I hope one day that may change, but for now, I can accept that." He cleared his throat. "I'll go find your grandmother and give her the good news."

"You should go to the hospital," Ned told AJ once Edward had left. "I'm sure Alan will

be relieved to hear that his sons are working together.”

“Yeah.” AJ nodded, took a deep breath. “Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.”

*Friday, May 17, 2002*

### **Kelly’s: Diner**

Elizabeth flashed a smile at AJ and Courtney as they left for the night, and she turned down their protest about leaving her there. She’d be fine. Jason had promised to pick her up around midnight and that was only a half hour away.

She could clean up and total the night’s receipts, then drop them at the night deposit box on their way...wherever. In the few days since their relationship had changed, they’d spent three of the four nights at Jake’s and just one at her apartment. Possibility because of the proximity to Taggart, who lived a floor above them, but she knew Jason still wasn’t sold on Gia, but time would change that.

Gia had a way of growing on you like a fungus.

“Your boyfriend late?”

Elizabeth snapped her head up at the sound of Lucky’s irritated voice. Why was he still doing this? “Lucky—”

“I know, I know. I’m supposed to use the back entrance,” he muttered, emerging from the shadows by the stairs. The diner was dim—she’d left two of three switches flipped off and now she wished she’d left it blazing.

Not that Lucky would hurt her.

She would just feel better.

“You never gave a damn before he came back.”

Elizabeth sighed and set the receipts down. She was tired of this. Tired of feeling guilty. Of feeling like somehow...she was at fault.

“Why are we still doing this?” she asked. “It’s been four months—”

“It was always him.” Lucky gestured towards the empty doorway as if Jason stood there. “Always, wasn’t it? You didn’t give a damn about me when I came home. If you had—”

“What would have been different?” she demanded. “You weren’t the same boy. I wasn’t the same girl. We both changed—”

“I was brainwashed, kept captive!” He pressed a hand to his chest, his nostrils flaring, his eyes bulging. “Locked up. You moved on with the first guy who looked at you twice

—”

Her eyes burned as she stood up. “That is not true, and you damn well know it. I nearly *drowned* myself in grief for you. I couldn’t get out of bed some days—” Elizabeth closed her eyes, forced back the angry words. “I’m sorry, Lucky. I can’t imagine what you’ve been through. How hard it must be. But I’m done apologizing.”

“How do you think it makes me feel to know I was nothing more than obligation or pity?” he demanded, taking a step towards her. “Knowing that every minute you were with me, you wanted to be with *him*—”

“Not every moment,” she murmured. She exhaled slowly. “It wasn’t like that, Lucky —”

“Then what was it like?” He spread his hands out at his side. “You stayed with me. You got engaged to me. But you wanted *him*.”

How could she ever explain how twisted it all had been last year? How she had struggled knowing she wasn’t in love with Lucky anymore, the guilt of not living up the promises she’d made—

There would never be a way to make him understand. She could barely manage it herself.

“We made promises when we were too young to know any better.” Elizabeth said after a moment. “And yeah, I feel like hell knowing that I—” Her stomach rolled. “That I fell in love with someone else while you were alive somewhere, being brainwashed. If I had known you were alive, Lucky, I would have tried to find you—”

“Bullshit. Nikolas told me you couldn’t wait to get into bed with Jason. You think I *believe* you weren’t screwing him when he was at your studio?”

Elizabeth shook her head and turned away from him. She would get her things together and walk to the Brownstone. Jason could pick her up—

Lucky grabbed her elbow and swung her back to face him, his fingers digging into her skin. “Let me go—”

“Stop walking away from me!”

“Lucky—” Her breathing hitched. She didn’t recognize him anymore. The light in his eyes, the anger on his face. “Lucky, let me go.”

“What the hell was so wrong with me that you couldn’t love *me*?” he growled. “What the hell does Jason have that I don’t?”

The echoes of words she’d wondered about herself, wondered why everyone loved Sarah. Why her parents and her grandmother seemed to value Sarah more—

“You know it’s not like that. It’s not that easy.” She tried to step back, to pull her arm free, but he just tightened his grip and jerked her forward. “Lucky—”

“You were supposed to love *me* forever—”

“Lucky, let her go.”

They both turned to see AJ in the doorway, Courtney just behind him, her eyes wide with worry. AJ stepped over the threshold. “Let her go,” Jason’s brother repeated.

Lucky scowled, but released her with almost a shove, and Elizabeth stumbled backwards into one of the counter stools. Courtney started to push past AJ to get to her, but her husband held her back with his arm.

“Go upstairs, Lucky, and be glad it was me that walked in here and not my brother.” But AJ’s eyes hardened. “Don’t touch her again.”

Lucky blinked at him and then looked at Elizabeth, holding her arm. “I—” He shook his head. “I didn’t mean—”

“Go upstairs,” Elizabeth said flatly. “And pack. I want you out of here by the end of the week. This is your notice.”

“Yeah—” Lucky exhaled slowly. “Yeah, that’s probably—” But he stopped talking and moved towards the stairs. When they heard a door close upstairs, Courtney ducked past AJ.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth looked down at her arm, at the angry red blotches. “You—you came back.”

“Courtney had a bad feeling,” AJ said simply. He tipped his head. “Get your stuff, we’ll drop you at the Brownstone if you want.”

“I—” She started to tell him no, that she would wait for Jason. But the words wouldn’t come out.

What would Lucky have done if AJ and Courtney hadn’t come back? If— She swallowed a sob that bubbled up her throat.

“Elizabeth?” Courtney asked softly. She started tucking the paperwork back in a file. “Call Jason. Tell him you’ll be at the Brownstone—”

“I—” She closed her eyes.

“What’s going on?”

Over AJ’s shoulder, Jason stood there, his eyes scanning the diner, taking in his

brother and his wife—and looking at her. Standing with her arm clutched against her chest.

AJ stepped aside as Jason moved forward. “Elizabeth?”

“I—” Elizabeth couldn’t speak as he reached her and gently took her arm in his. She winced as his fingers brushed the finger marks. “I was—I was waiting for you.” But she couldn’t make herself go on.

“I left her here to wait for you,” AJ admitted as Courtney silently tucked Elizabeth’s things in the tote bag. “But Courtney—and I—we just didn’t feel good about it. We came back, and Lucky Spencer had her by the arm—”

Jason pressed his lips together and looked down for a long moment. He was standing so close to her that she could feel the way his muscles tensed, the anger seeping through. “Are you okay?” he managed, somehow his voice sounding tender. Concerned.

But she could see the anger in his eyes. “Yeah. It’s—” She swallowed the excuse that she’d been okay, that she hadn’t been in any danger, but she couldn’t manage that lie.

She’d lied enough for Lucky.

“Thank you,” she told AJ. “For coming back. I—I want to say I would have been okay. I just—I don’t know.” She looked at Jason. “I evicted Lucky. I told him to get out. I had to give him a week legally, but—”

“He’ll be gone tomorrow,” AJ said with a steel note in his tone she hadn’t heard before. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“You—” Jason looked at him. “What?”

“If you go near him the way you look right now, Jase, Elizabeth will be bailing you out of jail. I’ll make sure he goes.”

Elizabeth squinted at Jason’s brother—because for the first time, she could see a resemblance between them. And understood that the ruthlessness she knew Jason was capable of...he’d come by it naturally. “I don’t want you to fight with Lucky.”

When Jason just shook his head, she touched his chest with her fingertips. “It’s not like before. I just—AJ’s right. I don’t want you to get into trouble because of him. It’s not worth it. I want him gone. That’s it.” She sighed, exhausted. “I’m done apologizing, feeling bad for what I did. He stepped over a line tonight, and I’m just... I’m done.”

“Okay,” Jason said finally. He looked at his brother. “If you could...do whatever you



could to encourage him to be gone tomorrow, I would...appreciate it. But if he's not—" He looked at Elizabeth. "If he doesn't go—"

"Then you can do whatever you want," Elizabeth agreed. "Can...we just go? I want to go."

"You need anything else done?" Courtney asked as she handed Elizabeth her tote and purse. "Washed? Locked?"

"No, I just have to put the chairs on the table—"

"We'll do it," AJ said, stepping forward, sliding an arm around Courtney's waist. "We'll lock up."

And Elizabeth was too tired to care. "Can we go?" she repeated to Jason. "Please."

"Yeah." He looked at AJ. "Thank you." When AJ just shrugged, Jason shook his head. "No, I mean it. Thank you for coming back. If it had been me who walked in—"

They would all be revisiting the summer of Dead Ted, Elizabeth thought, trying to find a way to dispose of Lucky's remains. And she wondered it said about her that she probably wouldn't have cared much.

### **Elizabeth & Gia's Apartment: Living Room**

"Gia is staying with her mother in Buffalo," Elizabeth told Jason as she unlocked the door. "She didn't really get to see her much during the last year, so when she finished her finals—" And she was babbling.

Jason nodded and followed her in. He stripped off his leather jacket and tossed it over the back of the sofa. When she switched on a lamp and took off her own jacket, he reached for her arm again.

The marks weren't disappearing—and were in fact, darkening. "You're going to bruise."

"Yeah." Elizabeth looked at the marks. "He's angry because I moved on while he was being brainwashed. Apparently, I was supposed to be a psychic and know he was still alive," She stepped away from him, running her hands up and down her arms, trying to chase the chill from her skin. She walked towards the window.

From here, they could just see the dim waters of the lake and several of the piers, including Jason and Sonny's coffee warehouse.

"*Don't* make excuses for him—"

"I—" She blinked at his irritated words. "I'm not. I'm...pissed at him. At myself. I *didn't* know he was alive, Jason. I can't be held responsible for not knowing that."

There was a body. And I—I did my time. I grieved for him. You know that. He just—” Elizabeth bit her lip and looked back at the window.

“I don’t know. He didn’t come back. Not all the way. Even with the brainwashing broken, there’s nothing left of the boy I promised to love forever. My Lucky never would have touched me. Hurt me.” A tear slid down her cheek. “I nearly killed myself grieving that sweet boy. And then this angry stranger comes back with his face and what...I’m supposed to worship him forever because I used to love the boy?”

She shook her head. “To *hell* with that. I mourned. And I grieved. And I picked myself back up. If he hadn’t come back, if he’d stayed dead, I would have moved on.”

She turned to look at him, but his expression was shuttered. “I kept looking for that boy, Jason, because he was the first person to love me for me. And I guess...it was hard to walk away from that. But that boy is dead. And he never came home.”

She met his eyes. “He thinks you and I were together already. That winter at the studio. He’s angry with me because he thinks I spent two years lying to him about you. And then for me...to walk away from him at New Year’s and now...to be here with you, it’s a betrayal to him. And I just—I don’t understand it. I can’t...” She looked away, because Jason was remaining silent. “He’s not wrong. I did spend two years lying to him. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“You stopped.”

“I stayed almost another year drowning in misery. I nearly married him.” She tilted her head back, looking at the ceiling. “I don’t know. I’m sorry. I’m doing it again. And you’re probably wondering why the hell you’re even bothering—”

“Hey—” Jason reached out to take her hand and drew her to him. “I remember Lucky before the fire. I remember you and Lucky. I know what you meant to him, Elizabeth. I could see it. You were both young, but anyone who looked at the two of you could feel it.” He used his thumbs to wipe her tears as they slid down her cheeks.

“And I saw you the night you lost him. And in all the months that followed. I know what it did to you. When he came home, how could you have done anything else but try again?”

“I should have stopped—”

“I know what it’s like to stay with a person long past the time you’re any good for one another,” he said gently. “Robin and I did that. She was my first friend. The first person who gave a damn about Jason Morgan. She taught me what it meant to be in love. But it changed. We were different people, going different directions. And we kept trying. And at the end, I think we almost hated each other.”

Elizabeth managed a shuddering breath. “He was my best friend. And we killed any

chance of having that again. And I hate it. I *hate* that I couldn't see it. We nearly destroyed each other, and I'm trying to walk away from that. He's stuck in it, and I think that anger is going to eat at him until it explodes. I—" Her breath hitched. "He scared me tonight. And it's just...I think—"

She leaned forward, pressed her forehead to his chest. "I think I'm grieving all over again. For what we had. For who he was."

She felt his lips press against the top of her hair. "I'm sorry. I wish..." he trailed off. "I don't know. I'm just sorry."

"Me, too." Elizabeth drew back and managed a shaky smile. "Let's...let's talk about something else."

"Okay." Jason followed as she led him to the sofa where he sat down, and she curled up next to him. "AJ...actually came by the warehouse earlier today."

"Yeah?"

"He signed the contract—the custody agreement." Jason watched as she traced a pattern on his palm. "He, uh, asked me...to go to..."

"His chip ceremony," Elizabeth said when Jason trailed off. "Courtney said he wanted to ask you. One year sober. She's really proud of him."

"Yeah. I guess. He said he's never made it that far before." Jason hesitated. "I don't know. He said he was inviting some of the Quartermaines, and I just—"

"I know all the reasons you walked away from them," Elizabeth said slowly. "But it's good that AJ is trying to work them back into his life. They're his triggers, aren't they?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess—"

"He can't walk from them forever, so it's good he's figuring out how to bring them back in." She bit her lip. "You should go."

Jason looked away, squinting his eyes. "I don't know. We're in a better place, I guess. For now. But—" He shrugged. "I don't know. He still sees us as brothers, but—"

"Maybe you'll never get there again," Elizabeth murmured. "But you both love Michael. And..." She hesitated. "I know it would mean a lot to him for you to be there. But that's all I'm going to say. He invited me, too."

He looked back at her. "He was there for you tonight," Jason said after a moment. "And he's been honest with me about his addiction. I know...he still blames himself for the accident. For...I guess killing Jason Quartermaine."

“His brother loved him,” Elizabeth murmured. “And he knows he’s the reason that’s not true anymore. It’s probably one of the worst triggers. I’m—I’m not trying to pressure you—”

“But it would be good for him if he could put the accident behind him,” Jason finished. “And if I...went...I guess that would help.” He rubbed his temple for a moment. “I don’t blame him. Not...the way I used to. I still...worry that he might drink and drive again. But...I don’t remember the life I had. And I like the one I have now.” He brushed a kiss against her mouth. “So...I’ll go.”

“Who knows?” Elizabeth managed a light smile. “You might end up liking him.”

“Don’t—That’s not funny—”

Their lighthearted banter was shattered as the sky lit up with orange and red and an earth-shaking BOOM shattered the windows that looked out towards the harbor.

Jason pushed Elizabeth to the ground, and reached behind him to draw out the gun he always kept there. Motioning for Elizabeth to stay down, he crept towards the window.

The roar of flames, the smell of sulfur permeated the air. “Jason—”

Jason looked out the window and then his shoulders slumped. “It’s okay—I mean—it’s not. But it’s not here. It’s...”

A few blocks away, the warehouse and some of the surrounding areas were engulfed in flames.

“It’s down at the pier,” he murmured. “The warehouse just blew up.”

“What—” Elizabeth jumped to her feet and joined him, stepping gingerly around the glass. “That’s what that was? I’ve never heard—”

“Maybe it was a gas line,” Jason murmured, as he wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her close. He didn’t believe it.

He knew that sound, and Elizabeth might have been familiar with it, too. If her studio had exploded the night the bomb had been planted.

## Chapter Thirteen

*They're tryin' to come back, all my senses push  
Untie the weight bags, I never thought I could  
Steady feet, don't fail me now  
I'm gonna run till you can't walk  
Something pulls my focus out  
And I'm standing down  
- Stop and Stare, OneRepublic*

---

*Saturday, May 18, 2002*

### Elizabeth & Gia's Apartment: Living Room

As Elizabeth went to get a broom and dustpan, Jason reached for his cell phone. The last thing any of them needed was someone coming in and blowing the warehouse sky high.

And he was almost positive it was a bomb—the force of the blast—the fact that windows had shattered five blocks away—what else could it be?

*"Where are you?"* Sonny's voice picked up almost before the phone rang. *"Did you see? Are you okay?"*

"Yeah, I'm good. I'm at the Brownstone with Elizabeth. It—Sonny, the windows shattered here. Probably almost everywhere else on the block."

He heard a knock and turned to the door as Elizabeth let Bobbie in. The redhead was a bit shaken as she took in the broken windows. "Bobbie just came in." He looked at her. "Your windows, too?"

"Yeah." Bobbie blinked at him. "I—it woke us up. I just—I left Lucas with Michael because I wanted—" She pressed her fingers to her lips. "I wanted to see if Elizabeth knew where you were—I saw it was at the warehouse—"

*"The whole area is engulfed,"* Sonny said, and Jason turned his attention back to the phone. *"Not just our building. But most of the pier. No way it's an accident. Alexis and I are on our way down—"*

"I'll be—"

*"We talked about this, Jase. You need to stick where you are. You need to be out of*

*this.”*

“Sonny—” Jason gritted his teeth. It had made sense in the moment, but now he wasn’t so sure. “This was serious—”

He saw Elizabeth dump glass in the recycle bin and then go back towards the bedrooms to check the other windows, but Bobbie stood there, her dark eyes sober. Worried.

*“I know. I don’t know who was there tonight. I’ll let you know when I know something else, but we gotta—we gotta stick to the plan.”*

“Yeah, all right. I’ll talk to you later.” Jason hung up the phone and just stared at it for a long moment. He hated being out of the loop. Unable to fix anything. To not be right there when the information came in.

“Jason?”

He turned to Bobbie. “Hey. I’m—I’m gonna make some calls. I’ll have someone out here to fix the windows by the morning, but—Is...is Michael okay? I’m sure he was scared.”

“He’s all right. Lucas distracted him with video games. He’s getting good at that.” Bobbie watched Elizabeth return from the back of the apartment, more glass in the dustpan. “I’m glad...I’m glad you were here, Jason.”

She left then, and Jason looked at Elizabeth who met his eyes without hesitation. With understanding. “Are you going to meet Sonny?” she asked softly.

“I—” Jason exhaled slowly and slid the cell phone back in his pocket. He picked up his gun from the table where he had set it, and put the safety back on and tucked the gun back in place. “There are things I won’t be able to tell you. I know you know that. But...that was before...” He looked away, leaned against the back of the sofa. “Before.”

“Before we started dating.” Elizabeth set the broom and dustpan aside, then sat at the small circular table she and Gia had used to dump their books and papers throughout the semester. “Okay.”

“Sonny—he likes to think it’s better when you don’t tell anyone anything ever. And I guess after Brenda and Carly, that makes sense for him, but it just—I don’t know. I never told Robin much, I guess. And it usually meant we argued about what I wasn’t telling her. And Carly turned Sonny into the Feds. And Brenda wore a wire. So, I think—”

“Jason.” She managed a brief smile, a light of amusement in her eyes. “You’re rambling. I get it. There’s stuff I don’t need to know because...I don’t need to know it.

But there's things you think I should know because it makes us both safer. And I know you don't want to lie to me. So, tell me what you want me to know."

Her quiet acceptance of everything he was—it was so different than anything he had ever had in his life before and it took him a minute to gather his thoughts again.

Jason pulled out another chair next to her and sat down. "After I left last year, I—I didn't think I'd come back so Sonny had to—what I used to do for him—"

"He gave your job to someone else," she said with a nod. "Makes sense." And neither of them commented on the reason he hadn't planned on returning to Port Charles. It just wasn't important anymore.

"So technically...I'm as out as I could be. And if I left Port Charles, I'd be out." Jason hesitated. "And I haven't...gotten my job back. In the same way. I'm..." He searched for the right way to explain it. "You know that Sorel died last year."

"Yeah, and Sonny merged the territories." When he blinked at her, she shrugged. "You pick up some things on the street, and Sonny gave some hints. He put a guard on me for a little bit during the worst of it because Sorel's men knew me from before."

"Oh." He felt out of his depth, didn't know what to do with someone he could...explain things to without them demanding more. Who just...understood him. "It meant taking in a lot of new guys. New clubs. And Sonny's been expanding elsewhere. In Atlantic City. He's talking about Las Vegas."

"I imagine it's been difficult with so many new people." Elizabeth tilted her head. "Is that what you're doing? Sorting through them?"

"Yeah. Kind of. Auditing records, actually." He rubbed his hands against his jeans. "There's...some irregularities. We think we know who and how, but we're just...we don't have enough. This, though..." He heard the sirens of ambulances, fire engines, and police cars as they raced towards the scene. "This is out of the blue. I don't know of any threat that...would explain this."

"Okay," she drew out the word with a squint of her eyes. "But you're not leaving to meet with Sonny because you're not technically back at work?" Elizabeth frowned. "Do...do you want people to think you're not there?"

"Yeah. If I'm out, then there's no reason for me to be there tonight." He frowned and looked at the door. "I'm surprised Taggart isn't banging on the door yet. He would have seen my bike parked on the street—"

"He went to Buffalo with Gia. He'll probably harass you when he gets back." Elizabeth bit her lip. "Thanks. I mean for telling me. I know you don't like to talk about any of this."

"I don't because—" Jason took her hand in his, felt the soft skin of her fingers. Ignored the bruise developing on her forearm. "I don't like to think about of that when we're together."

"But the real world is what it is." She laced her fingers with his. "For what it's worth, Jason, not that my opinion matters or anything, but if you're trying to find a traitor or whatever, it's probably good that they don't think you're doing more than the books. You've got a reputation."

He scowled at that. "What do you mean?"

She lifted a brow. "No one messes with you. I remember that day on the docks when you almost threw Sorel in the harbor for talking to me. I mean, yeah, he approached me one time when you left and there was that bomb, but I was mostly left alone after that. Anyway... I'm sorry if it makes you uncomfortable, but people talk about you, and I've..." She shrugged. "I've seen you in action. Anyone who wants to get one over on Sonny knows they have to go through you. If you're not really back at the job, if people think you're just here to deal with Michael and might go away again, they're not going to cover their tracks as much."

Jason leaned back, drawing his hand from hers. "None of this bothers you?" he asked, feeling a bit skeptical. Robin had never spoken so matter of factly about his job. Or what he did. And Carly had really only enjoyed spending the money.

But no one had ever spoken to him bluntly about the work he did. Or how *well* he did it.

Elizabeth frowned. "Are...are you mad because I get it?" She pressed her lips together. "I would think it would actually be easier for you if I *didn't*. I mean, Jesus, Jason, what do you want me to say? I found you bleeding in the snow and changed your bandages. I hid you in my studio because you didn't want anyone to know you were here. And I've seen you hold on a gun on people. I know what you do. I know who you are."

"I—"

"Do I wish that you...had a safer job? I guess. I don't really think about it. You were a mechanic for a while, but I know you didn't like it. And..." she shrugged. "I don't know. It's not black and white. You work in a violent world. But you know what? The whole damn *world* is violent. You don't have the monopoly on danger. I mean, I walked through the park at night and that turned out to be—" Her voice stopped.

"I'm sorry," Jason said roughly. "I don't mean—I just..." He swallowed hard. "I don't know. We've never talked about any of this."

"You need to understand that I don't see you through rose-colored glasses. That yeah,



there's the guy you are with me or with Michael or Bobbie—then there's another side of you. But I've seen that side of you, Jason." She leaned forward and forced him to meet her eyes. "I've *seen* it. I know you know how to use that gun. I know you've been shot more often than I want to think about. I've seen what you're capable of. And my face isn't going to change."

She held up a hand before he could speak. If he could have even spoken. "And don't tell me it did with Lucky. That was—that wasn't you. That was me. I was terrified last year. I didn't know what to think. Who to believe. I wanted to believe Lucky because that meant I didn't have to blow up my life. It was easier to believe him. I spent two years taking the easy way out. Because I was too afraid to do anything else."

"Elizabeth—"

"I'm not doing that again. I'm done living my life in fear. So, yeah, I know what you do for a living, Jason. And no, it doesn't bother me. If it bothers you that I'm not wringing my hands over it—" She rose to her feet, shrugging a shoulder as she did so. "Then maybe this isn't going to work—"

He reached for her hand as she started to walk away, just to stop her. To turn her back. "Hey. I'm sorry. I just—what I do is..."

"You're used to people looking at you differently because of it." Elizabeth sighed. "I get it. You've had to deal with my baggage about Lucky so many times, it's only fair that I get some of yours." She framed his face with her hands. "I am *not* Robin. And I will never walk away because of your job."

"Okay." He tugged her closer to him and kissed her. He wasn't entirely sure he believed her, but he knew she believed it, and that was enough for him.

It was more than he'd ever had before.

*Monday, May 20, 2002*

### **Kelly's: Hallway**

AJ hesitated for just a moment before knocking briskly on Lucky Spencer's door. It was jerked open and the blond man scowled. "What? I'm packing." He squinted. "Why are you here?"

"Because if it wasn't me making sure you were leaving, it'd be Jason." AJ raised his brows. "Pretty sure that would be bad idea."

Lucky scowled and jerked away from the door, disappearing back into the room. "I told Liz I'd go, and I'm going."

"Okay." AJ moved inside the doorway and leaned against the frame. He didn't like

the younger man—didn't much care for anyone who put their hands on a woman. Beyond that one horrible fight with Carly, he could honestly say he'd never stooped to that.

But there was something in the way he carried himself, something just beneath the anger that radiated from his lanky frame.

Desperation.

AJ understood that. He'd lived it.

"It's easy to stay angry."

Lucky paused as he shoved some clothes into a duffel and looked at him. "What?"

"When your world blows up," AJ continued. "When people disappoint you. When you disappoint yourself. Being angry is easy. It feels good. And sometimes, you get stuck in it."

Lucky exhaled slowly. "I'm not angry all of the time—" But the protest seemed weak and he couldn't finish it.

"When I found out Jason had lied about Michael, I got angry. And I stayed angry." He shrugged. "Not that my marriage to Carly ever really had a chance, but maybe if I had been kinder. More understanding. I don't know. Maybe. But I made choices that led me to losing her and Michael. And then I—I started drinking. And—"

"Carly fell."

"Yeah." AJ rubbed his mouth, trying to block out that moment. To forget his part in it. He hadn't pushed her. He knew that in his heart and in his soul. But he'd been part of the moment. And he should have walked away.

"I spent years drowning out all the voices that told me I wasn't good enough. I wasn't Jason. I wasn't Ned. I wasn't the right kind of Quartermaine. I crumbled under that pressure, Lucky. And I ruined my life. I didn't push her, but that doesn't make me any less guilty."

Lucky looked down at his hands as if they belonged to strangers. "I know I left marks on her," he murmured. "I had to have."

"I know what it's like to feel like you're not going to measure up to Jason. To come in a distant second." He'd done with the family. With Keesha. With Carly.

The younger man looked up, his mouth pressed into angry lines. "Yeah, and he just stands there because he doesn't actually give a damn. He's not—"

"He's not even competing. Yeah." AJ hesitated. "I understand being hurt about how

Elizabeth called off the wedding. That she didn't call it off before. That she waited until—"

"We were standing in front of everyone who loved us. Family. Friends. Everyone who —" Lucky broke off. "You didn't know us before. Before I died."

"No, but I remember—I remember you. Around the house, with Emily. And I—I went with Emily to your funeral." AJ rubbed his chest, thinking of his younger sister. "She was devastated. Everyone was. But Elizabeth was beyond that."

"Yeah." Lucky resumed packing. "She said that. When I came home. That she almost drowned in it. But that Jason helped her figure out how to live with it. And you know, I'm glad. I *want* to be glad," he corrected. "She didn't know I was alive. And I wouldn't have wanted her to lose herself." His voice dimmed. "She worked too hard to put herself back together. I would have hated if she'd gone back to that place. And so, yeah, when she told me Jason helped her. Was there for her, I was glad. I liked Jason. He was good to me."

"And then he came home."

"And she looked at him." Lucky turned to AJ. "And you know what I mean. She told me she loved me. But she *looked* at him."

"And stayed with you."

"And that's—I can't stop being pissed off about it. But I made that choice, too. I stayed. I guilted her into staying with me. I knew I could. And I did." He looked back at his hands. "And last night, I—I don't know."

"It's easy to stay angry," AJ said again. "Because, man, it feels good. It feels *righteous*. When you're angry, you can throw it at someone. Make them hurt the way you hurt. So, I get that. And I get how that anger turns into something like last night. The only person in my entire world that loved me anyway was my brother. And he's gone because of me. Jason's alive, but he's not my brother. I killed that man. I took him away from my family. From me. From everyone. And I have to live with that."

"I don't know how to stop being angry," Lucky said dully. "And it's not just Liz. It's... it's my whole damn life. I look around at it, and I just—" He shook his head. "I'm tired of everyone looking at me and wanting me to be that guy. Who I used to be."

Lucky wouldn't appreciate the comparison, but he had more in common with Jason than he thought. And maybe one day, AJ could tell him that. But for now, he stood there while Lucky packed the rest of his things and helped him put them in his car.

"Where are you going to go?"

"I'm going to go home and stay with my mom for a while. She and my dad are planning a second wedding," Lucky said. "I guess I'll help them do that. Do some photography for my mom's company. I don't know." He hesitated as he opened his car door. "You're right. I've...I've held on to the anger. Because I don't know what else is there."

"A year ago, I woke up," AJ said. "And I was hungover. I stumbled into the bathroom, looked at myself in the mirror, and I was just...I was done with it. Because the alcohol drowned out the voices, yeah. But I was killing myself. Nothing horrible happened. Nothing traumatic. I just woke up one day and I was done. But until that day comes, Lucky, you gotta stay away from the people who make you angry."

"Yeah. Not the worst idea. Thanks. For not...for not treating me like...well, for not kicking my ass."

"Thought about it, but I've been there, Lucky. And it doesn't help. You know you were wrong. Make it better."

AJ stepped back and watched as Lucky pulled out of the parking lot. He'd done what he could to reach out to someone else who was drowning, but there was no way to know if it had worked.

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Sonny ran his hands through his hair and winced as Benny listed the casualties from the explosion. Seven of their night shift workers hadn't been able to escape the building, including their manager who had been with Sonny since he'd managed the Paradise a decade ago.

"What does the fire chief say?" Jason asked from across the room by the fireplace.

"They found remnants of a bomb," Benny reported. "Too early to be more specific but we got our guys at the PD on it. We'll know when the full report comes in." He shook his head. "I didn't—I didn't see this coming."

"It wasn't just us they hit," Sonny murmured. "The fire spread to a few of the other businesses. The Quartermaines lost a building. A restaurant went up in flames. Two stores. Whoever planted this one—they meant to destroy everything."

"I've never seen anything do this kind of damage here," Jason admitted. "Five blocks away, most of the buildings lost their windows. I got someone out there today replacing what we can, but car windows—what do the Families say?"

Benny spread his hands. "Johnny called last night—he was in touch with the Zaccharas. We've heard from Hector in Miami. There's just nothing from their end. And this isn't Tagliatti or Vega's signature. They've got no reason to blow up our place."

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Sonny murmured. “A smaller bomb. A fire. Something to get our attention. But taking out the entire building and most of the crew that handles shipments—it’s nothing but problems for anyone going through us. It’ll be a month before we’re back up to speed. If not longer if the PCPD wants to be assholes about it.”

“What about Nico?” Benny asked. “I wouldn’t think he’d have the resources—”

“He’d have to get them from somewhere and I don’t know anyone who’s willing to destroy the waterfront to get to you,” Jason cut in. “Even Roscoe can’t be that stupid. This doesn’t make sense, Sonny. There’s...there’s no escalation here. It’s just nuclear right away.”

“I want to hear from Tagliatti and Vega to be sure. And make sure we got eyes and ears everywhere.” Sonny rubbed his eyes. He hadn’t slept. Had spent half the night down at the PCPD trying to explain to Mac he really wasn’t stone walling.

He didn’t know what the fuck was going on.

Benny excused himself to deal with the details and left Jason and Sonny alone. “You said you got the windows at the Brownstone replaced?”

“They’re there now,” Jason said. He hesitated. “We’ll figure this out, Sonny.”

“There used to be a way of doing business,” Sonny muttered. “A code. It’s all gone to hell.”

*Friday, June 7, 2002*

### **Miami, Florida: Cafe de Lune**

Zander slid off his sunglasses and scanned the interior of the small cafe. He found his target across the room, in a corner. He hadn’t expected to hear from Luis Alcazar for a few more weeks and certainly hadn’t thought to be summoned to meet in public.

“*Senor Smith.*” Luis folded the Venezuelan newspaper and set it down on the table. “Would you like an espresso?” He raised his hand to summon the waitress, but Zander shook it off.

“Nah, I don’t like that stuff.” He sat across from the other man and frowned. “I’m surprised you wanted to meet with me. Here.”

Alcazar shrugged. “Corinthos doesn’t have time to worry about a guy he fired a month ago. He confirmed your new employment and moved on. You heard about their warehouse?”

“Yeah.” Zander pressed his lips together. “Doesn’t seem like that was the plan.”

“It wasn’t. *Senor* Roscoe is impatient.” Alcazar sipped his own drink, somehow making the act of drinking from a miniature cup look intimidating. “Wanted to send a message.”

“Some message. Hector is pissed about it. All movement has halted. No profits. Everyone’s ticked off. And he’s looking at me funny.”

Zander wasn’t interested in working for another half-assed idiot who didn’t take Corinthos and Morgan seriously.

“I’ll speak to him. I’ve dealt with our associate. He knows if he moves again without my say-so, it will be to his detriment.” Alcazar pursed his lips. “Though it was interesting to learn that Jason Morgan did not report to the penthouse until the next day. He stayed with his girlfriend. Is she the type who needs her hand held?”

“Elizabeth?” Zander scowled, remembering the scrape of her nails as she’d clawed at his face. “She can take care of herself. And it’s not her first rodeo. Morgan’s sister told me she hid Morgan after he was shot. And had a bomb in her studio for her troubles. She wasn’t hurt, but it didn’t sour her none. She’s tougher than she looks.”

“Is it possible Morgan is staying out of the business while he is in Port Charles? That this trip home is temporary?”

Zander hesitated. “I would have said yes when he first came back. Corinthos split his job between O’Brien and Corelli after the merger. He hadn’t done that before. And the way I hear it, that hasn’t changed yet. But I know he was looking at the books. Nico was getting freaked out. Dumped the product.”

He waited for a moment. “I would have said it was temporary,” he repeated. “That he would have settled the custody issues and left. But it got complicated with AJ Quartermaine going after custody. And if he’s seeing Elizabeth Webber, he’s probably not pulling up stakes.”

“The Webber girl has been involved with him for several years—never stopped him before—”

“They never dated before,” Zander interrupted. “There was always Lucky Spencer. He’s not a factor now. Trust me, if they’re together, it’s serious. And she’s got roots here. She’s managing that restaurant. She has friends. She’s in college. She’s not gonna go away with him.”

Alcazar nodded, steepling his fingers under his nose. “Thank you for your insight. It helps a great deal.”

“Are you still planning an ambush?”

“I’ve had to readjust that plan a bit. This warehouse incident has heightened

security. Made them suspicious. My plan works when they're not expecting it. We'll have to wait." Alcazar dropped a twenty on the table. "I'll smooth things over with Hector and be in touch when we're ready." He rose to his feet. "You had a reputation for being a hothead. I'm pleased to see you've throttled it back."

"Well," Zander said with some consideration, "you seem to take Corinthos and Morgan seriously. They're not weak. Or easy to take it down. Not impossible. But not easy. It's irritating when no one else sees what you see."

"Indeed. Keep out of trouble."

### **Kelly's: Courtyard**

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose as she scrubbed dried milkshake from one of the outside tables. "Goddamn assholes can't even wipe up after themselves," she muttered.

She heard a sound behind her and turned to find Lucky standing just inside the entrance.

She hadn't seen him in nearly three weeks, not since that night. AJ had told her he'd seen Lucky to his car himself, and she'd been relieved by that news.

"Lucky," she said, a bit warily. She glanced over her shoulder through the window. Courtney and Gia were at the counter as always, bickering as Courtney refilled sugar canisters.

"I just wanted—" Lucky hesitated. "We met here, you know."

How could she forget? It had practically been her first day in town, and she'd made an irritation of herself to practically everyone—including Lucky when she'd insulted the bracelet his little sister made for him and his name. Love at first sight, obviously.

"I remember." She tossed the milkshake-stained rag into the plastic tub with the other dirty dishes. "You didn't much like me then, so I guess we've come full circle."

"I thought I had all the answers back then," he murmured. "I was Luke and Laura Spencer's kid. That made me special." He looked away, off to the side as if remembering that. "I don't remember why I felt that way. I just know it was part of my DNA. And then...somehow, during that year, I lost it. And I keep trying to find it."

She managed a sigh, feeling a bit of...empathy. She'd grieved that year, but he'd been kidnapped. Brainwashed. "I know. And I know I wasn't—I looked at you like you were supposed to still be that boy. And that wasn't fair."

"I thought you should still be that girl." He met her eyes there, and the anger...it was still there, but it was dimmer. And she didn't feel it radiating towards her. "But so did

everyone else. Everyone kept looking at me and you and I guess they thought if we could be those people again, it would all be okay. It could go back the way it was.”

“It’s too much pressure to put on a relationship,” she murmured. “I never stopped loving you—”

“But you stopped being in love with me,” he finished. Lucky nodded, slipping his hands in his pockets. “Yeah, I know. Because I stopped being in love with you, too. But I couldn’t admit it. Couldn’t face it. I just wanted to be that kid again. I wanted to be Lucky Spencer.”

“I went up to my room that night,” he continued, “and I just stared at my hands.” He looked down at them now, spreading his fingers out. “I...I grabbed you. Maybe I didn’t hit you. But I don’t think that changes it. I promised you once I would never hurt you. And that’s all I’ve done for years. And that night—” He shook his head. “I don’t recognize myself, Elizabeth.”

She sighed. “I hurt you, too. And I am sorry for that, I am. But at some point, Lucky, it’s going to have to be enough. I—I have to live my life. And I want—I deserve to be happy again.”

“Yeah.” Lucky nodded. “Yeah. You’re right. And maybe—maybe that’s why I can’t seem to put it away. Why I can’t stop being angry. Because I don’t know how to stop wanting my life back. I don’t even know what life I have now. And you do. You didn’t wait around for someone to give you the answers. You went out and got them.” Lucky looked away, his mouth twisting in disgust. “And I think maybe I almost hate you for being able to do that.”

She closed her eyes, accepted the words. “I didn’t have the answers when I left you, Lucky. I didn’t know what I wanted. I just...I tried things. I went back to school. I threw myself into my job. And I just tried to move past it all.” Elizabeth hesitated. “And, yeah...I found someone to be with. I can’t apologize for that.” She paused. “I *won’t* apologize for that.”

“I just...I came here to tell you I was sorry for that night. For all the nights—” Lucky shrugged. “It’s not enough. It never takes it back. But I just...I need you to know that I know I was wrong. And AJ didn’t have to force me to go. I’m surprised Jason hasn’t taken my head off. If it had been him who walked in—”

He exhaled slowly. “I try to remember that Jason is a man I used to respect. That I considered a friend. He looked out for me when I wasn’t living at home. And I—I’m—” He swallowed hard. “I’m mostly glad you had someone to talk to when I was gone. And I know he’ll treat you well. I just—I can’t seem to be happy for you.”

“Fair enough.” Elizabeth twisted her fingers in front her. “So—”



“Mom has some connections with some photography studios in New York,” Lucky cut in. “Photography...it’s the only thing I’ve kind of...felt good about since I came home. I’m going to try—I’m going to see if I can do something with it, you know? So I just—I’m going away. I think it’s better for both of us if I’m not around. Maybe I’ll be able to put something together and I can...stop being so goddamn angry.”

She was relieved to hear that he would be leaving Port Charles, but somewhere, deep inside, she grieved for the boy. And hoped he’d find peace. “Good luck, Lucky. I wish you the best.”

“Yeah.” He nodded slowly. “Thanks. You...you, too.”

## Chapter Fourteen

*Heart beats fast*

*Colors and promises*

*How to be brave*

*How can I love when I'm afraid to fall*

*But watching you stand alone*

*All of my doubt, suddenly goes away somehow*

- A Thousand Years, Christina Perri

---

*Thursday, July 25, 2002*

### AA Meeting Room

AJ accepted the gold chip from his sponsor at the podium and spent a moment looking at it, turning it between his fingers. Feeling the weight of it. He had several of these at home already—a white one for his first twenty-four hours of sobriety, and then one for every month that followed.

All of those were important to him. He carried the most current one in his pocket everywhere, touching it when the urge to drink threatened to swallow him. He would take the chip out, look at it—look at the length of time imprinted on it and reminded himself of all he had to throw away.

But a part of him had never truly believed he'd make it to this chip. To this moment.

"AJ?" his sponsor touched his shoulder, his voice quiet. "You don't need to say anything, you know that, right?"

"Yeah." His voice felt rusty, but he raised his eyes to meet the steady eyes of the man who had stood behind him the whole way. He looked out to those gathered—the usual members and the small group there to see him get the coin.

His miracle, his wife, Courtney. His mother and father. His grandparents. Ned. And next to Courtney, Jason and Elizabeth.

His brother was there to see him in this moment. Even if Jason never called him that, never felt that link—AJ always would.

He took a deep breath and turned to them. "My name is AJ. And I'm an alcoholic."

There were murmurs of the usual greetings. “Today I am one year sober.” He looked down at the coin. “A year ago, I came to my first meeting. But I didn’t speak. I couldn’t. I didn’t know what to say. I’m...I’m not even sure I know what to say now.”

He looked back at the audience and found Courtney’s encouraging eyes. “I had a miracle happen to me this year. I found someone who looked at me...and liked me. Just the way I was. Damaged. Broken. But she saw something in me worth loving. It gets easier to believe that it’s true every day we’re together.”

Elizabeth leaned over and squeezed Courtney’s hand, and the two shared a smile.

“I have a son,” AJ continued. “Because of my choices in life, his mother kept him away from me. I used...I used to hate her for that. But now that I’ve been allowed to be with him, to be his father—” He met Jason’s eyes. “I get it. They put him first. I wasn’t ready to be a father. To stop letting the alcohol win. But I am now.”

He cleared his throat. “I drank to forget. To forget that I wasn’t what my family wanted. That I had destroyed my life, nearly killed my brother. That I had thrown away anything worthwhile in my life. But last year...I looked at myself in the mirror and I realized...” AJ’s voice caught. “I realized that I was killing myself. And I didn’t want to do that anymore. I didn’t know what I wanted, but I wanted to stop living in a fog. Stop letting everyone else define me. I couldn’t stop drinking for my son. Or to atone for my brother. But I stopped for myself.”

He looked down at this coin. “I’m not sure I ever believed I would get here. And I’m terrified I might slip. That I might have to start over. But I—I know what it’s like to win now. To feel worthy. To be respected. And I have so much to lose. So, I hope that I’m here again next year for a second year sober. I’m going to do everything I can to make that happen.”

“I’m so proud of him,” Courtney murmured as AJ took his seat up front. “How honest he is.” She looked at Elizabeth. “And how happy he’s been with Michael. Thank you.” She met Jason’s eyes as well. “Thank you for letting him have a chance.”

When the meeting was over, Courtney and the Quartermaines went forward to meet AJ but Elizabeth hung back with Jason. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I guess...” Jason shook his head. “I don’t know. He’s been sober for a year. That’s...that’s good.”

“It’s always one day at a time,” she murmured.

AJ broke away from the others and hesitantly approached them. “Hey. Thanks for coming.”

“Congratulations.” Elizabeth stepped forward and embraced him. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, Liz.” AJ smiled at her. “It’s really...it’s Courtney who should—”

“You’re the one who didn’t take the drink,” Jason cut in, surprising them both. He looked away, as if he couldn’t quite meet AJ’s eyes. “Yeah, she’s been there. But you didn’t—you did the work.”

“Thanks.” AJ swallowed. “And thanks for last weekend. We had a lot of fun with Michael staying over.”

“Bobbie and I were talking—” Jason shifted slightly. “And we think it might be—we might try a few days. Maybe three or something.” He finally AJ’s eyes. “If you want.”

Elizabeth’s throat closed, and her eyes burned as she saw the surprise, the happiness, and the terror flitting across AJ’s face. She was so...proud of Jason for doing this. For giving AJ this chance. She knew how hard it was for him to give on this, to let go of Michael and trust AJ.

“Yeah.” AJ cleared his throat. “Yeah, I want.”

*Friday, July 26, 2002*

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

“The PCPD’s final report came back,” Benny said with a twist of his lips. He tossed a folder on the table. “They’re ruling it accidental.”

“What?” Sonny barked reaching for the paperwork. “How in the hell—I thought you said they found bomb remnants—”

“They’re reclassifying it as materials from the warehouse. Blaming a gas leak.” Benny hissed between his teeth. “They don’t have any leads, so it’s easier for them this way.”

“It’s easier for us,” Jason said after a long moment. He skimmed the report Sonny passed to him. “We’re almost finished the reconstruction. If the PCPD ruled it accidental, we can get back to work.”

“Unless it’s a trick,” Sonny muttered. He poured himself a bourbon and tossed half of it back, letting the harsh liquid burn a trail of fire down his throat. “We’re going to have to stay careful. They’ll be raiding it. Maybe...maybe that’s the point here.”

Jason raised his brows. “Blow up our warehouse? Let the cops crawl all over our waterfront properties for almost two months? Just so we can get harassed by the cops? I’m not saying no,” he added when Sonny scowled at him. “It just doesn’t seem to make sense.”

“We’ll need to find a way to draw the attention from our warehouses,” Benny said, neatly sidestepping both men. “I think we may have to consider the possibility that

the warehouse explosion was an accident—in that perhaps they did not intend it to be so powerful. In the last two months, not one member of the Families has taken advantage of our...issues.”

“Benny’s right,” Jason said. “And I’m finished going over the books. Looking at all the men. The casinos in Atlantic City could be run better, and that goes for the island. For Puerto Rico, but that’s just because of the expansion. And—”

“Because Nico is chomping at the bit to get out of Port Charles,” Sonny muttered. “His crew came back clean?”

“No. But his is the only crew that looks like an issue. Most of Sorel’s men went to Nico because he was a familiar face,” Jason told him. “We probably should have pushed some of them out of the city. He’s into drugs, there’s no doubt. They must have dumped the product because their sales records took a hit about a month ago, but they’ve ramped it back up—”

“The Paradise and Oasis sales are through the roof in June,” Benny confirmed. “Triple that of May and double over last year. And July is on track—”

“It was a distraction,” Sonny murmured. “Thought we’d be preoccupied with the warehouse. Thought it would force me to get you back into the fold,” he said to Jason. “We were right to keep you focused on the paperwork. Because now when I demand answers from that son of a bitch, I’ll—”

“We need to take this slowly,” Jason cut in. “He’s cocky right now, Sonny. And running drugs isn’t the goal. It can’t be. He’s been doing it for over a year, but now he tries to distract you? Now he tries to get out of town and leave a scapegoat? There’s no way Nico didn’t know Zander was a hothead. He planned on it. And he knew you hated him. He knew I hated him.”

“He’s got something else planned.” Sonny nodded. “Okay. I can get behind that. It makes sense.”

“Time to put in surveillance,” Jason told Benny. “Tell Stan we want everything. Both the Paradise and Oasis. Nico and Lenny’s phone lines.”

“I want someone following them at all times. I want to know who they talk to. When they talk to them.” Sonny hissed. “I shouldn’t have let the bastard in. I just—I didn’t want another Sorel. Better to join. Divide and conquering has never solved anything. Not after Smith or Moreno.”

“Drugs are lucrative,” Benny said kindly. “And most of the men don’t have your feelings against it—”

“You think I give a damn how people destroy themselves?” Sonny challenged. “I keep drugs out of Port Charles because I don’t want them near the high schools, yeah. But

the PCPD know I don't traffic in drugs. It's good for my reputation to be against them. It's kept me in business for the last seven years." He shrugged. "People can go anywhere for drugs. If I really gave a damn, I wouldn't move Zacchara or Ruiz's product."

"Fair enough." Benny checked his watch. "I better catch Stan while I can."

When their business manager left, Sonny looked to Jason. "We'll need to keep you out a little longer, but maybe by the end of the summer...unless you have plans to head out of town soon."

"I—" Jason hesitated. "What do you mean?"

"You stayed for Michael's custody." Sonny poured himself another. "It's settled now."

"Yeah, I guess. I don't think AJ is going to challenge it, and we've already increased visitation." Jason rubbed the back of his neck. "But Elizabeth is graduating in December and she's managing Kelly's—"

"Ah." Sonny managed a half smile. "So you're sticking around."

"I—hadn't thought about it, honestly. I figured I would be even before—but, yeah. Elizabeth's life is here right now. I don't know. Maybe that'll change." Jason shrugged. "For now, it's better if I stay on the fringes. Francis and Johnny are doing a good job of handling things." He waited a moment. "And I'm okay with what I'm doing now."

"Keeps you out of the line of fire. Below the radar. Makes Elizabeth safer, I guess." Sonny eyed him. "You're not going to be able to keep out of it forever, Jase. I hope you both know that."

*Tuesday, August 6, 2002*

### **Miami, Florida: Pier**

Zander scrawled his signature at the bottom of a clipboard, gave it back the harbor master, and gave the signal to his crew to unload.

It wasn't glamorous work—way more manual labor that Zander had had to do running gamblers and bookies to ground back in Port Charles, but it wasn't too bad. He had his own guys and might even move up the ranks, but he wanted off the pier, off the docks altogether.

Miami had a lot of opportunities to make money, and Zander was always looking for the next score.

"Yo, Smith."

Zander turned to find his boss's youngest son loping towards him. Manny Ruiz was short and covered in tattoos, and from a distance, wasn't all that intimidating.

But up close, there was a glint in his eye that made even the toughest guy shrink back. The Ruiz boys, save for the brother who had turned priest, were fucking crazy, and Manny was the worst of them.

"Manny." Zander turned, met his eyes evenly. "You need something?"

"*Papi* wanted me to send a message." Manny tilted his head with a half-smile. Despite the smothering, muggy heat, Zander felt a cold chill dance down his back. "Our friend has been in touch. You should start paying attention to matters back home."

"Am I going back?" Zander asked. He looped his fingers through the belt loop of his jeans. And why the hell was Manny Ruiz playing messenger boy?

"Not yet, no, but..." Manny stepped closer. His tone remained friendly, but the light in his eyes was anything but. "*Papi* wanted to make sure you know...if anything goes wrong, we're out of it."

In other words, when this all blew to hell, Hector Ruiz would set his fucking insane progeny on anyone who brought his name into the discussion.

Fair enough. If Zander had tools like Manny and Javier Ruiz to deploy, he would do so as often as necessary.

"If anything goes wrong," Zander said, slowly, "I'll be too busy getting my ass out of there to worry about diming anyone out." He offered his own sickly-sweet smile. "I don't intend to be caught, and I'm the only one who could give your name." He paused. "Other than Luis."

"Just so we're clear, amigo." Manny clapped him on the shoulder. "But I like you, you know. *Papi* expects good things from you."

Manny offered him another smile and then loped back up the ramp to the shipyard. Zander rolled his shoulders. He would play his role for Luis Alcazar, but when this fell apart as Zander thought it might, he was going to come back here to Miami, making money and not giving the Ruiz family a single regret for giving him a chance.

He'd do what he could to bring down Corinthos and Morgan, but there was no way he was putting his ass on the line. Not worth it.

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

Gia wiggled her fingers. "You see these hands, Liz? These are the hands of a free woman. My last summer class ended today."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and scowled at the receipts. She really needed to ask Jason to help her with the books more often. She sucked at math.

And lately, she almost resented having to total this stuff up at the end of the day. She had cleaned out her studio a few weeks ago, and for the first time in months, she was spending time there again. Sketching. Drawing.

She'd meant what she told Lucky almost two months ago — going back to school, managing Kelly's—they hadn't been plans. They'd just been a way to fill her time. Give her a direction. A reason to get out of bed.

And she was glad to be finishing her degree, even if she'd mostly got it to thumb her nose at anyone who said she couldn't. And she was glad to be helping out Bobbie here.

But she was starting to feel restless again, as if this wasn't quite what she'd planned. Or what she wanted.

"These last two months sucked," Gia continued, "but it means we can both graduate in December." She reached for her milkshake and slurped it. "Yo. Liz."

"What?" Elizabeth blinked at her. "Oh. Yeah. It's good. I'll be glad to get some time off next month. Um, Courtney said she'd cover my shifts if we still want to go away for a few days."

"Funny you should bring it up." Gia flexed her shoulders. "You're still dating Jason."

Elizabeth frowned at her. "What?"

"Almost three months now. Going solid. All good. Super happy for you. You know what Jason has?"

"Oh." Elizabeth scowled. "Christ, Gia. You want me to ask my—" Because boyfriend sounded weird, she skipped right over it, "if we can go to the island? What for free? Should I ask for Sonny's jet?"

"Well, if you can get it—" Gia frowned. Tilted her head. "I know that tone. I thought —" She paused. "I thought things were good. You're barely ever at the apartment anymore. I'd take it personally, except I think it's more because we live in the same building as my brother. Are you guys not okay?"

"No, we're fine." And because that sounded less than convincing, Elizabeth tried again. "Okay. I don't really know. I mean, we're—I think we're happy. I just—" She bit her lip. "I don't know. I can't explain it. We're together almost every night. And it's good. When we're together. I mean, it's...not perfect, but it's almost like it could be. I just..." She set the receipts down. "I think it's me."



“I know it’s you,” Gia muttered. “He’s too sexy for it to be him.” When Elizabeth glared at her, Gia just shrugged. “It’s usually you. And I say that with love.”

Elizabeth wanted to argue with her, but Gia’s logic was rock solid. Jason was an open and honest person. When something bothered him, he said so.

Not that anything was bothering her. It wasn’t.

“I think I don’t remember how to be happy,” she confessed. “That...I’m so used to fighting with Lucky and just generally being miserable in a relationship, I find it... uncomfortable to just have things be easy.”

“Okay...”

“And I think it’s because it’s early, right?” Elizabeth chewed her on her pen cap. “It’s a few months in. And we know each other really well. And we agree on stuff to do together. Take out from a bunch of places. Rides on his bike. Spending the night at Jake’s. Or sometimes at my studio. I don’t...ask him about his job because I don’t need to. I know if there was something for me to know, he’d tell me.”

“Yeah, okay, so this is what’s called the infatuation phase,” Gia told her. “You’re both enjoying each other. It’s not complicated yet. You haven’t decided to take it to the next step.”

“The next step?”

“You know, you’re just enjoying being together. And yeah, you do know each other really well, but I bet you’re still learning new stuff.”

“I—” Elizabeth tilted her head. “He’s a neat freak. Which I didn’t expect. Folds his clothes. Puts it away. Doesn’t like clutter. I used to think he just didn’t have a lot of stuff. My studio drives him crazy because there’s stuff everywhere. He never said anything before, but now I can see his grimace sometimes when he thinks I’m—” She smiled at the image.

“You need to figure out how to relax,” Gia told her. “Because it ain’t gonna be sunshine and roses. Eventually, y’all are gonna argue. Or one of you is going to start to want more.”

“More?” Elizabeth couldn’t imagine wanting more than she had right now. It would be tempting fate, and that bitch had always hated her.

“Yeah, like, you’re both sleeping together in small spaces. Maybe you want a drawer at Jake’s. Or your own bathroom at the studio. Or one of you says those three little words before the other is ready. Someone always wants more first.” Gia shrugged. “I mean, I don’t think it’s an issue for you guys right now. You’re both stupid for each other. But yeah, eventually, just hanging out at Jake’s isn’t gonna be enough.”

"I guess," Elizabeth sighed. "It's just irritating to know I could still...have doubts. It's exactly what I thought it would be like to be with Jason."

"Yeah?"

"Safe," she murmured. "And amazing. The way he just listens. Or looks at me. The way he says my name—"

"Girl, you're not the only one who finds that hot."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Gia—"

"He drops his voice an octave. It's sexy. I like it. I have decided not to settle for anyone who doesn't make my panties wet when he says my name," Gia declared. The mother sitting a table away gave her a dirty look which Gia didn't notice.

"Anyway—" Elizabeth said, her cheeks flaming because—well, Gia was right. "It's not just—I mean. Yeah. You're, um, not wrong about...you know."

"Oh, damn it. I knew it." Gia huffed. "Sex on a stick. He just oozes it. I should have seduced him when I had the chance."

Elizabeth flicked her straw wrapper at her friend. "Hey. Hands off. Don't be jealous because I'm having better sex than you."

"Girl, you are having better sex than *everyone*." When the mother gave Gia another dirty look, Gia arched her brows. "Why don't move closer, you want to listen so much? Maybe she'll talk about positions next."

The older woman scowled but averted her face.

"You're going to get us shut down for obscenities," Elizabeth said with a roll of her eyes.

"She's as jealous as the rest of us." Her roommate waited a moment. "You're not used to a guy who respects you. Who treats you like a queen. You should ask Jason to go away for a few days. And hey, if he needs to do business, I'll be happy to come along and keep you company."

"Somehow I knew this would come back around to a free vacation."

*Saturday, August 24, 2002*

### **AJ & Courtney's House: Front Porch**

Jason hugged Michael one more time. "Have a good time this week, all right?"

"We're gonna have lots of fun, Uncle Jason," Michael assured him with a broad smile. He peered up at his father through shaggy blond hair. "Right, Dad?"

AJ grinned down at him. "Right. We're going to Six Flags on Tuesday. You guys can come if you want," he told Elizabeth.

"Oh." Elizabeth grinned at Jason. "You like roller coasters?"

Jason hesitated at the sparkle in her eyes because he couldn't figure out if she was joking or not. "Uh, let me...check my schedule."

"It'd be lots of fun, Uncle Jason."

"Pretty sure I'd pay to see you at a theme park, Jase."

"You and everyone else," Elizabeth told AJ with a wicked grin. "I could live forever off those proceeds—"

"All right, I think it's almost time for Michael to go to bed," Jason said, stepping back. AJ just laughed and with another wave, father and son closed the door behind them.

Jason stood there, watching the door for just another minute. Elizabeth slid her hand into his. "You okay?"

"It's okay."

"Yeah. And he loves his new room." Elizabeth tugged him down the steps and Jason followed her reluctantly. "And the backyard."

"I know."

She turned to face him when they reached the door of the SUV Jason had borrowed from Sonny to drive Michael to AJ's house. "But this is his first full week. And you're worried."

"He'll be okay," Jason muttered, but he looked away.

"Because you know it's not going to be long before Michael's living with AJ," Elizabeth said. "Bobbie's already talked about how much Michael and AJ seem to like each other." She let her fingers drift down the soft blue t-shirt he wore. "I know that used to hurt you. The idea of them together."

Jason exhaled slowly and dipped his head until his chin hit his chest. "I didn't trust AJ. And it...it was the way it happened. I didn't have a chance—I couldn't...get ready for it. And I know I was right to give up visitation. That it gave Michael his best shot."

"Doesn't mean it hurts any less." Elizabeth looked at the one-story ranch home Courtney had been so excited to close on a month earlier. Her first real home, she'd told Elizabeth at Kelly's. She'd always lived in apartments, but now she had a home.

“He’s happy here,” Jason said after a moment. “That’s all I ever wanted for him. He’s not...AJ’s good. So far.”

Elizabeth nodded, because Jason had been forced to come a long way in the last five months. He’d all but ceded custody to a man that had almost killed him. A man who had spent most of his life in a drunken oblivion. “That’s one of the things I—” She stumbled a moment, and he tilted his head as if he knew what word she’d nearly said.

“One of my favorite things,” she corrected. “Is that you’re fair. And honest. I know it’s been difficult to let this happen. And not just because of AJ’s alcoholism.”

“Part of me...” Jason hesitated. “Still thinks I’m betraying Carly,” he admitted. “I promised her—”

“And you did everything you could to keep that promise,” Elizabeth cut in. “You really did. And maybe Carly would have rather you take Michael on the run to keep AJ from winning. I know you don’t like to break your word—”

“But I made a promise to Michael, too,” Jason said. “To always put him first.” He looked back at the house. “And that’s what I’m doing.”

She opened her mouth, but whatever she had been about to say—she swallowed it. And not for the first time that day. Or week. Or this month.

He brushed his fingers against her temple, smoothing her hair behind her ears, and she turned into his touch. How many times had Jason touched her like this the year before and watched as she’d pull away? Go back to Lucky?

“What were you going to say?” he asked softly.

“What? When?”

“Now. Or before.”

She tipped her face up to him as he kissed her, drinking in her taste. Her scent. “What were you going to say?” he repeated, their breaths mingling.

“Nice try.” But Elizabeth was smiling as she said it and kissed him again, her hand fisting in his shirt. “Let’s go back to Jake’s.”

### **Jake’s: Jason’s Room**

“You’re thinking again.”

Her breath still shallow, her heart still racing, Elizabeth scowled and sat up, her hands sliding down his chest, still straddling him. “Excuse me?”

Jason just grinned up at her, his hands behind his head. “You’re thinking again.

What's going on?"

"Nothing." She started to slide away, to reach for the thin sheet and cover herself, but Jason kept her there with his hands gripping her hips. "Jason—"

"You started to say something earlier and stopped. You did that yesterday. And last week." Jason sat up, touched her cheek.

"It's not—" Elizabeth sighed. "You're not wrong." And this time, when she moved away, he let her. "I don't know. I feel like an idiot. I've been..." She searched for the right way to express what she was thinking. "When you first came home, I tried to push you away."

"I know." He cleared his throat. "Are you—"

"I was so afraid of hurting you again," she continued, holding up her hand. "And of being hurt. And I think...maybe I was afraid to be happy. Nothing...nothing good ever happens when I'm...happy." Her voice trembled a bit. "I know that sounds insane—"

"Elizabeth." Jason drew her against him, tucking her head into shoulder as they laid back. "It doesn't. Sound insane, I mean."

"I just...these last few months...I think I've been waiting for something to go wrong. For you to change your mind, maybe. Or for me to mess it up."

"I can't promise that nothing is never going to go wrong," he told her. "We're both probably going to make mistakes." Jason shifted so he was laying on his side, facing her. "But that's not what you were going to say earlier."

"Ugh. You're relentless." She bit her lip, but suddenly she didn't feel like she would be tempting fate. "Specifically, what I was going to say earlier...at the house...was that..." She reached up to trace his features with her fingertips. "The way you look at things...with openness. Honesty. Fearlessness. It's one of the reasons I fell in love with you."

He wrapped his hand around her fingers, bring them to his lips where he kissed them softly. "Your courage and the way you always believe in people is one of the reasons I love you."

She opened her mouth to reply, but her cell phone began to shrilly ring from the depths of her purse across the room. She blinked at it and had almost decided to ignore it when his cell phone in his jeans began to ring, too.

"That..." Jason sat up and reached for his jeans beside the bed. "That can't be good." He looked at the display. "It's Sonny."

Elizabeth rushed to her purse and pulled out her phone. Fear sliced through her chest. "It's Gia. Oh, God, what if something—"

She heard him talking into his phone and she answered hers. "Gia—"

*"Jesus 'effin Christ, Elizabeth Webber. You are not going to fucking believe what the hell is going on here!"*

"Gia—"

"What?" she heard Jason demand from across the room. She turned to him, his phone against his ear, his face drained of color. "Say that again, Sonny."

"Gia—"

*"Carly was here a little while ago," Gia said. "Caroline Benson, aka Destroyer of Worlds, is alive, looking for her son and pissed as hell. And Bobbie was too stunned and told her about AJ—"*

"Carly?" Jason repeated. "What—"

"I'll call you back," Elizabeth said, numbly, closing her phone. "Jason—"

"We have to—" Jason stared at his phone. "Sonny said Carly just left his place. Carly. Looking for Michael."

"That's...what Gia said. Um, she knows he's with AJ. I guess she'll go to the mansion first, but—"

"We should..." Jason just stared at her, trailing off. "I can't—"

She took the phone from him and touched his cheek. "Hey. I can't imagine what's going through your mind right now. Carly's alive. And she's on the war path."

"Right." He cleared his throat. "So we should go to the house. We should get there before her. You should call AJ." He started to pull on his jeans but stopped and sat on the bed. "Christ, Elizabeth. Where the hell has she been for the last five months?"

## Chapter Fifteen

*Don't you dare look out your window darling  
Everything's on fire  
The war outside our door keeps raging on  
Hold on to this lullaby  
Even when the music's gone*  
- Safe and Sound, Julia Sheer

---

*Sunday, August 25, 2002*

### Courtney & AJ's House: Front Lawn

He had briefly thought of taking Elizabeth straight to the Brownstone where he knew Bobbie must be upset. Gia and Lucas were there, but Elizabeth had a way of comforting Bobbie.

But after they'd dressed in a hurry, as he listened to Elizabeth leave a voice mail for his brother, Jason swallowed the suggestion.

He wanted her with him when he found Carly. He wanted to have her next to him, to keep him grounded. To remember that Michael came first.

Elizabeth would keep him steady even as everything inside him was screaming for answers. For Sonny to be wrong. He didn't want Carly to be dead, but if she was alive

---

What the hell was going on?

He had thought by going straight to AJ and Courtney's house, they would have time. He didn't really know what they'd do with that time, but Carly couldn't know where AJ lived, and there was little chance anyone other than Bobbie would let that slip.

And all Carly knew was that Michael was with AJ. Her inclination should have been to go to the mansion, which would have given Jason a chance to catch up with her. To talk to her.

To find out where she'd been. Why she had put them through all this grief.

But somewhere inside of him there had been a voice that asked—why had Carly gone to Sonny? They were divorced and out of each other's lives. Michael rarely saw or asked about his Uncle Sonny.

Jason had guardianship. Jason was in control of her son.

So, when he turned his bike around the last corner and saw a small compact car parked halfway in AJ's driveway, halfway in the street, he wasn't really surprised.

He pulled the bike to a stop in front of the house, and he could hear voices from the porch. Three figures illuminated in the bright artificial porch lights.

Three.

It was real. Carly was alive.

Behind him, he felt Elizabeth climb off the bike, and he switched off the engine. But he couldn't make his legs move. Couldn't go towards the house.

"Jason?" Elizabeth soft voice broke into his thoughts. "Hey." Her cool hand slid into his and he looked down into her worried eyes. "Let's just get through this. We can... we can deal with the rest of it later."

And he knew exactly what she meant. Michael had to come first. Jason's answers would come later. "How did she know where they lived?" he murmured.

And that worry, that nagging suspicion that Carly was up to something gave him a reason to move.

With Elizabeth's hand in his, they rushed up the drive and the stairs, Elizabeth doubling her steps to keep pace.

"Carly—"

But he couldn't say anything else as his friend turned away from the united couple standing guard in front of their door.

There she was. As bright, as bold, as vivid as ever. Her blonde hair exploding into curls around her face, her brown eyes snapping with anger, her features lined with irritation. With fear.

"Oh my God, she's really alive," Elizabeth breathed. "Carly—"

Carly glared at her briefly, but dismissed her almost as quickly. "Jason. Thank God, you're here. I don't know what he said to Mama, but he has my son, and he won't give him back—"

And AJ just closed his eyes at that. At the accusation that somehow AJ must have manipulated Bobbie. What was it like for him to always be guilty? To *always* be accused of the worst?

Jason swallowed hard. But maybe Carly didn't—maybe there was an explanation.



Maybe she had lost her memory. Maybe she had been wandering around, trying to find home. And when she'd remembered—

Clinging to that, to the *only* explanation for this that would absolve Carly, Jason asked, "Carly, do you know what the date is? How long you've been...away?"

Carly snorted. "I'm not crazy," she spat at him. And her tone was familiar. He was the idiot here, he was the thick one.

Robin had sounded like that in the end.

"It's August," she snarled. "And I've been gone since April. I want to see my son!" she all but shrieked, turning her ire back at AJ who just stood there.

"Where have you been?" Jason asked. There had to be another explanation then. Maybe she knew how long she'd been gone, but still—and he closed his eyes. Grimaced.

He had to stop this.

Had to stop making excuses for Carly.

"Where have you been?" he repeated, this time, his voice was stronger. "Five months —"

"That's none of your business," she snapped. She started to move past AJ, tried to shove him aside, but Courtney—of all people—shoved her back.

AJ stood, his hands at his side, and Jason knew—he knew, for certain, that *this* was a different man. That AJ would have allowed Carly to storm inside his home if Courtney had not been there to physically hold her back. As punishment for Carly's fall and the death of her second son.

"You don't get to show up with no warning, call my husband a kidnapper and act like *you're* the only one who matters," Courtney said, her teeth gritted. "We told you. You tell us what the hell is going on and you can see Michael tomorrow when we've had a chance—"

"I'm seeing my son now! You have no *right*, you little goddamn twit—"

"Carly." Jason took her elbow and almost dragged her backwards when the blonde attempted to launch herself past AJ's wife again. "Stop it."

"Why are you helping him?" she demanded as he turned to her, planted himself between AJ and Carly. "I left you Michael because I knew you'd protect him. What, did that little bitch bat her eyes and you didn't have time for him?" She focused on Elizabeth now, and Jason just sighed. "You trying to step into my life because I was gone?"

"I'm not even dignifying that with a response," Elizabeth said, and he could all but hear the roll of her eyes in that tone. "Carly, why don't we go back to the Brownstone. Bobbie must be out of her mind with worry. She was so upset after the accident—"

"She gave my son away!" Carly cried. She met Jason's eyes, tears sparkling on her cheeks. "You *promised* me. Get my son. And if you don't, I will—"

"Legally, you're dead," Jason said after a moment. "And AJ's parental rights have been reinstated, and we have a custody agreement. So, if you want to see Michael, you're going to have to tell me what the hell is going on. Where have you been? Why did you let us think you were dead?"

"Fuck you!" Carly's cheeks paled as she took in the rest of Jason's words. "Custody agreement? You—you did this? *You* gave my son to him?"

"It's not that simple," AJ attempted. "I forced his hand—"

But that wasn't true, and Jason wasn't going to let AJ take the heat for this. He cut his brother off by raising his hand. "I promised you I would love Michael and I would always do what was best for him," he said in a low voice. "That's what I did."

"And that's AJ now? Not me?" Carly demanded, her voice raw.

"Until I know what's going on. Where have you been?" he demanded again. "Why did you go to Sonny? And how the hell did you know where AJ lived?"

"You," Carly said, with a lift of her chin. "Can go to hell." She jabbed a finger at him and then swung around to face them all in turn. "You can *all* go to hell. I will have my son."

She stalked away, the clicking of her boot heels harsh against the wooden porch. Her car screeched out of the driveway, nearly clipping the motorcycle, before squealing down the street.

Jason stared after her. He didn't know what to do next. What to say.

"Jason."

He turned to find Elizabeth standing beside him, her arm wrapped through his. "Hey. If you want to go after her—follow her, I could stay here—"

No. He shook his head and said it out loud. "No. I—" He looked at AJ. "I don't know what's going on but..."

"Carly's up to something," AJ finished with the exhausted sigh of a man who had been the target of more than one of Carly's plans. As her other most frequent target, Jason could understand. "I know—I know she's always been—"

“Michael comes first,” Jason said, almost to himself. “I meant what I said to her. She’ll have to go to court to get the agreement overturned.”

“And if she doesn’t want to tell a judge where she’s been,” Elizabeth said, “I doubt it will go over well.”

And Carly was stubborn enough to tell the judge to go to hell. “Michael stays with you for now.” He met AJ’s surprised eyes. “He’s safe here. I’ll put a guy on the house to make sure she doesn’t come here and make trouble. But Carly—Carly’s on the warpath,” he said, borrowing Elizabeth’s words from earlier. “And I don’t want Michael to be a casualty. Not again.”

“All right.” AJ looked to Courtney. “You okay?”

“Me?” she repeated with wide eyes. “I’m...I’m as fine as I can be considering my husband’s dead ex-wife just showed up on our front step.” She looked over her shoulder. “I should go check on Michael.”

“I need to go...” Do something, Jason finished, but he wasn’t entirely sure what. He just knew whatever came next couldn’t be found here.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” Elizabeth said to AJ. “Jason has to go to Sonny’s, and I meant what I said. I want to check on Bobbie. Let’s...try to get some sleep. We’ll...we’ll figure it all out tomorrow.”

“See, when you say it, it almost sounds possible.” AJ sighed again. “But yeah, let’s... let’s just figure this out tomorrow.”

He went back inside and closed his door.

Jason walked Elizabeth back to the motorcycle and handed her the helmet, but he didn’t dig his keys out of his pocket or climb on.

He stood there.

“Hey.” Elizabeth touched his shoulder. “Jason. Look at me.”

He did so, finding her eyes in the inky darkness. They were merely shadows, lit by the streetlight across the street. “Elizabeth—”

“You told me once that sometimes...things happen that are just...they’re too big to deal with at once, right? So, we just...we take a moment a time. We live through them slow. Right now...I don’t know what to feel about Carly. Angry because she’s...clearly not telling the truth. And worry. Fear. I know what she’s capable of.” She pressed a hand to his chest, to his heart. “And she doesn’t even matter to me all that much. So, I know what I’m feeling is a hundred times worse for you.”

“I just—” He sucked in a deep breath. “I thought I had changed my life, so Carly

couldn't wreck it anymore. I went away so she would stop—and I stopped loving her. I had to. It was the only way to survive. Because this is what she does. She gets hurt and she runs away. She gets angry and she decides to punish people.”

And all that anger, that pain, that grief he'd felt after finding her with Sonny, waltzing down his steps... That had been the last time, he had promised himself, that he would let Carly use him.

“She thinks you betrayed her,” Elizabeth murmured.

“She's right. And I'm not sorry. I'd do it again. It was the right thing to do. Michael is safe and he's happy, and that is the *only* thing I ever promised her that I would do.”

And some of the shock was burning away. The pain was fading. He was used to this. Used to Carly finding new ways to destroy his life.

“I have to go to Sonny's,” he said. “Something isn't right about any of this, and we need to know what's going on.”

“And I should go to the Brownstone,” she said again. “Not just because I'm worried about Bobbie, because I am, but maybe Carly said something. Bobbie might not have noticed it, but Gia and Lucas like Carly a whole lot less. So maybe she let something slip.”

Jason scrubbed his hands over his face, then nodded. “Okay. I'll drop you off there. And—” He hesitated. He wanted to tell her he'd see her tomorrow, but...

“When you're done with Sonny, come by,” she murmured. “I doubt either of us are going to sleep much tonight.”

“All right.”

### **Brownstone: Hallway**

Elizabeth watched as Jason drove away, her heart aching. How could she fix this for him? How could she even begin to know what was next?

“What happened?” Gia demanded from the stairs. From the living room, Lucas rose to his feet, his eyes rimmed with exhaustion, irritation...and fatigue.

Another man who had seen the damage Carly could do when she put her mind to it, even if Lucas had always been an indirect target.

“I called my dad to give Mom a sedative,” Lucas said, his voice tight. “Because she has to go to the hospital tomorrow and people who matter more than that bitch need her. I want to know what the hell is going on right now.”

Elizabeth pressed her heels into her eyes and took a moment to gather herself. “God.

Let's go talk where no one else can hear us."

"You mean my brother?" Gia said with a raised eyebrow, but she followed. "He heard the nonsense earlier and headed straight to the PCPD to see if they could find out what's going on. He tried to follow Carly when she left—he's probably harassing Sonny as we speak."

"Great. That's just what this night needed."

"Elizabeth—" Lucas began.

"I don't know much more than you do at this point. Sonny called Jason at the same time you called me, Gia. I just don't know how the timeline—"

"She must have gone there when she left here," Gia said to Lucas. "I could hear yelling down here, but I didn't come down right away."

"I came up to get you," Lucas told Elizabeth. "When Carly stormed out of here, I went up to see if you were home. If Jason was with you."

"And Bobbie was so upset—it took Lucas and I time to get her calmed down. She wanted to rush after Carly—"

"I don't think she stayed long with Sonny," Elizabeth murmured.

"Why go to Sonny at all?" Gia wondered. "That doesn't make a lot of sense."

"Carly's never made sense," Lucas muttered, but he was frowning, too. "Did you see her, Liz?"

"Yeah. She was already at Courtney and AJ's when we got there."

And they both blinked at her. "What?" Gia asked. "How—How could she—"

"That's what Jason and Sonny are hopefully going to figure out. We confronted her, but she kept trying to get into to see Michael—"

"I swear to God, Liz, if Jason let Carly take my nephew away from AJ again—" Lucas began.

"Carly refused to tell us what was going on, so Jason told her he wouldn't let her get near Michael." Elizabeth twisted her fingers together. She had been a little surprised when Jason had so quickly declined to help Carly get Michael.

He'd always done what was necessary to keep Carly in Michael's life. Even after Carly had hurt him.

"Well, I guess he has some sense after all," Gia replied, folding her arms. "She wouldn't tell Jason where she's been?"

"The only thing he got out of her was that she knows what the date is and how long it's been." She sighed, remembering the slight desperation Jason had shown asking if Carly knew what the date was.

He'd wanted to give her a reason for all of this, and Carly had failed him. Again.

"He thought she might have lost her memory?" Gia asked.

"If she did and only just got it back, she didn't say so. She seemed so..." Elizabeth shook her head. "Angry. And not...not in the way you might think. I get that she was pissed AJ had custody, but...she *had* to know that already."

"Because she went to their house, which meant she knew they had moved," Lucas said.

"She knew AJ had Michael," Gia said slowly, "so why go to Sonny? Why come here and berate her mother?" She met Elizabeth's eyes. "Oh, hell, Hurricane Carly is gonna make landfall."

"And God help us all when she does."

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Sonny could feel the exhaustion bleeding through his veins and raised tired eyes to first, Jason, then Benny. "What do we know? Do we know anything?"

"Before she showed up at the Brownstone this evening," Benny said, "There was no activity on any of her accounts that suggested Carly was alive. We had witnesses, the guardrail—"

"The fact that she was *gone*," Jason muttered. "You said no activity before tonight, Benny. How about now?"

"Her credit card was used to check into the Cosmopolitan Hotel about..." Benny looked at his watch. "Twenty-five minutes ago. I already sent over two of our guys."

"And I put someone at AJ's place to see if she comes by there again," Jason said. "But Sonny—"

"I know, I know." Sonny rubbed his hand against his chest. "How is any of this possible? How did she know AJ had Michael? Why did she come *here*?"

"She wouldn't tell me anything tonight, but she'll be back," Jason said. He accepted the drink Sonny handed him, which wasn't like his best friend and partner, but hell, this was that kind of night. "I have legal custody of Michael until Carly goes to the court to get him back. She's not gonna wanna do that."

"A judge is gonna wanna know where the hell she's been." Sonny sat down. "Benny, if

she's been gone—someone had to help her. Someone had to tell her about AJ getting custody of Michael.”

“I put in calls to some of the representatives, but so far...” Benny spread his hands. “There’s nothing to tell. She vanished in April and was resurrected tonight. That’s all anyone knows.”

“I’ll get answers,” Jason told Sonny. “One way or another. If she’s in trouble, that means Michael’s in the middle. And I’m not putting him at risk. Not again. He’s just getting over losing her in the first place. He’s staying with AJ until I know what’s going on.”

And then Jason grimaced—and Sonny understood. To know that all that Jason had done to keep Michael safe. What Sonny had done to keep Michael away from AJ—

To have arrived at the realization that, at least for now, AJ Quartermaine was the more solid parent. The right place for Michael.

How the tides had turned.

Sonny swallowed his bourbon. “Why would she do this? Why would she fake her death? It just...” He looked back at the mini bar, wanting another drink. Wanting to empty the bottle.

“She was doing good,” he continued, mystified. “The club. Michael. She was...she was on her own. Doing well. The divorce...it was the right decision.” He met Jason’s eyes. “This...I know Carly is capable of a lot of things but—”

“She’s stayed away before,” Jason said roughly. “After Michael was born, she left. But...” He shook his head. “Not since then. She’s never left him. Not willingly.”

“Then why come back like this?” Sonny shook his head. “Maybe she didn’t go on her own, but this? Whatever happens from this night on, it’s on Carly. She could tell you what’s going on. She could come to me. But if she doesn’t—”

“She will.” Jason closed his eyes. “She always tells me the truth. Eventually. Just... not usually in time for me to stop her.”

### **Brownstone: Front Steps**

Elizabeth had stayed with Gia and Lucas in the front room for another hour or so to be sure Bobbie wouldn’t wake up.

That Carly wouldn’t come back.

Then Lucas had gone to sleep, and Gia had gone upstairs.

It was nearly four in the morning, and her eyes felt gritty. She had had the opening

shift the day before at Kelly's and had been awake for nearly twenty-fours now. She should have gone to sleep, but Jason had said he would come by.

And she wanted to see him. To know he was okay.

She hadn't really been around the first time Carly had blown up his entire world when she'd taken Michael to the Quartermaines and declared Jason a kidnapper before marrying AJ. Hadn't seen the initial firestorm.

But Elizabeth had been there for the aftermath, for the excruciating pain Michael's loss had caused. She could still picture him, standing on the docks, watching AJ and Michael looking at the ELQ crane, looking at them as if he'd been sucker punched.

And though she hadn't known it at the time, she had been there when Carly and Sonny had blown it up again when they'd slept together.

It hadn't been hard to connect the dots when Elizabeth learned Carly was carrying Sonny's child. It was the only reason she had to explain Jason's trek to the boxcar the night he'd been shot and nearly died.

And now Carly had blown his world up again.

Maybe not as cleanly or neatly or as totally as she had in the past, but she'd been dead. And now she wasn't. And Michael was, again, in the middle of it all. Carly had looked at Jason, the man who had never abandoned her even when she had damn well deserved it...and attacked him.

As if *any* of this was Jason's fault.

So, she sat here on the steps, a cup of bad coffee in her hands in a desperate attempt to stay awake. Waiting for him.

Elizabeth heard the rumble of the motorcycle when he was still several blocks away—it was the only sound breaking the silence of the quiet summer night.

He drew the bike to a stop, switched it off, and then swung his leg over the side. Jason stopped when he saw her sitting there.

"Hey. You—" He blinked at her as he drew closer, stood on the bottom step. "You shouldn't have waited up."

"I said I would." She rose to her feet and stepped down two more steps until she was in his arms, his face buried in her neck. "I wanted to see you."

Elizabeth wasn't sure how long they stood there in silence before he drew back, his thumbs smoothing her hair back over her forehead, drifting down her cheeks. "Hey," she murmured, tightening her arms around his waist. "Can you talk to me?"



“Yeah.” He swallowed and then they sat on the step, her chin resting on his shoulder. “She’s at the Cosmopolitan. But we don’t know anything we didn’t know before I went to Sonny’s.”

“Tony came over to give Bobbie a sedative,” Elizabeth told him. “She has work in the morning and she just—she couldn’t. It was too much, I think. So, I don’t know if Carly said anything. She came here first, though.”

“That matters,” Jason murmured. “She knew when she left here that AJ had Michael, but she still went to Sonny’s. And he didn’t know where AJ lives now. So, she already knew where Michael was.”

“Which means everything she did tonight was calculated. Planned.”

“Yeah.” Jason exhaled slowly, his breath almost shaky. “I can usually—I can usually talk Carly down. M-Maybe I still can. I don’t know. I just...” He looked at her, his eyes wet with tears she knew to be rare. “I don’t know what she’s going to do. Where she was. Why any of this—I don’t know what she’s going to do,” he repeated. “And that means I don’t know how to stop her.”

Elizabeth bit her lip. “I don’t have the words,” she confessed. “I don’t know how to help you.”

“Just...just be here.” He leaned his forehead against hers. “For me. For Bobbie. And Michael. Just be you. That’s always enough.”

## Chapter Sixteen

*I shot for the sky  
I'm stuck on the ground  
So why do I try, I know I'm gonna fall down  
I thought I could fly, so why did I drown?  
Never know why it's coming down, down, down  
- Down, Jason Walker*

---

*Sunday, August 25, 2002*

### General Hospital: Nurse's Station

It was just after eight in the morning when Jason stepped off the elevator on the fifth floor and found Bobbie behind the nurse's station, a pen in her hand, a stack of paperwork in front of her. Her familiar red hair was tugged back, and her face was bare, her eyes exhausted.

She raised her eyes as he approached.

"If it's possible," she murmured, "you look worse than I feel." She capped her pen and gestured to the waiting area. "I'm sorry. I know you were at the Brownstone last night, but I just..."

Jason waited until she had perched on the edge of the sofa before speaking. "It's okay. It was..." He shook his head. "I don't even know. I haven't really...processed it yet."

"I saw Elizabeth and Gia this morning. They told me that you'd caught up to Carly at AJ and Courtney's. I—I didn't tell her the address." Bobbie hesitated before continuing. "At least, I don't think I did. I'm not even sure I know the house number, just the neighborhood and what the house looks like—" She cut off, closed her eyes. "I can't. I can't think straight. I don't know how to deal with this either, Jason."

"I don't know if I'm doing the right thing with Michael," he admitted. "I know Elizabeth thinks I am, but I don't know, she's never liked Carly—and—" He stopped. "I don't mean—"

"I know what you mean." Bobbie took his hand, squeezed it. "You and I are the only ones, I think, that have seen the real Carly. That appreciated the person behind the anger. The desperation. The insanity. Elizabeth...made her peace with Carly, but she never liked her much. And the feeling was mutual." Bobbie was so weary. So

beyond it all.

"I know the length you've gone to make sure Carly kept custody of Michael," she said slowly. "So, if you think leaving him with AJ is the right decision, I'll defend you. I promise." She pressed a hand to her cheek, closing her eyes. "I buried her, Jason. Not her body. But I planned a memorial service. I purchased a stone. She's supposed... she's supposed to be resting next to BJ. I can't do this again, I just can't."

"I'll find out what's going on—"

"From the moment she showed up in my life, there hasn't been a moment's peace," Bobbie continued softly. "Her affair with Tony, her need to ruin my life...Michael's kidnapping, going away to Ferncliffe...the paternity mess, and God, her accusing you of kidnapping. Marrying AJ. Losing that baby. Turning Sonny into the feds..." She looked at Jason. "I'm exhausted. And my son looks at me like he hates me."

And for *Bobbie* to be at the end of her rope—Bobbie who had always seemed to find more patience, more love for Carly—Jason felt less...alone.

Because he and Bobbie were the only ones who had always managed to support Carly. To find the reason, the explanation for the crazy plans and destruction. Because there always had been a reason.

"I don't know what Carly's planning," Jason said after a long moment of silence. "But I'm not going to let her put Michael in the middle. Not again. I—I left Port Charles to keep her from using Michael against me. Robin—" He shook his head, not quite believing he'd come around to knowing Robin had been right.

"Robin told AJ the truth because she thought it meant Carly couldn't manipulate me anymore. But I've let her do it anyway."

"Michael's been better for it," Bobbie said with a sad smile. "Your postcards you've sent—and I told him stories while you were gone. Showed him the pictures. I read from those travel books you left for him. He knew you, Jason, when you came back."

"She thought I would *always* take her side," Jason told her. "That I would do whatever she wanted me to do because it was best for Michael. But it's not this time. He's...he's okay with AJ and Courtney. And he was doing okay with you and Lucas at the Brownstone. It's Carly who's taken apart his life. I don't know—I can't believe she'd leave him willingly, but if she doesn't tell me what happened..."

"She's going to force you to take sides, Jason." Bobbie covered his hand with hers. "I don't know if it's going to go to a court hearing, but you know it might. You'll be asked —"

"And I'll do what's right for Michael." Even if went against everything Jason had fought for all those years ago. "No matter what it is." He hesitated. "Will you?"

"I'm hesitant to do anything that will make Carly...worse," Bobbie admitted. "But he's my grandson, and I want better for him. And right now, that's to stay where he is." She sighed. "I should get back to work. Do..." She hesitated. "I almost want to ask if you know where she's staying, but you know what? I don't think I can deal with it right now. I don't think I have the energy."

### **Brownstone: Living Room**

"It's not that I mind sitting at Bobbie's all day—she's got a better cable package than we do—but how do we even know Carly will show up?" Gia said as she flipped through the channels.

Elizabeth grimaced when her roommate found a rerun of *Sex and the City* to watch and then resumed peering through the lacy curtains at the sidewalk out front. "We don't. But I doubt she's going to go near Jason today."

"Yeah?" Gia tipped her head, intrigued. "You'd think he would have been her first stop. I mean, I didn't live in Port Charles when she had his balls on a chain around her neck, but I do remember the way she talked about him when I was at Deception."

"Yeah, well, Carly also has a sense of when to back off. It never lasts long," Elizabeth added. "And eventually she talks herself into thinking Jason will take her side this time, but..." She sighed and turned away from the window. "I don't know. I thought she'd grown out of all of this. Reacting first. Never thinking anything through." She shrugged. "You remember when I told you about that December in my studio?"

"When you were hiding Jason's gunshot from everyone and letting everyone think you were doing the nasty? Yeah. He and Carly were still..." Gia wiggled her fingers. "Doing whatever."

"She'd come barging in, trying to intimidate me. Like I gave a shit about what she said. She'd throw Lucky's death in my face or talk about how I was just a little girl." Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "And then Jason would tell her to get the hell out. She'd do it. And then maybe two days later, she'd be back. He was supposed to be in hiding and she knew that. She still pulled the fire alarm to get him out of my building. But she did that with everything. She told everyone Jason was Michael's father because she panicked. Told the Q's that Jason kidnapped Michael, basically. Married AJ."

"One woman walking disaster. Got it. So, she knows how to take Jason's temperature. Figures the guilt will set in." Gia nodded. "But coming back here?"

"She also knows Bobbie has a soft spot for her. I remember when it came out that Carly was Bobbie's daughter." Elizabeth pursed her lips. "It was just...before that Valentine's Day, so I was still kind into all the gossip at that point, you know? And Bobbie flipped out at first. But..."

“But Carly was her daughter.”

“And Bobbie’s always had a blind spot for her.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “I just...I don’t know. You knew Carly this last year. She was different, wasn’t she?”

“I guess.” Gia hesitated. “But you know, she didn’t have a choice, you know? Jason was gone. And Bobbie supports her, but even that has its limits. Sonny just...he never looked back after she pulled that shit last year. Carly didn’t have anyone to save her this time. Anyone to turn to. So, she had to rely on herself. Had to get it together. I would have thought she was doing well, but...” Gia bit her lip. “I just don’t know.”

“Yeah, well, the Carly I saw last night—*that’s* the Carly I got to know after Jason got shot. She’d ripped his heart out by sleeping with his best friend after marrying his brother and taking away his son. He just wanted her to go away, to give him space. And she just kept going after him. Because she only cared about herself. What she wanted. What was important to her.”

“And Jason has a blind spot for her, too.”

“Always. I could see it last night when he was trying to give her an excuse for what happened. But Carly didn’t see that. Didn’t see how upset he was. Or hurt he was. She never does. It was all about her again.” Elizabeth rubbed her head. “And that’s when she’s the most dangerous, Gia. I don’t know where the hell she’s been, but you know what? I don’t know if I even care. I just don’t want her to go after Jason. She’s never made him a target, you know. He’s always been collateral damage.”

A car door distracted them both from the conversation and Gia parted the curtains with a smirk. “Score one for you, Webber,” she murmured as they watched Carly stalk up the front steps. “You do know her.”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth sighed as they heard the locks turn and the door shove open. “God help me, I do.”

Carly turned the corner from the front hallway into the living room, her eyes already snapping with the same anger as the night before. “Where’s my mother?” she demanded.

“Not here,” Elizabeth said plainly, remaining seated in the arm chair. “Can I help you, Carly?”

“You—” Carly took in a deep breath. “You can tell me why the hell my son is with that asshole—”

“I’ll be happy to tell you anything you want to know,” Elizabeth said with a friendly smile. “But you have to answer my questions too—”

Carly snorted. Dismissed with a wave of her hand “Whatever little girl—”

“You’re underestimating me, Carly. Again.” Elizabeth tipped her head. “I live with your mother. I babysat Michael. I’m dating Jason. Courtney is one of my best friends. I know exactly why Michael is with AJ.”

Carly hesitated at that, her eyes narrowing. “You’re dating Jason.”

“Yep.”

“And it’s all thanks to you, Carly,” Gia said. “If you hadn’t died, Jason wouldn’t have come home.”

“Gia—” Elizabeth looked at her. “Don’t help.”

“Sorry. Couldn’t resist.”

“I want my son,” Carly said flatly. “Unless you’re going to help me with that—”

“Carly, Bobbie buried you,” Elizabeth cut in. She rose to her feet. “She ordered a headstone and laid you to rest next to BJ. So, let’s cut the bullshit. I don’t know where the hell you were, and as I was just telling Gia, I don’t particularly care—”

“Of course not. You know that I’m a threat to you.” Carly flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I’m single. Jason’s home—”

Gia burst into hysterical laughter while Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “It’s like time travel,” she told Gia. “She still thinks Jason is some sort of toy you can take from someone. You know what she told me once?”

“Damn it,” Carly hissed.

“What?” Gia asked, ignoring Carly.

“She told me she’d gotten rid of one little angel, and I was next—” Elizabeth offered a sickly-sweet smile at Carly. “Haven’t gotten rid of me yet, have you?”

“Day’s still young,” Carly growled, stepping towards her. But Elizabeth never backed up. Never gave an inch.

The first rule of dealing with Carly was to never show weakness. She would only use it against you later.

“Bobbie buried you,” Elizabeth repeated. “And Jason grieved. Michael cried. For days. Do you know what it’s like to explain to a five-year-old about Heaven?”

At that, Carly blinked and closed her eyes. Her shoulders slumped. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah. We all worked hard to make sure that Michael was okay.” Elizabeth folded her

arms, looked away. Because this was the Carly that always seemed the most genuine—the one who did honestly love her son. “Lucas played video games with him. I colored. Jason read to him. Bobbie cuddled him. We’ve tried to fill the void, Carly. But he loves you. He misses you.”

“I want my son,” Carly said, but this time her voice broke. “I want him back.”

“Then I need you to think about what you’re doing right now,” Elizabeth told her. “You showed up in the middle of the night, flipping out on everyone. We’re not idiots, Carly. You knew AJ had him before you showed up here. Which means you went after your mother just to attack her. You went to Sonny so that he damn well knew you were alive. And then you went to a house whose address you could not have possibly known.”

“I—” Carly pressed her lips together. “You don’t understand.”

“I don’t have to. It’s not my decision to make. You left Jason guardianship, Carly. And I know you didn’t do that just to stick it to AJ. You did that because Jason loves him. So I need you to remember how much Jason loves Michael—”

But it was the wrong angle to pursue, and whatever ground Elizabeth had gained was lost.

“He promised me that he would make sure I always had my son,” Carly said, her teeth clenched. The anger back in her eyes. “He promised me that AJ wouldn’t—”

“You were dead. And the situation changed,” Elizabeth said bluntly. “If you want to know how and why, then I’ll tell you. But you need to tell Jason where you’ve been. You need to tell him what’s going on. He can’t help you if you don’t talk to him.”

“I don’t need him to help me.” Carly turned abruptly and headed for the door.

“Carly—”

“I want my son back,” Carly shot back. “You tell Jason that if he doesn’t give me back my son, I’ll make him. And he’ll be sorry he lied to me.”

The door slammed so hard that the frame cracked.

“Well, that could have gone worse,” Gia said with a bright smile. “Time for the wine?”

“Shit.” Elizabeth looked at her watch. It was only noon, but — “It’s five o’clock somewhere.”

### **AJ & Courtney’s House: Living Room**

Michael took the news with a bit of confusion. He thought people didn’t come back from Heaven, and if his mommy could, did that mean his little brother could? And

how come his grandma Bobbie's other daughter couldn't come back?

These were not questions AJ could answer, but thank God, Courtney had managed to tell Michael that they had all been mistaken. That Carly hadn't been in her car, so she'd never gone to heaven in the first place.

Okay, Michael had said, but then where had his mommy been?

And for that, Courtney couldn't bring herself to lie. And neither could AJ. So they'd just...given that time-honored answer you'll understand when you're older and that Michael could see his mother as soon as everyone agreed on a good time.

"Should I be concerned that he took that so well?" AJ asked as he watched Michael's uncle Lucas lead him into the family room, an Xbox game under his arm. Thank God for Lucas Jones, who somehow always knew when to show up with a video game.

"I think he's been through so much that it's just another event. And he's young," Courtney offered, biting at the nail on her thumb. "Children are resilient."

He shouldn't have to be resilient, AJ thought bitterly, and he spent every minute of the morning terrified Carly would show up to take him. That Jason would change his mind. He had visitation with Michael as long as Jason allowed it. That was the agreement, and AJ had been okay with it.

It had been a way to give Jason control over Michael's safety. For them all to learn how to trust one another. And now...and now it was different.

Carly was back.

Oh, God, he still couldn't wrap his mind around this.

"Jason isn't going to change his mind," Courtney said, dragging AJ out of his dismal thoughts. "And even if he did, we'd wouldn't be back to square one." She tugged him down on the sofa and sat next to him. "You have your parental rights back. And a year of sobriety under your belt. If Jason changes his mind, he'll have to take Michael away."

"He could do it," AJ murmured, clasping his hands in front of his mouth, resting his elbows on his knees. "He could—"

"And then we'll go to court. And Carly is the negligent parent right now," Courtney said. "*She's* the one who's been gone for five months. And she's the one who showed up with no word, won't tell us where she's been. AJ—"

"I'm sorry. I can't seem to—"

It had been only three months since Michael had been back in his life. A month since the little boy had looked at him with hopeful eyes, calling him Daddy. AJ had showed



him pictures of the brief year that he'd been allowed to be Michael's father.

And the overnight visits had been fun, and it had seemed easy to be his father again. To watch Courtney happy and smiling with his son. To think of maybe...maybe having more children.

God, he wanted the chance to be a father from the ground floor.

"I get it's hard for you to trust that Jason sees you differently," Courtney said. "And maybe it's easier for me since I didn't know him before. But he doesn't lie, right? That's supposed to be his thing. And I know how hard he struggled to give you a chance. He and Elizabeth argued. I argued with her. He made the choice to support you, AJ. He came to your chip ceremony."

AJ's chest eased then and he closed his eyes.

*"You're the one who didn't take the drink...you did the work."*

She rose to answer the door when someone knocked, leaving AJ to think about that. To consider actually trusting that he'd done enough this time to make Jason look at him as a new person. As someone other than the asshole who'd nearly killed him.

"Hey, Junior."

AJ looked up to see Courtney showing Ned into the living room. He rose to his feet. "I guess...I guess you heard."

"I did. It's in the newspapers." Ned held up the headlines. "They must have rushed to get the story published. Grandfather almost had a coronary, and Alan and Monica are...concerned. I told them I'd come over and check on you."

Which meant the rest of the family would be held at bay. AJ hesitated and then gave Ned a quick recap of Carly's erratic visit the night before—and Jason's support in leaving Michael asleep in his room.

"You won't just have Jason in your corner," Ned said, tossing the newspaper down. "I know you've had your issues with the way Grandfather...shows his love. God knows I have, too. But he was proud of you getting your chip. And Grandmother is, too. And you impressed him...winning Michael's custody on your own."

"I didn't—" AJ nodded. "I mean, I guess I did. But Jason gave me a chance—"

"Another factor which has not gone unnoticed. Monica is particularly pleased that her children might yet like one another at the same time in the same room." Ned offered a half smile. "I don't know what Carly is up to, but I've known her long enough to be sure it's something. Grandfather wanted me to tell you that however you want to handle this, you tell us. And we'll follow."

Courtney blinked at that and then looked at AJ. “Seriously?”

And even though AJ had told himself he didn’t want or need his family’s approval—knowing he had it—that he had their trust—something inside him relaxed.

It was different this time. He was a better man. A sober man. A man worthy of having his son. And for the moment, he had allies.

“Right now, we’re sitting back,” AJ told him. “Jason’s right. Legally, Carly’s will has gone into probate. The court has recognized him as Michael’s guardian. My parental rights were reinstated. The custody agreement simply states I get visitation when Jason gives it. And for now, he’s leaving Michael here. I think he wants to see what Carly will do next.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Ned picked up the newspaper again, studied the photo of Carly above the fold. “And this...this next part isn’t a quid pro quo, it’s just...”

“The Quartermaines want to see Michael,” Courtney said flatly.

“It’s not a condition for their support,” Ned told AJ. “It’s just...you’re not the only one who lost Michael when Carly divorced you. He lived in that house for a year. Grandmother fell in love with him. And so did Alan and Monica. And you know Grandfather—”

“I know.” And AJ could understand that. “It’s something I’d want to talk to Jason about, and to be honest—”

“You’ve got enough on your plate. Well, just keep it in mind and let us know if we can do anything.”

When Courtney came back from walking Ned out, she bit her lip. “I guess it’s because I know they still don’t really like me—”

“You’re suspicious,” AJ said with a nod. “I am, too. But I think it’s because I’ve never had unqualified approval from my family. They’ve always had a string attached. I hope that’s not true this time. Ned’s right. The entire family lost Michael when my marriage fell apart. But I promised Jason that if he gave me a chance with Michael, I’d make sure he never had to be under that pressure.”

He exhaled slowly. “And that’s one promise I’m going to keep. Michael is never...for one moment...going to think he has to do anything to earn my love. All he has to do is exist.”

### **Brownstone: Front Steps**

Elizabeth had a glass of wine in her hand when Jason parked his bike. That was probably not a good sign. His men had followed Carly to the Brownstone earlier that

day—the blonde had stayed for all of ten minutes before storming out.

And Elizabeth had told him she would be at the Brownstone most of the day in case Carly came back.

“Hey, how was your day?” Elizabeth asked, with a smirk as she finished the last of the liquid in her glass. “Pretty sure I can make it worse.”

Jason climbed the steps and sat next to her. “Well, you talked to Carly and I didn’t, I’m sure that’s true.”

She offered him the wine bottle. “You want some? It might make it better.”

He shook his head, though if she’d offered vodka or a beer, he might—he might have taken it. It wasn’t often that he understood why AJ and people like him drowned their problems in alcohol, but tonight—

Tonight, he had never understood AJ more.

“So the guard on Carly said she didn’t stay long.”

“No. I didn’t—” Elizabeth hesitated. “I didn’t mean to fight with her, Jason. I was just—I wanted to tell her about Bobbie grieving. And I thought if I could just tell her how sad Michael was—but she came in all pissed off and angry. And she was...” She bit her lip. “Bitchy.”

Jason sighed, dipping his head. It was too much to hope that Elizabeth would have been able to get through to Carly. The two women had been at war for years, and he’d seen how the normally kind and compassionate Elizabeth could go toe to toe with Carly without blinking.

“What happened?” he asked.

She tensed. “She wanted me to tell her why Michael was with AJ, and I told her I would. We talked about that. That I would tell her about the chances you were facing in court if I saw her before you—”

“I know, Elizabeth.” And because he could see the unhappiness in her eyes, the slump in her shoulders, Jason took her hand in his. “Hey. I know you and Carly don’t get along. I didn’t think it would magically solve anything for you guys to talk. And I know that Carly has a way of making people—”

“She just—” She huffed. “It’s not important. I told her that I would tell her if she told you where she was, and I guess—I mean I was trying to convince her that I would have those answers, so I told her we were dating—”

Yeah, that probably hadn’t helped though Jason wasn’t sure how it could have been avoided.

“—so she said that I was threatened by her because she was single and you were home—and Gia sort of actually laughed at her—”

And to that, Jason couldn't help himself. He smiled. He had never been good at imagining things, at creating pictures in his head. But sometimes...sometimes he could. And he could actually see Carly going up against Elizabeth and Gia and being pissed that she hadn't won.

“But then I did get to tell her about Michael, and how we'd had to explain Heaven to him. She seemed—” Elizabeth bit her lip. “She seemed to listen to me then. For a minute. I told her we'd tried to be there for him. But that he missed her. And she just wanted him back, she said. So I...” She sighed. “I mean, I told her that we knew something was wrong, and that if she'd just tell you what was going on, you could help her.”

“And that didn't get you anywhere?” Jason asked, a bit surprised. Usually Carly leapt at the chance to lay her problems at his feet. Maybe she'd been pissed last night, but—but it was a day later.

Why hadn't she called him? Asked him for help?

“It actually seemed to make her mad again,” Elizabeth admitted. “And she left—but she said she didn't want your help. That you were going to be sorry you lied.”

“That *I* lied?” Jason repeated.

“You promised her you'd always make sure she had Michael. I tried to tell her that it hadn't been so simple—she'd been gone—I mean, maybe I could have been nicer about it, but damn it, Jason...” Elizabeth rose to her feet and stalked down the steps. She whirled around to glare at him. “I don't like Carly.”

“That's not news to me—”

“I thought I did. I thought—I thought I could almost understand her because you know, I'm really good at lying to people and making dumb ass choices and looking to you to fix them—”

“Elizabeth—”

“And I thought she was different before the accident, but you know what? She's not. She's still the same selfish bitch who destroyed Bobbie's life and—” Elizabeth looked away. “You know what I would give to have a mother like Bobbie? Someone who always seemed to find something worthwhile in me? Whatever Bobbie's faults, she's stood by Carly. And *this* is how she repays her.” She looked at him. “And I know you don't need me to be pissed on your behalf, but I am. I remember how much she hurt you before and maybe you forgave her, that's your business—but I haven't forgotten how you looked when you lost Michael. How you left town because of it.”

Jason exhaled slowly. “Elizabeth—”

“And I’m sorry because how I feel about Carly isn’t important.” Elizabeth’s hands fell to her side. “And you don’t need this right now. So I’m sorry about that.”

“I—” he hesitated. He just stared at her. “What do you want me to do?”

“I don’t want you to do anything,” she said with an irritated roll of her eyes. “I just—I’m sorry. I don’t know if I made it worse. Maybe I shouldn’t have had Gia in the room. It probably didn’t help for Carly to feel ganged up on. I just...” She bit her lip. “It’s none of my business, really. I guess.”

And he frowned at that. “Are we back to this again?”

“What?”

“I love you,” he told her, and if he’d thought the second time he’d told her that, he’d be angry with her, he wouldn’t have believed it. “But—”

She narrowed her eyes. “But what?” Elizabeth said with a bite in her tone Jason wasn’t sure he’d ever had directed at him. “But I can be a bitch sometimes?”

“No.” Jason stood. “But—” His cell phone rang, and he dug it out of his pocket to give himself time to think. And he just stared at the screen. Carly. She...still had her cell phone. Which...didn’t make sense. Her car was supposed to be at the bottom of Lake Ontario.

“Carly?”

*“Jason...can we talk?”*

“Yeah.” Jason rubbed the back of his neck. Turned away from Elizabeth. “Yeah. Where are you?” he asked.

*Her laugh was short. Bitter. “Like you don’t know.”*

“Carly—”

*“I’m at the hotel. We need to settle a few things.”*

She hung up first, and he put his phone back in his pocket. “Carly wants to talk.”

Elizabeth stared back at him with just a tip of her head. “That’s good.”

He exhaled slowly, and then walked down the steps until he faced her on the sidewalk. “I’ll call you—”

“I’m opening at Kelly’s in the morning—I have to pick up some of Courtney’s shifts. She wants to be close to the house for a few days.” Elizabeth brushed a kiss against

his cheek. "So, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

And without another word, she walked up the stairs, opened the door to the Brownstone, and closed it behind her.

## Chapter Seventeen

*The angels they burn inside for us  
Are we ever  
Are we ever gonna learn to fly  
The devils they burn inside of us  
Are we ever gonna come back down - come around  
I'm always gonna worry about the things that could break us  
- Angels and Devils, Dishwalla*

---

*Thursday, August 29, 2002*

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

"Hey." Elizabeth managed a smile for her best friend as Courtney tucked her purse under the counter and tied on her apron. "Welcome back."

The blonde managed an exhausted smile. "Thanks for the time off—it's been..." she sighed and shook her head. "Not great. I mean, it's not Michael. He's—"

"Tough?" Elizabeth offered as she measured coffee beans for the grinder. "Taking it all in stride?"

"I don't know if that's good or bad," Courtney admitted. "Should he just not even blink when his mother returns from the dead? Or he is just so used to having his life upended that he just shrugs and moves on?"

"Well, he'll probably be in therapy for the rest of his life. How's AJ dealing with it?"

"Okay, I guess. He was worried Jason would change his mind at first the way he always does with Carly, but he hasn't. And Carly hasn't come back. Which makes us even more nervous."

Elizabeth turned on the grinder and they were both silent for a few minutes while the machine roared.

"How is Jason doing with all of this?" Courtney paused. "I mean, if you want—"

"I don't know. He's not..." Elizabeth measured the first of the grounds into the pot, the habitual routine comforting to her. This—*this* she could do. "We had kind of a fight that first day after Carly came home. We're not—we're not *not* talking, but I guess he's trying not to—"

“Are you okay?” Courtney asked after a moment when Elizabeth stopped speaking. “I know you’ve been waiting for the second shoe—”

“I don’t like Carly. Which I told him. And then she called him to come and talk.”

Courtney hesitated. “She did? But—”

“She didn’t tell him anything,” Elizabeth cut in. “Jason didn’t—he didn’t really get into it, but I’m sure she tried to guilt him like she always does.” Elizabeth waited a moment. “She called him again the next day. And then *again* yesterday.”

“And still hasn’t told him anything?” Courtney shook her head. “That doesn’t make any sense. Why—”

“She’s testing him,” Elizabeth muttered. “To see if she can—” She stopped. “I don’t know. Maybe that’s just me not liking her coming out. But it feels that way. It feels like she calls him to see if he’ll come running. And he does. Because he wants answers. Because he wants to fix this.”

With the coffee brewing and a signal from Don in the kitchen that he was ready to get started, Elizabeth flipped the sign on the door to open. In about ten minutes, they would be flooded with dock workers grabbing coffee and breakfast before or after a shift.

“Are...” Courtney hesitated. “Are you mad at him?”

“No.” Elizabeth considered her answer. “Just...resigned, I think. This is who Jason is. I just...I don’t know how I’m supposed to...do this. How I’m supposed to feel about it. I...I don’t want to be Robin.”

Courtney frowned. “I don’t get the reference.”

“Robin was Jason’s ex-girlfriend—”

“Who told AJ about Michael. Yeah, that much I know.”

“Robin put up with Carly for the last two years of her relationship with Jason. Carly was always a factor. In fact...Jason...” Elizabeth hesitated. “You know about the accident? That it...he had to...kind of relearn a lot of things.”

“Yeah—”

“Well, he slept with Carly even when he was with Robin. It’s not—it’s not important because I get it. And I’m not worried about that. But it’s always given Carly a sense of power over Jason. And Robin was basically humiliated in front of everyone when people thought Jason was Michael’s father—”

“Because it was during the period when they were dating.”



“Basically. And Robin put up with Carly over and over again. Jason let Carly get away with so much—you should hear the way Carly talks about Robin, and you just know she said it to her face—”

“Do you think he’ll do that to you—”

“No.” Elizabeth shook her head. “No, I don’t. I guess, mostly I don’t. He was pretty angry with Carly back when we were getting close. Carly and I got into it more than once when he was at my studio. And he stepped in. He says he’s learned from what happened with Robin. That he wasn’t fair to either of them in the end, but—” She looked at Courtney. “By the time Robin left town, I know they hated one another. Jason says he’s forgiven her, but I’m not sure he’s forgotten what she did.”

“What, you think because you made it clear you’re not really going to do much to help Carly, that it’s going to change things between you?”

“I don’t know. I feel like maybe it already has.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “And I’m not being fair, I guess. I know Carly is his friend. I may not understand it, but I’m not...I wouldn’t ask him to choose—”

“Why not?” Courtney demanded. “What’s she done to deserve his loyalty after all this?”

“She gave him Michael.” Elizabeth managed a smile for the first wave of customers as the bell over the door rang. “I can’t compete with that. I’m not going to.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I just...I’m not going to let Carly run my life or get in my face. Even to make his life easier. I’ve spent too much time letting people walk all over me. That part of my life is over.” Elizabeth picked up her order pad. “I know who I am now. And no one is going to change that. Not ever again.”

### **Cosmopolitan Hotel: Lobby**

AJ stood from his seat when Carly strode out of the elevators. “Make it quick,” his ex-wife barked as she approached him, her arms crossed tightly. “If you’re not here to give me back my son—”

“I don’t want to be at odds with you, Carly,” AJ murmured. “I want us to figure out a way to resolve this without—without making Michael’s life more complicated.”

“Then give him back—”

“*That’s* not on the table,” he said quietly. Her lips pressed into a thin line. “I have my rights back. And until you petition the court to vacate Jason’s guardianship, legally, you can’t say anything about where Michael goes. Who he sees.”

“Jason will come around. He always does. He’s just mad at me right now.”

And AJ knew that was probably true. That his time was limited to make an agreement with Carly. Jason had stood by him so far, but eventually—eventually Jason would give in.

He always took Carly’s side.

“That could be weeks. Or least until you tell him what’s going on and where you’ve been since April.” AJ held his hands up, palms facing her. “Michael is asking about you. We—we told him you were alive. And he’s so happy, Carly. God, he missed you.”

“I missed him, too. And I—”

“I’ve been sober a year.” AJ took his chip out. The small gold chip that meant almost as much to him as the wedding ring he wore. “I know why you’re scared. What happened two years ago, Carly, I can’t—”

“You killed my son. You’re lucky you’re alive,” Carly hissed. She snatched the chip out of his hand. “This? This doesn’t mean a damn thing to me. Easy come, easy go.”

And then she flicked it away, sending it rolling across the lobby floor until it disappeared under a sofa.

He followed its progress, noting exactly where it had landed, and then looked back at Carly. At the smug, arrogant set of her features. “You really think Jason is going to come through for you, don’t you?”

“He always does. He just—” Carly’s lips trembled just a moment—just long enough for the mask to slip. For AJ to see that she wasn’t...quite as convinced as she said she was. “He’s just mad at me right now,” she repeated. “He’ll get over it.”

“Not until you tell him what happened.” AJ paused. “But if he does try to take Michael—it’s not going to be like before. I’m going to fight you, Carly. I gave you ammunition to keep Michael before. The warehouse fire. The...” His throat closed. “The stairs. My drinking. But none of those were the reasons you kept Michael from me in the beginning—”

“Don’t even try me—”

“You lied to keep Tony Jones happy. And then you lied because I was angry. Because you—” He dipped his head. “You destroyed my life. You...you made me think I was drinking again, Carly. To make your life easier, you made me think I had thrown away everything I had worked on. You were my friend. And you destroyed my *life*.”

“I had—” Carly closed her mouth. “Don’t blame me for your damage. I never forced you to pick up a bottle.”

“No,” AJ said softly. “But you made me think I had. I’ve never been in a good position to fight you, Carly. I am now. I have a good job. I have a good relationship with my family.” With Jason, for now, but AJ wasn’t hopeful it would last once Jason had forgiven Carly. “I don’t want to drag Michael through court. I think we could make something work between us—”

“Michael is my son. If you don’t give him back to me, then Jason will make you.”

“He can try.” AJ sighed. “You know where I live, Carly, if you change your mind.”

And with that, he strode away, moved the sofa, retrieved his chip, and left.

He would wait to see what Jason decided, but having had a taste of Michael in his life again—there was nothing in the world that could make him give that up.

*Friday, August 30, 2002*

### **Kelly’s: Dining Room**

Elizabeth set the coffee down in front of Bobbie and then sat across from her. “I haven’t seen you much this week,” she said to her landlord. “How...how are you?”

“Oh...” Bobbie sighed, stirring some cream and sugar into the mug. “I’m surviving. Lucas is speaking me again. Apparently, since Carly didn’t move back in with us and Michael is still with AJ, he feels like he can trust me.”

“I know he’s struggled with Carly for several years,” Elizabeth said. She sipped her own iced tea. “So you...haven’t seen her?”

“Not since that first night. Have you?”

“Not since Sunday when she came to the house. Courtney said AJ went to talk to her, but—Carly thinks Jason is gonna fix everything so—” Elizabeth shrugged. Sat back. “She wasn’t in a negotiating mood.”

“God.” Bobbie pressed her fingertips to her temples. “And Jason told me he still hasn’t gotten anything out of her. Not for lack of trying, of course. I don’t understand. Why won’t she just—why won’t she *tell* us—”

Elizabeth sipped her water. What did it say about her that she just couldn’t dredge up any real interest in where Carly had been? Or why she wouldn’t tell Jason or anyone else? Yeah, maybe it hadn’t been Carly’s fault, but what was Elizabeth supposed to do about it? She’d reached out to the insufferable woman and had had her hand slapped for it.

And her every waking moment for the last six days had been steeped in the drama of Carly’s life. Which was fine, she supposed. It was only the first few days, and Carly *had* returned from the dead. She couldn’t hold Bobbie’s emotional state or Jason’s

agitation against them.

But Carly had called Jason again the night before. And Jason had, *again*, dropped everything to go talk to her. Then Jason hadn't come back, and from the way Bobbie was talking—there was still no update on where Carly had been. Which meant she still wasn't talking.

"She hasn't made any legal moves to get Michael back?" Elizabeth asked.

Bobbie frowned. "No—I think—she must think she'll bring Jason around without—Are you—are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be? I'm not—I'm not the one going through any of this, Bobbie. I'm upset for you. For Jason. And for AJ and Michael. But beyond that..." Elizabeth fiddled with the napkin on the table in front of her. "This doesn't really affect me."

She avoided the redhead's eyes when Bobbie squinted at her. Elizabeth continued, "Jason will figure it out eventually. Either he'll find a way to make Carly tell the truth or she'll do something even worse and the truth will come out anyway."

Bobbie pressed her lips. "You...things are all right with Jason, aren't they? Not that I pay attention to these things, but you haven't been home much this week—"

"I've been staying at my studio. Painting. Getting in some time before classes start next Tuesday. It's my last semester, so I'll be swamped between classes and work." Elizabeth set the napkin down, ignoring the tears and twists her fingers had made. "Jason's been busy. I didn't expect anything less."

"Has he—"

"Worrying about Carly is a full-time job," Elizabeth said with a false smile. "You know that."

"I do," Bobbie said slowly. "Jason—you know he's worried about Michael—"

"He is. Which is why Michael is still with AJ." For now. Elizabeth cleared her throat. "She calls him. He goes to talk to her. He's not making much headway, I don't think, but he will. You know how stubborn Jason can be."

"I do," Bobbie repeated. "But—"

"It'll work out." Elizabeth got to her feet. "Jason will fix this, Bobbie. He always does."

"Elizabeth—"

"I have to get back to work."

**Cosmopolitan Hotel: Carly's Suite**

When Carly swung open her hotel room door and glared at him, Sonny remembered how he had hated her once. How he had seen a bitter, venomous viper whose only redeeming quality was her fierce loyalty to Michael.

He thought he had found a heart underneath all that anger and vindictiveness—that she had shown a mask to the world, but that he knew the vulnerable woman underneath.

And now he wondered if they had all just been fooled.

“Carly.”

“We have nothing to say to one another—” She started to slam the door shut, but Sonny slapped a hand against it and stopped it. “How did you even get up here? Did you bribe someone?”

Sonny just flashed her a smile. “I’m a friendly guy.”

“We have nothing to say to each other,” Carly repeated. “You said it all when you kicked me out. When you walked away from Michael—”

“Uh uh. You do not get to make me the bad guy here, Carly. I was generous in our divorce settlement, and I got AJ to surrender his rights—”

She snorted. “A lot of good it did me—”

“I am not the one who walked away from him for five months.” Sonny tipped his head to the side. “What I can’t figure out is whether it was on purpose or...something that got out of hand. You trying to get my attention? Is that what this is about?”

“Please.” Carly rolled her eyes and walked back into the room. He followed her, closing the door. “You were just Jason in a fancy suit.”

Sonny studied her. There was something to that statement of course—they had become closer when Jason wasn’t available. Wasn’t in town. And he liked the finer things in life. Had a lot of money.

“You trying to get Jason to come home? He’d have to come home for Michael. Did you fake your death for that?”

“Maybe.” Carly lifted her chin. “What do you care?”

“I don’t,” Sonny said. “I care about Jason. And Michael.” And Elizabeth, but that wouldn’t be useful to say. “You ask someone to help you? They turn on you, wouldn’t let you leave? Because if you wanted Jason to come home, you probably should have revealed yourself before he started dating Elizabeth—”

“Like she’s competition,” Carly muttered. She lifted a glass of wine to her lips, but her

fingers were trembling. "I know what I'm doing, Sonny. And it's none of your damn business."

"You think Jason will forgive you for putting Michael through this? For making Bobbie bury another daughter?" He shrugged. "Even if he did, it doesn't change anything. He doesn't love you. He told himself he did. But he knows better now."

"What, his little twit loves him better?" she snarled, whirling to glare at him. "Because *everyone* is better than me, right?"

"You said it, I didn't." Sonny squinted. "You're not going to dangle Michael in front of him like candy. It didn't work four years ago, Carly. It's not working now. He's moved on."

"Whatever—"

"Whatever you're up to, Carly, just *stop*. You know the only people you ever end up hurting are yourself, Michael, and Jason. I don't know what happened in April, Carly. I don't—I don't know if I can believe you did it on purpose." Sonny exhaled slowly. "You love Michael too much."

Carly just stared at him, her eyes burning with hatred. "You don't know a damn thing about me, Sonny. You never did. I was just a toy for you to play with when you got bored. You wanted me to be someone else. Jason will give me my son back. He always comes back to me. And you know that."

"Carly—"

"Let him have his fun with Elizabeth. Because he'll get bored eventually. Just like he did with the princess. He'll remember how good we had it. How close we were to having it all—"

"And then he'll remember why you don't. Because you accused him of kidnapping, Carly. And then you married his brother. And Jason lost Michael. And then you and I broke his heart. His trust." Sonny shook his head. "You know it's never been the same. He's never trusted either of us the same way again."

"Sonny—"

"Jason might have been halfway in love with you, God knows why at the moment, but *you* burned him to the ground, Carly. No one else. You might want to blame Robin or Elizabeth, but the truth of the matter is no one took Jason from you. You destroyed him. You're not doing it again—"

"Yeah, well, we'll see about that." Carly stalked past him and jerked open her door. "You can go."

Sonny stopped at the threshold and looked back at her. “We loved each other once,” he said quietly. “And we lost our little boy. I loved him, Carly. And I hated AJ for a long time. I still do,” he admitted. “But whatever is going on, Carly, Jason and I can’t help you until you’re honest with us.”

“I don’t owe you anything—”

“Maybe not. But you owe Jason.”

### **Elizabeth’s Studio**

Elizabeth pushed the key into the lock and turned back to Jason with a smile. “I’m glad you called—that we could go for a ride.”

When he followed her in, she turned to face him and leaned up to kiss him. Jason kicked the door closed behind him with one booted foot as he pushed her light jacket from her shoulders.

“I’ve missed you,” she murmured as she tugged his shirt upwards.

“I—”

And then his phone rang. With a mutter, Jason stepped away, dug his phone from his pocket. “It’s Carly.”

Of course it was. Carly must have fucking radar, Elizabeth thought bitterly as Jason answered. Never failed. As soon as she and Jason had a minute to themselves—there she was.

Maybe she was watching them.

“Carly—I can’t—What? All right. Yeah. I’ll—” Jason cast a look at her, and she just arched a brow. “I’ll be there.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. Of course he would.

“I have to—”

“Did you ask how high first?” she bit out, cutting him off. When he just blinked at her in confusion, Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Carly said jump, didn’t she? So, go.”

“Elizabeth—”

“She’s not going to tell you anything.” She grabbed her jacket from the floor and tossed it over the sofa. “You’ll go over there, and she’ll try to guilt you. And eventually you’re going to think that the only way Carly will tell you the truth is if you get Michael back for her—”

“Hey—”

Elizabeth faced him, jabbing her finger at him. "I am not Robin."

He scowled. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I am not going to let Carly run my life until I loathe the sight of her *and* you. I don't care where Carly was. I only care how it effects the people I love. And that includes you. And Bobbie and Michael. She does *not* get to waltz back in here like she wasn't dead for five months, Jason. You grieved for her. And now it's like—"

She closed her eyes. "It's like we're all just treating this like another episode in the Carly show. Well, Carly screwed up again. Let's bail her out—"

"Is that what you think I'm doing—"

"You are drowning in guilt because Carly made you promise something completely stupid five years ago," Elizabeth shot back. "But you know what? You promised her she could keep Michael, and she abandoned you. She walked out on you to deal with Michael on your own. And you raised him. He was your son. You made a promise to him to love him—"

Her voice broke. "And you're so pissed at yourself because you broke a promise to Carly. Why the hell should that matter? Why isn't Michael more important—"

"He is—" Jason sliced a hand through the air, all but growling in response. "Have I even once said I'll get Michael back for her—"

"No. But you're thinking about it," Elizabeth said flatly. "You're thinking if you can clean this up, if you can find out how Carly is in trouble this time, maybe you can make her understand why AJ has custody and everyone can live happily ever after —"

"I—"

"And it hasn't once crossed your mind that maybe Carly doesn't deserve to get Michael back at all," she continued, scathingly. "Nothing AJ has ever done to Michael could be as bad as what Carly's done to him. She's used that little boy as a meal ticket for five years. She nearly got Sonny thrown in jail and *still* sued him for child support and alimony. She played you and AJ against each other after she got done drop kicking Tony Jones—"

"What—" Jason held up his hands. He took a deep breath. "Wait. Let's just...let's just stop this for a minute, okay? Let's—"

"I get it, okay?" he continued when Elizabeth said nothing. "Carly has...Carly hasn't done much for me except..." Destroy his life on a regular basis. "And you're right. I do feel guilty because it's one thing not to keep my promise when I thought she was dead, it's another to actively keep her from Michael. But me feeling guilty,



Elizabeth? It's not gonna change anything. Because you're right. I don't know where Carly has been. Or why she was gone for so long. Maybe it wasn't her fault. I don't know. What I know is that Michael is safe where he is. Happy. And that has to come first with me. It does. It's just—"

"Then why do you go every time she calls?" Elizabeth demanded. "Every single time. What's going to change this time, Jason? Why do you magically think that *this* time Carly is gonna tell the truth?"

"I—"

"Because she's won't. She's manipulating you. And I'm done watching." Elizabeth nodded towards the door. "So, go."

"What does that mean?" Jason demanded. "If I go, what, we're done? What the hell does one thing have to do with another?"

"I will not play Robin's role in this ridiculous farce," Elizabeth said. "You humiliated her, Jason. You know that. And you drove her away. Because you kept letting Carly get away with everything. I don't understand it and I don't want to. Whatever is between the two of you—that's not friendship. It's sick. And I'm tired of it."

"It's been a goddamn week, Elizabeth—"

"It's been years," Elizabeth said, her teeth clenched. "*Years*. Because yeah, she's been back for a week. But you've been playing her games for years."

"Damn it—"

"I am done," she repeated. "Because this will *never* change. Because if this—if you forgive her for this, if you take that little boy away from AJ because you think it will make Carly tell you the truth—"

"I never said I would do that—" But he looked away.

"Yeah, I'm not an idiot. I know you, Jason. I know how you think. And I know Carly. I can practically see the gears turning in her head. She keeps calling you when we're together, Jason. Hasn't that crossed your mind? Does she call you when you're with Sonny? When you're at work?"

"I—"

"No. She calls you when you're with *me*. Because she wants to see if she can still make you dance to her tune. And you're doing it. You are walking away from me to go to her." Her eyes burned. "This is call number five. How long do I have to put up with it before you think it's okay for me to be upset about it? Ten? Twenty? She's *never* going to tell you where she was, Jason."

“She will—”

“She won’t. Not until she’s backed into a corner. And you’re letting her off the hook. Because it’s Carly, right? She does insane things. Awful things. But she always has a reason, right?”

“Elizabeth—”

“She’s watching you. Or someone is watching you. Because she knows when we’re together. And she knew where AJ and Courtney lived. She still has her goddamn cell phone and *that* should be at the bottom of the fucking lake. She faked her death, Jason. I don’t give a shit how she did or if whoever helped her turned against her. Kept her away—you think because you and Sonny don’t tell me what you’re thinking, I don’t know?”

Jason held up a hand. “I don’t want to argue with you, Elizabeth. C’mon.” His voice softened. “I love you—”

“I love you, too, but you know what? I love me more. I have to put myself first. And if I honestly thought it was just...it was just going to be these couple of days, if I thought that we were just—going to have to keep our heads down until Carly came clean, then maybe I could deal with it.”

She closed her eyes. “But you know I’m not crazy. Because when it comes to Carly, there *will* be a next time. There is *always* a next time. You’ve been on this ride for five years, Jason. Maybe you like it. Maybe you like that she sees you as some kind of superhero that can fix anything. But I’m not playing back up. So, if you want to go and have another useless conversation with Carly while she just tries to guilt you—” She gestured to the door. “Be my guest.”

Jason took a deep breath. “She’s in trouble, Elizabeth. And Michael—we need to know the answers for his sake—”

“Stop. Do not use Michael.” The tears were hot as they slid down her cheeks. “You’re better than that. *You* need to fix this for her. Stop lying to yourself. You’ve made saving Carly your life’s mission, and you don’t know how to stop. It’s your life, Jason. You get to do what you want. But I do not have to stand by and watch.”

“Elizabeth—”

She walked past him, pulled the door open. “You should go. Because if you stay now, it’ll be because I’m upset. But you want to go. I can see it.”

He exhaled slowly. “I just have to—I’ll—I’ll tell her that this is it. This is the last time —”

“I think you honestly believe that,” she murmured as Jason passed her. “But it never

is. There's always a next time."

She closed the door even as he was opening his mouth to say something else. And shoved the bolt home.

Elizabeth pressed her forehead against the door. It was the right decision, she knew that. She needed to make herself clear. To put herself first.

She just wished it didn't hurt so damn much.

## Chapter Eighteen

*Cause I'm not who I was  
When I took my first step  
And I'm clinging to the promise  
You're not through with me yet  
So if all of the trials bring me closer to you  
Then I will go through the fire  
If you want me to*  
- If You Want Me To, Ginny Owens

---

*Monday, September 2, 2002*

### **Kelly's: Courtyard**

When Elizabeth saw Sonny sitting down in the courtyard, she sighed and thought about asking Penny to cover the table. A month ago, she had been telling Gia she didn't know how to be happy. A week ago, she'd confessed those fears to Jason who had seemed to understand.

And two days ago, Jason had left her studio to talk to Carly again. He hadn't called her since.

She should have known.

There would *always* be a second shoe. Always a disaster.

And somehow, even though Elizabeth couldn't quite figure out why, she felt like the villain here.

She'd been honest with Jason—maybe too honest. And her timing had sucked. He'd just been drop kicked by Carly for maybe the eighth time in his life and she hadn't waited more than a handful of days before giving him what must have felt like an ultimatum.

"Hey, Elizabeth." Sonny tossed aside the menu and sat back as she poured him a cup of coffee. "How's life?"

"Oh, fantastic," she muttered. "You?"

Sonny sighed. "Can you sit?"

She didn't want to, but she could tell Sonny had something on his mind and he'd timed his visit for the post-lunch rush. "Yeah."

"I don't intend to pry," Sonny began. "I just...I'm worried. About Carly. And how Jason is handling this. He hasn't talked to me—"

"Why do you think I would know anything?" Elizabeth demanded.

Sonny blinked at her short response. "Did you...did you have another run-in with Carly?" he repeated.

"Oh, my God." Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut. This was going to be her life now. All Carly all the time. "No. She's not going to bother with me. I made my position clear to her. The only the way she gets anything from me is to tell Jason what's going on. She's not going to do that, so I'm useless to her. Is that it?"

"I—" He held out a hand to stop her as she started to rise. "I get it. Carly's not your favorite person right now, but she's in trouble—"

"I just—I can't." She threw up her hands. "I'm sorry. I *can't*. I'm a bad friend. A terrible girlfriend. Whatever label you want to slap on me. But I do not give a rat's ass if she's in trouble."

Sonny's lips formed a bit of an 'oh' as he took this tumble of words in. "Are...are you and Jason fighting? He hasn't said—I mean, he wouldn't. He'd rather chew off his own arm rather than talk to me about this stuff." He looked away.

"I don't know what we are." Elizabeth shifted. "I tried to help. I waited at the Brownstone. I did exactly what Jason and I talked about. Trying to convince her to think about Michael. But she just—God, Sonny. She's the same person she's always been, and I just get don't this obsession with getting her out of trouble. I don't care what the hell happened—"

"Ah. She..." Sonny scratched the side of his nose. "She probably didn't really like finding out you were dating Jason."

"Yeah, because I was worried about *her* opinion. Jason got that look, too, when I told him I had mentioned it. That grimace like I shouldn't have. I'm sorry, are we protecting Carly? Was my relationship with Jason something I was supposed to *lie* about?" she bit out.

"No. Just..." Sonny sighed. "Antagonizing her—"

"I'm done with this—" Elizabeth shot to her feet. "Look. I get it. I'm not an idiot. Part of the reason you and Jason are treading so cautiously is because...where ever she's been—it might be...connected to whatever. But you're both kidding yourselves if you think that's the only reason you're both so goddamn concerned. You both have spent

years bailing Carly out of her bullshit, and you're apparently addicted to it. Well, I don't have blinders where she's concerned."

"Jason doesn't see her that way—"

"This is not jealousy you're seeing and screw you, Sonny, for thinking that it's that simple. It's not a cat fight over a guy. This is about seeing Carly for who she is which I thought *you* had." Elizabeth shook her head. "Like I said, I'm a terrible person, whatever you want to say. But I'm not going to spend my day thinking about her. And I'm not going to sit by and watch while you and Jason let her wreak havoc—"

"Elizabeth." Sonny stood. "Let me just—I'm not helping, I can see that. And I'm sorry. I think—" He tilted his head. "You're thinking about Robin. And that entire mess when Carly came home, and Jason had them both in the cottage—"

"I can remember their fights at the garage when I used to visit Lucky," Elizabeth admitted. "And I know how Carly saw Robin. She was a threat. And I don't know what she did, but it worked. Because Robin left. And Jason stayed with Carly. No matter what she did, he always—"

She closed her eyes. "It's not about romantic feelings. I don't...I don't see her as a threat. Not like that. But he will *always* go running to help her, Sonny. I don't understand it. And I'm not sure I want to. She's planning something, and she's going after Jason. But then he's talking about this like it's another scheme, something he can fix. You know better than anyone else how much damage Carly can do when she's trying to help. What about when she's actively trying to destroy someone? Bobbie and Tony are still picking up the pieces of their lives. And what about Lucas and Michael? Just collateral damage in whatever she cooks up."

"You're not wrong, Elizabeth—"

"Yeah, Jason said that, too. Except *I'm* the one getting the silent treatment because I had the nerve to be honest—" Her voice broke, and she had to look away. "I told you, Sonny. I wasn't going to do this again. And here I am, all over again. Giving pieces of myself away I will *never* get back. I've already been sacrificed on the altar of the Spencer/Cassadine feud. Excuse me if I'm not really interested in signing up to be a piece of roadkill Carly leaves behind."

Sonny exhaled slowly. "You don't want to sit back like Robin did, and wait for Carly to destroy Jason's life. Again. She can't take Michael away from him again—the only thing he gives a damn about now is you. So you know—"

"Oh, don't—" Elizabeth stabbed a finger at him. "Don't you dare play that card. I get to be angry about this. Because I've been here picking up the pieces of Carly's life for *years*. You think I don't know exactly why Jason went to the boxcar that night and nearly killed himself laying in the snow?"

Sonny ducked his head. “Elizabeth—”

“I can *count*, Sonny. Jason cut you and Carly out at the same time. And then she was pregnant. So yeah, I know exactly how much damage she can do. He nearly died.”

“It’s not—” Sonny took a deep breath. “She saw him dancing with you, and I taunted her. I told her that he was moving on. And you know, he was, Elizabeth. You had to know he cared about you—”

“Not enough to stay.” Her eyes burned. “I know why he left that first time. Because of her. Because she made it clear she would keep using Michael against him. So, he gave in. And he left.” She swiped at her tears. “I’m—I’m tired, Sonny. I’m tired of being a runner-up in a contest I *never* entered—”

“You and Jason made a lot of mistakes,” Sonny said carefully. “You know that’s true. But it’s not like that now. I know he loves you, Elizabeth. He has to have told you that by now.”

“He has.” Elizabeth tilted her head back and tried to catch her breath. “But he loved Robin. And he was with her longer.”

“Fair enough.” Sonny waited a moment. “I hear what you’re saying, Elizabeth. I really do, and you know, I-I agree with you. I don’t want to watch Jason chase after Carly, solving all her problems, either. But...what exactly are you asking for him... for either us to do?”

“Stop playing her games,” she said, then sighed. “I blew up at him this weekend, he hasn’t—we haven’t—talked. I told him I wouldn’t sit back and watch him run after Carly every time she called. But...”

“Okay.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize—have you thought about talking to him again?”

“Why bother? If I were any other girl he was dating, it wouldn’t even be—I don’t know. Maybe if I hadn’t had the year I’ve had, I could swallow it. But I—I just—I’m broken. I tried to tell him—”

“Stop it.” Sonny took a step towards her, as if he wanted to do something but he left the space between them. “You’ve been through hell. And God knows, you’re not wrong about what she’s capable of. Look, let’s just... let this lie for now, okay? Do...do you feel any better for having yelled at me? Because you can keep doing that if you don’t want to talk to Jason. I can listen.”

Elizabeth sat back down, exhausted. “I don’t know anymore, Sonny. I guess...you know they said love isn’t supposed to be easy. And I believe that. If it’s worth having—and I believe Jason loves me. But it’s like it always is. We do really well inside our own bubble. When the rest of the world gets involved...” She stared at the coffee pot.

“Don’t tell him. He’s dealing with enough, and you know, I know that this isn’t easy for him. I know it would be better if I swallowed all of this and just...sucked it up. Held his hand—”

“The last thing Jason wants you to do is be anyone other than who you are. And you know what?” He dipped his head down so their eyes met. “I’m proud of you, you know. A year ago, you folded in on yourself. You weren’t honest with yourself and now you can’t hold back.”

“Yeah. Whoopee.” Elizabeth rose. “Thanks, Sonny. It did—it did help to just...admit how angry I am. And to realize that it’s not even about Jason. It’s about me. It usually is. It’s like he’s doomed to pay for the mistakes of others—”

“To be fair,” Sonny said as he held the door open for her to go back inside. “This time it looks like he’s actually paying for his own mistakes.”

### **Jake’s: Jason’s Room**

Jason grimaced as he studied his cell phone, his finger hesitating over Elizabeth’s name. This wasn’t like him.

He was decisive. He didn’t *have* second thoughts.

But he hadn’t spoken to Elizabeth in two days. Hadn’t seen her. And after four months of being with her—of spending nearly every night together—this silence sucked.

But he didn’t know how to make it stop. How to convince her that it wasn’t like all the times with Carly and Robin. That it was different.

Because Jason was almost convinced Elizabeth was *right*. That Carly wasn’t manipulating him. He’d gone to the hotel, and Carly had just cried. Told him that Sonny came to see her, said all kinds of awful things to her. If she had Michael back —

So he’d told her he wouldn’t come the next time she called. He was done waiting for her to come clean. And then he’d ignored her phone calls.

He just wished he hadn’t left Elizabeth at the studio on the Friday. That she hadn’t had to force him to see what Carly was up to.

A sharp knock drew him out of his thoughts and he closed his phone, standing.

“I know you’re in there,” Carly snarled. “Open up.”

Jason took a moment to take a deep breath and braced himself for another round with Carly. She was coming to him this time, so that had to be...a good sign.



He opened the door to find her scowling at him. “Why the hell didn’t you answer your phone?” she demanded as she stalked past him. She narrowed her eyes at the scattering of cosmetics on his dresser—Elizabeth had started to leave things here to make it easier and he liked it.

“I still cannot believe you’re dating that little twit,” Carly muttered as she whirled to face him. “What do you see in these mealy mouthed little girls, Jase?”

Jason just stared at her. “Are you serious, Carly? What did I tell you—”

Carly’s lip trembled. “If I could just see Michael, if I could—just hold him, I could...I could start to get past it. It’s hard to think about what happened when I’m so worried about him.” One solo tear slid down her cheek. “Please, Jason. Just...let me see my little boy. We can talk about anything you want after that—”

“I—” He knew his line. He knew what she expected. But Jason stopped himself.

Because Elizabeth was right. This wasn’t about Michael. This was about Carly, and all the reasons he kept bailing her out.

And it had to end.

“When you left me guardianship,” Jason said slowly, “I didn’t immediately—I tried to keep him away from AJ. I talked to Alexis. I looked at my options. But she made it clear that I faced an uphill battle.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake. You pay a judge—”

Jason shook his head. “AJ has the Quartermaines behind him. Even if he isn’t asking them for help. Any judge I tried to bribe Carly, Edward would have just given him more money. And we would have dragged Michael through all of that for nothing because I was never—” He swallowed hard. “I was never going to win.”

“She got to you, didn’t she?” Carly demanded. She picked up a tube of lipstick and sneered at it. “Little Miss Muffin Face. She’s all buddy buddy with Sonny’s stupid sister. AJ’s cheerleader. I bet Elizabeth couldn’t wait to bad mouth me and tell you to give Michael to AJ—”

There was so much...wrong in what she’d said that Jason couldn’t even take it all in. “Elizabeth didn’t tell me anything. I saw for myself. He’s sober, Carly. And he’s been good to Michael. That’s what I wanted for him—”

“You promised me,” Carly said as she tossed the lipstick down. It rolled off the bureau, across the floor. “You promised me you’d keep him away—”

“I couldn’t keep that promise—”

“So you take Michael and go,” she snapped. “There are a lot of countries without

extradition—”

Jason took a moment, tried to keep himself calm. “Michael’s life is here. *My* life is here—”

“Oh, Elizabeth, right?” Carly rolled her eyes. Dismissive. “For the next five minutes. She’ll be running soon enough.” She smirked. “Isn’t she already avoiding you?”

“Are—” Jason sucked in a breath. Damn it. “Are you watching me?”

“So I’m right. Trouble in paradise.” And a glint ignited in her eyes—something he hadn’t seen in more than two years. Something he’d thought was dead and buried.

So this was how it was gonna be, Jason thought, with a surprising amount of bitterness. “It’s that simple for you, isn’t it? You think you can do what you did before. I’ll come running because you crook your finger. What, you think I’ll take Michael away from AJ so *we* can be a family?” he demanded.

She blinked at his harsh tone. “Look, Jase, we’ve both—we’ve both gone down different roads, and I guess maybe you like the hero worship, but Elizabeth Webber can’t give you what I can—”

Jason took her wrist as she reached out to slide her hand down his chest and held it between them, his grip tight. “We haven’t been together that way in five years, Carly.”

Carly yanked her hand back. “I want my son, Jason. You know what I’m capable of—”

“And you know what *I*’m capable of,” he said, flatly. “The terms haven’t changed. You’re not getting near Michael until you tell me where the hell you’ve been for five months and why you left.”

“We’ll see about that.” Carly snapped. “I’ll get my son back, and then you’re going to pay for keeping him from me. All of you will.”

### **General Hospital: Cafeteria**

Bobbie sighed when Alan set his coffee on the table and took the seat across from her. “Hey.” His tone was kind, his eyes were concerned. And she wanted to throw herself out the window. She was sick of people looking at her that way.

“I don’t know what Carly is planning,” she said abruptly. “She came to my home in the middle of the night, screamed at me, and only came back once since then. I didn’t even see her.”

And wasn’t sure she wanted to.

“I’m not—” Alan took a deep breath. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t wondering what

Carly had in mind. But that's not—I'm just...I'm worried. And I thought we could be worried together."

She closed her eyes. "I'm not...sure I have the energy left to be worried. I feel... empty. I love my daughter, but..." Bobbie looked at her old friend. "I love her the way a mother loves a child. I gave birth to her. I supported her. And I'm glad she's alive. But at the same time—"

"You don't know what direction to go." He sipped his coffee. "How is Lucas handling all of this?"

"Lucas...is worried about Michael. He's been hanging out with him, keeping him company at AJ's. Helping the transition. He's so good to that little boy, Alan. But he hates Carly. And that will probably never change. Not after this stunt."

She hesitated. "I meant what I said. Carly hasn't sought me out since that first night. When she came back to the house the next day, I was at work, and Elizabeth was there to run interference. To try to get answers. But she and Carly argued. Mostly about Jason, I'm sure."

Bobbie stared down into her coffee, likely cold by now. "For months, I walked around in a fog, trying to do the best by her memory. By her son. And when she came home—when she walked through that door—I think I would have forgiven her anything if she'd only told me what happened. But she refuses, Alan. All she wants is Michael. There's no room in her head for me, for what she put me or Jason through by being gone for five months."

"Do you think it was willingly?" Alan asked curiously. "Carly is a lot of things, but I never—I never pictured her leaving Michael."

"I don't want to think that," Bobbie admitted. "But it's been more than a week, Alan. If she'd been kidnapped, if she'd lost her memory—why wasn't that the first words out of her mouth? What reason does she have to come back here like she's the victim? Like we did something to her—all we did was love Michael. And do our best by him. She won't—she won't slow down long enough for anyone to tell her about the custody issues."

"I wanted to tell Jason how much I appreciated him giving AJ a chance, but I knew he wasn't interested in my opinion," Alan admitted. "And the fact that he's stood by that—that AJ still has Michael even though Carly is home—"

"I would have told you that there was nothing Carly could do to make Jason cut her off. She destroyed his life over Michael. Married AJ. Slept with Sonny. Nearly got Sonny arrested twice. And still—he called her a friend."

Alan's lips thinned in displeasure. "I certainly never understood either of my sons

when it came to Carly.”

“But this?” Bobbie shook his head. “Whatever my daughter is planning on, he’s not going to bail her out.” She sighed. “Or maybe I hope not. Because I don’t see Elizabeth putting up with it for long.”

He just tipped his head in silent inquiry, so Bobbie elaborated. “Playing second fiddle to Carly. Which is what tends to happen to anyone in Jason’s life when Carly is a factor. Carly has a way of convincing Jason to help her—and I used to be grateful for that. Because he kept her from going too far. But it’s too much to ask for him be that for another person. I don’t want him to destroy his life for her. Not again.”

She sipped her coffee, then grimaced. It was ice cold and not in a good way. “I know you’re concerned about AJ losing custody of Michael again, but you know...I’m not sure my daughter has even faced the possibility that a judge is going to look at the two of them and leave the situation as it is. She’s so used to getting her way with Michael that...I fear for us all when she realizes that this time...she might lose him.”

### **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

As Elizabeth folded up a chair to stack it with the others, her toe caught the edge of another chair and she tripped, sending the whole stack sliding across the courtyard.

“What the fuck,” she muttered, kicking the chair. It clattered against the rest of them. “God I hate this world—”

“Hey.”

Elizabeth turned to find Jason at the entrance. “Hey.” She sighed and then started to pull the chairs back into formation.

“Can we talk—”

“Jason—” She closed her mouth. “Fine. Go ahead. I’ve said what I need to say, except —” She set a chair down and looked at him. “I know you’re dealing with a lot. And I’m not—I’m not a bitch. I can *see* you’re struggling. I just—”

“You’ve been around Carly long enough to know what she’s capable of.” Jason slid his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “I don’t—I don’t want this to be like it was with Robin. I didn’t do right by her. And she *was* right about Carly. You’re right.”

“Not sure that gives me a lot of comfort, Jason.” Elizabeth walked back towards the diner, opening the door. “I knew I was right. You knew I was right. But you still went.”

“You told me to go—” He stopped talking as the door swung shut behind them and he watched her go behind the counter. “But you were right. I wanted to go. I thought—I

thought I could find the right thing to say. That there *had* to be something I hadn't tried.

"Carly..." Jason hesitated. "After the accident, everyone looked at me like I was...a problem to fix. Even Robin and Sonny. They both thought they knew better than me —"

"You told me once you grew up in Sonny's eyes, but not in Robin's." Elizabeth studied him. "But that was before that night at the boxcar."

"Sonny thought I needed to be free from Carly. And he knew—he knew how to play her." Jason looked away. "So he slept with her."

"I did the math when she got pregnant. I'm sorry. But that doesn't explain—"

"Why I let Carly get away with so much." He exhaled slowly. "Carly never thought I was damaged."

Elizabeth tilted her head. "So...fixing her problems, what...proves it?"

"I guess. I don't know. I just...I see her in trouble, and something in me tells me to fix it. I never really thought about why before. I should have. I could have saved Robin a lot of pain if I could—" Jason shook his head. "That doesn't matter."

"Great. So now you know why you jump when she calls. Doesn't change it." Elizabeth slid some paperwork in her tote. "I'm surprised she hasn't called you yet. We've been here ten minutes—"

"You were right about that, too. She is—she knows when we're together. Because she knew you hadn't been at Jake's."

"Oh, I bet she did." Elizabeth's smile felt as sour as her stomach. "And she came to see you, right? Probably finally played her trump card."

"Yeah. Promised to tell me whatever I wanted if she could see Michael."

"Smart. Didn't ask for Michael outright, just to see him. You must have been tempted."

"I—" Jason hesitated. "I would have been."

"Don't do anything because you don't want to upset me." Elizabeth came out from behind the corner as she untied her apron. "You want to give in to her, that's your problem—"

"Hey—" Jason took her by the elbow. "Just—just stop. Can you just *listen* to me? Or are you going to—"

“Be bitchy?” Elizabeth demanded. “What, do you want a cookie because you saw Carly was manipulating you before you gave in? We’re all out, but maybe I can dig up a lollipop—”

“Elizabeth—Damn it.”

She stepped back away from him. “I’m sorry. What do you want from me?”

“I—” He dragged his hands through his hair. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, Elizabeth. Whatever Carly is up to, she had help. How the hell do I know it’s not someone coming after us? What if she’s part of it?”

Elizabeth looked down at her feet. “Jason—”

“She thought I would just—” His hands dropped to his side. “She thought I would bring her Michael and we’d—we’d just be a family. Like nothing happened.”

She rolled her eyes. “I saw that coming, too, didn’t I?”

“There’s nothing—” Jason paused. “You don’t have to feel threatened by Carly, Elizabeth. I told you. I love you.”

“I’m not *threatened* by Carly,” Elizabeth said with a touch of disgust. “I’m just—I told you. I’m not interested in letting her play you like a piano while I stand by and wring my hands. Carly’s not going to run my life.”

“I don’t plan on letting Carly run my life either,” Jason said, his eyes flashing with impatience. “It’s been a *week*—”

“No one ever plans for Carly,” she shot back. “That’s how she gets you. Great, Jason. You know she’s manipulating you. I’m thrilled for you.”

“Elizabeth—”

“I don’t want to fight anymore. I really don’t.” She rubbed her eyes. “I’m tired. I’m tired of watching Bobbie kill herself trying to understand her daughter. Of worrying about you and Michael. I’m just...I’m *tired* of Carly, Jason.”

“I know.” He swallowed hard. “This is—it’s gonna be over soon, okay? She’ll screw up. Or she’ll realize I’m not coming through for her. And she’ll have to tell us what’s going on. Just...” He held his hand out to her on the table, his palm facing up. “Just give me a chance, okay?”

Against her better judgment, Elizabeth took his hand. For all the times she hadn’t stood by him the year before—she owed him this. Even if everything inside of her was screaming at her to get out before it all fell apart.

Jason had never let her down, so she had to trust that he wouldn’t this time.

## Chapter Nineteen

*Couldn't take the blame*  
*Sick with shame*  
*Must be exhausting to lose your own game*  
*Selfishly hated*  
*No wonder you're jaded*  
*You can't play the victim this time*  
*And you're too late*  
- Call Me When You're Sober, Evanescence

---

*Tuesday, September 3, 2002*

### **Kelly's: Courtyard**

Bobbie poked at her lunch, unable to muster the appetite necessary to lift the fork. Across the table, Felicia Jones tipped her head. "Hey. This was supposed to distract you."

"As if that were possible." Bobbie moved her salad listlessly across the plate. "She's been home an entire week."

"I know."

"And I haven't seen her." Bobbie pursed her lips. "Haven't wanted to. I know where she's staying. I know Jason is keeping watch—I just don't care. God. How awful that sounds."

"I know that I can't imagine either of my daughters ever doing anything that would get me to that point," Felicia said slowly, "but then again, Bobbie, you didn't raise Carly. She's only been in your life for four years as your daughter. Before that—"

"She was the conniving bitch who broke up my marriage." Bobbie sighed, pressing a hand to her head. "Yes, I know. And I've moved on from that. Because—because I see myself in her, you know? That willingness to do whatever I had to to get what I thought I deserved. I mean, I'm not some shining example—"

"You did things when you were younger, sure." Felicia shrugged. "We've all done things we're not proud of. I mean, I broke up a marriage to a good man for... something that didn't exist. You and Tony both did that, too. Everyone makes mistakes. But not everyone revels in it the way Carly does. I honestly think she gets

off on the damage.”

“I wouldn’t have thought so before,” Bobbie murmured. “But the woman who came back...something happened during those five months, Felicia. I just...I feel like if she would just tell me, we could get past this. Maybe not Jason and Carly—I honestly think he’s done with her—but maybe I could get over it.”

“Maybe. Or maybe her reasons wouldn’t be good enough. I mean, it sounds like they’re not good enough for Jason. Is he still not turning custody over to her?”

“No, but—” Bobbie sighed. “I’m surprised.” She paused. “Or maybe I’m not. I remember thinking when she came home that I didn’t want him to get caught up in her games again. Not just because I care about him, but...”

“But because he’s dating Elizabeth Webber?”

“Yes. I didn’t want that for her, either. You were at that stupid wedding, Felicia. You saw the reaction when she walked away from Lucky. From that entire fiasco. She’s kept walking, and she’s...she’s the girl I always thought she’d grow up to be. I wanted that for her, and I wanted her to be happy. And...Jason chasing Carly isn’t the life I wanted for her.”

“I always thought it was a shame that Robin and Jason broke up the way they did,” Felicia said slowly. “Mac was relieved. He hated how Robin just...let Carly walk all over her. But I never saw it that way. I think Robin knew she and Jason were on borrowed time once she left for college that first time. She was just holding on to him. To the familiarity. And he was, too. They were already over, they just didn’t know it.”

“I guess.” Bobbie leaned back in her chair. “But since Carly’s been home, I’m relieved that Jason hasn’t given in. Because it means he’s putting Michael first. And Elizabeth, if not first as well, a close second—”

“Because everyone is better than *me*.”

The venomous bitter words startled both women as they turned to see Carly standing just behind the table. When had she—

“Carly,” Bobbie said. But then stopped. What could she say to this woman? This woman who wore the same anger that she’d known all those years ago when they’d first known one another? Her daughter hated her again the same visceral way she’d had when she’d first come to Port Charles.

“Everyone is a better person than me,” Carly continued. Almost growling. “Right? Elizabeth is a better daughter. A better girlfriend. Probably a better mother. Michael probably just loved her.”

When Felicia picked up her milkshake and just slurped it, Bobbie shot her a dirty



look. “Carly,” she began again. “That’s not how it was—we all missed you—” Well, not all, but that was important. “I grieved for you—”

“I’m not the daughter you wanted,” Carly retorted. “I got that from the moment I came to Port Charles. All everyone could ever talk about was BJ and how perfect she was—”

“God, Carly—” Bobbie just closed her eyes as a shaft a pain pierced her. Nearly a decade and it still took her breath away. “That’s not fair—”

“I come back again, and it’s all about Elizabeth Goddamn Webber. Jason loves her. You love her. God knows Sonny loves her more than his own damned sister—but what about me?”

“What *about* you?” Bobbie shoved herself to her feet. “I buried you, Carly. I wept for you. What do you want from any of us? You were dead—”

“You sure didn’t look very hard,” Carly cut in. “From what I hear, the Coast Guard called off the search within twenty-four hours? You all just jumped at the chance to be rid of me.”

“Carly, Bobbie was inconsolable,” Felicia said, finally. “She went to the PCPD day after day, trying to convince them to keep searching. They kept it open longer than they might have because of her—”

“Then why isn’t she helping me get my son back?” Carly demanded. She focused those angry dark eyes on Bobbie’s. “Why aren’t you helping me?”

“I’m not—” Bobbie exhaled slowly. “You weren’t gone a week. Or two weeks, Carly. You were gone five months. Where *were* you?” she demanded, her voice breaking. “What happened?”

“I didn’t want to believe it,” Carly said with a shake of her head. “I couldn’t believe that you would all forget me. That I didn’t matter. But it was like I never existed. My son, living with the man who killed my child. My best friend in the world, dating someone else, breaking bread with that son of a bitch. My own mother helping them—My ex-husband didn’t even go to my memorial—” Her voice broke. “You all forgot me. It was like I *never* existed.”

Felicia frowned, but Bobbie just shook her head. “No, no. That’s not—we all struggled to put it back together. Those first two months were horrible. I couldn’t tell one day from the next, and Lucas had to practically take over. Get Michael to school. Look out for him—I couldn’t *breathe*, Carly—”

Her daughter just shook her head. “I don’t believe that. How could I believe that? You gave my son away to a dangerous and violent alcoholic like he didn’t matter—just one more reminder of your mistake, right, Mama?” She swiped at her tears. “And

Jason never loved me. How could he? How could he love me and then not even help —”

“Carly—”

“You’re all going to be sorry,” Carly growled. “I’ll get my son back and then I’m taking him away from all of you.” She spun on her heel and stalked back to the parking lot.

“Damn it,” Bobbie muttered, sitting back down. “Damn it. How could she think we didn’t miss her? That we could have forgotten—”

“I didn’t want to believe it,” Felicia echoed softly. She looked at Bobbie. “She couldn’t believe you would all forget her. She didn’t want to believe it.”

“She just can’t see how it was—”

“Bobbie. Listen to me,” Felicia cut in, and her sharp tone forced Bobbie to take a deep breath. To look at her. “Listen to me. Carly came home last week ready to go to war. She was *already* angry when she came to your house, remember? And you told me that Jason thought she already knew about AJ. Already knew where Michael was.”

“Right.” Bobbie exhaled slowly. “She didn’t want to believe that we all forgot her.”

“Which means...someone told her that.” Felicia tapped her nails. “Not that it excuses any of the bullshit she’s pulling, Bobbie, but I think you might want to tell Jason that someone was feeding Carly information while she was gone.”

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

“I don’t understand how she could just disappear,” Sonny said slowly, squinting at Benny and Stan, “and then reappear, and there be nothing to explain it.”

“I wish I could help you,” Stan said with a shrug. “We’ve dug into all of her accounts. She was declared legally dead about two weeks after the accident. Her estate went into probate. And nothing. Nothing before. Nothing until she showed up at the Cosmopolitan. Bobbie hadn’t dealt with Carly’s accounts—”

“And it didn’t occur to me to do anything about them either,” Jason interrupted. “Custody came first.” He rubbed his eyes. “I don’t see why anyone would fake her death to get at us.”

“She was barely connected,” Sonny mused. “Why fake it at all? Why not kill her outright? What is served by having her come home? It’s not adding up, Jase. It just isn’t. If she had faked her own death, there would have been a trail. Carly’s smart, but not that smart. The fact that we can’t pick up her scent—”

“What about the witness that called in the accident?” Jason asked. He looked to Stan. “If she wasn’t in the accident—”

“He’s in the wind,” Stan said. “If he ever existed. To be honest, we didn’t—” He hesitated. “We didn’t really check him out before. It all seemed on the up and up.”

“Witness calls in an accident with Carly’s car,” Sonny said with a nod. “I didn’t even know anything until the morning, but by then the Coast Guard was already searching. The PCPD had confirmed something happened up there. Carly never came home. It all added up.”

“But the accident was a set up if this witness is gone.” Jason exhaled slowly. “I keep going back to it being connected to us, Sonny. But I just—it doesn’t make work for me.”

“Roscoe does not have the resources to pull this off. And we’re watching Nico’s money too closely. We weren’t in April, but we were by the end of May. Where could they have kept Carly that we wouldn’t have had noticed?” Benny pointed out. “But even so —”

“What do they gain?” Sonny pressed. “She’s my ex-wife, yeah. Your ex...whatever. But not now. Everyone had to know about the divorce. We barely saw one another those last few months. Why Carly? Why not—” And he hesitated at that. “Why not someone who was still in my life? I have a sister. There’s Courtney. Mike. And Elizabeth has been around for years. Why *Carly*?”

“It brought you home, Jase,” Stan pointed out. “Maybe someone knew you would have custody of her son. That you’d have to be here.”

“Then there’s no way it’s Nico or Roscoe, because the last thing they wanted was your eyes on the paperwork again,” Benny argued. “But who else?”

They were arguing in circles, but Jason finally shook his head. “This all depends on whether or not we believe Carly did this on her own or if she had help. Or if it was unwillingly. Everything else....it doesn’t matter. Because—”

“You think Carly managed this all on her own?” Sonny shook his head. “I know I said as much to her, and she let me think it was about you, but I’m not buying it, Jase. *She* doesn’t have the resources—”

“I think it’s possible that she was in an accident,” Jason said slowly. “And maybe... she planned to stay away a day or two. Or just long enough to make a point. Maybe it was for you. Maybe it was me. I don’t know. I doubt she meant to stay away for months, but—”

“Maybe it started as her idea but got twisted by someone else,” Sonny said with a nod. “Remember what Bobbie said—that Carly didn’t want to believe we had forgotten her. You don’t have to believe something you don’t know about. She came back to Port Charles already pissed off, playing it like she didn’t know where Michael was—”

“Elizabeth suggested she followed us the night we took Michael to AJ’s,” Jason said. “I think she followed us longer than that. Or someone did. Because—” And at this hesitated, because it was personal. But it might be important. “We usually spend the night together. At Jake’s most of the time. I don’t like the apartment because of Taggart, and her studio doesn’t—” He shook his head. “Anyway, Elizabeth wasn’t at my place for more than a week. And Carly knew it. She thought it meant we were having issues.”

“And if she knew Elizabeth was usually at your place—someone had to tell her, or she followed you for several days.”

“So we’re back to thinking Carly had help,” Jason said, a bit relieved by that. “She’ll have to tell us eventually, Sonny.” It was what he had clung to all month—this assurance that when it came down to a choice between whatever secret she was holding and her son, Carly would come clean.

Then Jason could—

And then he stopped himself. He didn’t *want* to fix this for her. It was reflex to look at this situation as a problem he had to solve for Carly. Carly had made her choice that first night she’d been back. Every time she had called him and not told him the truth. And when she come to Jake’s and attempted to exploit his issues with Elizabeth.

She didn’t care about him. About what was important to him. And if he was honest with himself, Carly had never concerned herself with that. She told herself she did—but it had never been true.

And he let himself think it was—if he let himself get sucked into helping Carly, making her problems go away—he knew it wouldn’t stop there.

Carly would take it as invitation to go back to where she had been in his life before Sonny. Looking over his shoulder. Taking care of herself first and then punishing him later.

He’d already let it happen once and watched Robin walk away from him.

He would be damned if he’d let Elizabeth go to take care of Carly.

“Or maybe she won’t come,” Jason admitted. “I don’t know. I’ve given up trying to predict Carly’s next move, Sonny. But I don’t think we can just...assume there’s nothing behind it. It doesn’t make sense right now. But nothing in the last week has made sense. We should just—keep our eyes open. Because whatever she’s up to—”

“—we’re not going to know what hit us.”

**Vista Point: Cliff Road**

Elizabeth frowned when Jason pulled the bike over to the shoulder near the guard rail where Carly had had her accident. “What—”

He switched off the engine and then walked to the edge of the road. The rail had been replaced at some point that summer. Like the accident had never happened.

“I met with Sonny today while you were in class,” he told her when she joined him. “We were talking about how Carly could have pulled off faking her death without help.”

“Okay.”

He looked at her with a wary expression. “I know you’re sick of Carly—”

“I am,” she admitted. “But she’s a problem that exists whether I’m here or not, and I’d rather be here. So what are you thinking?”

“Sonny thought she might have faked the accident to get his attention. Or mine.”

“Because if she were missing, Sonny would call you.”

“I keep coming back to that...because it *seems* logical. It seems like an asinine plan Carly would pull to make a point. I didn’t talk to her all that much, but she was always asking me to come back.” Jason hesitated. “And I was starting to consider it. I wanted—” He looked at her. “I knew you weren’t seeing Lucky. I guess I was starting to wonder if it would be different this time.”

She managed a smile for him. “I’m glad you did come home. I’m just sorry any of this is happening. Is that you think Carly did?”

“I don’t know. Because...the guard rail was damaged. It was ripped apart and mangled. *Something* went over this cliff.”

“Maybe Carly’s car.” Elizabeth pursed her lips. “She loved that car. First thing she bought when the divorce settlement came through. She used to drive Bobbie crazy with it—you could hear her speeding down the block.” She hesitated. “I’m not saying Carly wouldn’t...fake her death to get to you or Sonny. Because there’s literally nothing Carly wouldn’t do. But...I don’t know. She loved that car.”

“I think someone took her,” Jason said quietly. “And I don’t know what happened after that. I don’t know if she stayed away willingly. I know someone told her we were all living our lives like she hadn’t ever been here. Like she didn’t matter. That doesn’t make what Carly’s doing right—”

“She thinks we were all better off without her. Happier without her.” Elizabeth exhaled slowly. “Yeah. I can see how—I mean, we talked about it back then, Jason. How there were only a handful of people who were really going to miss her.”

“When Carly gets angry, she doesn’t usually stop to think until she’s forced to,” Jason murmured. “And she hasn’t been forced to. She’s running on that anger now. She thinks it’ll work. But she hasn’t gone to court. Hasn’t asked a lawyer to get custody.”

“Because she doesn’t think she’d win. Or she’d have to tell everyone where she’s been.”

“And she doesn’t want to do that.” Jason turned, leaned against the guard rail. “She could get joint custody at least at this point if she told us the truth. Joint custody is better than what she has now. She’s not telling us.”

“Which means it’s more complicated than a plan that backfired.” Elizabeth nodded. She folded her arms and looked away. “It’s not just the car that has me hesitating to completely...blame her. I *want* to blame her, Jason. Because it’s convenient. Because I don’t like her. But...she loved that car. And she loves Michael. And you. If this was designed to get you home, Jason—she never would have stayed away for five months. It’s not like you and I got together right away. There was a window for her to come home. And she didn’t.”

“Because she couldn’t.” Jason looked away. “I don’t know. I can’t explain why someone would fake her death and then just send her back. Maybe they threatened her if she told the truth. I just—I can’t put Michael in the middle of it. Even if it ends it sooner.”

Elizabeth’s shoulders relaxed as she exhaled slowly. “I know what I said before about...Carly using him. But I wonder if...he’s been asking about her, Courtney told me. And everyone thought...Carly would come clean by now.”

Jason raised his brows. “I thought you said—”

“I didn’t want you to bring Michael to her because Carly manipulated you. This is different. That was four days ago. She’s been home a week and a half...and she’s just treading water. She’s waiting for you to give in, Jason.”

“So you think I should—”

“I don’t know. I don’t...” Elizabeth chewed on her bottom lip. “I just know that we can’t keep waiting. We’re at a stalemate, Jason, and if Carly is the first one to make a move...that’s kind of a terrifying thought. She once shot a man in open court. And it was her idea to—” She bit her lip. “You know why AJ surrendered his rights, don’t you?”

“I figured Sonny or Carly blackmailed him—” Jason hissed. “What happened?”

“Sonny threatened his life. Hung him on a meat hook and left him in a freezer for a few hours to make his point. Either AJ signed Michael away or...” Elizabeth trailed off. “It was the only way Carly agreed to go quietly in the divorce. And Sonny wanted

the divorce. You know he's never liked AJ."

"This was Carly's idea?" Jason asked, in disbelief. "I mean...I know AJ has his issues, but that's...that's—"

"I didn't know about it at the time. AJ told Courtney, and Courtney told me and Gia. He doesn't know I know. I think he's ashamed of himself for giving in. For not being a better father or something. I don't know. Anyway, that's not my point." She hesitated. "My point is that if we wait for Carly to make the next move, I don't think any of us are going to be happy. I don't want Michael in the middle of this, Jason, but it doesn't change the fact that he is."

"Yeah, I guess. I can't—I can't just...do it on my own." He grimaced. "It's not just my decision."

"We can talk to AJ and Courtney tomorrow," she told him. "They're both...worried as well. AJ's kind of...terrified you'll change your mind and he'll have to fight for Michael in court. So we'll figure this out." She took his face in her hands. "I don't really care where she was, Jason, but I always understood you did. And that for all of our sakes, you needed to know. What bothered me was that—"

"I let her manipulate me because I wanted the answers," he said quietly. "I know. And I'm sorry. I wasn't fair to either of us." He wrapped his hands around her wrists and leaned down to brush her lips with his. "You want to drive back?"

"Wow, you really are sorry." She offered him a wicked grin. "I want a rain check on that offer because I'd rather go nowhere. Fast."

"Done."

### **Cosmopolitan Hotel: Carly's Suite**

Carly paced in her hotel suite, growling at her phone. Why the hell wasn't Jason answering her calls? He had to be desperate by now.

If he would just give her Michael, she could tell him everything. That was the deal. She'd been so sure of him—so sure of their friendship, of his loyalty—

It had never occurred to her that Jason would betray her. That he would be like everyone else.

That he would steal her son and give him away to Carly's worst enemy. To the man who had murdered her baby.

If Jason didn't give her back Michael, Carly was going to make him pay just like all the rest—

The knock at her door had her leaping across the room. Finally! Maybe he had

Michael with him—that was why he hadn't answered any of her calls—

“Ah, Ms. Benson.”

Carly scowled. “What do you want?”

“I'm checking in. We agreed you would have some time to convince Mr. Morgan to cooperate. To give you back your son.” Mickey Roscoe tipped his head with a knowing smile. “I see he hasn't come through. It's just as I told you.”

“I just need a little more time—”

“I know how we can force Mr. Morgan's hand. And...” Mickey's lips curved into a smile. “Don't you want a little revenge?”



## Chapter Twenty

*Through this world I've stumbled  
So many times betrayed,  
Trying to find an honest word,  
To find the truth enslaved,  
Oh you speak to me in riddles and  
You speak to me in rhymes  
My body aches to breathe your breath,  
Your words keep me alive*  
- Possession, Sarah McLachlan

---

*Friday, September 6, 2002*

### **Jake's: Jason's Room**

Elizabeth squinted at her textbook. "What made me think I wanted to major in business again?"

"You thought you should know what you were doing with Kelly's." Jason dropped a kiss on top of her head as he set coffee down in front of her. "Sorry—it's from down the street."

She wrinkled her nose. "Maybe Jake will let us have a hot plate or a coffee machine in here. You should look into it—"

"Maybe." Jason sat across from her at the small table currently covered with textbooks, folders, and notebooks. "You don't like coffee enough to worry about it."

"You don't have to like something to appreciate its benefits." Elizabeth sipped the glorious caffeine. "After January, I won't need it as much. I won't have to schedule my shifts around my class schedule, and I think one of the benefits of being manager is I shouldn't have to work opening. No need for coffee when you're not dragging your ass out of bed at four-thirty."

She hesitated a moment before asking, "Are you and AJ still meeting with your attorneys today?"

"Yeah." Jason rubbed his temple with his thumb. "Yeah. Carly...should be served on Monday. Once I surrender guardianship to AJ...I'm out of it. She won't have an excuse not to tell me." He paused. "You still don't like this idea."

“Anything that gives Carly more of a reason to be angry with you is not my first choice, no. *And* you lose your leverage. As long as you control Michael’s custody, Carly has to pay attention to you. You give it to AJ...” Elizabeth shrugged. Picked up her highlighter.

“I know it’s risky. I know it might make Carly...go crazy. But it also might make her angry enough to let something slip. We have to change the situation.”

“I know, I know.” She bit her lip. “I just...I don’t want you to get hurt.”

He lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “I’ve survived Carly’s plans before.”

She sighed but said nothing more on the subject. Jason still had his blinders on where Carly was concerned. Carly had only been able to inflict emotional damage on Jason because Jason had never been the direct target, and he wasn’t taking that into account. But she had already voiced her worries and concerned. Jason had considered them but had ultimately decided it was worth the risk.

So, she managed a smile for him. “You have to go to the warehouse today?”

“Yeah, September is the end of the fiscal year, so Benny wants me to look at the books for the warehouse.” Jason eyed her. “You want me to look at Kelly’s records, too?”

“No,” Elizabeth muttered. “I’m smart. I can do it.” She wrinkled her nose. “Maybe you could double check them or something.”

When he just shrugged, she set her highlighter down. “What?”

“You don’t like managing Kelly’s,” Jason said after a moment. “And you hate your business classes.”

“So why do I bother with either?” Elizabeth asked her brows raised. “I needed something to do every day after I called off the wedding. I had really lost touch with my art, and I didn’t have anything else. I was afraid if I didn’t fill every hour of my day with something—I might be tempted to drift back.” She shrugged. “Bobbie asked me to take over Kelly’s. And Gia thought it might be fun to go back to school together. I’m not sorry I did it. And I’m excited to graduate. To finish it. And I know I’ve done a good job at Kelly’s.”

“Okay.”

“But you’re right. It’s not really what I want to do. I was gonna talk to Bobbie about it...about maybe training Courtney or someone else so I could start focusing on art.” She bit her lip. “And then Carly came home.”

“Yeah.” He scratched his forehead. “Well, that...I don’t know what’s going to happen with that. But you should tell Bobbie. You know she wouldn’t want you to put your

life on hold for her.”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth put the cap on her highlighter and closed her economics book.

“Well, that’s a conversation for another day.”

### **Kelly’s: Alley**

Jason followed Elizabeth to the back door, but before she opened it, he touched her elbow. “Hey...about this morning—”

Elizabeth turned back to him with a quizzical smile. “What? Kelly’s?”

“No.” He hesitated. “You...said we should ask Jake about...a hot plate or something.” Jason shifted, unsure why he felt nervous. He knew he wanted to make some changes, grateful that he and Elizabeth were on the same page after last week.

“Oh. I was just joking—”

“Yeah, but it made me think...” He took her hand in his. “It might be nice to have... good coffee for a change. And not always order out.”

“What, can you cook?” Elizabeth asked with a grin. “Because I can make a mean bowl of soup on the hot plate at my studio...” She poked him in the chest lightly with her free hand. “I bet Sonny taught you, didn’t he?”

“Yeah.” He grabbed her other hand, and then held both of them behind her back as he kissed her. She laughed against his lips as he backed her against the brick wall of Kelly’s back alley, deepening the kiss.

“What was that for?” she asked, her breath shallow as Jason pulled back.

“Just wanted to.” Jason slid a tendril of hair behind her ear. “What I was thinking is maybe we should find a place. With a kitchen.”

“You mean...live together?” Elizabeth asked. She bit her lip but smiled. “You could always move into our place. I bet Gia—”

“Yeah, I want live downstairs from Taggart,” Jason replied with a grin. “Elizabeth—”

“No, I think—” She hesitated. “I like it. Let’s talk about it. You’re coming by after you and AJ meet with the lawyers, right?”

“Yeah.” Though he shared her concerns that this wasn’t the best way forward—no one had had a better idea when they’d talked about it earlier that week. And he still had an itch between his shoulders at the thought of going to AJ with problems and working together to solve them.

He wondered if that was what was to really have a brother. A person you didn’t like

one hundred percent of the time, respected sometimes, wanted to slap upside the head for being an idiot most of the time, and yet...turned to for help when you needed it.

“Well, you owe me a rain check on driving...” She pressed her lips to the corner of his mouth. “So, I’ll take it tonight, and we’ll talk it over...but...” Elizabeth licked her lips. “I like it. We already spend all our time together anyway. Might be nice not to pay rent on a place where I barely live anymore.”

He laughed, kissed her again. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Mmm, I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

### **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

Elizabeth grimaced as she saw Carly sitting at a table in her section. That’s what she got for trading the opening shift with Penny.

“Carly,” she said with a wary smile, digging a notebook out of her pocket. “What’s—” And then she looked at the blonde for the first time since their encounter the Sunday after she’d blown up all their lives.

Carly looked like shit. Her eyes were red, her makeup nonexistent, her hair drawn back into a ponytail—Elizabeth wasn’t entire sure she’d seen the woman not look perfectly put together.

“Tell me about the custody problems Jason had,” she said softly, her fingers clutching the empty water glass like a lifeline. “Why did he agree to give AJ custody?”

Elizabeth sighed, and then sank down into a chair across from her. “Carly, you should talk to Jason about this—”

“He’s so angry with me,” Carly murmured. Not meeting her eyes. Her red nails were chipped. “I’ve *never* seen him so angry. Not even when I slept with Sonny. When I went to the Quartermaines. I see him now, and it’s that look—it’s not even hurt. It’s just...anger.”

“Okay.” Elizabeth set her order pad and pencil on the table. “Jason couldn’t get back for almost a week. By that time, the Quartermaines had already started circling Bobbie. *Not* AJ—it’s important that you know that. AJ told me, and he told his family, that he would not go after Michael’s custody right away.”

Carly raised her eyes. “What? Why? Wouldn’t—Jason wasn’t there—”

“To disrupt Michael’s life in that way when he was already grieving you,” Elizabeth said slowly, “was something AJ didn’t want to do. I’m not going to pretend it was his

conscience entirely making that decision. He had an attorney advising him to wait as well. To go after Michael before his legal guardian could take stock of the situation—it wouldn't reflect well. So, yeah, AJ waited."

"It wasn't..." Carly closed her eyes. "You said Mama grieved."

"She went to the PCPD every day for a week. The Coast Guard wouldn't search after the first few days. The currents were too strong, they told us. But Bobbie convinced Mac to keep looking. And Sonny offered money if they wanted to do private searches. But.... based on what we knew about the location of the accident—it's where Brenda's car went into the lake."

"I—" Carly cleared her throat. "I remember. I think they said it would be impossible. With—with how deep the lake is there."

"Her car would have been swept out towards the St. Lawrence." Elizabeth rolled the pencil between her fingers. "You know how Bobbie gets. She started to throw herself into the details. Into dealing with your estate. Into the memorial service. Anything she could do to occupy her brain. Lucas and I took care of Michael the first week because she wouldn't sit down long enough. If she did—she wouldn't be able to breathe."

Carly nodded. "Okay. Then what happened?"

If Carly wanted a blow by blow—if this would help—Elizabeth just shrugged. "Jason came home. And then your will was read. Alexis told him his chances in court were just...awful. He was probably not going to win."

"Why?" Carly demanded, her eyes fierce now. "That's stupid. AJ gave up his rights. So, it shouldn't have mattered—"

"And that's how Jason saw it at first, too. AJ wasn't in the picture for him. He had this promise to you, and he wasn't convinced AJ was good for Michael." Elizabeth bit her lip. "But it wasn't that simple, Carly. AJ didn't have his rights *taken* by the court. He surrendered them voluntarily." Her lips twisted. "Or so the court is concerned. Jason is Michael's uncle, but he was *also* the reason AJ wasn't in Michael's life from birth. His lie was part of it. And Jason actively worked to keep them apart."

Carly huffed and sat back. "So, the court would have thrown the book at him for it," she muttered. "That's fucking stupid."

"Maybe. But that's how the court would have seen it, Carly. And if Jason had a prayer of winning, he'd have to drag Michael to therapists. He'd have to talk to lawyers and judges and counselors. He'd already lost you, and to do that to him, and not be guaranteed anything—do you have any idea how much that broke his heart?"

"Maybe," Carly murmured. "Then he should have taken Michael and left—" Her eyes

burned. “He wouldn’t leave *you*.”

“I was not a factor in this, Carly,” Elizabeth retorted. “We weren’t even dating at the point most of this was happening. The truth of it is, Carly, AJ is not the villain you think he is—”

“He killed my baby!”

Elizabeth sat back. Waited a moment. “I won’t pretend I understand that pain, Carly. I don’t. I know what it is to lose someone you love, but I can’t imagine it holds a candle to the loss of a child.”

A tear slid down Carly’s cheek. “It was his fault. It *is*. He pushed me...” Her voice faded, and she looked away. “I wanted him dead. But Sonny wouldn’t let me. So, I had to settle for taking Michael away. Keeping him safe.”

“And punishing AJ for it forever.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Carly said, lifting her chin defiantly. “But, yes. Why not?”

“Because AJ didn’t push you—”

“*You* weren’t there—”

“But other people were,” Elizabeth said gently. “And no one else tells the story that way. I get it, Carly. I get why you blame him. You have to blame him. It has to be his fault completely. Because it’s the only way you can get past it. But it doesn’t change the fact that he didn’t push you.”

“You don’t understand—” Carly shoved to her feet. “It is his fault. And now he has my little boy—”

“He’s been sober a year, Carly, but Jason was worried. He signed an agreement that kept him in control. AJ only saw Michael when Jason said it was okay. They talked to therapists. AJ and Michael went to a counselor. They started with supervised visits. Last week? It was the first full week after three entire months. Jason did everything he could to protect Michael, and AJ agreed every step of the way to let Jason keep that control. Because Michael came first for both of them.” Elizabeth pushed to her feet. “Can you say that for yourself?”

“Excuse me?” Carly demanded.

“Have you ever put anyone *but* yourself first?”

“How dare you—”

“Were you putting Michael first when you slept with Sonny and ruined his family at

the Quartermaines? When you forced AJ to give up his rights in the first place? When you ran away for five months?" Elizabeth retorted. "When you came home and refused to tell anyone what the hell was going on? Did you put Michael first when you tried to seduce Jason last week?"

"Oh, *that's* what this is about." Carly flipped her hair over her shoulder and that arrogant light was back in her eyes. "You're just mad because I tempted your boyfriend. You worried?"

"Not in the slightest, Carly. If Jason wanted you, he'd have you. And you know that. *I* am not the reason you don't have Jason." Elizabeth jabbed a finger at her. "That's on *you*. You destroyed any chance you ever had with Jason, and you hate me because I'm the one he loves. That's not my fault. None of this is my fault."

"I don't even know why I bothered to ask you anything—"

"Because you know I don't give a shit about you enough to lie."

Elizabeth's words stopped Carly as she started to storm out of the courtyard. "What?" Carly asked, whirling around.

"You thought your mother would sugar coat it. Make AJ into some kind of sympathetic hero. Or absolve Jason of something. Because she loves you. And Jason would take the blame all on himself. You know I don't care enough to do either."

Carly pressed her lips together and looked away. "I had my reasons for what happened."

"And that's great. I don't care about your reasons, Carly. They're not my problem. What matters to me is Jason, Bobbie, and Michael. They're my family. And you destroyed them. Right now, you have the two people who love you—who *genuinely* grieved your loss—you have them thinking you did it on purpose. That you faked your death to get Jason's attention or something."

"Yeah, everyone loves to make me the bad guy," Carly muttered.

"And I'm not saying it's not something you would never do," Elizabeth said. "But I know how much you love Michael. And how much you loved that club. And your car. You never would have sacrificed all three of them to make a stupid point."

Carly's eyes were wet with tears when she met Elizabeth's eyes. "I didn't fake my death."

"I'm not the person you should be telling." Elizabeth gestured in the direction. "You should tell Jason. Because whatever trouble you're in, he can fix it. More than that, he *wants* to fix it. So just let him."

## Corinthos & Morgan: Warehouse

When one of the guards told Jason Carly was there to see him, Jason almost told him to send her away. Having made the decision to surrender guardianship to AJ, Jason really didn't want to go another round with Carly.

Particularly when he was almost convinced that she would never tell him what the hell was going on, and he wasn't interested in keeping his life on hold to fix hers anymore.

He'd wanted to take a few days with Elizabeth before her classes started. He knew that she and Gia had been saving for a vacation for that week all summer, and Jason had planned to surprise them both with a week on the island. He could have gone to Puerto Rico to do some business, giving them time alone.

But Carly *had* come home, and none of them had left. Gia Campbell would never be his favorite person, but she'd proved to be the kind of loyal and devoted friend Carly had always claimed to be, and she'd stayed home with Elizabeth.

"Jason?" Max asked again with raised brows. "You want me to get rid of her?"

He sighed. "No." Jason waved his hand. "Let her in."

He'd tell her in person what he was planning to do. Maybe the shock of it—

But then Carly came in, tears stained her cheek, her hands were trembling. "I can't—I can't do it."

"Okay." Jason got to his feet and steered her to one of the chairs in front of the desk. "Can't do what?"

"I can't do what he asked. I can't. I'm so *mad* at you, Jase. So angry. But not that angry. I'm not. I can't ever be that angry."

With a sinking feeling, Jason sat in the chair next to her. He'd been right. Someone had orchestrated this. "Who asked what? Let's...start at the beginning."

"Elizabeth was right. I loved that car." Carly's lip trembled, but she swallowed hard. "I was just...I was driving the cliff roads. You used to talk about your bike a-and I hated that stupid thing, but I loved taking those turns in that car. Sonny hated that car, but I *loved* it—"

She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. "I don't—I don't remember the accident. Just—there were bright lights. And then pain. And then nothing. I don't know if the car went into the water. God. I don't know if *I* went into the water. I just—there *was* an accident, Jase."

Bright lights. Maybe headlights. "What is the next thing you remember?"



"It's hard...I feel like..." She bit her lip. "I think I was kept drugged. I don't know. You know that feeling when you just drift? You can't...you can't wake up. You can't open your eyes. You just...drift. You tell your body to move and it just ignores you." She sucked in another shaky breath. "I don't know how long that...that lasted. I just don't. But um, when I was conscious—I thought I was in a hospital or something. A nurse told me—she told me I was in Canada. Toronto. But I think—"

"That was a lie," Jason told her gently. "The PCPD looked in all the hospitals in the region. Sonny and I did, too. And then we looked a second time when you came home. No one with your description was admitted and then wasn't accounted for."

"Okay. Okay. Um, she told me there was an accident. That I had been in a coma for a while or something. It was...I woke up two weeks before that night. I didn't stay away the whole time, Jason, I wouldn't do that to Michael."

"I didn't think so, either." Jason hesitated. "I thought you might have...that you might have faked the accident, but not for so long. I thought whoever helped you kept you—"

Carly closed her eyes. "Yeah, I guess...I guess I haven't given you a reason not to... think that. The shit I've pulled, Jase...I'm surprised your hair isn't white."

She dragged her hands through her hair. "Okay. Okay. So, then this guy comes in and he's got this—he's got these pictures. And this crap from the court. It's AJ and Michael. And he's telling me that AJ has my son. That Michael is living there. That no one misses me. And I'm like, that's bullshit. I told him it was *bullshit*, Jase."

"Carly—"

"But he showed me the court records and photos from the Fourth of July, and you're —*you're* with AJ. And Michael is with them. And I was so angry—and then pictures of you and that stupid twit—" She closed her eyes. "Pictures of everyone laughing. Smiling. Like I didn't matter."

"Carly—"

"I get it. I mean, I kind of get it. I understand mostly. It was months, right? April, May, June—July. Of course, life moved on. But it didn't for me—" Carly pressed a hand to her chest. "I wasn't dead. And I didn't—I didn't *know* it was faked. I just thought no one was looking for me—"

"A guy comes in with all this information and you didn't think someone faked your death?" Jason asked skeptically. "*Carly—*"

"You *know* I don't think," Carly snapped. "So, I kept telling him it was bullshit and as soon as I got out of the hospital, I'd prove it to him. You were my best friend and you loved Michael. You would never do that to me."

“Carly—”

“So, he told me that that was the plan. That when I went home, I should see how much people missed me. And—and I could go home. But there was a deal. There was a catch—”

“You couldn’t tell me anything.” Jason leaned back in his chair. “It was a test, wasn’t it, Carly? If I had given you Michael right away, you’d have told me everything.”

“B-but you wouldn’t.” Carly’s hands fisted. “You refused. A-And I was so *angry*. And when I get angry, I just—I react. I tried to—I used Michael the way you hate. I knew you’d say no. But it was the last thing I knew to do. Nothing else was working.”

“And when I refused, what did this man ask you to do?” Jason said, but he had a feeling he already knew.

“He—he asked me if I wanted revenge.” Tears slid down Carly’s face. “And I did. I did. Until he told me *what* he wanted me to do. I agreed, but I was scared, Jase—I never would have—”

“What did he ask you to do?” Jason repeated, getting to his feet. “Carly—”

“There’s—he wanted me to get you to come to a warehouse tonight.” Carly also stood. “But I wasn’t gonna be there. He said he just wanted to talk to you away from Sonny, but I *knew* what he was asking. I never—I couldn’t.”

“Tonight.” Jason hissed under his breath. “When did he ask you this?”

“A few—a few days ago. I was still so *mad*. I didn’t want to do it, but I thought I would just ignore it all, but then he called me today and told me that he knew I hadn’t come to see you yet. He was watching me—watching you—”

Her eyes filled with tears. “So, I had to come to you. But I didn’t know what to do. How to deal with it. But—I wanted to know. I wanted to know what Elizabeth knew about AJ and Michael. She’s right. She doesn’t care enough to bullshit me. So, I get it now. I still hate what you did, Jase, but I get it. And I’m sorry, but—”

Jason held up a hand to cut off her rambling apologies. “Stop. When is this ambush? Because *that’s* what it is, Carly. You agreed to lure me into an ambush.”

“I wouldn’t do that!” Carly cried. “Except. Yeah. I did. But to stall for time. I didn’t—Tonight. At nine. At Pier 52. Jason—”

“Just stop.” Jason took a deep breath. It was almost four o’clock. They had time...time to set up something. A trap, maybe. To get at the bottom of all of this. “Did the man ever introduce himself?”

“No, but I know who he is. I’ve seen his face in the paper and his wife has come to my

club. Mickey Roscoe.”

“Roscoe,” Jason repeated. He had to be working with someone. Could Nico and Roscoe have started to work together? They didn’t have evidence of that, but— “Okay. You can go. You’ve done your part, Carly. Go.” He hesitated. “Go talk to Bobbie. Tell her that you’ve told me everything, and that I’m satisfied. Tell her you were kidnapped. I’m sorry this happened to you, Carly, but damn it—” He closed his eyes. “Go talk to your mother.”

“I’m sorry, Jase—”

“Yeah, me, too. Now go. I’ve got things to do.”

She left with more tears on her cheeks, but he couldn’t spare time to think about that. He knew what had happened during those five months, but why was Roscoe’s first plan to take Jason out? What did *that* serve?

He strode down the hall to Sonny’s office, pushing the door open to find Sonny meeting with Benny. “We’ve got a problem.”

### **Kelly’s: Dining Room**

Courtney returned from her break with a pensive look on her face and made a beeline for Elizabeth counting receipts behind the counter. “Hey. Have you talked to Jason today?”

“Not since he dropped me off. And he hasn’t called--” Elizabeth reached into her purse for her phone and cursed. “I left it at Jake’s. Damn it.” She looked at Courtney. “Why?”

“AJ just called. His lawyer said that Alexis Davis called him and canceled the meeting for tonight. He tried to call Jason, but—”

“It’s already five—” Elizabeth frowned. “They were supposed to meet in an hour— why would Jason—” She bit her lip. “Maybe something came up at the warehouse.” And wasn’t *that* a comforting thought? Why had she forgotten her phone today of all days?

She picked up the phone behind Kelly’s counter and dialed Jason’s cell. It went straight to voicemail. That did not make her feel better. She tried Sonny’s number. Nothing.

She furrowed her brow. What was Alexis’s office number? Had they been arrested? Should she call the PCPD to find out? Damn it.

“Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth met Courtney’s worried gaze and took a deep breath. “This is something

that happens sometimes,” she said softly. More to herself than to her friend. “Things come up. A-and I can’t know about it until it’s okay. So, they’re not answering their phones. I just—I have to wait. Someone will tell me something soon. It’s how it works.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth cleared her throat. “There’s no reason to panic. This just happens sometimes. Jason had to go out of town once really unexpectedly, and he couldn’t tell me. I kind of freaked out a bit, and I felt stupid asking Sonny about it. So...this is fine. I’ll just...wait it out.”

Even as all her nerve endings were standing up and screaming that Jason and Sonny were *never* out of touch at the same time.

“I could cover for you if you want to go to the warehouse? Or to Jake’s to get your phone.”

Elizabeth hesitated, considered it, but ultimately shook her head. “No. No, it’s fine. Jason will probably stop by before closing and let me know what’s up.”

And if she went to the warehouse or to get her phone...it would be admitting something might be wrong. And she wasn’t ready to do that.

## Chapter Twenty-One

*Maybe there's a God above  
All I've ever learned from love  
Was how to shoot somebody who outdrew you  
And it's not a cry that you hear at night  
It's not somebody who's seen the light  
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah*  
- Hallelujah, Rufus Wainwright

---

*Friday, September 6, 2002*

### Pier 52: Warehouse

Jason parked the SUV and looked at the man in the passenger seat. Johnny O'Brien, their warehouse manager and Sonny's top enforcer at the moment, was checking the clip in his handgun.

"Is Richie in place?" Jason asked, squinting. "Did he say?"

"Yeah, he got there about ten minutes ago. Scoped out the place and found a spot to cover both exits. He's ready." Johnny hesitated. "Are we sure this is the way we want to handle it? Maybe it would be better if we just didn't show up."

Jason shook his head. "No. If someone is watching Carly, they know she came to me today. They know I want to know where she's been. I've run around town for the last two weeks proving that I jump when she calls. If I don't show up, they'll be on to her."

"So?" Johnny muttered. "You slap a guard on her idiot ass and move on—" When Jason scowled, Johnny shrugged. "Hey, it's not like I wish her ill, Jase, but she put everyone in danger last year when she turned on Sonny. And no one's really ever liked that much to begin with."

"They want me out of the loop, Johnny. I need to know what we're up against—"

"Yeah, yeah. I get it. I'll follow orders." He shoved open the door. "I'll take the back exit, you take the front."

"Yeah."

They split up. Jason tugged his gun from behind his back and held it low in front of

him as he crept towards the entrance of the abandoned warehouse where Carly had been told to send him.

Why this place? Did they think he would go anywhere Carly asked? Jason shared Johnny's doubts, and Benny had been skeptical that this would be worth the effort. But if they could just get their hands on one of the guys sent by Roscoe—maybe they could get somewhere.

This life was always risky, but Jason preferred it when the risk was legal, not mortal. Most of the time, the danger was getting arrested, or being on the wrong end of a police raid. Territory squabbles were minimal, particularly this far from New York City.

There was always someone lower in the ranks who wanted to make their bones by taking out someone closer to the top, but Sonny usually ran an effective organization—those kinds of men were weeded out before any real damage was done.

Every once in a while, though there was a Moreno or a Sorel who wanted their own piece and didn't want to share. And Jason was tired of taking bullets for assholes who wanted power they couldn't handle.

The door to the warehouse was hanging off its hinges, the larger garage door to the truck entrance was dilapidated and looked as if it hadn't been opened for business in years.

Jason hesitated before opening the door. Even if Carly hadn't told him it was a trap, his instincts would have been screaming it by now. Had they expected Carly to come clean?

But he pushed open the door, the hinges creaking in the cavernous open space. There were stacks of packing crates, cardboard boxes with papers spilling out of the sagging sides. The odor of mildew and mold seeped into his nostrils.

He made it no more than ten feet into the room before he saw a black boot sticking out from behind a pile of packing crates. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as he moved closer. He kicked the boot and raised his gun—

It was Richie, their best sniper. He was lying on his back, his arms and legs spread eagle across the cement floor. His eyes were wide open, staring at the ceiling. A small round bullet hole in his forehead. No blood on the floor around him, which meant he'd been placed here.

Damn it. Jason spun around at Johnny's shout. At the sound of gunfire—

And then he felt the first bullet slam into his upper chest, the hot metal digging through muscles and tendons. Another in his shoulder. He grunted and fell back, getting off his own shot in the process. Another bullet in his leg.

And then he was on the cement ground, choking. A man walked towards him. Jason's vision was beginning to blur—the first bullet must have sliced an artery because he couldn't catch his breath.

He could see the dim outline of a gun as it pointed straight at his head. Jason closed his eyes. Elizabeth's smile, her eyes flashed in front of his face.

Another shot echoed in the room, and Jason choked, struggling—a man's weight slumped over him. "Jesus fucking Christ, Morgan—" Johnny's voice faded as Jason couldn't manage to stay awake.

The world dimmed and he closed his eyes.

*Saturday, September 7, 2002*

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

Every hour that passed added another layer of uncertainty and terror. The clock struck six. Seven. Eight. Nine.

Courtney's shift finished at ten, and AJ came to pick her up, but Courtney refused to leave. She was too worried about Elizabeth. So AJ called the babysitter with Michael and sat down to wait with them.

Because Jason hadn't called. And neither he nor Sonny were picking up their phones.

By eleven and closing, Gia had joined them and the four of them sat around a table in the back, Courtney having put together a pot of coffee and served it.

Elizabeth's mug was ice cold and untouched by midnight.

She called Alexis, finally, but Jason and Sonny's lawyer hadn't heard from them either. Jason had called her to cancel the meeting, but she knew nothing beyond that. Nothing she could share. Gia, who had started an internship in Alexis's office the week before, could offer nothing else.

Jason and Sonny had not answered any phone calls in eight hours.

Elizabeth still refused to go to the warehouse or get her phone from Jake's. She couldn't. If she took any action that suggested something was wrong...then *something was wrong*.

And she knew that in Jason's life, when something went wrong, and he was out of touch, it was never good. And for Sonny to be gone as well—

Around twelve-thirty, AJ shifted and sighed. He drew Courtney out of her seat and pulled her towards the entrance. "I'm going to go home and relieve the babysitter," he murmured to Courtney. "Call me when you know something."

“I can go...” But Courtney’s voice faded, and she looked at Elizabeth. “But I want to be here.” She looked at AJ. “You must be scared, too. I should stay with you—”

“I am,” AJ admitted. “But not as scared as she is. I can least admit that something is wrong. She’s not there yet.” He kissed her cheek. “She needs you more than I do right now.”

“What if something happened?” Courtney asked, her voice trembling. “What if he’s hurt? God, AJ. Gia and I pushed her towards him.”

“Hey.” He shook his head. “Let’s not think that way. Odds are that he got hurt, and Sonny’s being a dick and keeping it from everyone. He’ll get in touch when he can. Jason’s too stubborn for anything else—”

“He’s not Superman,” Courtney muttered, but she watched AJ leave and turned back to the table where Gia and Elizabeth still sat. Gia was attempting to study, to turn this into anything other than what Courtney knew this was.

Waiting for someone to deliver devastation.

### **Safe House: Living Room**

Sonny rocked back on his heels as he waited for the doctor to emerge from the back room. At a table, Benny was restless, going through the same paperwork he’d been looking at for the last four hours. Sonny didn’t think he was even reading the words at this point.

Johnny was grimacing at the sling hanging over his left shoulder and attempting to drink a beer with his right, less dominant hand.

Jason had required surgery to repair a partially severed artery in his chest, and only Johnny’s quick first aid had kept Sonny’s partner from bleeding out as they transported him to the only safe house with a sterilized surgery in one of the bedrooms.

And still, it was touch and go.

Johnny had suggested maybe calling Elizabeth—Jason had asked for her in the car, his words slurring, but the request had been repeated several times.

Sonny knew that Elizabeth was waiting for Jason, that he was supposed to pick her up from Kelly’s. He had picked up his phone to call her more than once. Not to tell her Jason was hurt, but just that he couldn’t be in touch.

But something held him back. By now, Elizabeth must be worried. It was after midnight—the diner closed at eleven. Hell, she must be terrified. She’d called Sonny’s phone three times, twice in the last hour alone.



Sonny hadn't answered any of those calls. He didn't know if Jason would survive the bullet wound, and God, he did not want to be the one to tell her. She would be able to hear it in his voice. And she was probably with Gia or his sister. Maybe even Bobbie.

No one could know that Jason had been shot. They had gotten one of the shooters, but he'd died before Johnny could ask him any questions, and the gunfire had been called into the PCPD. They had barely been able to remove Richie and the other body from the warehouse before the cops had showed up.

And...this was how it was *supposed* to work. There were things Elizabeth couldn't know. She'd only known the last time Jason had been shot because she found him. If Carly hadn't been there—if Sonny hadn't betrayed him—Jason would have recuperated in a safe house and Elizabeth would never have been brought into it.

Jason always told Elizabeth more than Sonny wanted her to know. No one had been supposed to know Jason was in town the year before—but Jason had gone straight to her, like a goddamn moth to the flame. Had put her in danger. Again.

No, it was better this way. Better to wait until he had something to tell her.

And Jason needed to be out of commission. If no word was had from him, if no one knew where he was—whoever had gone after Jason might step it up. Make more mistakes. Sonny had to know who was coming after him.

The doctor finally emerged, his eyes lined with exhaustion, a blood stained towel in his hand. "I've stabilized him for now."

Sonny exhaled slowly as Johnny and Benny got to their feet. "For now?" he echoed.

"He lost of a lot of blood," the doctor said with a mutter. "He should be in the hospital. I've sedated him, and I'll leave the necessary medication—I'll have to get a few things, but he's going to be weak. Woozy for a while. If I can get my hands on blood for a transfusion—"

"But he'll make it—"

"Barring infection, as long he doesn't move around—" The doctor shrugged. "Sure. Lucky son of a bitch."

"I'll call Elizabeth," Johnny interrupted, reaching for his phone. "She must be out of her mind—"

"No, no." Sonny held out his hand. "Not yet."

"Sonny—the warehouse shooting was called into the police. If the PCPD haven't harassed her yet, they will—"

The doctor, seeing that he was no longer needed, returned to his patient as Johnny

gave Sonny a questioning look. “Jason’s going to ask for her the minute he wakes up —”

“We’ll put him off. He’ll understand once he’s alert.” Sonny shook his head. “They wanted to eliminate him tonight, Johnny. We gotta do what we can to make sure Jason stays out of commission—”

“Boss, I agree, but I don’t see what that has to do with Elizabeth. We can make arrangements to bring her here in secrecy—” Benny began.

“What does Roscoe know right now?” Sonny demanded. “He knows that Richie is dead —” and he took a moment for that, because Richie had been working with them for years and had always been reliable. “Maybe he knows Jason was shot. He knows that the cops were called, but none of our guys were left on the scene.”

“Which means they think Jason’s alive, which the opposite of what they were trying to do,” Johnny argued. “So this is just bullshit—”

“But if Jason doesn’t turn up, if Elizabeth doesn’t disappear—” Benny sighed. “Roscoe knows how we operate. It’s how everyone operates. Jason’s injured enough to go MIA, he’s out of the way. I don’t like it, but I think we gotta hold off making any moves for at least twenty four hours.”

Sonny nodded. “Elizabeth knows how this works. She’ll be worried, but it’ll be temporary and Jason will be too out of to know any better. It’s just for a little while, okay?”

“You’ll be the one explaining it to Jason,” Johnny muttered. “But fine.”

### **Jake’s: Van Ess Street**

Around one in the morning, Elizabeth gave up.

Jason was two hours late picking her up. Phone calls to Sonny and Jason were still not being returned, and Elizabeth was ready to give in.

Something had happened. Something bad.

They dropped Courtney off at her house first—Courtney was reluctant to leave, but Elizabeth told her that AJ needed her, too. He was at home with Michael, and they’d keep her in the loop.

Gia drove her to Jake’s first to get her phone—but there were police cars out front, and the bar was clearly closed for the night.

“Do you want me to go ask questions?” Gia asked as their car sat idling a few spaces back from the bar as the red and blue lights flashed, illuminating the stark white pallor of Elizabeth’s face. “Maybe it was just another bar fight.”

“No.” Elizabeth cleared her throat. She nodded at the men walking out. “That’s a crime scene unit—you see their jackets? They’re looking for something. And Jason is Jake’s only tenant right now.” She swallowed. “Go to the warehouse.”

Gia muttered something under her breath but pulled the car back out onto the street and drove the mile that separated the bar from the docks.

More police cars surrounded the piers, and the entrance to the Elm Street Pier was closed off entirely. There was another set of crime scene tech guys milling about in the parking lot, as if waiting for clearance. Here, Elizabeth saw more than that. She recognized the curly hair of the police commissioner, and the long dark hair of Detective Andy Capelli.

Her heart was pounding. Her mouth was dry. “They’re at the warehouse. They’re at Jake’s.”

“I’ll call my brother,” Gia said, offering for what must have been the tenth time that night. But this time, Elizabeth closed her eyes and nodded.

She waited long enough, and if anyone wanted to take her to task, she’d tell them to go to hell. She had a right to know what the hell was going on, and if no one wanted to tell her—

She’d find out for herself.

“Marcus, I’m with Elizabeth. We’re at the warehouse—” Gia scowled. “No, we’re in the car. Look—stop talking for five seconds and I’ll tell you why I’m calling—Okay. Okay.” She hung up, took a deep breath, and put her phone back in her bag.

“Marcus wants us to go back to our place and wait for him. He has questions for you.”

“Did—” Elizabeth licked her lips. Forced the words out. “Did he say where Jason was?”

“He refused. This doesn’t mean anything, Liz. You know that. My brother, the PCPD—they’re assholes in general. They could have Jason in a holding cell—”

“Without telling Alexis?”

“Maybe,” Gia said with some hesitation. “You know they can get desperate—”

“Gia, let’s just go home and wait for your brother.” Elizabeth closed her eyes and tried to breathe. In and out. In and out.

She could do this. She was strong. She had survived the worst life could throw at her. This was nothing. Piece of cake.

*Palm Beach, Florida*

## **Ruiz Compound: Hector Ruiz's Study**

Zander grimaced as he was shown into the inner sanctum of the Ruiz family's seat of power. It was a hot, muggy night, and even the open terraced villa that Hector had constructed looking over the ocean didn't provide any relief from the miserable, heavy humidity.

It was after one in the morning, and he'd been pulled from a comfortable bed with a sexy woman in order to answer the summons of Hector Ruiz.

Inside the study, Hector sat behind his desk, a man leaning toward his late sixties with olive skin, salt and pepper hair slicked back, and mean dark eyes.

He sat across from Luis Alcazar, each with a tumbler of liquor and a cigar in hand as if it wasn't one-thirty in the fucking morning.

Assholes.

"Smith. You made good time." Ruiz gestured at him with his cigar. "Luis has some news for us."

"News, and some questions." Neither men rose nor indicated that Zander would be taking a seat or offered his own drink or cigar. This was obviously not a social call.

"There was a shooting tonight on Pier 52," Luis said.

Zander hesitated. "Your ambush happened?"

"That's what I want to know," Luis murmured. He shifted to face Zander more directly. "You heard that Carly Corinthos' death had been exaggerated slightly?"

"She was your plan?" Zander asked with raised brows. "You used her to lure Jason into an ambush?"

"I had hoped to turn her more forcefully," Luis admitted. "I had...hopes she could be twisted entirely. She's known for her rash decisions. Her anger—" He sighed. "But I have reasons to believe it did not go as I had intended."

"Well, what did happen?" And why the fuck had he been dragged from his bed for this?

"Gunfire was reported. Blood was found," Luis continued. "One of Roscoe's men was shot, the other escaped. He seemed convinced that Jason had been mortally injured—he saw a shot to the chest. But no one has been admitted to the hospital. Does Corinthos have off site medical assistance for a serious injury like this?"

"Probably," Zander admitted. "He might also be licking his wounds with a shot to the arm."

“If he’s not dead, we gotta go again,” Ruiz began, but Zander shook his head. “Why not? You said Jason had to be eliminated—”

“If he took a shot to the chest, he’s going to go under. The last thing Sonny needs is an actual injury on his hands. The cops will crawl all over Jason. Blood being found doesn’t mean much. It could be from anything. No telling they can even prove who it belongs to.” Zander shrugged. “You wait a few days, Jason doesn’t surface, then he’s badly injured—”

“But he’s not eliminated—”

“You want to take out Sonny Corinthos, don’t you?” Zander demanded. “Here’s your chance. Jason’s out of commission. You get Nico or Roscoe to take the hit, Sonny will go after them. Your hands will be clean. You don’t want the territory, so what do you care if Nico and Roscoe take the fall. Nico doesn’t even know your name, and Roscoe will be probably be eliminated before he has a chance to say your name. He’ll go out in a blaze of glory before they take him alive.”

“I like this kid,” Hector said with a grin. “He thinks through all the angles. Why the hell did Corinthos let him go?”

“Because I think for myself, and I put myself first.” Zander shrugged. “Corinthos still thinks he’s Vito Corleone.”

Luis tipped his head. “What makes you think I don’t want the territory?” he asked coolly.

“Because by now you know that Nico and Roscoe are morons which is why they’ve never been able to step up when someone else was available. There’s a reason they stayed beneath Moreno and Sorel. Why they’re basically third string.”

“So?”

“If you wanted the territory, you wouldn’t be a silent partner. You wouldn’t let Roscoe and Nico take the lead. You wouldn’t have sent me away to keep me under the radar. You wouldn’t have faked Sonny Corinthos’s ex-wife’s death. You don’t want the territory. You want to destroy the man.”

“He’s got you there, my old friend.” Hector raised bushy brows at Luis. “I’ve never liked Corinthos, but what do you have against him?”

“That is my concern. After he is gone, you can do what you like with Morgan.” Luis blew out a stream of thin smoke out from his lips. “Because you’re right. I want to eliminate the man. Nothing else matters.”

**Elizabeth & Gia’s Apartment: Living Room**

It was nearly two in the morning by the time Gia let her exhausted brother through the front door of their apartment.

Elizabeth was curled on the sofa, staring at their land line. Begging silently for it to ring. For someone to make this nightmare go away.

Taggart looked at the two of them, at Elizabeth sitting, at Gia standing in front of him, and his shoulders slumped. “Hell, you don’t know anything more than me, do you?”

“Do you know why the police were at Jake’s and the warehouse?” Elizabeth asked listlessly. “Because that’s more than I know.”

Taggart sighed. “We got reports of gunfire at an old warehouse near Pier 52. It’s one of Anthony Moreno’s old holding companies. It’s been wasting away for three years and it looks like a pile of crap. When we got there, we found blood on the ground, some places where someone had clearly been laying—and spent casings from bullets that match the type of gun Jason Morgan has registered in his name.”

“But no one was there,” Gia said slowly.

“No.” Taggart hesitated. “But we also can’t find Morgan. We’re trying to get his phone records. We’re executing search warrants. Sonny Corinthos is MIA. Elizabeth, listen —”

“How much blood?” she asked softly. “Because you know, it’s a warehouse. People get hurt.”

“We found some blood upstairs—a lot.” He paused. “And some...brain matter. We’re having it tested, but the preliminary blood type did not come back to Morgan.”

She closed her eyes, exhaled slowly. “Okay.”

“You haven’t heard from him?”

“The last time I saw Jason was when he dropped me off for work around eleven. I was working from twelve until closing.” Elizabeth rubbed her eyes, trying to get her brain to think. To focus. “He was supposed to do some paperwork at the warehouse, and then meet with AJ and some lawyers about Carly and Michael.”

“He was supposed to have that meeting at six, but AJ said it got canceled about five—at least that’s when his lawyer called AJ,” Gia volunteered. “And that’s the last anyone has heard from him.”

“My phone is at Jake’s,” Elizabeth said. “So if he called me, I wouldn’t know. He—” She swallowed hard. “He doesn’t call the land line at Kelly’s. Or at least he didn’t today.”

“Okay.” Taggert nodded. “Okay.” He waited a moment. “If you hear from him, would you tell me?” His tone was gentle. Compassionate. So at odds with the way he usually spoke—God, if he thought Jason was dead...

“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “If I can...I will.”

“I appreciate that.” He touched her shoulder gently. “Okay.”

Gia showed him out and closed the door behind him. “You were pretty cooperative,” she murmured.

“Two hours—” She looked at the clock on the wall. “Three hours since Jason was supposed to pick me up. Jason wouldn’t let me worry like this. Maybe once he would have left town and not told me. It was different before. We’re different now.”

She thought they were different.

“And what I told Taggert? It’s nothing that AJ and Courtney probably wouldn’t tell him. No state secrets.” Her lips twisted. “And if Sonny didn’t want me to talk to the cops, then maybe he should have called me.”

“You don’t think something happened to Sonny?” Gia asked with raised eyebrows.

“That’s not how this works. Jason went somewhere tonight. Something went wrong. And Sonny is mopping it up. He’s keeping me out of the loop.”

Her roommate exhaled slowly. “That’s cold—”

“That’s Sonny.” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “If he doesn’t come to see me tomorrow... then I’ll start to worry. For now...I just have to keep my cool. This is the life. I love Jason. I’m in this. I just...” She let her legs fall to the ground. “I thought he might be coming to notify me that they had Jason’s body.”

“But they don’t have any bodies.”

“Which means the warehouse was cleaned up. There was time for that. So until someone tells me differently, Jason is somewhere where he can’t contact me, and Sonny isn’t getting in touch.”

“Okay.”

Elizabeth rose to her feet. “I’m going to try to get some sleep.”

### **Safe House: Bedroom**

Between Benny, the doctor, and Sonny, they managed to transfer Jason to a bedroom with an IV. Jason was pale, sweating, like a furnace to the touch—an infection was already setting in.

“Elizabeth,” Jason murmured, stirring slightly. His eyes were slits, just a mixture of blue and red underneath the pale lids. “Did you...”

“Hey, she’s fine. I’ve got it handled,” Sonny murmured, eyeing Johnny with a warning glance. “You better not make her cry for you, man.”

“Tell her...” Jason exhaled slowly, his head lolling to one side, his voice fading in and out. “No soup.”

“No soup?” Johnny repeated, but Sonny shook his head.

“Got it. I’ll let her know.” He nodded to the doctor, and then exited the room with Benny and Johnny. “What’s going on back home?” he asked once they returned to the living room.

“Cops are all over the warehouse,” Benny said. “And they’ve closed Jake’s as a crime scene, so they suspect Jason is involved. Our guy at the Brownstone says Taggart went inside briefly, then left. No guarantee he talked to Miss Webber, but—”

“Odds are,” Sonny murmured. “We go talk to her now, the cops will know. Taggart is too close to Elizabeth. He knows her movements. We bring her here and it’s nothing but problems—”

“That doesn’t mean we don’t tell her,” Johnny hissed.

“We need to let things cool down,” Sonny said with a shake of his head. “She can’t be involved. Jason wouldn’t want her in the middle with the cops. Hey, Elizabeth knows how this works.”

“This is bullshit,” Johnny muttered. But he had his orders, so he swallowed and looked away.

Sonny dismissed them both as he returned to Jason’s room. “Hey, I’m going back to Port Charles,” he murmured, perching on the edge of the double bed. “The doc and Johnny are going to hang out here. Take care of you.”

“Elizabeth,” Jason managed. “Bringing her?”

“Yeah, I’m gonna bring her when I come back. She’ll be glad to see you.” Sonny rose and met the doctor at the door. He hesitated, waiting for Jason to slip back into unconscious. “You’ll do what I told you?”

“Keep him sedated on pain meds for a few days?” the doctor replied in a low voice. “He hates them—”

“He’s too delirious to know better. I’ll be in touch.”

Sonny intended to keep his promise — he would try to stay away until it was time for



Elizabeth to be told. He would bring her here just as soon as it was safe. He knew Jason wanted her to know he was okay, but Elizabeth was stronger than Jason gave her credit for.

As soon as Roscoe made his move, as soon as Sonny knew who the hell was coming for him—well then, this would all be over.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*Hey now you're 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

---

*Thursday, September 12, 2002*

### **Kelly's: Courtyard**

Courtney stepped out of the diner and embraced her husband with a tight hug. "Hey."

"Hey." He dipped his head into her neck and just let her touch soothe him. "How is everything?"

"Elizabeth isn't here today." Courtney drew back, letting her hands slide over his shoulders and resting on his upper chest. "Bobbie wants her to take a few days."

"I bet she'd rather be busy," AJ muttered, exhaling slowly. "I'd ask how she's doing but—"

"She hasn't heard from Jason in nearly a week. And Sonny keeps turning her away," Courtney confessed. "He sent someone yesterday to tell her that Sonny had gone out of town, but he's still in Port Charles. He's just too scared to tell her what's going on."

"Is that what Liz thinks?" AJ asked, frowning.

"No, but it's what Gia says. She's getting really pissed off and she accidentally—so she says—told her brother what the guard told Liz. And Taggert says that Sonny is holed up at the Towers, refusing to talk to the police."

AJ hissed under his breath. "He's lying to her. That can't be good."

"Yeah, Gia didn't tell her what Taggert said, but—it's been a week. Jason would have contacted her by now if he could. So, he can't."

She let her head dip down into his chest. "I'm so worried for her, AJ. And I'm worried for you."

“For me?”

Courtney flushed but raised her head to meet his eyes. “I hate myself for it, but if something happened to your brother, after everything you’ve been through these last few months—”

“You mean if my brother is dead when we’ve finally started to understand one another?” AJ said roughly. “Will I take a drink?”

“Yeah,” Courtney said in a small voice. “God, I’m *sorry*—”

“Hey. Honesty, right? That’s what we promised each other. I don’t know, Courtney. For right now, I’m just.... not letting myself think of it. I’m telling myself maybe he got hurt, and Sonny’s just being an asshole to Elizabeth. No news is good news as far as I can tell.” He hesitated. “But yeah. I don’t know what’s going to happen if it’s bad. I like to think I could do it. I haven’t...”

AJ was quiet for a moment, and Courtney let him have his space.

“When Carly came home, I didn’t know Jason was going to take my side,” he said. “There were a few times when I thought...I thought about taking a drink. Just to take the edge off. To stop being so worried. So tense.”

“You didn’t say anything,” Courtney murmured.

“I called my sponsor the first time, and he stayed on the phone with me until the feeling was gone. And I called him again. Then Jason went missing.” He looked away. “But people depend on me. You. Michael. I have to be there for my family if it goes wrong. And I know he wouldn’t expect it, but I feel like I should be there for Elizabeth —”

“You shouldn’t put that kind of pressure on yourself,” Courtney protested, but he just shook his head.

“It’s not pressure,” he said. “I don’t know how to explain it. I just...if I take a drink, I’m not just breaking a promise to you, to myself. To Michael. I’m breaking it to Jason. And if I let the people I care about worry about Jason on their own—I don’t know. I just...I have responsibilities, and before—maybe I would have run from them. Now? I just want to do the right thing. Be strong for everyone else.”

Courtney smiled, but her eyes were sad, her lashes a bit wet. “I’m so scared for her, AJ. She’s already closing in on herself. She’s going to her classes, going to work, but there’s a desperation—I don’t know what will happen if Jason—”

“Then let’s try not to worry about it,” AJ told her. He kissed her cheek. “I need to get back to work.”

## Brownstone: Kitchen

Bobbie sighed, restless, as she stirred sugar into her coffee at the counter. She watched Elizabeth at the dining table, mindlessly flipping pages in one of her textbooks.

She didn't know how to help Elizabeth, what to say to her, how to get her through this. Jason had disappeared from the face of the Earth, and Sonny wasn't taking anyone's phone calls, had even gone as far as to claim that he was out of town to avoid Elizabeth.

"I called Scott again today," she told Elizabeth as she joined her at the table. "But the PCPD is *still* not releasing Jason's room at Jake's."

"That's okay." Elizabeth lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "They got my phone records. Alexis told me they just couldn't get a search warrant for the messages." The words were basic, the tone was matter-of-fact, but Bobbie knew Elizabeth well enough now to know when she was lying. When she was protecting herself. And Bobbie didn't have the heart to challenge her on it.

"They can't prove Jason's involved in anything, so she's holding them off." Bobbie sipped the coffee. Winced. She'd put too much cream into it again. "He'll turn up, Elizabeth—"

"If he's alive, he's hurt," Elizabeth murmured. "And he's hurt badly enough he can't contact me." Her dark blue eyes were lush with tears as she looked at Bobbie.

"Twenty-four hours, I could...I could live with that, you know? I just...I don't know why Sonny won't *talk* to me."

Bobbie hesitated. "You know...Sonny's...always had issues with trust."

Elizabeth's lips were pressed into a thin line. "I've never given him a reason to distrust me, Bobbie. I've always put Jason first—"

"You know that. Jason knows that. But Sonny? He's got a history with this sort of thing. When he was dating Brenda, she wore a wire."

"Jason mentioned that a few months ago, but he didn't really talk about it. Why would she do that to him?"

"I'm not really sure, actually." Bobbie lifted a shoulder. "I only heard about it second hand, but I think she was scared. It destroyed them. And then Carly—"

"Carly entrapped him and then six months later, she turned him into the feds, that much I know." Elizabeth pushed her textbook away. "I remember back when Jason was shot. I could tell Sonny *hated* that I knew. I knew that Jason was hurt, that I had been the one to help him. I wouldn't tell him where Jason was—he hated it."

“Sonny is obsessed with power, with control, there’s no doubt about that.”

“It wasn’t just not knowing about Jason. He was so uncomfortable with *me* being involved at all, and I used to think it was the danger. But last year, when Jason came to town and stayed in my studio because he wanted to watch the warehouse? Sonny was angry about that, too. He thought there were other places Jason could have stayed—”

“But Jason wanted to see you. He trusted you.”

“When Jason and I first started dating, he told me that there was this...code. This way of doing things. You don’t talk. There were things I could never know, but...” She sighed, her breath tremulous. Shaky. “He’s never been good at that. I mean, he would talk in euphemisms and around things, but he *always* told me more than I think Sonny liked. That’s why I know...if he was just hurt and lying low, he would have found a way to tell me.”

“I believe that,” Bobbie said, reaching out to squeeze Elizabeth’s wrist. “I was there, too, when he was shot. When you were taking care of him. And I’ve been here these last few months. Whatever is going on, you can blame Sonny for it. I have no doubt there.”

“I—” Elizabeth licked her lips. “I haven’t seen Carly around. Is she still not—”

“She came to me the night Jason went missing,” Bobbie admitted. “She had told Jason the truth finally, or at least that’s what she said.”

Elizabeth stared at her. “That same night? I saw her earlier that day. She told me she didn’t fake her death.”

Bobbie nodded. “Whatever you said, convinced her to go to Jason, who told her to come to me. She didn’t tell me what happened, only that Jason was satisfied with her answer—”

Elizabeth dipped her head, an icy sensation spreading throughout her body. Oh. God. “Jason...wasn’t working that night. Not...that way.”

Bobbie squinted. “What do you mean?”

“He...wasn’t—” Elizabeth hesitated. “I can’t...get into it, but Jason going to a warehouse with his gun? That *wasn’t* supposed to happen. It’s been driving me insane all week because we had plans. He was supposed to meet with AJ’s lawyer to turn over guardianship—but he canceled that meeting.”

“Right,” Bobbie said faintly. “What...what time did you see her?”

“Around three. She went straight to Jason, and he canceled the meeting after she

left.” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “Whatever she said to him...he went to that warehouse. The voicemail that Taggert told me about? He left it for me *after* she came to see him. He must have.”

“Elizabeth—”

“She’s been manipulating this situation since the moment she came home, Bobbie. C’mon.” Elizabeth shoved back the chair and stood up. “She was watching Jason. She knew when we were alone because that’s when she called him. She refused to tell him what was going on. But somehow, that day, she told him. *Why?*”

“I...thought maybe she realized she wasn’t going to get her way—” Bobbie sighed. “What happened when you saw her?”

“She looked like hell and wanted to know why AJ had Michael. I gave her a play by play, and she seemed...to understand what Jason’s choices were. But why did she want to know that day?” Elizabeth shook her head. “I’m done. I can’t wait anymore.”

“Elizabeth—”

The doorbell rang before Bobbie could finish and she went to answer the door. On her front step, Monica stood, her eyes worried, her fingers clutching the strap of her purse. “Is Elizabeth here?”

“Monica?” Elizabeth appeared over Bobbie’s shoulder. “Oh, God...did you hear anything?”

“No.” Monica’s voice wobbled, but she swallowed hard and kept speaking. “I was hoping you had.”

Bobbie stepped back to allow Jason’s mother to step inside the foyer. “Monica—”

“I know what everyone else does,” Elizabeth said, folding her arms and looking at the floor. “But I haven’t heard from Jason in a week.”

“How—” Monica shook her head. “That’s not like him, is it? Elizabeth—”

“He’s gone out of town without telling me,” Elizabeth admitted, “but not since we started dating. We weren’t really...back then. But, no...” She swallowed hard. “This... this isn’t something he would do to me. He...the last time I saw him—” She couldn’t hold back the tears. “He asked me to move in with him—”

“You didn’t say anything,” Bobbie murmured, putting an arm around Elizabeth’s shoulders. “Oh, sweetheart.”

“I thought someone would call. That I would find out—” Elizabeth shook her head. “I don’t understand what’s going on. Why—” She used the heels of her palms to swipe away her tears. “I have to go. I’m going to see Sonny.”

"I thought they wouldn't let you in to see him," Bobbie said with a frown. "He's supposed to be out of town—"

"Do you think one of those guards on the way up to the penthouse is going to stop me?" she demanded. "Just let them try."

She stalked back to the dining table and returned with her purse looped over her arm. "I've put up with this for too long."

She stormed past both Bobbie and Monica, slamming the door behind her.

"Monica—"

The doctor turned back to Bobbie with her own tears. "I'm so terrified, Bobbie, that someone is going to knock on my door to tell me he's dead."

Bobbie folded her old friend into a tight embrace and prayed that day wouldn't happen.

### **Port Charles Police Department: Interrogation Room**

Carly shifted in the hard wooden seat and scowled at Taggart who sat sprawled in a chair across from her. "Am I under arrest?" she demanded. "Because I want a lawyer —"

"You're free to leave whenever you want."

"Good." She jumped up and started for the door.

"Of course, if you don't want to help us find Jason Morgan, that's your problem."

Carly scowled, turned back to him. "Jason's *fine*. He's out of town doing something for Sonny. Who do you think you're playing?"

"Yeah?" Taggart twisted in his seat with a shrug. "We found shell casings matching a gun registered to him—"

"The type of gun," Carly corrected with clenched teeth. "Fucking assholes trying to get over on her. Jason was fine. He was pissed at her, but he was fine."

He was out of town, fixing this for her. She knew that, and she would be patient for the first time in her life. She would wait for Jason.

"We found blood—"

"With someone *else's* blood type," Carly snapped.

Taggart tossed a folder on the desk. "Sure, the blood with the brain matter. What about the other blood?"

Carly stopped, stared at the folder. Swallowed. “What’s in that?”

“Sit down and I’ll tell you.”

And so, against her better judgment, Carly returned to the chair, perching on the edge of the seat. “What other blood?” she demanded.

Taggart opened the folder and set out a crime scene photo. “We found a couple areas with blood spatter. Two of them were the same. A body was moved from upstairs downstairs, we figure. Someone was shot near the back exit. And two more people...” Taggart tapped a dark gray spot. “They were both shot next to the dumping spot for the body we don’t have.”

Carly swallowed. “So?” she managed. “That doesn’t—”

“Four sets of DNA. Four men were shot in that warehouse. Two of the blood spatters match Jason Morgan’s blood type. We’re waiting on an official match through DNA, but—” Taggart shrugged. “We’ll have that in a few weeks.”

In her lap, Carly’s hands clenched into fists. This was a trick. Somehow...this was a lie. “How much blood—”

“Someone tried to clean it up, but to survive the amount of blood loss?” Taggart shrugged. “You better hope someone got him to a doctor.”

Carly closed her eyes. “Jason is out of town.”

“Then you know more than his girlfriend, and I find *that* hard to believe.”

Carly scowled. Was that goddamn troll talking to the cops? “No way Elizabeth Webber says a word to you—”

“She doesn’t have to.” Taggart tilted his head. “I live in the same building, Carly. Before last week? Morgan was over a lot. Elizabeth spent most of her nights out. She’s walking around like a ghost. If he was hurt, you think she wouldn’t be with him?”

God, Carly wanted to argue with that, but the last time she knew for sure Jason had been shot—he’d let Elizabeth take care of him. He’d pushed Carly away. Turned to the little princess.

“Maybe he’s called her.”

“We’ve got her phone records.” Taggart tossed a report to her. “He called her six times. Last Friday. At 4:40 in the afternoon, he left her one voicemail. Nothing since then. So... you tell me that Jason is out of town. How do you know that?”

“He...has to be out of town,” Carly said, but it was less sure. Less adamant. God, had



she gotten him killed?

“What I think happened is that Jason went to that warehouse and was ambushed. Maybe Sonny Corinthos cleaned up the scene as much as he could. Maybe Jason’s just hurt somewhere, laying low. Lying to his girlfriend like the bastard I know he is —”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Carly snapped without thinking. Oh, God. He would *never* do that. He would never put someone he loved through the worry and the pain. She knew that. Oh, God. He was dead.

Carly shoved the photos away. “Are we done here?” she asked, her voice shaking. “Am I under arrest?”

“Sonny isn’t going to tell you what happened to him. You’re out in the cold, Carly. Everyone is pissed at you for what happened. And maybe Sonny won’t ever tell anyone what happened. Maybe Jason will just disappear.”

Carly shook her head. “No—”

“Maybe he’ll just fade away. Everyone will forget him. Your son? Too young to remember him—”

“You don’t even like Jason—”

“I like Elizabeth Webber,” Taggart interrupted. “She deserves better than what she’s getting. I like your mother. Monica Quartermaine. Lila Quartermaine. The people who love Jason Morgan deserve to know what happened to him even if it’s just to close the door. So, whatever you know, Carly—and we both know that you know something—you need to tell me.”

“If I am not under arrest,” Carly said, rising to her feet again. “I’m leaving.”

“Go ahead.” Taggart sat back. “I just hope you can sleep at night.”

### **Safe House: Bedroom**

Johnny O’Brien scowled at the doctor as he watched the man attach another bag of morphine to the IV stand next to the double bed where Jason slept fitfully.

“Sonny asked you to keep the pain meds coming, didn’t he?” Johnny demanded.

The doctor hesitated, then nodded. “He wanted to keep Jason sedated through the worst of the recovery,” he mumbled.

“Stop it.” Johnny nodded at the bag. “That’s the last dose I want him to have. It’s been a week—”

“I take my orders from Sonny—”

“He’s not here,” Johnny said with a roll of his eyes. “And eventually, Jason is going to wake up and realize he’s slept for a week.” He waited a moment. “Sonny is keeping Jason sedated because when Jason wakes up—he’s going to expect to see his girlfriend here. He thinks Sonny told her he was hurt. He asked Sonny to bring her.”

The doctor carefully completed the hook up for the morphine drop and sighed. “Yeah, I know. Her name is Elizabeth, right? He asks for her when he manages to surface.”

“Sonny wanted you to keep him sedated for a while, but it wasn’t supposed to be this long. I promised him twenty-four hours. We’ve given him six days. So, when I say that’s the last dose, I mean it. You’re not giving him anymore meds.”

The doctor waited a long moment, then nodded. “We’ll start weaning him off. He should come around fully in about two days.” He met Johnny’s eyes. “This wasn’t my choice.”

“Yeah, well, you could have refused,” Johnny muttered. “And when Jason figures out we’ve been lying our asses off and keeping him trapped in a bed all week, drugged out of his mind, we’re all going to get killed.”

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Sonny heard the voices in the hallway before Max knocked on his door and opened it slightly. He nodded to Benny, who closed some folders and drew some newspapers over another set of paperwork.

“Miss Webber is here.”

Sonny furrowed his brow, but nodded to wave her in. He’d been putting off this conversation for days, and honestly, he should have been prepared for this.

Elizabeth strode in, yanking her arm out of the grasp of a younger guard who had apparently been trying to keep her from storming the penthouse.

“Where is he?” she demanded after Sonny closed the door, leaving Max and the guard out in the hallway. “Where is he? Is he all right?”

“Elizabeth—”

“Why did you lie to me?” Her eyes were red, exhaustion in the lines of her face—she looked as though she hadn’t slept in days. “Why did you ignore my phone calls and send someone to tell me you weren’t in town?”

“Elizabeth.” Sonny tipped his head back, took a deep breath, and steeled himself for the conversation to follow. “You know better—”

“Don’t give me that bullshit, Sonny.” She stabbed a finger at him. “Don’t you *dare* patronize me like I’m a scared kid looking for Jason. You did that before. You tried to make me feel like an idiot—well that’s not happening. Not today.”

“You always knew there were things you couldn’t know—”

“No, I knew there were things *you* wouldn’t tell me,” she retorted. “But it’s been a week. Jason is gone. And I know something happened that night—”

“Elizabeth—”

“Just shut up. *Stop* lying to me!” She cried, her hands trembling as she dragged them through her hair. “Jason’s out. He told me he wasn’t working for you the way he was before. That you wanted people to think he was out.”

Sonny hissed under his breath. “He shouldn’t have—”

“It doesn’t matter. I know Jason wasn’t supposed to go any warehouse that night. He was supposed to be with me—” Her voice broke. “He asked me to move in with him, Sonny. We are planning a future together. I have the right to know—”

“You have the right to know what I tell you,” Sonny said, a bit more sharply than he’d intended to and the anger in his voice turned her face white. “You don’t ask about business, Elizabeth. *That’s* the rule—”

“Yeah? How about I ask about Carly then?” she shot back. “She came to see Jason that day. Bobbie told me she did. And I know that Jason called me. Taggart pulled the phone logs. He left a voicemail, but they don’t know what he said.”

Sonny exhaled slowly. “I know that, Elizabeth. Alexis is fighting it—”

“Everything I know about Friday night is because Taggart told me. He told me about the phone calls I never got because I forgot my goddamn phone—” Her voice was climbing until she was nearly screaming. “I know his blood was in a warehouse, that he was there, with his gun—”

“Sonny,” Benny murmured, as he rose to his feet. “C’mon—”

Elizabeth seemed to notice him for the first time, her bloodshot eyes taking in his sadness. His worry. “You know where he is?”

“Elizabeth, look...” Sonny waited until she looked back at him, Benny subsiding back into silence. “The truth is that I don’t know anything more than Taggart does.”

“What?” Her voice trembled. She shook her head. “That’s not—”

“I haven’t seen Jason since Friday night, either. I haven’t heard from him.”

“B-But—” She was still shaking her head. “You didn’t—”

“I don’t know what happened. I don’t know if he’s okay.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Why...why wouldn’t you just say that? Why did you have to —” She pressed her lips together, closed her eyes. “But that’s good. Because that means Jason is lying low. He’s not calling you either. You would know if he was gone.”

“I’d hope so,” Sonny said. The shame of his lies made him look away. “Elizabeth, he wouldn’t want you to worry. So...just go about your life. When this dies down, he’ll get in touch with both of us.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him...and he had a peculiar feeling that maybe... just maybe...she could see right through him. “I know you don’t think I should know anything about business, Sonny. That’s fine. But *this* isn’t business. This isn’t just me. I’m not the only person terrified. Monica came by the Brownstone today. Jason has family who worry about him. You’re keeping me out of loop to prove a fucking point, and it’s *bullshit*. Jason knows he can trust me. I just wish you did, too.”

The door slammed so hard behind her that the door frame rattled. Sonny exhaled and turned to the mini, pouring himself a double bourbon.

“You’re making a mistake.”

Benny’s quiet voice broke into Sonny’s misery. He turned, the tumbler in his hand. “Benny—”

“And I’m not thinking about what just happened here, though Elizabeth Webber is correct. Had you brought her in, told her Jason was all right—there would be a lot less suspicion. She could have backed up Jason being out of town. The police are all over this. Digging into everything. Because Jason broke pattern, and he left her hanging.”

“We had to make everyone think he was out of commission—”

“You’re creating problems we don’t need. Jason is loyal to you. He’s proved that.” Benny tapped the papers he was covering. “And he wouldn’t agree to do what you’re planning.”

“They’re not making a move. They’re not taking advantage of Jason’s absence,” Sonny muttered, even as the disgust licked at his throat. He was sick to his stomach just thinking about it. “They don’t think he’s hurt enough. They will when we’re done.”

“And when Jason comes back?” Benny asked. “When he finds out what you’ve done? How will you ever justify it?”

“I don’t have to justify *anything*,” Sonny snapped. “Someone is coming after me. You know why they went for Jason? To get at me. To make it easier to get to me. They already came for Carly. Who’s next? Who is my family, huh? Courtney? Mike?” Sonny shook his head. “No, they won’t go for them. They’ll go for *Elizabeth*. For Michael. For the people I chose to make my family. Elizabeth can hate me all she wants. Jason can hate me, too. But I’m doing this for them.”

“Sonny—”

“And if you don’t agree, well then...” Sonny shrugged. “I’ll find someone who does. This *is* going to happen.”

Benny hesitated for a long moment. “It’s too late to stop it now,” he admitted. “If they think Jason is just hiding—they might get desperate enough to try to draw him out.”

“That’s right,” Sonny muttered. “They’ll go after Elizabeth or Michael next to make sure Jason is gone. I gotta stop that. I gotta keep that from happening. How long?”

“Maybe three days to make the arrangements. Another day or two to plant the evidence. Do you think they’ll wait that long?”

“Keep the guards on Elizabeth and Michael. *Especially* Elizabeth. She’s the easiest target. No one takes kids unless they have to.” Sonny hesitated. “I don’t like this anymore than you do, Benny. But you don’t stay alive in this business unless you make the tough decisions.”

Benny didn’t look convinced, but he sat down and returned to his paperwork while Sonny tossed back the double bourbon, hoping the burning liquid would wash away the disgust and the shame.

It didn’t.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

*In this room  
I can barely breathe  
This air that speaks your name  
It flows through me  
From each corner  
From the window frame  
Where we used to watch together  
For the sun to rise again  
- In This Room, Leslie Tucker*

---

*Friday, September 20, 2002*

### **Elizabeth & Gia's Apartment: Living Room**

Elizabeth knew even before Gia opened the door. No one knocked on a door at four in the morning without it being bad news.

Gia had fallen asleep on the sofa the night before as they had watched some mindless television, trying to keep their minds off everything happening around them.

Trying to forget that it had now been two weeks without a word from Jason.

Elizabeth had drifted into a light sleep while half-listening to the late night television, and the infomercials had given away to the early morning news broadcast that would run from four to seven before national affiliates took over.

The knocked was quiet. Hesitant. But it echoed in the room like a shot gun blast.

Elizabeth jerked awake and was still trying to figure out what was happening as Gia rose and went to answer the door.

Her brother stood there, looking as if he hadn't had any more sleep than Elizabeth in the last few weeks. The hallway was dim—only a small sconce lit Taggart from behind.

Gia sighed and drew back the door. "Marcus."

"Hey."

Elizabeth got to her feet. Switched on the lamp next to the sofa. She knew what he

would say even before he said it.

“Last night,” Taggert began hesitantly, “a body was pulled from the harbor.”

Oh. Oh, God. The sob spilled out of her lips before she could even process it. She *knew* what he was going to say. Her body knew, her heart knew, but her brain still needed the words.

“Are they sure—” Gia began, but Taggert shook his head.

“Preliminary testing has tentatively identified him.” He cleared his throat, looked at Elizabeth. “He’d been shot twice in the chest—”

“Marcus,” Gia hissed.

“There’s no way to tell how long he was in the water,” Taggert said. “But...it looks like it’s been a while.”

“Two weeks?” she managed, the tears spilling down her cheeks. “Are you *sure* it’s him —”

“It was hard to say from the state of the body, but like I said, some early blood tests. Ah...it’s tentative, but the PCPD feels confident enough—” Taggert shook his head. “The body was pretty decomposed—”

“Oh, God.” She pressed her hands to the mouth. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t force the air into lungs. Oh, God. She didn’t even know how convinced she’d been that he was okay until this minute. “Oh, God.”

Gia crossed to her, put an arm around her shoulder. “Let’s sit down, honey. C’mon—”

Elizabeth allowed herself to be guided back to the sofa, the back of her knees hitting the cushion as she sat down. She forced herself to think. “You said last night. When?”

“Around midnight.” Taggert knelt in front of her. “I know you’re not his technical next of kin, but—I asked to notify you myself. Mac is waiting a few more hours to tell the Quartermaines. I just—I knew you weren’t sleeping well. I *knew* you were terrified, and I know this doesn’t make it better—”

“It makes it over,” Elizabeth said dully. She closed her eyes. “I can’t—this isn’t *real*. It’s not. It can’t be. Can I see him? Maybe I could tell you if it was wrong—”

“If you insisted on seeing him, I would do it,” Taggert said after a moment, but he shook his head. “Please don’t ask me. I did not like Jason Morgan, but *you* loved him. And I know he loved you. He would not want that to be your memory of him. Please.”

His beautiful face. His eyes. His mouth. His smile. His voice. Oh, God, she would never see him again. Never hold him. *Oh, God.*

"I'm so sorry, Elizabeth." He hesitated. "There are questions I need to ask you, but they can wait, okay?"

"No." She shook her head. "No. There's nothing I can tell you anyway. I told you that night what I knew." Elizabeth paused. "I—you said the phone records came back. That he left me a voicemail. Can I have my phone?"

He waited a moment. "Yeah. We're releasing the room today. We didn't have...any cause to take your phone, so it's still sitting there. If there's anything on the message you think I should know—"

"I'll tell you."

Taggart got to his feet and she heard his footsteps mingle with his sisters as Gia let him out and locked the door behind him.

"Am I awake?" she murmured. "Is this really happening?"

"Elizabeth—"

She took a deep breath. "I need to take a shower. I need to be ready. Because Bobbie is going to be up here as soon as she hears, and I know Courtney and AJ—and God, Emily and the Quartermaines It's all going to happen so fast, but I want—"

"You don't have to *anything* you don't want to do," Gia said with some irritation. "You want to sit here and stare at the wall—"

Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut so tightly that it hurt. "I'm scared if I go lay down, if I don't start doing something, I'll never be able to get back up again. So, I have to get up. I have to go." She exhaled slowly. "There's a lot that has to be done, and I really...I *want* my phone."

"Okay."

"I *need* to know what he said to me. And then...then I need to know why Sonny lied." She wrapped her arms around her torso, took a deep breath. "Because he knew something last week when I went to see him. And I let him lie to me. How long did he know Jason wasn't just *hurt*—"

"Maybe he really didn't know—"

"He knew something," Elizabeth repeated. "He lied to me. And I deserve to know why."

### **Safe House: Bedroom**

When Jason had regained consciousness—when he stayed awake long enough to have coherent thought—he knew immediately something was wrong.



He was not allowed to move, and Johnny and the doctor refused to bring him newspapers. Refused to tell him anything that was happening. Wouldn't even allow him to know what day it was.

Which meant it had been more than a handful of days since the warehouse shooting.

And Elizabeth wasn't here.

*That* fact told Jason all he needed to know. He'd been kept drugged so Sonny didn't have to bring Elizabeth to see him. So that Sonny didn't have to tell her he was hurt.

Johnny had kept putting him off, telling him that Sonny would answer his questions when he got there, but Jason was starting to feel strong enough to start moving around, even if the doctor had advised against it.

Sonny knew better. Sonny should have known better. Jason hated being confined. Hated pain medication that knocked him out, left him groggy and disoriented. Hated being lied to.

But Jason also knew that he *was* too weak to move on his own—that the safe house where he'd been taken was located away from Port Charles. There wasn't likely to be any transportation for him to get out of here and find anything out—and if he walked on his own, he might reopen his stitches and bleed out before he reached civilization.

So, he waited. He waited on Sunday. Monday. Tuesday.

And when Wednesday slipped into Thursday, Jason told Johnny that if Sonny didn't show up by the end of the next day, he'd take his chances on the walk, and Johnny relayed the message. And apparently, Sonny had believed him.

"I *know* you're angry," Sonny said when he entered the bedroom on Friday afternoon. "Let me explain—"

"What day is it?" Jason said, flatly. "What date? How *many* days did you drug me?"

Sonny exhaled slowly. "It's September 20. Friday. You were kept sedated until last week—"

"Did you tell Elizabeth I was shot?"

When Sonny hesitated, Jason shook his head and pushed himself out of the bed, into a standing position. He held out his hand. "Give me my phone. Now."

"By the time I could have told her," Sonny said, backing up from his enraged partner, "Taggart was already talking to her. He already knew you'd walked out on plans—he'd told her about the warehouse—I couldn't bring her here—"

"Did you *tell* her I was okay?" Jason demanded. He knew Sonny. He knew the way the

man could and would talk circles around someone, make them think their questions had been answered.

“She figured you were lying low and couldn’t contact her,” Sonny said. “She’s pissed at me because I didn’t confirm it.”

“Why the hell—”

“You told her that you were supposed to be out. What the *hell* were you thinking?” Sonny cut in. “She came at me, both barrels, telling me she knew this was about Carly because you were supposed to be out. Why the fuck are you talking about *business* with your girlfriend?”

Jason scowled. “Don’t change the goddamn subject, Sonny. It was after the warehouse. I was with her when it happened. So, yeah, I told her I wasn’t going. She’s not an idiot—and—” He bit off. “She’s not just my girlfriend, Sonny. She’s not just someone I picked up in a bar. *Don’t* talk about her that way—”

“Then don’t be stupid. She’s been talking to Taggert, Jason. Cooperating with the cops—”

“Because the cops are the *only* ones telling her—” Jason sliced his hand through the air. “I’m not debating this with you. Give me my phone.”

“No,” Sonny shook his head. “No one’s made any moves. You call her, you go back on the grid, then this is for *nothing*!”

“I don’t give a shit. Give me my phone, Sonny. You don’t own me, and I’m not letting Elizabeth worry about me. I want to talk to her. I get that she can’t come to see me, but you’ve already lied to her—”

“I didn’t lie to her,” Sonny said with a grimace. “I just told her I hadn’t heard from you since Friday. Or seen you. And that was true.”

“You lied to her, Sonny. You knew I was okay. That I was just hurt, and you didn’t tell her—”

“Because she’s not an idiot,” Sonny said, throwing the words back at him. “She knows what’s going on. Calling her now is only going to bring attention to all of this. They’ll make their move in another day or two.”

“What if they don’t?” Jason demanded. “What if we’re still waiting?”

Sonny hesitated. “Give me a week, Jase. I’ve got some things in motion. I’ve sent up some smoke signals that we’re weak. That we’re vulnerable. That’s what I’m asking —”

“Fine. But when you leave here, you go tell her that I’m okay. Promise me, Sonny,”

Jason said, roughly. “You *know* what she’s been through. You were here when I wasn’t. Don’t make her worry anymore.”

“I promise,” Sonny said after a moment. “I’ll see her today. I’ll make sure she knows what’s going on. I don’t like this. I hate keeping her in the dark, Jason. Because I damn well know how hard she’s worked this last year to get away from this kind of crap. But this is the business. *This* is what we chose. So maybe you need to know whether *she* can really choose it—”

“Sonny, if you lie to Elizabeth one more time about what’s going on, you and I are done,” Jason said quietly. “I love her. I asked her to move in with me. She’s the one I want a future with. And *every* minute she’s worrying about whether I’m dead or alive, you’re chipping away at that.”

“Jase—”

“You *never* would have put Brenda or Carly through this. You lied to them. You misled them. You destroyed Brenda when you walked away from her without a word. But you never made them wait for weeks to know if you were alive. You wouldn’t do this to them. Elizabeth deserves at least that much respect.”

Sonny dipped his head. Nodded. “All right. I’ll take care of it today. You may not like the way I’ve handled this situation, Jason, but I handled it the best way I knew how. I did it to keep everyone safe. Just remember *that*.”

### **Jake: Jason’s Room**

If the PCPD had done an extensive search, Elizabeth could find no evidence of it when she flipped the light switch later that morning.

In fact, the room looked just as she had left two weeks earlier: her textbooks still taking over the table, her cosmetics strewn across the dresser.

Her phone neatly plugged in on the nightstand.

Next to her, Gia waited a moment. “Do you want me to get it?” she asked softly. “You could—you could just—”

“No.”

Elizabeth walked over the threshold and sat at the table, staring at the chair across from her. Where Jason usually sat. Where they had shared a lot of bad coffee and greasy take-out. In this room in the last four months, where they had laughed. Made love. Teased one another. Argued. Made up.

“The first time he nearly kissed me was in this room. It looked different then.” Elizabeth looked at her roommate. “I came to him after the Face of Deception photo

shoot.”

“I remember,” Gia said with a pained smile. “You...you left the studio.”

“I came here. It was selfish to come here. I’d *already* told Jason we couldn’t...that we had to stop...but I just...I knew he’d get it. Or even if he didn’t... he’d let me fall apart. He wouldn’t look at me like I was crushing his dreams.”

She closed her eyes. “There used to be these really ugly orange chairs. I sat here. And I tried to explain it to him. Why being a model made me feel like I was dying inside. I wanted to take off my makeup—and he...he washed my face. Because I didn’t look like me.”

Her eyes burned as she continued. “I was sitting on the edge of the bed, and he was holding my chin in one hand—and I wanted to kiss him. I knew he wanted to kiss me. But I was so scared of what it would mean—I couldn’t. I *couldn’t* take that step. I couldn’t lie to myself once I kissed him. God what the hell was I so *afraid* of?”

Elizabeth stood and crossed to the dresser, picked up a tube of lipstick. “He hated clutter, you know? I told you that, right?”

“Yeah.” Gia looked around the room. “I can tell.”

“But he just gave me the top of the dresser. He didn’t use it, he told me. So even though it drove him crazy...I just left things all over.” She picked up a ring she’d removed the last night she’d been here. “But he keeps—*kept*...he kept...” she corrected softly as she looked at the small shelf next to the dresser. “Some travel books.”

“Yeah. You told me he used to read to Michael.”

“Michael still loves to read about the places all over the world. Africa is his favorite. The animals, mostly.” Elizabeth set the ring down and then slid her fingers over the four or five books stacked on the shelf. “He wanted to take me to Italy.”

She closed her eyes. “He wanted to show me the light in Italy. And I turned him down. Everything in me screamed yes, but I was *terrified*.”

“Why?” Gia asked softly. “Why did it scare you so much, Elizabeth?”

She turned to her best friend but saw no judgment in her dark eyes. “Staying with Lucky was safe,” she murmured. “Or I thought it was. And there’s a comfort in that. Lucky would never leave me. *I* had to leave *him*.” Except hadn’t he left first? Why hadn’t she seen that?

“And you thought Jason would?”

“Maybe. I don’t—” Elizabeth licked her lips. “I don’t know if I thought...I mean, you

know what he looks—” She caught her breath. “What he *looked* like,” she corrected softly. “You knew him, Gia. The girl I was last year? I couldn’t have made him happy. I didn’t even like myself. How was I supposed to love someone else?”

“That...” Gia said with a hesitant smile. “Is the *nicest* thing you’ve said about yourself back then. You made the right choice not to leave with him last year. I know it hurts. I know it feels like a mistake. Especially now. But you weren’t ready to be in love with someone who would love you back. You were ready this year.”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth released a long shaky breath. “He’s really gone, isn’t he? I can’t quite make myself believe it. I don’t feel it here. Not at all the way.” She pressed a fist to her heart. “But...I guess that doesn’t matter. I felt it with Lucky. There was a hole in me almost immediately. I could accept that he was gone even when I couldn’t. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Gia shifted. “Elizabeth—”

She crossed the room and picked up her phone. She flipped it open. There were a few scattered calls from Bobbie, from Courtney. And a few from her grandmother, who must have seen the news from Memphis where she lived with Elizabeth’s brother, Steven. And from Jason...

“He called me six times.” Elizabeth opened her voicemails—there were a few unread, but only one from his number.

And pressed play, lifting the phone to her ear.

*“I guess you left your phone at Jake’s. I can’t—I won’t be able to come by tonight. Something came up—I’ll explain when I can, okay? I love you, Elizabeth.”*

His voice. His words. God. Why hadn’t she grabbed her phone that last morning?

She hurriedly followed the directions to save the message, clutching the cell phone to her heart. Maybe Lucas or one of his tech savvy friends could...find a way Elizabeth could keep this message. So she could just.... listen to him.

“That’s it. That’s the last thing he said to me,” she murmured. “God. I can’t—”

Her throat closed, her knees buckled, and she sat on the edge of the bed. “I can’t breathe, Gia. How can he be gone?”

Gia sat next to her, their shoulders brushing. “I don’t know. I don’t have the words, Elizabeth.”

“I know if I just put one foot in front of the other and keeping doing that—I’ll look up one day, and it’ll be...later. It’ll hurt less. That’s how it happened with Lucky. I put on a mask, I pretended. I was angry in private, but I kept—I graduated from school. I

smiled when Emily started to date Juan even though I *hated* her for being happy. I wanted to burn everything down so that they would be in ashes like Lucky. Like my life.”

She sobbed into her fist, trying to keep her composure. Trying to keep it together. If she lost it, if she really lost it in this place, in this room where she and Jason had shared a life together—it would be real.

God, she didn’t want it to be real.

“But it didn’t work. Going about my life—it never made it stop hurting. Until Jason. And it’s not—he didn’t perform any miracles. He just never made me feel like I had to be okay.” Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut. “I could say anything to him, and he would never judge me. He was so kind. So sweet. And I’m sure he’d hate that.”

“It would probably have ruined his reputation,” Gia agreed.

“But it helped to just have someone I could be awful around. Someone I didn’t have to pretend with. And then one day—” Elizabeth swallowed hard. “I was having a bad day. An art professor had roasted a portrait of Lucky I’d done for class, and I felt like I’d failed him. I was telling Jason I wanted Lucky back for just a moment, and I had this—I had this insane idea—I asked him to dance with me to our song—Lucky’s and mine.”

She pulled that memory back into her head, closing her eyes to remember it. “It didn’t work. I knew immediately it wouldn’t. Jason was taller than Lucky. And...more muscular. He wasn’t Lucky...and I liked it. I knew it was a stupid idea. But I liked being in his arms. And then I hated myself for even for a minute...thinking about someone else.”

Elizabeth rose to her feet and crossed to the closet, opening it. She drew out the leather jacket Jason kept for cooler weather. “It wasn’t this jacket. That one got destroyed by the gunshot. Blood. And a bullet hole.”

She ran her fingers over the smooth leather. “He looked good in this jacket, didn’t he?”

“He did.”

Elizabeth brought the jacket to her face, breathed in the smell of Jason. He hadn’t worn the jacket in a few months, but it hung next to other clothes he wore more often. It smelled like him today.

But one day it wouldn’t.

And one day, someone else would rent this room.

And someone else would do his job at the warehouse.

“When I lost Lucky, I never thought I could let myself love anyone again. I didn’t think I had the...ability. Or even the right. You were supposed to fall in forever love once, you know? How many soul mates does a girl get?”

“I don’t know if I believe in soul mates,” Gia said after a long moment. “I think...it’s too easy. And it can be used to justify unhappiness. I think we find people who make us like ourselves better, you know? When Nikolas and I first started...it’s not like I was a great person. I mean, I had issues. But I wanted to do better. And he thought I could. He was what I needed in the moment. And if we had married before all that crap happened last year, I don’t know—we probably would have been happy. Or not. But how much time did you waste with Lucky because you were supposed to be soul mates?”

Elizabeth sighed. “Maybe. It was hard for me back then to ever imagine loving anyone the way I loved Lucky. And you know, I didn’t love Jason that way. You only get one first love. It’s sweet. It’s pure. It feels like a high. A rush of adrenaline. Lucky and I never argued. We didn’t need to.”

She sat back down, cradling the jacket in her arms.

“With Jason, I don’t know. I looked at this man who seemed larger than life. Jason was always honest. With himself. With others, and God, that’s just so rare. And he *always* seemed to understand me better than I understood myself. We did fight. About Lucky. About Carly. About Michael. But...it never...” Elizabeth traced her fingers over the leather again. “I knew he respected me. He wanted me to be honest with myself. To be whoever I wanted to be. I didn’t have to hide with him.” She closed her eyes. “Before Carly came back, I could see our future. We hadn’t really talked about it, but you know, you didn’t always need words with Jason.”

She sucked in a deep breath as the pain slid through her belly again. “Not like the future Lucky and I planned out before the fire. I didn’t—I didn’t know he was going to ask me to live with him. But I just...I could think about myself in five years, and he’d be there. Ten years. I could see him with me. Because I can’t imagine either of us would change without doing it together.”

“I’m sorry,” Gia said softly. “It’s...weak to say that, but I don’t have anything else. I’m just...I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “Yeah. I don’t think there’s anything else to say.” She rose to her feet, looked around the room again. “This was a good place, you know? A safe place.” She paused. “But I don’t want to come back here. I can’t. Sonny can...I’ll ask Sonny to get his things. I don’t even know where—but I can...I should get my things.”

She started to put the jacket back—and then stopped.

It wouldn't smell like Jason for very long, but...for now...for now it was something she could keep.

### **Harborview Towers: Lobby**

With Gia hesitantly trailing behind her, Elizabeth approached the desk where a security guard was quietly sitting, his head down. "Excuse me?"

The head snapped up, and Elizabeth was surprised to see the man's eyes were red, as if he'd been crying. "Miss Webber." He lunged to his feet. "Ah..." He looked past her, to Gia. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I was hoping to see Sonny," Elizabeth murmured. "I know...I know Gia has to wait down here."

"Oh." The guard blinked, took a deep breath. "Yeah. Yeah. Let me—" He reached for the phone. "Mr. Corinthos isn't taking visitors—he—he got the call—but I'm sure he'll—" He stopped as someone must have picked up on the other line. "Hey, Miss Webber—" He frowned, listening to someone. "Oh. Okay." He put the phone back on the receiver and looked at Elizabeth. "Mr. Corinthos sends his apologies, but he's not ready to see anyone."

"Anyone, or me?" Elizabeth asked bitterly.

"I—" The guard flushed. "I wouldn't know. He asked that you take a guard with you for a few days. I'm going to call downstairs—"

Elizabeth shook her head. "No. Tell him I refused."

"Elizabeth—" Gia said quietly. "Maybe—"

"No, obviously any obligation or feeling Sonny felt towards me died the same time—" Her voice broke. "It doesn't matter. Tell Sonny I get it. He knows I'm here to ask why the hell he lied to me, and he doesn't want to lie to my face *again*."

The guard's face remained passive, but he swallowed hard. "Okay, maybe that's true. But...Mr. Morgan...we all know how much you—maybe—for him—"

She closed her eyes. "Fine. Call someone up to take me home." She turned to Gia. "You have your car, so I'll meet you there."

"Okay." Gia touched her arm. "I'll see you later." She eyed the guard for a long moment before heading for the lobby exit.

Elizabeth waited until the elevator to the parking garage opened, and a man in a dark suit emerged. He was tall, with his head carefully shaved. He introduced himself as Cody, and Elizabeth followed him back to the parking garage.



Once the doors had closed, the guard picked up the phone and called the penthouse again.

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Sonny sighed and hung up the phone. “She took the guard. I had someone on her anyway, but this way, she’ll have someone with her.”

Benny grunted as he read paperwork across the room. “You should have told her—”

“And I *will*.” Sonny turned. “But there are too many eyes on us. The cops are watching her too closely. They know Elizabeth is angry at me, I’m sure she’s made that clear to Taggart. To Bobbie. She was angry with me before she ever came here last week, Benny—”

“My obligation is not to Elizabeth Webber,” Benny said with some irritation.

“Though morally, this bothers me on a level I am severely uncomfortable with. My obligation is to you and your organization. *You* are creating problems with Jason that will not be simply solved by his return from the dead.”

“Jason will understand eventually—”

“You are holding Elizabeth responsible for mistakes that she did not make.” Benny got to his feet. “You’re holding her to *your* standards—”

“Mine are the only ones that matter—”

“Not to Jason, they don’t. He walked away for the better part of two years because of that business with Carly—”

“That wasn’t just me,” Sonny muttered, even as an itch developed between his shoulders. Goddamn it, would he *never* live that single horrible night down?

“No. But you and I both knew he left because he didn’t know if he could keep doing his job for you. When he finds out that not only did you fake his death and put his family through the grief and devastation but that you did it to *Elizabeth*—a woman he has made very clear he would have trusted with the truth—you are putting that in jeopardy—”

“Benny, I don’t pay you to lecture me—”

“No, you pay me to advise you on your business arrangements, and this is a bad business decision. Jason forgave you once. For Carly. Because it was both of you. This? This will all come down on you. So, I hope you ask yourself if it’s enough to prove a point.” Benny tipped his head. “You were going to bring her in on this, Sonny. We talked about it. When we started planning a body dump, you were going to tell her the truth. Prepare her. Until you found out she knew too much.”

“She needs plausible deniability,” Sonny muttered. “She’s too close to Taggart. She wouldn’t be able keep it up—”

“If that helps you sleep at night,” Benny said with a kindness Sonny knew the older man didn’t feel. “I have to go file these at the court house. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

His manager left, leaving Sonny alone in his penthouse. He reached for the bottle of bourbon and didn’t even bother with the glass.

### **Elizabeth & Gia’s Apartment: Living Room**

Later that night, in the kitchen, Gia’s hands were shaking slightly as she arranged some food on plate for Elizabeth. Bobbie had brought it home from Kelly’s and had encouraged Gia to make sure Elizabeth ate something. Anything.

When Elizabeth had returned from Sonny’s, walking in only a few minutes after Gia, she had sat down on the sofa, turned on the television and stared at it. Not watching it, not listening, just staring at the screen.

Gia had tried to talk to her a few times, but it was as if an icy wall had descended. As if her roommate had crawled inside herself and refused to come out.

Gia was not a good person. She had never aspired to *be* a good person, and almost everything she knew about being one came from her brother, her mother, and the figure in the living room.

Their friendship had come out of nowhere—just two people tired of the lies and bullshit surrounding them. Tired of their own poor choices and dissatisfied with the road ahead of them. They had gone back to school, rented this apartment, and promised each other complete and total honesty. No matter what.

And Gia had delivered that. Had pushed Elizabeth when she’d backslid to lying to herself, to protecting herself. Had championed her relationship with Jason.

Had dismissed Elizabeth’s fears about being broken. About being left behind.

Had ignored the fact that Jason Morgan worked a dangerous job and was even more at risk than a seventeen-year-old boy lighting candles in his bedroom.

“Well, girl, you reap what you sow,” Gia murmured. Now her best friend, the only person who knew her past, wasn’t related to her, and still liked her company, had had her entire world crumble around her, and Gia...hated herself for whatever role she had played in this tragedy.

Her cell phone vibrated on the white Formica counter next to the coffee pot. Gia picked it up and flipped it open.

“Courtney. Hey.”

*“Hey.” Courtney was quiet for a long moment, her voice a bit hoarse when she spoke again. “I called...I called to check on Elizabeth, but that’s stupid, right? She’s not okay. How could she be okay?”*

“It’s not stupid. It’s what people do.” Gia pressed a hand to her forehead. “Christ, Courtney. How’s AJ? Which is also a ridiculous question.”

*“He’s in, um, shock. I think. We came to the mansion. We’re still here. Um, Michael was crying at first and started to ask if we were sure. If we were making a mistake about Jason like we did Carly, and I don’t know what to say to him. Edward is in his room with Lila. They’re not coming out. And Alan and Monica are just...they’re staring into silence. Not even crying.”*

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s—” Gia passed Elizabeth on the couch and peered through the curtain. “Now, we have news vans outside the Brownstone. They were already here when we got back from Sonny’s. Already filming. Fucking vultures.”

*“Yeah, Liz and whoever she was with was on the news—Ned was watching it. He wants to sic the lawyers on them. Do something. Liz looked—she looked empty. In shock. Ned said if you want him to send over ELQ’s lawyer to get them to go—”*

“We’ll keep it in mind. I left a message with Marcus. I’m hoping he’ll stop by—he should be able to get rid of them. Thanks.”

Gia turned back to Elizabeth. “Um, Elizabeth? It’s Courtney. She just.... she wanted to check on you.”

Elizabeth met her eyes, and that blank empty stare—God, she knew that stare. Elizabeth had worn it so often in the months leading up to her wedding. During that last final awful year with Lucky. Then it cleared, and Elizabeth took a deep breath. “I’m—is AJ okay?”

“Courtney thinks he’s in shock. They went to the Qs.” Gia hesitated. “Did you—maybe you want to go there—”

“Oh.” Elizabeth blinked. “No.” She paused. “Thank you.”

“Oookay,” Gia drawled. She was completely out of her depth. She turned her attention back to Courtney. “Is—Is Emily coming back?”

*“Oh. Yeah. Ned called her. She’s flying in tomorrow. I’ll let you know the details—” Courtney paused. “Hey, I need to go. Michael’s awake and he’s—”*

“Yeah, go. Go.”

Gia closed her phone and then slid it into her pocket. She sat next to Elizabeth on the sofa. “Do you need me to just sit here? To...be quiet? You can scream at me, if you want. Something.”

“I—” Elizabeth hesitated. Focused on Gia. “I should have told him yes about living together. That’s all I can think about now. I smiled at him, I kissed him. I told him I loved him, but I put him off. I wanted it—I wanted it to be a moment. He was going to pick me up. He was going to let me drive. And we were going to go somewhere. And I was going to tell him yes.”

“He knew that, Elizabeth. He *had* to know that.” God, Gia hoped that was true. “He loved you.”

“I wasted so much time,” she murmured. “I picked that fight about Carly—”

“It was the right fight,” Gia insisted, going with her instinct here. “Hey. I need you to look at me.” She waited until Elizabeth met her eyes. “You knew she was manipulating him, and you *knew* he would refuse to see it. You made him see it. A year ago, you swallowed every piece of emotional abuse Lucky threw at you. You stood up for yourself. And for Jason. And he knew you were right. You know that.”

“I just—” Elizabeth’s voice broke. “He thought Carly was his friend, and she never deserved that label. *Never*. I hated how much she hurt him. But I thought I knew what was right, and I forced him to do what I wanted. I became Robin—”

“No. Jesus, no. Hey.” Gia leaned forward. “No, you didn’t. You did the one thing Robin never did. You stood in front him, and you drew a line in the sand. You said this is what I need from you. From a relationship. You challenged him to give you what you needed. And he stepped up. And he asked you to move in with him.”

Elizabeth dug the heels of her hands into her eyes. Her shoulders trembled. “He...he told me he didn’t want me to be anyone else for him. To hide how I felt. What I thought. He didn’t want that.”

“I don’t know what to say to you. I’m so fucking angry at the world—” Gia felt pressure behind her eyes. “So fucking angry that they would put that man on this planet, make him practically perfect, give him to you for five fucking minutes and steal him away again—what is the goddamn *point* of it?” she demanded, her voice breaking.

And...then Elizabeth laughed. Bitter, choked laughter as tears slid down her cheeks. As her shoulders shook. “God. Oh, God. God, is it real? Is he—How could—”

Gia slid across the couch and pulled Elizabeth into a hug, wrapping her arms around her tightly. “I’m so sorry. I am so goddamn sorry.”

And she held Elizabeth as her best friend sobbed until her voice was gone.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

*Oh yeah everything's all wrong yeah  
Everything's all wrong yeah  
Stranger than your sympathy  
I take these things so I don't feel  
And all these thoughts from the inside out  
Now my head's been filled with doubt  
- Sympathy, Goo Goo Dolls*

---

*Friday, September 20, 2002*

### **Quartermaine Mansion: Foyer**

Courtney closed her cell phone and stared at it for a long moment. She hated this. She hated every minute of this.

Michael had cried until he'd decided that Jason would come back like his mommy—and how much longer until he could talk to his mother? AJ had tried to keep it together. Had wanted to check in on his family, so they'd packed Michael up and come to the mansion.

But AJ wasn't letting it out. Wasn't talking to her. Wasn't talking to anyone really. Just sitting with his grandmother in the garden today, sharing old stories of Jason. Alan and Monica had gone to work, trying to be normal.

Trying to forget.

And Courtney wasn't really sure what she was supposed to be doing here.

"Courtney?"

She turned to find Ned stepping out of the foyer. "Oh. Hey. What's—what's up?" She tucked her phone in her back pocket. "Do you guys need anything? I can—"

"We're okay." He closed the door behind him. "I left AJ and Grandmother out there, so I can check on Grandfather, but I overheard you on the phone with Gia. I didn't want to intrude."

"Oh. No, it's okay." Courtney bit her lip. "Gia's just worried. Elizabeth has been a lot like Alan and Monica since Jason went missing. She was trying to keep breathing, to

stop herself from thinking the worst, but now the worst has happened—” She stopped. “I’m rambling.”

“You’re worried about AJ. And I imagine you’re pretty worried about Elizabeth.” Ned folded his arms. “It hasn’t hit him yet, you know? This summer—I think he came as close as he ever probably would to having his brother back and that’s...” Ned looked away. “It’s gone. I have a little brother, too. He’s much younger than me, but I love him. I can’t *imagine*—” He shook his head.

“I figure it’s gotta be harder for you guys,” Courtney said after a moment. “I mean, it’s not even the first time you’ve lost Jason.”

Ned nodded. “Yeah, I think that’s—that’s what makes this so awful. We lost Jason Quartermaine, and God, I don’t think we *ever* let Jason Morgan forget it. He ran away from this family because of it. And a lot of other reasons, but that was part of it. You know...” He rubbed his chest absently. “We told ourselves it was a matter of time. He made his choices, this was how it was supposed to be—we all expected him to die violently—” His voice failed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Courtney folded her arms tightly under her breath. “I didn’t—I only know Jason through AJ and Elizabeth, so I’m sad. But it’s for you guys. And for her. Because he seemed like a nice guy. And even if he had a dangerous lifestyle, it doesn’t make it easier for the people who loved him.”

“No.” Ned exhaled slowly. “No, it doesn’t. Have you spoken to Elizabeth? Grandmother asked about her—”

“She’s...managing,” Courtney said. “Gia’s with her. I just...I don’t know how she’s going to do this. He just...he just asked her to move in with him. She was so happy—” Her voice broke. “Sorry. It’s not even—this just sucks.”

“Yeah, yeah it does.” Ned touched her shoulder lightly. “For what it’s worth, it gives my grandmother comfort knowing he was happy at the end. Elizabeth was good for him, and I’m just sorry they didn’t get to see where it would go. You let me know if she needs anything, all right?”

“Yeah, thanks Ned.”

“And don’t worry about Junior. He’s done a lot of work in the last year or so. He’s battled his demons—I’m not saying he’s won completely, but he’s.... settled. You gave him that, Courtney—”

She shook her head. “He likes to say that, too, but I’m not some kind of miracle. I’m just a girl who rushed into marriage with a man she barely knew on a hope and prayer. We both got lucky it’s working. But Jason told him—he told him at the chip ceremony that AJ did the work. He’s the one that didn’t take a drink.” Her lip

trembled. “It meant the world to him that Jason was there, but to say that—God, I don’t think Jason ever knew what he did for AJ that night.”

Ned dipped his head and took another deep breath. “They were so close once. I like to think they could have been again.” He cleared his throat. “I should check on Grandfather.”

*Sunday, September 22, 2002*

### **Quartermaine Mansion: Foyer**

Elizabeth smiled briefly at Alice, the maid, who directed her to the garden where Lila, Courtney, and Emily were having tea.

And then she couldn’t quite bring herself to cross through the family room out onto the terrace and into the garden.

Because until now, she had been able to stay in a bubble, inside her own world at the Brownstone with Bobbie and Gia.

But she wasn’t the only person who had lost Jason, and she would have to share her pain with others. She had to, because hiding her grief and running from it three years ago had been the wrong choice.

“Elizabeth?”

She turned to find AJ emerging from the dining room. “Oh. Hey.”

“Hey.” He approached her, his hands in his pockets. “I won’t ask how you’re doing. It’s a stupid question, and—I can see it.”

“Yeah?” Elizabeth asked with a sigh. “Am I that transparent?”

“You’re thinking about how to keep it together for Grandmother and my sister. So that Courtney doesn’t have to worry about you, too. Or am I just...projecting?” He shrugged. “Because what’s what I’ve been doing since the second—” AJ looked down. “Anyway. I wanted to call, but Courtney said you were mostly...keeping to yourself.”

“Yeah, for the last two days.” Elizabeth crossed her arms, closed her eyes. “I fell asleep for the first time last night. Bobbie wanted to have Tony give me a prescription for something, but I didn’t want to close my eyes. I didn’t want to wake up in a world and know—I could lie to myself when he was just missing. But I can’t now.”

Her eyes burned as the first tear slid down her cheek. “He’s not *here*, and I just—I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. How to breathe. I guess it doesn’t matter, because I keep doing it. But it’s like every breath I take is.... a shock. How can I breathe without him?”

Elizabeth wiped her tears as AJ said nothing. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—I'm okay. I mean, I'm not. I'm...managing—"

"There were a couple of moments there that I thought..." AJ said slowly, "this summer...I mean...I thought if Jason and I had enough time...maybe we could be brothers again. It was a stupid dream, and I know he'd never claim me that way. But I thought it. And I just—it's never gonna happen now. He's my little brother and he's gone, and I can't seem to wrap my head around it."

"I know. I've been through this. I know what the shock feels like, but somehow—" She shook her head. "It still feels brand-new." She managed a short laugh. "My grandmother called this morning. She...she called a few days ago, too, but I ignored it. I almost ignored it again this morning, but for some reason, I wanted to hear her voice, and you know what she said? She said...it was hard to believe it right now, but that there would someone else someday. I mean, hadn't I learned that after Lucky was gone?"

"God." Elizabeth dug her heels into her eyes. "Like it's the *same*. I was a teenager. This—this is different. This—I don't know how to explain it. She, of all people, ought to know you can't compare grief."

She exhaled slowly. "I should get out to the garden before they send a search party." She hesitated. "I'm sorry, I didn't even ask about Michael—"

AJ shrugged. "We talked to a counselor yesterday. Right now, Michael is convinced it's going to be like Carly." He rubbed his temple with his thumb. "That we're all just mistaken. It'll sink in for him. Or it won't. He's almost six, but..."

"One day, he won't even remember Jason," Elizabeth murmured. Her chest ached, and she just wanted to go home. To curl up in her bed, draw the curtain, and ignore the world.

But that wouldn't solve anything. Wouldn't make it better.

"God, I hate knowing that's true." AJ cleared his throat, looked away as his eyes glittered. "You need anything, Liz. You just let me know."

### **Quartermaine Mansion: Terrace**

Emily's eyes were swollen and rimmed with red, while Lila was clutching a handkerchief in her hand. Courtney was quiet, solemn.

And Elizabeth wanted to be anywhere else.

"Elizabeth." Her best friend rose to her feet and crossed to the doorway. "Oh, God."

"Hey." Elizabeth closed her eyes, struggled to keep back the flood of tears that



threatened to swallow her whole. She had to get through this moment. Had to get through this day.

She clung to Emily for just a moment before stepping back. "It's good to see you but I wish it were for any other reason."

"Yeah." Emily swallowed as they sat down on the long iron bench adjacent to Lila's wheel chair.

"Mrs. Quartermaine," Elizabeth said as she took one of Lila's delicate hands in hers. "Hey."

"Oh, my darling—" Lila's voice was thin and shaky. "Thank you for coming. I cannot imagine—" She closed her eyes. "I just cannot accept *any* of this is real."

Elizabeth dragged the heel of her hand under her eyes, sweeping away her tears. "I know. I keep thinking it's a nightmare I'm gonna wake up from, but...then I realize it's not."

"I talked to him just a few weeks ago—" Emily managed, her voice raw. "He sounded...God, Elizabeth, he was happy. You made him so *happy*."

"Thank you," Lila murmured. "For giving him that. It hurts so very much right now, my darling. But someday, knowing the love you brought to one another, it will bring comfort."

She closed her eyes. Pressed her hands to the lids. "I want to believe that. I just can't seem to think past right now. It hurts so much."

Emily wrapped an arm around her shoulder, and Elizabeth leaned into her. "I can't even pretend it's going to be okay," Emily said softly. "Because I can't accept that it ever will be. It's not supposed to be this way."

It is for me, Elizabeth very nearly said, but she could hear the wallowing in those words, the self-pity, and she bit them back. Emily and Lila didn't need her devastation. They had their own.

But she was never going to be allowed to be happy for more than a moment in time, and it was time Elizabeth learned to accept that. If she could just stop...dreaming she deserved more, maybe the fall wouldn't hurt so damn much.

*Monday, September 23, 2002*

### **Kelly's: Diner**

Bobbie touched Gia's shoulder. "You mind if I take this seat?" she asked indicating the chair across from her. "I wanted to grab a quick lunch between shifts at the hospital."

“Oh, yeah.” Gia pushed her notebook aside. “I have a class in an hour, so...” She shrugged. “Not that I can seem to concentrate. I mean, it’s stupid. I didn’t lose anyone. Jason didn’t even like me all that much.”

“You’re an acquired taste,” Bobbie said with a small. She gave her order to Penny and sighed. “I can’t tell if Elizabeth is managing or pretending to manage. She’s always been good at putting up a front.”

“She keeps it together for a while, and then something breaks her down. It’s only been three days, so I think she’s still kind of in shock.” Gia picked up her iced tea and sipped it. “I feel like this is my fault. I pushed her at him.”

“Gia—”

“She wanted to lie to herself, to pretend she wasn’t interested, and I forced her to admit that she was. I told myself I was just living up to our promise, you know? No more lies, not to each other and really not to ourselves. I told her I didn’t care if she pursued him, but she shouldn’t lie to herself.”

“And what? You think it made it worse because she—she lost him—” Bobbie caught her breath. Pressed a fist to her chest. “I’m sorry. It’s still...it’s catching me. I didn’t—I loved him like one of my own, and I just—I keep expecting him to walk through the doors. To come to the Brownstone.”

“I tried to tell her at least she had this time, but how much *more* did it suck that she got a taste of what it could be like?” Gia’s eyes burned. “I hate this. I hate this caring about people bullshit. I should have just seduced him or something. She’d hate me for that, and then I wouldn’t care, and I wouldn’t feel like shit—”

“That wouldn’t have solved anything.”

“No, but—” Gia sighed. “I don’t know. I just—I don’t think I pushed her like everyone did with Lucky last year. I don’t feel like that. I just didn’t want her to...lie to herself. And then when she admitted it, yeah, I kept encouraging it, I guess. You know, maybe I was jealous. I wanted someone like that, you know?”

“Someone like what?”

“Someone whose entire existence is made better because you’re there. You know how he looked at her, how he talked to her, about her. The way he was around her.” Gia sighed, pushed her French fries around her plate. “She had this chance at that kind of love, and I didn’t think she should throw it away. Nikolas, even when it was good, he *never* looked at me like that. Like the world disappeared when we were together. I wanted that in my life, so I pushed her towards it, and I just...I feel like what she’s going through is my fault.”

“It’s tempting to think...it would have hurt less if they hadn’t been dating,” Bobbie

said slowly. “But I wonder if it would have given her more anguish...to know she had lost that chance forever. I think...I think we regret the roads we don’t take more than the ones we do.”

“I guess.”

“You’re hurting for your friend, Gia. That’s not a bad thing. She was happy, and now she’s not. And...maybe one day...this summer *will* be a comforting memory.” Bobbie pressed her lips together for a moment. “She had him for a brief moment, but it was a shining moment. And... before Jason died—” She couldn’t finish. Had to start again. “At the end, she brought him love and joy.”

“I wish I could believe that,” Gia said slowly. “But all I can think of is that...she had that before. With Lucky. Why the hell would the universe do this to her *again*?”

“Well...that I can’t answer.” Bobbie sighed. “I don’t know why the universe does anything. When I lost my BJ, my darling, sweet, *amazing* BJ—I still had Lucas. But it wasn’t the same. Having another child didn’t fill the hole, didn’t mend the pain. The universe gave me another daughter.”

“Yeah, the universe was feeling pretty salty *that* day,” Gia muttered. “Sorry—”

“I love my daughter because I gave birth to her,” Bobbie said slowly. “I forgave her for what she had done to my marriage because I recognized that same self-destructive streak in her that I have fought against my entire life. I could *understand* the way her mind worked. The way she just reacted—the damage she could do. I could live with all of that because I knew she had inherited it from me—”

“And you’ve been blaming yourself for Carly ever since,” Gia said bluntly. “I get Carly. I used to be Carly. I used to hate the world—” She stopped. “My brother left home when I was still a kid. I’m a lot younger than him—I think you know that. When he left, things didn’t stay okay. My mom was always looking for another guy to fill the space that Marcus’s father, that my father had left her—”

“Gia—”

“It doesn’t matter.” Gia shook her head. “I learned to look out for myself. To *always* put myself first, because I was damn sure the only one who could. I thought what I wanted meant more than anyone else. Carly’s like that, Bobbie. Except she managed to hook up with a bunch of people who just excuse that kind of selfishness as a character flaw. As something to overlook. I hated Elizabeth. You know that. I did awful things to her. Said them to her face. Behind her back.”

Bobbie’s eyes softened. “Gia, she doesn’t—”

“Because I didn’t see her, you know? I just saw the way everyone else reacted to her. They treated her like this precious porcelain that belonged to Lucky Spencer, and

Laura was bending over backwards to give her the modeling contract that I damn well deserved—I knew about Tom Baker. And I used it against her.”

Bobbie exhaled slowly. Sat back and just looked at her. “That’s pretty cold.”

“Yep. And I didn’t have a problem with that. She wasn’t right for the job. I was. Take what you want, that was my motto. And then I overheard Nikolas and Lucky talking about her the day of the wedding. Talking about how Lucky didn’t love her anymore, but he owed her this. And I just got pissed off. Because everyone had lied to me, and I was supposed to swallow it to go along with it. But now they were lying again. So, I went to her because I wanted to throw it in her face.”

She paused, took a sip of water. “I wanted to show her *I* was a better person. That I wouldn’t keep her in the fucking dark like she did to me. And so, I told her with hatred in my heart that her precious Lucky didn’t even *love* her. That he only pitied her. Like she was a dog.”

“What happened then?” Bobbie asked quietly.

“She looked at me, with tears in her eyes, and she *thanked* me. She said she’d been having her doubts, but that she thought she owed this to Lucky. But now...now I had set her free. She didn’t have to sacrifice her life anymore. I was going to shove her face in it, but she looked at me like I was doing her a favor. Like I was some kind of sign from the universe.”

“And three days later, you asked to rent the apartment from me. To live together.” Bobbie tipped her head. “What changed?”

“I stopped looking at her as the enemy, and she stopped seeing me as the bitch who blackmailed her best friend. Because being with Nikolas had only made me *more* selfish, and I was starting to hate myself. When I realized that I had gone into that room to destroy Elizabeth’s life just because I didn’t like her—I knew I was taking it too far. I didn’t want to be that girl anymore. She didn’t want to be who she was either. So, we figured, fuck it, let’s try and save each other.”

“It’s not your fault, Gia, that Elizabeth is hurting right now.”

“And it’s not your fault, Bobbie, that Carly is who she is. You gave her love, compassion. Understanding. A place to raise her son. *What else* were you supposed to do to keep this from happening?”

Bobbie closed her eyes. “I can’t look at her. I haven’t seen her much since Jason went missing. She’s avoiding me, and that means she’s involved. Somehow, someway. And she knows I’m at the end of my rope.” She sighed. “But you’re right. This isn’t my fault either. I have to let her fall. Let her hit rock bottom. She needs to have that moment, Gia, where she doesn’t like that person she sees in the mirror. And right

now, she's still the victim. It's still someone else's fault. Someone else's responsibility to fix."

"Until that stops, there's nothing you can do."

*Wednesday, September 25, 2002*

### **Elm Street Pier**

Elizabeth stepped off the last stair and turned to the left. There it was. The bench where she and Jason had sat so often in those early days. Where she had poured her heart out.

Where he had left her only months later.

Where they had been reunited.

Where she had betrayed him for the first time when she had thought he had attacked Lucky.

She sat down and looked out over the harbor, out at Spoon Island. She hadn't thought about Nikolas Cassadine in months. He still lived out there. Still lived in Port Charles. But he was removed from her life, and she grieved for that. They had been through hell together once, and she'd thought that meant she was important.

That she deserved honesty. And respect.

She knew Gia was back at the apartment, her classes completed for the day. She knew she had to really go home. To try and do some of the studying she'd been ignoring. Pretending to do. If she was going to use her degree to distract her, it was probably time...to actually use it as a distraction.

But she just couldn't.

If she tried to bury her grief, it would drown her. She *knew* that. She had to get through it. She had to live it, but...

Jason was dead. He was dead. They were having a memorial tomorrow, burying him on Friday. Three weeks after she'd last seen him, he would be in the ground.

*Jason was dead.*

And she still couldn't wrap her mind around that.

Dead.

It was the first time, even in her own mind, that she had acknowledged it. Jason was dead. Shot to death in some filthy warehouse. Left to rot in the harbor. His funeral would require a closed casket—

A sob bubbled out of her throat and she fought it back. She was tired of losing it. Tired of the tears. They didn't change anything.

There were some footsteps just around the corner, where the pier met Bannister's Wharf. And then she saw the figure that bled out of the early evening shadows.

Zander Smith walked towards her, hands in the pockets of a light jacket, his dark hair cut short. She hadn't seen him since the bar fight, since Jason had told her he'd been fired and gone to Miami.

He stopped in front her. "Hey. I—I didn't expect to run into you here."

She frowned. Narrowed her eyes. "I thought you left Port Charles."

"I did." Zander swallowed hard. "I *had* to. It was..." He looked away, shaking his head. "I kept looking around, seeing Emily, and hating it. I wasn't good enough for her, but I wanted to be. And every day I was here, I was reminded of that."

Elizabeth slowly got to her feet. "Why do you think I'd care—"

"Because I was an asshole to you, and Morgan—" He closed his mouth. "I got what I deserved, but I—my boss set me up in Miami. And so, I heard about him. And I knew...I just...I knew Emily would be home—"

"You thought you'd come back, try to slide into her good graces?" Elizabeth demanded.

"Listen—"

"You are nothing," she hissed. "*Nothing*. You're not half the man Jason is—was—" Her voice broke. "I wish it were you. I don't understand why it's not. How can you be alive and someone like Jason—"

Zander just stared at her. "I know you're upset, but c'mon, I only—I only bothered you for a like a minute. Why—"

"Because he's dead. And you're here. Trying to use it like he was just—an obstacle." She strode towards him and shoved him. Hard. He fell back a few steps. "You think you can worm your way back into Emily's life—what, is Sonny next? Do you think that Jason is gone, and you can just step right back in? Back to your goddamn corner office and promotion?"

"What the hell—"

"He's dead—" Elizabeth whirled away, dragged her hands through hair, trying to draw back some of the anger. "And you're like a fucking scavenger. A *vulture* here to pick at the pieces before his body is even cold." She faced him again. "What is *wrong* with you?" she cried.

“Look, I never—” Zander shook his head. “I don’t want to make this worse for you. I’m sorry. I didn’t—” He looked away. “I’ll send Emily a letter or something. I was gonna go tomorrow, but I don’t—it’s not worth it. I’m sorry, Elizabeth.”

“You’re only sorry he ever came home and screwed up your cozy life,” she snarled. “Go to hell.”

“You know what?” Zander shot back, his face flushing. “I had it right the first time—you’re a fucking bitch—”

“Back off!” The unexpected growl came from the top of the stairs, and Elizabeth saw just a blur as Lucky Spencer took the steps two at a time and shoved himself between the two of them. “What the hell is wrong with you, you piece of shit?”

“Oh, of course.” Zander sneered. “Here you are. Think you’re going to lap up Jason’s leavings? She’ll just jump back to you like she jumped to Jason—”

Lucky took Zander by the collar, his knuckles white. “Walk away. You stay *away* from that memorial tomorrow. You stay away from Emily, from Elizabeth. From all of us.”

“Go to hell,” the other man growled, but he jerked away from Lucky and stalked in the opposite direction, the way he came.

Lucky turned back to Elizabeth, dragging his hand through his hair. “Hey. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“What are you—” Elizabeth cleared her throat, trying to process his presence. “I thought you were in New York.”

“Emily called when Jason went missing...and then she told me—” Lucky swallowed. “It’s *not* what Zander said, I’m not trying—I just...”

He waited a moment, trying to gather his thoughts. “Emily told me what happened, and all I could think was that I had to make sure you were—I don’t know. That you weren’t alone. We were friends for so *long*, Elizabeth. You held me together when my entire family fell apart. Every time my world fell apart, you were there. Even when it hurt you.”

“Lucky—”

“So, I just...I don’t know. I wanted to be here for Emily, too, but I just—I wanted to try to see if I could be a friend to you again.” Lucky hesitated. “So here I am.”

“Okay.” Elizabeth folded her arms tightly. She looked back out over the lake as the sun set behind them, casting the Gothic mansion into shadows. “We’re burying him in two days, Lucky. I don’t know if I’m strong enough to do this again,” she admitted.

He put his arm around her shoulders, and for just a minute, she could remember

what it had been like once to lean on him. To trust that he would be there for her.

“The thing about you, Elizabeth Imogene Webber,” he said, and smiled when she grimaced at the sound of her hated middle name, “is that you never give yourself enough credit. But let me say that it’s bullshit that you even *have* to do this again.”

She sighed and let him walk her towards the steps and away from the bench.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

*But if you close your eyes  
Does it almost feel like  
Nothing changed at all?  
And if you close your eyes  
Does it almost feel like  
You've been here before?*  
- Pompeii, Bastille

---

*Thursday, September 26, 2002*

### Queen of Angels: Anteroom

Gia hesitated when she stepped over the threshold of the church. She could see through the main doors that Elizabeth and Bobbie were at the front of the chapel, speaking quietly with Father Coates before the memorial.

But Emily was here. In this room. With her brother and Courtney.

They turned at her entrance. Courtney smiled at her, a sad smile, but they were the only ones who weren't...really reeling from this loss. Jason had been on the peripheries of their lives, not a central character.

Emily hesitated, then broke away from the pair to approach Gia. Her eyes swollen and red, she said in a rough voice, "Do you have a minute to talk?"

"Sure," Gia said. And if Emily wanted to throw shade at her, read her to filth for her past actions—whatever Emily needed to do in this moment, Gia would let her.

Gia had an older brother who was at the center of her universe too, after all.

"I know..." Emily said after they had gone to the courtyard. She paused. "I know we've had our differences. That—that we've never been...friendly, but, um..." Her voice broke. "I know you and Elizabeth are close now. And that you've been here in a way this year that I don't know if I could have."

"Emily, listen—"

"No, no just—" Emily took a deep breath. "When Lucky died, we all...we *all* drowned. And we couldn't save each other. We didn't—we should have clung to one another,

but we just couldn't. We didn't lose him in the same way, and maybe we were just too young to know how to help each other." She cleared her throat. "But it helped for Elizabeth to have someone who didn't lose him that way—but had known him all the same—it helped her. My brother—" Emily sucked in a deep breath. "Oh, God."

"Hey, listen—" Gia touched her shoulder. "*Listen*," she repeated. "I'm here for Liz, no questions. Because she's been here for me. But—I can be here for you. I think about losing Marcus, and even though he literally annoys me more than anyone on Earth, if I lost him, I would lose my center. I would lose my goddamn mind. So, listen. Yeah, I'm here for Liz. And we've never been friends, you and me. But that was then. This is now."

"I just—I can't—I can't stop thinking—I always knew it would be this way. I *knew* it," Emily said fiercely. "I knew he'd been shot before. He's almost died. But I didn't—I always thought—I thought he was Superman. That bullets couldn't break him. And they *did*. They took him from the world, and he was just—he was just—Elizabeth sounded happy when we talked. Jason sounded happy. They were happy. What kind of world does this—"

Her face crumbled, and the tears Emily had been holding back broke though. Gia embraced her, her old enemy, this girl she'd never been kind to, and held her while she sobbed.

### **Queen of Angels: Chapel**

"Mama."

Bobbie turned away from Elizabeth at the sound of her daughter's voice and winced. "Carly."

"I—" Carly's face was swollen as if she had done nothing but cry since she'd heard the news. "I just—" She looked at Elizabeth who hadn't moved since Carly's approach.

Elizabeth was so fragile, so brittle—Bobbie took her daughter's elbow and started to steer her away. "I just wanted to tell her I was—"

"There is nothing you could say to Elizabeth right now that would make this go away." Bobbie shook her head. "I don't know what you said to him that day, what put this all in motion, but—"

"Mama, I—" Carly closed her eyes and said flatly, "You're blaming me."

"I'm blaming the man who shot him," Bobbie retorted. "I'm blaming Sonny Corinthos for introducing him to this life. Jason for staying. I'm blaming myself. But if you said something to him, and he went to that warehouse because of you, then, yes, Carly, I *blame* you."

“Of course you do.” And just like that the grief slid from Carly’s expression. The distaste. The bitterness. The venom. It was back. “You loved Jason more than me. Elizabeth. They’re your family. Not me.”

“I made you my family when you didn’t give me a reason to.” Bobbie sliced her hand through the air. “But, yes, Jason and Elizabeth are part of my family, too.” Her eyes softened just a bit as she took in the misery behind Carly’s anger.

“I know you feel like you’ve never measured up. Not to BJ. Not to Robin. Elizabeth is *not* competition for your place in my life. Or your place in Jason’s life. And I’m sorry if I’ve made you feel that way. You are my daughter, and I love you, Carly. But you have to stop this.”

“I don’t know how—” She swallowed her sobs. “Because, oh, God, it is my fault, and I don’t know if I can live with that.”

“And I don’t know if I can help you with that. Not anymore. I have to think about Michael. And about my family. I can’t make you a better person, Carly. That will be up to you.”

---

Elizabeth floated through the memorial. It was short—Jason never would have wanted anything elaborate or complicated. Father Coates said a few words, but no one got up to speak. Emily tried, but she was crying too hard, and Ned and AJ had to carry her back to her seat.

Elizabeth wanted to—God, she nearly stood. But what she had to say about Jason wasn’t for anyone else’s ears. It was just for her own.

Sonny had sat down next to her before the service had begun, and she had forgotten she was angry at him. Forgotten that she blamed him. She just let him sit there and took solace in the fact that he had loved Jason, too. The anger, the bitterness...that could wait.

She sat between Bobbie and Sonny, her hands clasped tightly in Bobbie’s, Sonny’s arm around her shoulder. And just...floated.

His casket was up there, his photograph was next to it. He was smiling in it—a photo Bobbie had said was from one of the times he had gone to the Nurse’s Ball with Robin, who had not flown in from Paris, though Bobbie said she had called. Had tried to get away.

These were just facts to Elizabeth now. Just pieces of a life she couldn’t seem to grasp.

Carly was sitting in the back. Elizabeth could see Monica, Lila, and Emily in the front pew on the other side. AJ and Courtney were behind Elizabeth and Bobbie.

Taggart and Gia were sitting quietly a few rows in front of Carly. Alan, Ned, and Edward behind their family. Lucky and Nikolas were across from Taggart and Gia.

After Father Coates closed the prayers, the Quartermaines shuffled past the coffin. Saying their last respects. Monica's knees buckled, but Alan kept her upright and helped her back to her seat.

Emily didn't leave her seat, and God, Elizabeth couldn't bring herself to do it either. She couldn't look at the coffin. Couldn't accept that Jason was inside of it.

"I can't stand it," she murmured, her voice breaking after Bobbie had gone up to talk to Edward and Lila. "He's trapped in there. We should—we should have had him cremated, Sonny. We-we did it *wrong*. He should be free. Can we—" She sucked in a breath, because it hurt so much to think about it. But she had to do it.

*Had* to do right by him. "I want—can we talk to the Quartermaines? Or is it you? I don't even know who did any of this. We should—he needs to be free, Sonny. Please, **please**—"

"Elizabeth—" Sonny closed his eyes, bowed his head, and she felt like a horrible villain. This was Sonny's best friend Elizabeth was talking about. Sonny's brother.

"I—I'm sorry—"

"No, No, don't." Sonny got to his feet. "But you're right. It's wrong." He looked over, his eyes wet. "I did it all wrong," he said hoarsely. "It's—come back to the penthouse with me. We can—let's talk about it, okay?"

"I—" Elizabeth swallowed, let Sonny pull her to her feet. "I'm supposed to go to the Quartermaines, but—" She took a deep breath. "Okay. Okay. I can't stand it anymore. I don't want to go to the cemetery tomorrow and bury him. I-I can't. It's not too late, is it?"

"No." Sonny smoothed his hand down her back as they approached Emily, who had been joined by Courtney and Bobbie. "No, it's not too late."

"I know there's a reception at the mansion," Elizabeth told her friends, "but Sonny—Sonny asked me to come to the penthouse."

"A quiet dinner, maybe...just...some...quiet," Sonny repeated.

"Of course," Bobbie murmured, pressing a kiss to Elizabeth's forehead. "Call me, okay, sweetheart?"

"I'm sorry, Em," Elizabeth began.

"Hey—" Emily shook her head. "You have to do what's right for you. I wanna be

surrounded by family, but you don't have to want that. Go be with Sonny. Jason—" She looked at Sonny. "Jason loved you so much."

"I know," Sonny murmured, his voice tight. "Let's get going before the press gets it in their head to follow us."

## **Limo**

Elizabeth closed her eyes, leaning back against the smooth leather of the back seat. "I've been so angry at you."

"Elizabeth—"

She continued as if he hadn't spoken. "But I should have thought about you. That you were worried, too. I shouldn't have shut you out—or let you shut me out—"

"Elizabeth..." Across from her, Sonny just shook his head. "Don't worry about it. Listen. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all of this. God, Elizabeth, I never wanted you hurt again. You know that—"

"I know." Elizabeth blinked as she realized they had driven longer than it would have normally taken to travel from the Queen of Angels to Harborview Towers. "Are we going in circles or something? Are we trying to lose the press?"

"Oh. No." Sonny felt the car slow. "Listen to me," he said, leaning forward. "No matter what you think going forward, Elizabeth, you *matter* to me. You are part of my family. You have been part of my family longer than my own sister—"

"Sonny—"

"And I know that these last few weeks have been devastating. That you—I know how much you're hurting. And I want to make that go away for you. But you know...you knew what kind of life Jason and I—what our business is. Jason *told* me you knew. I know that knowing is different from being in the middle of it, but we just—sometimes we have to make choices that we hate. To protect everyone." The car started to ride over gravel, the rocks crunching beneath the tires until it came to a complete stop."

Elizabeth frowned at him. "Sonny, what's going on—" She frowned when Max opened the car door.

She stepped outside, still frowning as she took in the trees around them, the simple stone English-style cottage set back against the lake. "Sonny—Are we trying to avoid the press?"

This time, Sonny nodded. "Yeah. Something like that. Let's just...let's go inside."

Inside the house, Elizabeth frowned when she saw Johnny O'Brien lounging on a sofa, irritated with a magazine in his hands, flexing his left arm as if it was sore.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Johnny was with Jason that night,” Sonny said. He looked at her now, and his expression was empty. Stony. “Jason was shot twice, and Johnny kept him alive until we got him to this safe house. There’s a medical facility here.”

Elizabeth opened her mouth, then closed it. “Jason...was alive when he left the—I don’t understand—” Except she thought...maybe she did and everything inside her was screaming.

“I kept him sedated for the first week because I knew he would want to see you. And it was hell keeping him here the next two weeks once we finally stopped—”

“Just stop—” Elizabeth held up her hands, shook her head. “What...what is happening right now? What do you mean you kept him sedated—what the hell, Sonny—”

“Sonny,” Johnny said, slowly, “why is she dressed like she’s coming back from a funeral?”

Sonny closed his eyes. “Elizabeth, Jason is in the back. He’s...he was shot. He almost died, that wasn’t a lie. It was touch and go. The blood loss was severe—”

“Oh my God, oh my God, you faked his death—” She pressed her fist to her mouth. Looked at Johnny. “You—you lied. You knew where he was. You knew he was okay, and oh, God, you arranged for a body—”

“A body—” Johnny’s eyes bulged. “Fuck off, Sonny. What did you do?”

“You didn’t know—” Elizabeth’s eyes started to burn from the tears. “What—”

“Jason never would have let that—” But Johnny shut his mouth.

“Listen to me, this was all me.” Sonny planted a hand against his chest. “I lied to you. I put the plan in motion. And I got reason to believe it’s working, okay? And it only works if Jason doesn’t know.”

“W-What?” Elizabeth sputtered. “What are you talking about?” She shook her head. She had to think. Had to get through this. Had to understand. “Jason didn’t fake his death. You did it. You put us through this for business—”

“A week ago, before the body was found, we caught two men lying in wait at your studio,” Sonny said bluntly. “They did not believe Jason was hurt badly enough to get what they wanted from me, so they decided they would force their hand. Taking you would have forced Jason to come out of hiding.”

Elizabeth pressed her trembling lips together. “And if I went back there—if I told him—”

“He’s not recovered enough to come back yet,” Sonny said. “And you know the cops. They’re crawling all over this. But yeah, he finds out what’s happening, he’ll want to end it, and he’ll put his recovery in jeopardy.”

“Sonny,” Johnny muttered. “C’mon—”

“He knows that you didn’t know. He’s pissed at me for that, too. It was all I could to convince him to wait. To give me time to solve this. But you cannot tell him—”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve asking for me for anything right now,” she hissed. “For three weeks, I have been living in a nightmare. For the past week, I’ve been grieving my future with him, and you’re here, telling me that it was all a lie. That none of it was real—”

“I did what I had to do to protect you,” Sonny said. “I never wanted to hurt you, but I couldn’t avoid it. If they had taken you, Elizabeth—” He shook his head. “I know what you’ve been through. So yeah, I put you through this because I didn’t want something worse.”

She closed her eyes. “Then why am I here today?”

“Because Jason threatened to walk to town again on his own to find transportation if Sonny didn’t bring you,” Johnny said bluntly. “And this time, Sonny couldn’t talk him out of it.”

“Why is he back there? He would have heard the car—heard us talking—it’s not that big a house—”

“The doctor drugged him again,” Johnny muttered. “Said Jason was moving around too much. He ripped his stitches when he was yelling at Sonny yesterday—”

Sonny winced. “Johnny—” He sighed. “He’ll be coming out of it soon. That’s why I asked you to come to the penthouse for dinner. You can stay for a while. Over night.” Sonny looked at Max who was standing impassively at the door, and Elizabeth noticed the bag in his hands for the first time. “We brought some things for you to change into—”

“So Jason doesn’t see my black dress and wonder?” Elizabeth said, acidly. “You kept him drugged and confined to a room for three weeks, Sonny. You lied to everyone in his life that he loves. You—you planted a body that was so decomposed we had to have a closed casket, and now you want me to go into that room and keep lying to him. To the man I love—” She shook her head. “And if I don’t, it’ll just prove you right, won’t it?”

Sonny hesitated. “Elizabeth—”

“You may tell yourself that you were just protecting me, but you were testing me.

And at some point, I must have failed, right? Was it that first night? When I answered Taggart's questions? When I admitted I knew more than I should? When exactly did I let you down, Sonny?"

"You didn't—"

"If I go in that room, and I tell him the truth, and I tell him what you've done to his life, to me—that'll just make you right. You'll just feel justified that I'm a little girl who doesn't understand Jason or his life. You lied to me, Sonny. And you, more than anyone else, know what you're asking of me." She shook her head. "I'm not giving you the satisfaction. I'll keep your fucking secret. Because I don't want to hurt him. I don't want to be the one to tell him what you've done. I can't break his heart. That'll have to be you."

She turned away from him, turned her back and looked at Johnny, who looked supremely uncomfortable. "Take me to him. I want—" Her voice broke. "I need to see him. And I need him to see me when he wakes up. So, show me where to change, so I can be with Jason."

Johnny remained silent as he showed Elizabeth to a bathroom where she quickly shed her black dress and pulled on a pair of jeans and long-sleeved shirt. She shoved the dress into the duffel bag and followed Johnny to a closed door.

"He's still out of it," Johnny told her with a sigh. "It was the only way to keep him still long enough to put the stitches back in. He really doesn't know—I'm sorry—"

"It's fine," she said with a shake of her head. "I just—" She swallowed hard. "I need to see him. I can't believe it until I see him."

"He's going to kill Sonny," Johnny muttered but he left her alone at the door and returned to the front of the house.

Elizabeth stared at the door for a long moment before pushing it open.

The room was in shadows—the only light from the setting sun peeking through the white blinds stretched across a bay window. It was a plain room with bare walls, a wooden dresser and a pair of matching nightstands flanking a wide double bed.

And in that bed, even in the dim light, she could see that Jason was stretched out, his eyes closed, his face turned slightly towards her.

His chest gently rising and falling as he slept.

He was alive. He was breathing.

She stifled the sob that bubbled up in her throat, biting hard on her fist. Jason was shirtless, so the white bandages stretched across his chest were stark against the



gray comforter and sheets, one affixed high on his left shoulder, and the other was lower, closer to the heart.

How close had she come to losing him? She should have been here. Taking care of him. Making sure he ate. That he didn't move.

Elizabeth crept forward, her bare feet making little sound on the threadbare carpet covering the floor. She perched on the other side of the bed, just staring at him.

He didn't stir when the mattress dipped—and she knew that was from the drugs. He was such a light sleeper—almost as if the fluttering of her eyelids in the morning was enough to wake him. But he slept on even as Elizabeth gingerly stretched out on her side next to him, reached for his hand and laced her fingers in his.

He was alive. Everything else could wait.

*Miami, Florida*

### **Ruiz Compound: Hector's Study**

Zander was still pissed when he received the summons to meet with Ruiz and Alcazar as soon his flight landed at the local airport. He'd been sent to Port Charles to get an on the ground report from Roscoe and Nico, and he was starting to resent playing the middle man. When the hell was he going to have something show for this?

"The PCPD tests came in while I was there," Zander said. He poured himself his own drink at Hector's mini bar and didn't bother to wait until he was offered a seat. "DNA confirms it was Morgan in the harbor."

"How did he end up there?" Hector demanded. "Why did it take so long—"

"No way to know for sure. His is the only body that surfaced. Nico told me that no one's seen Johnny O'Brien since the night Jason went missing either." Zander shrugged. "Roscoe sent two guys. One came back—all he said was that Morgan has been shot, that it all went to hell. Does it matter?"

"I don't like loose ends," Alcazar murmured. "And I don't like unexplained bodies. The body was decomposed?"

"Two weeks in the Port Charles harbor will do that."

"Still." Alcazar lifted a shoulder, took his cigar from his mouth and examined the tip. "It's interesting that of the men unaccounted for—only Morgan showed up. And it was Morgan who was the target."

Zander squinted. He hadn't thought about it that way. "You think it's a lie?"

"Does Sonny have the connections to pull that off?" Hector asked. "How hard it would

it be? Bribe a few officials. Grease a few hands. Find a corpse that looks similar in build—”

“Nico and Roscoe didn’t seem to question it,” Zander said. “They were planning to grab Elizabeth Webber outside her studio last week, but the guys never came back. They figured Corinthos had someone on her.”

“Trying to draw Morgan out of hiding.” Alcazar looked at Hector. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Hector admitted. “It’s...a pretty ballsy move to fake Morgan’s death. It’s not like he’s a standard soldier. Doesn’t he have connections in the city?”

“Yeah.” Zander ignored the pressure in his chest, the guilt swimming inside over Emily. “He doesn’t claim the Quartermaines, but they claim him. But I saw his girlfriend—Elizabeth Webber thinks he’s dead. And he’s not gonna lie to her.”

“Maybe he’s not lying to her.” Alcazar tapped the ashes of cigar into a stone tray on the edge of Hector’s desk. “And wouldn’t that be interesting if Corinthos was doing this on his own?”

“Why would that be interesting?” Zander said. “We wanted Morgan dead—”

“I wanted to destroy Sonny Corinthos,” Alcazar corrected. “Morgan is incidental. You told me I’d have to get past Morgan to get to him. If Corinthos went ahead and faked Morgan’s death without even telling the Webber girl—well, I suppose we’ll just see how much blind loyalty he has for his boss.”

“Roscoe and Nico are planning a hit next week,” Zander said after a moment, because he didn’t know what the hell Alcazar was looking for here. It was as if Alcazar didn’t mind that the entire ambush might have failed—as if toying with Sonny Corinthos was nearly as much fun as actually killing him.

What the hell was his game?

“Odds are it will fail,” Hector told Alcazar. “Neither of them is all that bright. But you might get lucky. All you need is one bullet to hit its mark.”

“That’s what I’m counting on.” Alcazar shrugged. “But if this doesn’t work, we’ll just find another way to get at Corinthos. He’s not invincible.”

### **Safe House: Bedroom**

He’d been drugged again.

Jason woke with a groggy groan as he turned his face into the pillow, irritated with the sluggish way his muscles responded to his brain’s commands to move.

He remembered arguing with Johnny—a pain in his chest—blood—and then the doctor—he must have ripped his stitches, because his chest felt sorer than it had in a few days.

He forced his eyes open and then turned his head sharply—someone else was in the room—

Elizabeth lay beside him, one hand on the pillow, another laying between them, just inches from his hand. He stared at her for a long moment, trying to clear his head. Had she been here before they drugged him? No. No, she wouldn't have let them—

He turned his head to the other side where a digital clock told him it was nearly seven. Judging from the lack of light coming from the windows, it was evening.

Jason winced as he slowly sat up, pressing a hand to his chest, swinging his legs over the side. He had to start moving. Had to get up.

“Jason—” Elizabeth’s voice was slurred and then she jackknifed into a sitting position. Even in the shadowed room, he could see the white of her eyes. “Jason?”

“Hey...” he switched on the lamp on the night stand. “Hey. I’m right here.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth turned to him, her eyes wet with tears. She reached out, her fingers brushing his shoulder. “You’re real. I’m awake? I’m really here?”

“You are.” Jason scowled as he took in the dark circles under her eyes. He took her wrist in his hand—and was startled to find that it seemed thinner than it had the last time he’d seen her. “I’m sorry. I know Sonny didn’t...really tell you anything.”

“Um.” Elizabeth shoved her hair out of her face and looked away. “No.” Her voice trembled. “I thought...you were hurt. But I just—he didn’t tell me for sure.”

“I didn’t know,” he said. “I wouldn’t have done that to you, Elizabeth. You know that, don’t you? I—I don’t really remember what happened, but I know I asked for you.”

“Yeah, Johnny said something about that.

“Johnny?” Jason said with some irritation. “Sonny didn’t talk to you last week?”  
Damn it.

“No. I guess he was busy with other things,” she said bitterly. She drew her hand back. “Should you be sitting up? Johnny said you ripped your stitches.”

She hurried out of the bed, and around to his side to check on him and the bandages. Her fingers slid over the white gauze. “Sonny said it was...that it was close.”

“I guess. I don’t know. They kept me sedated for a while.” Jason caught her hand as she tried to push him back into a prone position. “Hey. Talk to me. I know this was

hard—”

“It’s—” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “It was. But it’s over. And you’re okay. And I can see you’re okay. That helps.” She sucked in a deep breath. “I’m okay.”

“You’re not,” he said with a shake of his head. “C’mon—”

“I’m better than I was this morning,” she replied. “I slept, too. For a few hours. The longest since...Bobbie wanted Tony to give me something to sleep, but I refused. Because I hate the way it makes me feel, so I haven’t—” Elizabeth bit her lip. “I’ll be okay, Jason. Now that I know you’re—okay.”

She stumbled over the last word, and he narrowed his eyes, because there was something in the jerky movements of her hands—the way she wouldn’t quite look at him—something else was going on.

But she looked exhausted, and Jason didn’t want her to worry about him. So, he laid back on the bed and scooted over so that there was space on his right side. “Come here.”

Elizabeth stretched out next to him and gingerly laid her cheek against his shoulder as his arm came around to cradle her. “I love you,” she murmured.

“I love you, too.” He pressed his lips to the top of her head. “Let’s just...lay here.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” she said, her voice still wobbling. “I missed you.” Her shoulders jerked, and he heard the sob that slid past her lips. “I’m sorry—” Elizabeth started to pull back, but he tightened his hold and held her while she cried quietly.

## **Elm Street**

It was early morning when the limo pulled up in front of Bobbie’s building. Elizabeth had not spoken a word to Sonny since leaving Jason that morning and getting into the car. She had refused an offer of coffee and breakfast, climbed into the car, and the thirty-minute drive had been nothing but stony silence.

“Elizabeth, I can’t let you go like this.” Sonny stopped her from exiting the limo, placing a hand over hers as she reached for the handle. “Please.”

“You know what hurts even more than knowing you didn’t trust me to do right by Jason?” Elizabeth said softly, staring straight ahead. “It’s that...I thought you understood. I didn’t want to be Robin—”

“You’re not—”

“You asked me to lie to Jason. And I did. And now I am going back to my life to live a lie that I know hurts the people I care about.” Elizabeth arched her brow. “Robin walked around for a year pretending Jason had cheated on her, that Michael wasn’t

AJ's son. And she did it because Jason had promised Carly. She lied to the Quartermaines. She was humiliated. And it broke her."

"Elizabeth—"

"Emily is my best friend. Bobbie is like a mother to me. They are grieving beyond words, Sonny, and I can't take that away. And when they do find out the truth, what happens to me? Do you think for one second they're going to think I didn't know?"

Sonny closed his eyes. "It's just—it got so complicated—"

"You made me Robin. Even if I had been told the truth, you did the one thing I begged Jason not to do weeks ago." Tears burned her eyes as she looked out the tinted window. Up at the safety of her apartment. "And you...put me through hell. You let me think he was dead, Sonny. A week after I poured my heart out to you about all of this...you did this to me. I didn't want to be broken again, Sonny. And you shattered me."

She folded her arms tightly across her chest, trying to chase the chill that had set into her bones. "You broke apart my world, and you think bringing me to see him yesterday glued the pieces back together."

"I—I thought it would help—"

"Every time I put myself back together, I feel a little more damaged," she murmured. "And you knew that. I told you that."

"Elizabeth—"

"I don't want to talk about this anymore."

### **Elizabeth & Gia's Apartment: Living Room**

Gia was already awake, sipping a cup of coffee when Elizabeth walked through the door that morning. Her best friend blinked at her, straightening. "Hey. I got your message about not coming home—"

"He's alive."

She didn't even know she was going to say it until the words spilled out of her lips. She had to lie to Jason. She had to lie to everyone in her life who loved her.

But she just wanted one person that she could be herself with.

Gia slowly set the coffee cup down and just stared at her. "Jason is alive," she repeated. She got to her feet. "Are...are you sure you just didn't—" She shook her head. "Stupid question. Of course you're sure."

Elizabeth nodded. And she swayed, falling to her knees. Sucking in deep breaths. Struggling to keep herself from blacking out.

Had it just been hitting her? Had it just been sinking in? *Jason was alive.*

*It was a lie.*

Gia came to her side, helped her to sit on the sofa. “Hey, hey—”

“I didn’t know. I didn’t know, I swear to God, I didn’t know—”

“Of course you didn’t know,” Gia said sharply. “Elizabeth—”

“Sonny—he lied to me. He lied to Jason. He doesn’t know either.”

“What does that mean?”

“Jason doesn’t know Sonny faked his death.” Elizabeth pressed her hands to her eyes.

“And Sonny—I had to lie to Jason. Oh, God, I lied to him. I didn’t tell him. He made me a liar again.” Her voice broke. “I don’t want to be a liar anymore.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

*I would swallow my pride  
I would choke on the rhymes  
But the lack thereof would leave me empty inside  
I would swallow my doubt, turn it inside out  
Find nothing but faith in nothing  
Want to put my tender  
Heart in a blender  
Watch it spin round to a beautiful oblivion  
Rendezvous, then I'm through with you  
- Inside Out, Eve*

---

*Friday, September 27, 2002*

### Safe House: Living Room

Jason carefully edged his way down the hall, wincing at the pain in his side. Ripping his stitches the other day had probably set him back in his recovery—not to mention the week or so Sonny and the doctor had kept him drugged into oblivion.

He had been unable to sleep after Elizabeth had left that morning, and he couldn't quite kick the idea that something was bothering her—something more drastic than Sonny lying to her and her worry over his condition. She had assumed he was hurt somewhere and Sonny was just not giving her the details, but her eyes had shifted away when she spoke.

He was missing *something*.

The front door opened, and Johnny strode in with a paper bag and a tray of coffees. It had been deemed relatively safe enough for Johnny to venture into the outskirts of Port Charles to replenish their supplies.

The single bag did not look as though it was enough to feed them for a day much less the weekend Jason had promised Sonny he would wait.

Johnny handed Jason a coffee and then set the bag down before fishing out a newspaper. "I take orders from Sonny," the warehouse manager said. "I've worked for him longer than you have, you know."

"I know," Jason said, squinting. "Johnny—"

“And I was only a *little* irritated when you were promoted over guys who’d been here longer,” the other man continued. “You were younger. Less experienced. And there was a lot of grumbling. You know that.”

“I do—”

“Five minutes of working for you changed that. Even when you turned things over to Moreno, most of us knew why. And knew you’d be back. You were the right guy for the job at the wrong time.”

“Okay, but—

“When Sonny came back, and we went after the territory to get it back, that was fine by me. I respected you both—”

“Johnny, I get it. You followed orders.” Jason shook his head. “My problem isn’t with you—”

Johnny dropped the newspaper on the table in front of Jason as he spoke, and Jason abruptly closed his mouth, silenced by the headline. By the large color photographs. He had never been all that great at photographs, but these were easy to understand.

“Morgan Memorial, No Suspects in Killing.” Everything inside Jason seized as he unfolded the paper to read the caption beneath the grainy color photograph of Elizabeth, dressed in black, stepping out of a car with a similarly clad Bobbie at her side. “Jason Morgan’s grieving girlfriend—” He stopped. “What the *hell* is going on?”

“I didn’t know until Elizabeth came here yesterday.” Johnny’s mouth twisted. “And Sonny...he gave her a royal guilt trip, so she’d lie to you about it. Didn’t want to set back your recovery or put you in danger—”

Jason skimmed the article that recapped some of the events. He’d been missing for two weeks, presumed to be in hiding—until a decomposed body was pulled from the harbor the week before. Testing had later positively identified—next of kin—

“She thought I was dead,” Jason said flatly. “And Sonny waited until *yesterday* to tell her.” Because Jason had left him no choice. How the hell—Sonny knew what she’d been through in the last few years—knew better than *anyone* how much she had struggled after Lucky—

“Give me a phone. Now.”

### **Queen of Angels: Cemetery**

It was a cold, dreary, gray afternoon the day they put his little brother in the ground. AJ stood with his wife’s hand firmly in his, next to his mother and father. Emily



leaning hard on Ned, with Alexis next to her, an arm around her shoulder. Just a few paces away, on the other side of Courtney, stood Elizabeth, Gia and Bobbie.

Elizabeth's face was pale. Blank. And he worried about her. He wanted to look after her because maybe it was the thing you were supposed to do when your brother was murdered. You should look after his family. And Elizabeth was his family.

But it was all AJ could do to get through the day.

He had been one of his brother's pallbearers. Elizabeth had quietly asked him earlier that week, had asked Sonny if it would be okay. Sonny and some of the men who worked with Jason had also agreed, but Elizabeth wanted AJ to be there too.

To honor the relationship AJ and Jason had managed to create over the last few months.

He had carried his brother's coffin from the church the day before and loaded it into the hearse. Had taken it from the hearse and carried it to the graveside.

And now he watched as the coffin was slowly lowered.

Soon his little brother would be alone. Beneath cold, dark dirt with nothing but a tombstone marking his place and time on this earth.

His grandparents left first, then his parents. Courtney drove back with Elizabeth and Emily. Slowly, one by one, the mourners at the grave left.

But AJ couldn't bring himself to walk away.

"Junior?"

AJ turned to his cousin. "Oh. Hey. You're still here—"

"I keep thinking about that last Christmas," Ned murmured. "When he was Jason Quartermaine. I can't even remember the last time I saw Jason Morgan. Now they're both gone." He put an arm around AJ's shoulders. "I hate it. I knew he'd never get his memories back but if he was here—we could still hope."

AJ closed his eyes, but the overwhelming guilt he normally felt—the knowledge that *he* had stolen that young man from his life and family—it wasn't as sharp. It wasn't his fault Jason was dead.

"I called Alexis yesterday because...I wasn't sure what would happen with Jason gone," AJ murmured. "I didn't know what to do about the guardianship. Carly hasn't said anything—"

"She can't take him from you, can she?" Ned asked. His dark eyes glittered with anger. "After everything—"

"I asked Alexis, and—he left everything not related to the business to Elizabeth. Except guardianship. He left that to me. She just—she doesn't know it yet." He sighed. "So, I think I'm probably okay. Carly still would have to go to court to establish legal custody, and..."

AJ was quiet for a minute. Let the world settle around him. "All my life I tried to live up to him, to be a better man. And when I failed, I used it as an excuse to destroy my life. I'm looking at his grave, and I can't—I wasted so much time trying to outdo him. I just...I want him back." AJ's eyes burned.

"But I don't want a drink. So that's good, right? I don't want to drown myself in alcohol to lose the grief. I want to hold on to it. Because I *finally* got to know my brother this summer, and I don't want to lose that."

Ned's arm around AJ's shoulders tightened into a one-armed hug. "Hey, you want some good news? I'm going to tell the family tonight."

"Yeah?"

"Alexis is pregnant." Ned managed a half-smile. "We're having a baby."

AJ grinned—and for the first time in a week, felt lightness in his heart. "That's incredible! Congratulations!" He hugged his cousin more tightly. "Michael's gonna love having a younger cousin."

"Let's go back to the house so Alexis and I can tell the family." Ned's smile was a bit more genuine. "We could all use the boost."

### **Quartermaine Mansion: Terrace**

Emily rubbed her arms as she stepped out of the family room and smiled when she found Lucky standing there, with Nikolas at his side. "My guys."

"Hey, Em." Lucky kissed her cheek. "We were just coming back in—"

"It's fine." Emily shook her head. "It's...this reception isn't really for Jason—it's for my family, and I know the Quartermaines are a lot to take in." She turned and through the window, she could see Elizabeth sitting on the sofa, looking down at her lap. Next to her, AJ's wife, Courtney, touched her shoulder.

She had returned to find that her best friend had...become someone else. Not that Elizabeth still wasn't her best friend—but she could see the intimacy between Elizabeth and Courtney—the trust. And...with Gia.

"What happened last year?" Emily asked quietly. "Why is Elizabeth so distant—" She looked back at them and was surprised to catch guilty looks being exchanged. "All I knew was that everyone had broken up and that Liz was living with Gia—but I

didn't *understand*."

"It's complicated," Nikolas began, but Lucky shook his head.

"The why is complicated, but the what *isn't*. Nikolas and I lied to them. We lied to Gia for months. And then I lied to Elizabeth. And..." Lucky offered a light shrug. "We weren't in love anymore. She just...had the courage to walk away first." He nodded at Nikolas. "And he and Gia realized they brought out the worst in each other."

"She *also* saw it first," his brother said with a dry tone.

Emily bit her lip. "I guess it was naive of me to hope the four of us would be family forever," she murmured.

"You don't always have to like your family," Lucky said, tipping her chin up and offering her a smile. "Sometimes you hate them. You fight. You walk away. And you come back better. We're still family, Em. We're just...estranged." He nodded towards the window. "Elizabeth is still your best friend. When you come home next spring, when you graduate—she'll be here. So will me and Nikolas."

"You're in New York—"

"At the moment," Lucky said with a nod. "I went there for space. To do an internship with a photographer my mother knew. I needed to figure out who I wanted to be. Because the guy I was going to be here? He was a selfish asshole who hurt people."

"Lucky—"

"It's better now," Lucky said simply. "I know what I want from life, and I've finally... I've finally stopped hating myself for not being the guy everyone wanted me to be—" He held up a hand at Emily's anguished expression. "The guy I *thought* everyone wanted me to be. And Nikolas and Gia stopped trying to outdo each other to be the most selfish. Elizabeth—"

The trio looked again at the window, at the brunette who had finished the foursome as she flashed a sad smile at Emily's grandmother.

"And Elizabeth will get through this," Lucky finished.

Emily turned back to him with a sigh. Had she spent the last few years completely blind to the people around her? Lucky seemed so different from the boy she'd left behind a year ago—but he seemed so at peace, so much...lighter. Nikolas looked unhappy, with lines at the corners of his mouth no one in their mid-twenties should have.

She didn't know them anymore, didn't know the ins and outs of their lives or why they had changed. She didn't know how her brother and Elizabeth had fallen in love

—only knew that Jason had seemed happy when they’d last spoken—that Elizabeth’s phone calls had been more frequent and joyful over the last summer—

It was so unfair that all that promise was gone—that Emily would *never* be able to see what her brother and best friend were like together—that they wouldn’t get to have that life together.

“C’mon, let’s go in and give Elizabeth a break from having to be strong for everyone else,” Emily suggested, linking arms with her friends.

### **Quartermaine Mansion: Foyer**

Bobbie slid her pager back into her bag and touched Monica’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry—I got called in and—”

“Oh.” Monica shook her head. “Thank you for coming—does—does Elizabeth have a way home? I thought she came with you to the cemetery—” Her voice faltered as she said the final words.

“She drove with me, but Gia’s here, so—can you let her know I had to leave?” Bobbie paused as the door to the family room opened, and Edward found them.

She had not seen the Quartermaine patriarch since their tense and bitter dispute at Carly’s will reading in May, and they had not spoken after Bobbie found out Edward had visited Michael’s school.

“Bobbie. I was hoping to find you—”

“I was just on my way out—”

“This won’t take long.” Edward stepped towards her, and then touched Monica’s arm. “Is everything all right?”

“I was just...going to tell Elizabeth that Bobbie had to go—” Monica flashed a smile at Bobbie. “I’ll make sure she gets back to the Brownstone.” She disappeared into the family room.

Edward sighed, looking after her. “It seems so final,” he murmured. “I didn’t realize I had held out hope he could still...come back to us until...” He trailed off, then focused on Bobbie. “I wanted to—I realize I was—I was not—after Carly—”

“Be good to AJ,” Bobbie said. “He’s worked hard, and he deserves your trust. I—” She hesitated. “I *always* understood your anger, Edward. And I know what happened with Michael wasn’t about me.”

“Still. I thought I knew best, and I could have ruined AJ’s chances. I just—I should trust him more. He’s earned it this summer.” His voice became even more gruff. “You look out for Elizabeth. Take care of her. She’s been good to this family, and we all

worry about her.”

“She won’t be alone,” Bobbie said. “I really do have to get to the hospital. Take care of yourself, Edward, and Lila. My prayers are with you.”

“And ours with you.”

### **Quartermaine: Living Room**

Most of the mourners had gravitated towards the family room where the terrace opened out into the garden, so when Emily drew Elizabeth away from the others, she took her to the front foyer. She had also invited Gia and Courtney, and AJ had followed them. She wanted Elizabeth to feel comfortable, to have her support system around her.

But Emily also wanted to find a way to still be part of Elizabeth’s life—not just because she had been so close to her once, but Elizabeth...was the last link to her brother.

“How long are you staying?” Lucky asked as a slightly awkward silence fell on the group. “Do you have to go back right away?”

Emily sighed. “I could only get a few days this week, but I have a break coming up in a few weeks—I’m coming back for about a week in early October. I moved some things around, talked to some professors—I wanted to stay longer—” She shook her head. “I wish like hell I hadn’t gone to UCLA after my rehab finished. I just want to be *home*.”

“But you’re doing okay out there, right?” Gia asked with a forced casual smile. “You like it?”

“Oh. Yeah. It’s a great program. And I’ll be able to finish my degree in half the amount of time, so—yeah.” She exhaled slowly.

Another silence fell on the group, but Lucky broke it after a moment. “Do you remember when I introduced you to Jason?” he said to Elizabeth. “I think you’d met him before, but it was that day in the boxcar—”

“Oh.” Elizabeth grimaced. “When he came to tell you he was...changing jobs and I embarrassed myself.” She rolled her eyes. “God, I was such a *kid*—”

“I thought it was funny.” Lucky looked at the others. “She asked if, like, his enemies were gonna come after me—”

“Oh, come on, I did not say it that way—” Elizabeth bit her lip and winced. “Oh, God. But that’s what I meant, and he knew it. He *was* laughing at me. You know how he does that—he doesn’t actually laugh—” She stopped, as if realizing she was still talking about him as if he were alive. A shadow started to creep back into her

expression.

“But you could see it in the way he responded that he was enjoying himself at your expense on the inside,” AJ said quickly with a wry grin. “Yeah. I remember. Obviously, he didn’t think you were too ridiculous.”

“He was a good guy,” Lucky said. “I didn’t always remember that, but it’s easier now. He gave me a job, gave me a way to support myself when I left home. Gave me a home. I should have—” He shook his head. “I should have remembered that before.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Nikolas said with a stubborn glare at Elizabeth who returned his scowl.

“It wasn’t his,” Lucky said easily, and Emily squinted at him. He’d only left Port Charles in May. Could three months away *really* have given him this kind of peace of mind?

“It was both of ours,” Elizabeth murmured. “But we stopped it.”

“Hey, the first time I met Jason, I totally tried to get him into bed,” Gia said, with a brash grin. Nikolas turned his irritation on her and she just shrugged. “What? I hated Elizabeth, and she clearly wanted him, so it seemed like a good idea.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes—it obviously wasn’t the first time she’d heard that story, so Emily tried to smile at it.

“The first time I met Jason, I got shot,” Nikolas muttered.

“And he saved your life,” Elizabeth shot back. She got to her feet. “I’m going to go—”

“No.” Emily rose. “Nikolas, c’mon—”

“What? We’re sitting around eulogizing the guy like he didn’t get himself killed. People around him die—”

“What about you?” Elizabeth demanded. “You’re a *Cassadine*. How many people have died around you?”

“Hey, I don’t invite the danger,” Nikolas retorted.

“Really?” Elizabeth snorted. “Pretty sure last year was entirely your idiotic idea—”

“Guys—”

“And it worked,” Nikolas said flatly. “Stavros is dead. Lucky is free. And Helena is locked away. The danger is over for me, but you don’t even see that this is the best thing that could have happened to you—”

“Nikolas!” Emily growled. “That’s my brother you’re talking about—”

“Whatever. You stay, Liz. Clearly, *I’m* the only person here who lives in reality—”

Elizabeth stopped him as he started to stand. “Don’t talk to me about reality, Nikolas. All I have *ever* done is support you. You wanted to marry Katherine Bell? I stood by you even though everyone of us knew you were insane—”

“Katherine Bell?” Lucky said with a frown.

“That’s not fair—”

“You wanted to date the woman who blackmailed Emily—”

“Hey—” Gia said with a scowl.

“And I stood by you even though she was literally the worst—”

“I mean, that’s some strong language,” Gia muttered. “I’m not that bad—”

“And every time you told me that I just had to stick it out, that if I walked away from Lucky, he’d be lost forever, I let you *punish* me. I let you guilt me into staying. Don’t —” She broke off, shook her head. “You don’t have some high moral ground here, Nikolas. You have been punishing me for years—”

“Punishing you for what?” Nikolas demanded.

“Don’t make me—” Elizabeth huffed. “*Don’t* make me say this in front of them.”

“No, say it—”

“You don’t like Jason because I fell in love with him, and not with you when we thought Lucky was dead,” Elizabeth snarled. “That’s where this started, and you damn well know it. You tried to kiss me the night of my birthday party, and I pushed you away. And you have *never* forgiven me for turning to someone else.”

Nikolas’s face stilled as he swallowed. “That is not true—”

“And when you thought I had moved on, you threw Lucky in my face. You used him against me, tried to make me feel guilty like I was supposed to be alone forever—”

Lucky squinted. “Is *that* why Helena made me say you belonged with Nikolas all the goddamn time? Because *you* wanted Elizabeth—”

“This is fascinating,” Gia murmured to Courtney who smacked her in the arm. “Ow, what? I’m not supposed to be entertained?”

“You can throw Jason’s life in my face all you want, but we both know the truth.” She looked to Gia. “I want to leave. Can you—Bobbie was my ride—”

“Yeah, yeah. Even though I’m literally the worst.” Gia got to her feet and shook her

head at her former fiancé. “Man, you should have just let it go. You really are a dink.”

Elizabeth looked at Emily’s stricken face. “I’ll call you later. We’ll—we’ll talk.”

And then she left the room, Gia hurrying after her.

“Is that true?” Emily asked softly. “Did you—kiss her—and then throw Lucky—”

“She makes it sound simple,” Nikolas muttered as he scrubbed his hands over his face. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Except it was.” Lucky tilted his head. “Carly told me that they were sleeping together, and I went to you. And you...you *had* to know the truth by then. Except—you didn’t tell me. You told me that Jason was a bad influence on her, that he’d nearly gotten her killed. You never told me they weren’t together.” He rose to his feet. “And you know, I didn’t...I didn’t believe her when she said nothing happened. Because you were my brother, and I thought she was trying to spare my feelings.”

“Lucky—” Nikolas paused. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

“Well, this has been fun,” Emily said with some irritation. “*Now* I remember why I went to school in California. I just wanted to sit here with people I loved and mourn my brother. I wanted Elizabeth to feel safe here. And you had to make it about *you*,” she said with derision towards the man she had loved once so fiercely. Nikolas grimaced.

“Em—”

“You can show yourself out,” she said with a snarl and stalked from the room.

### **Gia’s Car**

“I didn’t mean it.”

Gia shrugged as she maneuvered down the Quartermaine’s long driveway towards Harborview Road. “I literally *was* the worst, so it’s okay.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Hey, let me tell you how much fun it was to see you finally let loose on my idiot ex-fiancé.” Gia made a left and turned towards the waterfront. “He’s the only one who didn’t get to hear your wrath when it all went down, so I was wondering if you’d get around to him.”

“I just— I can’t believe he did that. That he made it all about him. Emily just wanted to talk about her brother. To be with her friends. And Lucky was trying so hard—”

“It was nice, hearing him talk about Jason without violence in his eyes.” Gia glanced



at her. “Look, you’re already dealing with the guilt of having to bury a casket with a fake body, and then mourn with his family. Don’t take on Nikolas’s idiocy with that.”

“He’s just—” Elizabeth closed her mouth. “He hasn’t been right since Stefan faked his death that summer after we lost Lucky. And then Katherine Bell lied about being pregnant—he wasn’t in love with me, Gia. I was just...safe. A link to Lucky. And I don’t know, maybe if I hadn’t...found Jason. Hadn’t already started to work through my grief—maybe I would have been—” She stopped. “But I can’t make excuses for him. He had no right to do that to Emily. And for all he knows, I’m actually grieving Jason.”

She looked at the window as they left behind the ritzy neighborhood of the Quartermaines. “And I’m already irritated with myself for lying to Jason. It didn’t take a lot to set me off today.”

“Jason will understand.”

“I just...” Elizabeth was quiet for a moment. “When this is over, everything will change. You weren’t here when Jason found out about Sonny and Carly, but it was—he wouldn’t tell me exactly what happened. He’s always held things close to the chest, but I knew they’d done something. He cut them both out, but he just seemed so uncertain, and God, that’s the one thing Jason just never—he was never uncertain. He always knew what he was doing. Where he was going. What he was thinking. They stole that from him.”

Gia pulled up to a red light and flicked on her blinker to turn onto Elm Street. “And now, Sonny has forced the people who love Jason to mourn him. To memorialize and bury him. He’s stolen Jason’s entire life this time.”

“He couldn’t figure out how to do his job after what happened with Carly. He tried for a little, but it was part of the reason he left. Sonny isn’t just his partner, Gia. Not just his friend. He’s—he’s a brother—”

“He’s a father figure,” Gia corrected. “Brothers get to mess up. Father figures get put on pedestals. When they mess up, it screws with the whole order of things.” She was quiet for a moment. “I know what it’s like for the man you think of as your father to destroy your entire world.”

Elizabeth frowned at her. Gia didn’t often speak of the time before she’d arrived in Port Charles, of her life after her brother had left home and Elizabeth had never pushed her. “Gia—”

“Anyway. It’s a mess no matter how you look at it. You’re pissed at Sonny, pissed at yourself for being in the position of having to grieve at all—just because Jason wasn’t actually dead, as far as you were concerned, he was. And you gotta deal with that. Plus, Sonny lied to Jason. And Jason’s gonna find out. How are you supposed to

protect yourself when all you wanna do right now is protect him?”

“Can I even do both?” she asked softly. “Should I even try? I’m...I’m just tired of pretending to be something I’m not. Someone I’m not. I really thought this part of my life was over.”

### **Safe House: Living Room**

Sonny had thought he might have more time before Jason discovered the truth. A few more days—there were hints that a hit was being planned, some rumors that someone was shopping out for a hired gun. Nothing tangible, nothing Sonny could use to find out who was involved—

But he thought he might be close.

And then Jason’s phone call had come that morning.

He’d always known Jason would never have agreed to this plan if he’d known—if Sonny had given him the choice. He’d known that Jason would be angry. That it would strain the bonds of friendship—

But Jason didn’t want to hear Sonny’s reasons, didn’t care that Sonny had seen it as a choice between hurting Elizabeth and his family for a little while to protect them from something worse happening. Something more permanent.

“They all think I’m *dead*, Sonny.” Jason threw the newspaper at him, his face set in that empty expression Sonny knew so well. Jason only retreated like this when he was too angry or too hurt to deal with the emotions.

“I know.” Sonny picked the paper up from the floor and smoothed his hand over the photo of Elizabeth and Bobbie at the funeral. “I told you. They were going to try something to drag you out of hiding—we were lucky to intercept those guys before they grabbed Elizabeth at her studio. She was almost kidnapped—”

“Then you tell me. And we deal with it. You don’t fake my death, Sonny!” Jason shot back. “And you let *Elizabeth* think I was dead—and then you convinced her to lie about it. What the hell did you think you were going to prove?”

“I—” Sonny hesitated. Sat down. “I knew that the second they confirmed the identity, Taggart would go straight for her. To tell her. To test her reaction. If the cops didn’t believe it, if *Elizabeth* didn’t believe it—”

“Bullshit,” Jason said quietly. “You deliberately lied to Elizabeth. You know she could have done this. She’s lied before. She lied to me, and I almost bought it. She could have done this. But you cut her out.” He looked away. “*Everyone* who matters the most to me in the world, Sonny—they think I’m dead. My grandmother. My sister.” He swallowed. “Michael. My parents. Bobbie.”

“I—” Sonny exhaled slowly. “I keep underestimating the people doing this. I keep thinking that if we do this *one* thing, then we’ll find them. If you go to the warehouse, we’ll get answers. If I keep you out of sight, if I fake your death—I *can’t* get ahead of them, Jason. Maybe I lied to Elizabeth for other reasons, but I’m *not* lying about the danger she was in—”

“How long do you expect me to wait?” Jason demanded roughly. “To put my family through this?”

At his side, Benny cleared his throat. “We’ve had some rumors about some men moving around. We know Roscoe’s behind Carly’s disappearance. Nico’s involved—he’s been seen meeting with Roscoe, but we got some evidence that Zander Smith might still be a factor.”

“Zander—”

“Which means Hector Ruiz might be the mastermind,” Sonny cut off Jason’s surprised reply. “We confirmed Zander’s running a crew down there. But he was in Port Charles a few days ago—and he made it a point to seek out Elizabeth. He was testing her reaction. She got angry at him, went after him—and he got on a plane shortly afterwards. He never tried to see Emily or anyone else.”

Jason waited a moment. “Hector Ruiz. Those men moving around—”

“Are his men. And wherever Hector goes—”

“Javier and Manny do, too.” Jason looked away. Swallowed hard. And Sonny knew he had him. “Okay. What’s the plan?”

“They wanted you out of the way, Jason, to get at Sonny,” Benny said. “That’s another reason we think Zander is involved. There aren’t many people who would know that taking out Sonny can’t be the endgame if you’re still in play. He came to see Elizabeth—because Zander probably knows you wouldn’t lie to her. And nothing would draw you out of hiding like going after Elizabeth. *He’s* the inside track.”

Jason scrubbed his hands over his face. “I’m not hearing a goddamn plan, Benny.”

“We’re still working that out,” Sonny admitted. “A week, Jase. No longer. I promise.”

Jason looked at him with that same empty expression. “That’s all you get. But the lying to Elizabeth stops now. Do you get that? I trusted—” He stopped. Shook his head. “It just stops now.”

“Yeah.” Sonny stepped back, set the newspaper he still held on the back of the sofa. “Yeah, okay. A week, and this will all be over.”

But the words felt empty even as he said them. He’d made his choices. He would

defend them to his last breath.

And ultimately, Sonny would have to live with them.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

*Our memories  
Well, they can be inviting  
But some are altogether  
Mighty frightening  
As we die, both you and I  
With my head in my hands  
I sit and cry  
- Don't Speak, No Doubt*

---

*Monday, September 30, 2002*

### General Hospital: Nurse's Station

Bobbie's stomach clenched as she watched her daughter step off the elevator. Carly met her eyes and then walked toward her.

She could count on one hand how many times she had been in the same room with her daughter since the horrible night in August when Carly had shown up on the steps of the Brownstone with blood in her eye and anger in her heart.

All of that energy, as destructive as it seemed, had drained from Carly in the weeks since Jason had gone missing, since his body had been found. Carly had avoided everyone as far as Bobbie could see, and Bobbie was ashamed to admit she was relieved.

There *was* some truth to Carly's accusations—that Bobbie had considered Jason family, that Elizabeth held a special place in her heart as an honorary daughter. Carly could never understand that loving others didn't take away from Bobbie's love for her daughter.

Bobbie could understand that—hadn't she lived that truth? Hadn't *she* always tried to be competitive? Schemed, lied, cheated to get what she thought was hers?

It grieved her to see her daughter making the same mistakes Bobbie had made, that she was unable to stop her.

"Mama." Carly wrapped her hand tightly around the strap of her purse. "I was hoping maybe we could talk. Just for a second. I know—I know how busy you are." She flicked her eyes at one of Bobbie's floor nurses. "Maybe someone could cover for

you?”

Against her better judgment, Bobbie turned to the woman next to her trying really hard not to eavesdrop. “Epiphany—”

“Not a problem, Bobbie. You go and take care of your business.”

Bobbie gestured for Carly to move over to the waiting area. “I haven’t seen you in a few weeks, other than at the memorial.”

“Well, I’ve been trying to get myself together. I had to hire a lawyer to fix my estate. I’ve been trying to talk Jax into giving me control of the club again—” Carly rubbed her temple. “When I go to court for Michael, I need to convince the judge I’ve got my act together—”

“Mmm-hmm...” Bobbie tilted her head. “The judge is going to ask where you’ve been. Do you plan to tell him what you told me?”

“That an enemy of my ex-husband kidnapped me?” Carly said dryly. “That wouldn’t convince anyone Michael was safe with me.” She sighed, set her purse in her lap. “The truth is, Mama, I’m not sure a judge is going to give me custody. I found out that...shortly before he—” Her lip trembled. “I guess Elizabeth or Sonny finally signed the papers or did something because Alexis told me Jason signed a new will just before—” She was quiet for a moment. “He left some money to Michael, but most of it went to her. And guardianship—he gave my son to AJ. Which is all AJ needed. He has his parental rights, he’ll have guardianship—”

“Jason did that this summer *before* you came back,” Bobbie said. “It was not a punishment to you. He knew if anything happened to him, the Quartermaines might go after Michael. He signed a will in May that gave guardianship to Elizabeth, and then changed it to AJ after the custody agreement was signed.” She braced herself, but Carly didn’t explode.

“Elizabeth told me what happened—how AJ—” Carly closed her eyes. “I thought signing away his rights was the end of it. I always figured if something happened to me, then Michael should go to Jason. That it would be my way of making it right.”

“Jason was never going to win in court, and it weighed on him for some time. Did Elizabeth tell you that? That it was *weeks* before Jason could admit that to himself. If he hadn’t negotiated with AJ—”

“Then Jason wouldn’t be able to do anything if AJ started to drink again.” Carly nodded. “Yeah, Elizabeth told me that much. And I’ve been thinking about it. AJ didn’t have to sign an agreement either. I—I asked my lawyer to get me a copy of it. Jason...still had total control over visitation.”

“AJ knew Jason was scared, and he wanted Jason to be at peace with it. Dragging

Michael in court—he would have won, but everyone would have lost. No, AJ didn’t have to agree. But he did. They both put Michael first, Carly.”

“Jason was always better at doing that than I was,” Carly murmured. “Do you think AJ has it in him to be the same? I need my son, Mama. And I think.... I think the only way I’m gonna get him is if AJ lets me.”

“That’s probably true. You’re going to have to ask him and find out.”

Carly exhaled slowly. “And hope he’s a better person than I am. Because I was *never* going to give him a chance to be Michael’s father. He knows that. If it were me—”

“But it’s not.”

“You know...” Carly said, a tear sliding down her cheek. “You know, it’s not like I wake up in the morning planning to be a horrible a person. I just...I get scared sometimes. And I just—I react before I can think. Jason knew that about me. He loved me anyway.”

Still making excuses, Bobbie thought as Carly got to her feet, but at least her daughter was finally being realistic about her future.

She just wished that Jason hadn’t had to die to make it happen.

### **Safe House: Living Room**

Jason scowled over some paperwork, his face pinched in pain. Unsurprisingly, the enforcer had refused any pain medication, and Johnny didn’t blame him.

First, Jason had been drugged out of his mind for a week, then he’d woken up to find his world ripped into pieces, and as if Sonny wasn’t satisfied with that, the remnants of that world had been stomped into the ground, crushed into ashes.

Sure, Jason was alive. And sure, his girlfriend knew it. But no one else did. Johnny didn’t know Elizabeth Webber all that well, but he knew enough about women to figure that no woman relished being tortured for weeks with a missing boyfriend, only to bury a false body—

Yeah, knowing the truth wouldn’t have solved *that* problem. Only created new ones.

“You want some Tylenol?” Johnny said after another wince had Johnny clutching his own healing shoulder. They were both chafing at being restricted to the property and the week Sonny had asked them to commit to had just turned into two weeks that morning with a phone call.

People were moving around, Sonny had told them. Flights had been purchased for Monday. Could he just have until Tuesday? Tuesday it would all be over.

Jason had agreed but had remained silent since. He hadn't asked to speak to Elizabeth, hadn't asked for any of the details. Tuesday would be the final deadline.

And even if Jason didn't agree, well, Johnny was just going to go back and take out a full-page announcement. This plan had been doomed from the start, but then again, anything involving the boss's ex-wife was usually a disaster. Came with the territory.

"No, I'm good."

They returned to their silence, but Johnny grew bored with the Yankees game and finally switched off the television. He tapped his fingers on the armchair.

"You got somethin' to say, Johnny?" Jason asked after a few minutes.

"No." Johnny scowled. "Yes." He shoved himself to his feet, gritting his teeth as his shoulder sang out in pain. "Why did you agree to Tuesday? Why are we going to be stuck in this damn house for *another* week while the rest of Port Charles thinks you're dead?"

Jason stared down at the paperwork in front him. Said nothing. His face was set in that empty expression Johnny had always hated and envied at the same time. How the hell did a man just shut down like that? Wipe everything from the surface?

"You don't have to explain anything to me, all right? You don't care that Sonny is destroying your life, that's on you. But you didn't even bother to check with me to make sure I didn't mind being stuck here. I work for you, Morgan. You and Sonny don't own my ass."

Jason hesitated, sat back in his chair, then looked at Johnny. After a long exhale, Jason nodded. "Yeah. Yeah. I didn't ask. I should have. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well..." Johnny shrugged, uncomfortable now. "Tuesday's it. This plan—if it even counts as a plan—it isn't working, and I'm not doing jackshit here locked up with you. Someone's coming at us, Jase, and we're out of the loop. Why doesn't *that* piss you off?"

"You think it doesn't?" Jason demanded, but his voice remained empty. Cold. "You think because I didn't pull the plug that I'm okay with this—"

"You think your girl *doesn't* think that?" Johnny retorted. "Have you even talked to Elizabeth since she left? She walked in this house, and she didn't know you were alive. That's what Sonny did to her. She came from your fucking funeral, and he used her guilt, her worry about you to keep you in the dark. Every day you're here. Every day you don't talk to her about this—"

"Don't talk to me about Elizabeth." Jason rose to his feet, the blue in his eyes hard as flint. "You don't know what you're talking about—"



“I was in this room when he told her the truth. When she went to see you, I saw her. I talked to her. Don’t tell me I don’t know. Sonny did that to her. And you’re letting him get away with it—”

Jason exhaled. Closed his eyes. “I’m not. And if anyone but the goddamn Ruiz family was involved, this would already be over, but—” He looked away. “Sonny said some guys were waiting to grab Elizabeth at her studio. To bring me out of hiding, they went after her—”

“And Sonny got them—”

“If they had been connected to Javier or Manny...if they took her...” Jason swallowed. “We’ve heard the stories, Johnny. We *know* what they do to women. The next time, it might be Manny.”

“Okay, but—”

“The flights from Miami Sonny told me about? It’s Hector’s men coming up on Monday. The Ruizes aren’t predictable. They don’t follow the rules. They make Zacchara look right in the head.”

“I know—”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen with Elizabeth when this is over.” Jason swallowed hard, his eyes cast aside. An uncharacteristic show of weakness. “I can’t think about that. She can be pissed at me. She can walk away from me. But I need her alive to do that.”

“Okay,” Johnny repeated. He waited a moment. “You don’t have to justify it to me, Jase. That’s not what I’m trying to say—”

“Sonny crossed a line with this. With all of this.” Jason hesitated. “But I’m not thinking about that yet. I can’t.”

Johnny nodded. “Look, it’s not like you’d ever ask me for advice, but.... you need to talk to Elizabeth.”

“Johnny—”

“I can get some burner cells, and if you give me a few days, I can make it untraceable. But you haven’t spoken to her since you found out, and while I want to believe Sonny is keeping her in the loop—”

“Yeah.” Jason met his eyes. “Yeah. Get me a phone.”

*Wednesday, October 2, 2002*

**Kelly’s: Courtyard**

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Courtney folded her arms and had pitched her voice a bit lower so that Michael would remain at the counter, carefully finishing his math homework. “Michael,” she said, a bit louder, “make sure you count the apples before you write the number.”

“No, I’m not sure,” AJ said, rubbing the back of his neck. “But with Jason gone, everything is different.” He paused. “I knew he’d updated his will, I just...I don’t want to push Elizabeth into going to probate court about his estate. I know Alexis has told Carly about the guardianship. I can’t sit back and wait.”

“I just...” Courtney dipped her head. “I can’t stop myself from blaming her. Everything was fine until she came back. We were all happy. You and Jason were going to be brothers. I could see it happening, even if it was just so Liz and I could hang out, you know? And she came in like a one woman wrecking crew, and...now Jason’s dead. My best friend is miserable. And Carly gets her kid back? I mean, come on—”

“If I don’t do something to make the court see I’m trying to do right by Michael, then I look like the petty asshole. She’s going to go after me legally. I didn’t want to drag Michael into court last spring, Courtney. I really don’t want to do it now—”

“I get it,” she said flatly. “I just don’t have to like it.” She nodded to the doorway, where a hesitant Carly was hovering outside the door. “She’s here. Go see what deal you can make.”

AJ ruffled Michael’s hair and then reached out to squeeze Courtney’s hand. “I love you, you know. I wish like hell I could make this different.”

“You can’t, so I guess we just have to figure out how to live with what we’ve got.”

He sighed, and then joined his ex-wife in the courtyard, making sure that Courtney had distracted Michael at the counter.

“AJ.” Carly looked tired—and somehow worse than the last time he’d seen her at Jason’s memorial service. Her eyes were still swollen, her face pale. She wore no makeup and dressed in a simple sweater and jeans with a pair of black boots.

“Thanks for meeting me.” AJ gestured for her to sit, and when she did, he sat across from her. “By now...Alexis has told you about Jason’s will.”

“She has.” Carly pressed her lips together. “But it’s not in effect yet, she said. Sonny and Elizabeth haven’t gone to probate court yet.” She looked away, folding her arms. “I don’t know what they’re waiting for. It’s not like it’ll bring him back—” Her voice broke. “Are you going to tell me I’ll never get my son back? Do to me what I did to you?”

AJ waited a moment. “I thought about it. We both know I could probably win

permanent custody if it came to that. Or that we could spend the rest of our lives dragging each other and Michael into court. I don't want that, Carly. Jason wouldn't want that."

"Oh, you speak for Jason now?" Her brown eyes lit now with fury. "You know him so goddamn well? He was my best friend and I—"

"Jason and I talked a lot about Michael when you were gone," AJ said gently. "About our dreams for him. How much he meant to both of us. I used to resent the way Jason loved him. I thought that I was the only one supposed to love him like a father. I was consumed by jealousy, Carly. You know that."

"Yeah." Carly exhaled slowly, closing her eyes. "Yeah, I know. And that's my fault. I've been..." She looked at him. "I've been spending a lot of time thinking about that—about what you said the day you came to see me at the hotel. I did go out of my way to cut you out of Michael's life. And in the beginning, it was..." Carly sighed. "I don't know. I was scared all the damn time back then. I wanted to love Tony. Life would have been easier if I did. But I just didn't. But I didn't want to be alone with the baby. And I wanted Jason. That night, I just figured you looked enough like him, if I got drunk enough—" She shrugged.

"I wasn't a good candidate to be his father back then. Even sober," AJ admitted. "I wasn't ready to be sober for myself. I didn't drink when we were married—until you left. But I didn't drink because of Michael. It's not a bad reason, but it's just—it's not enough. I have to be sober for me."

"You showed me a chip." Carly bit her lip. "A year."

"Yeah. I got it in July." He drew it out. Set it on the table. "They work on an honor system, Carly, so I get that you don't trust it. I didn't push you, Carly, but that doesn't change my part in what happened."

She shook her head. "Can't—I *can't* talk about that. I won't—"

"We *have* to deal with it, Carly." AJ leaned forward. "Because I know we both love Michael. I don't know where you were for five months, Carly. But I know you love him. I love him. I want to give him a good life. And he's been asking about you. I need you to see him. I need for him to see you."

Her dark eyes were wet, and she licked her lips. "Is he—did you bring him?" She shot up from her chair, but before she could get to the doorway, AJ stopped her.

"I brought him. Because I think we can work this out. But we have to find a way to deal with each other. You don't ever have to forgive me for that night, Carly. I don't even know if I've forgiven myself. I had to put it away, so I could look—"

"You didn't push me," Carly said softly. She stepped back. Met his eyes. "I—I know

that. I couldn't—I *had* to blame you, AJ."

AJ just stared at her. "Carly—"

"I was..." Carly shook her head, turned away. She wrapped her arms around herself. "A few weeks ago, I went to see Elizabeth. I wanted to understand why Jason...why you had Michael. And she said something..." She hesitated. "She said I needed it to be you. And I hated her for it. But she was right. Because if it wasn't you, then it was me. But that's not..."

She turned back around. "We were being hateful. The way we always were. And I was digging at you, trying to make you angry. I don't know why it seemed so important. And you were going right back at me."

Carly spread her hands out. Looked at her fingers. "And I shoved my hand in your face. I shoved Sonny in your face. Told you he was a better man. A better father. And you—you grabbed my hand."

"You pulled away." AJ's throat was raw. "I should have walked away, Carly. I just—I wanted to hurt you."

"Because I had hurt you first. You didn't—" She swallowed hard. "You didn't deserve what I did to you. I married you, but it was a lie. I never even tried to make a life with you. I think about it sometimes. If I had just...trusted you. If I had just trusted Jason, would he still be alive?"

"Carly—"

"I was kidnapped," she said flatly. "By someone who wanted to do something to Sonny and Jason. I don't know why. They faked a car accident, and they drugged me until sometime in August. I didn't even know I was supposed to be dead. And then they showed me pictures. Everyone was so happy. Like I was the only one holding everyone back and with me gone—" Carly closed her eyes. "And you know me. Destroy first. Ask questions when the dust settles."

AJ exhaled slowly. "You were kidnapped by one of their enemies."

"Yeah, well, whatever." She shrugged. "I came home. I made it all worse. And Jason's dead because of me. We're all caught up."

"Carly—"

"I want to see Michael," she said with a wave of her hand. "We can do everything else later. I just...I need to see him. Please."

"Yeah." AJ shook his head, trying to clear it. "Yeah, okay."

He opened the door to Kelly's. "Michael, your mom's out here—"

But the words weren't out of AJ's mouth before his son was already halfway across the diner. Like a bolt of lightning, the little boy hurtled past him at his mother.

Carly wrapped her arms around him and lifted Michael into a fierce hug. "Hey, Mr. Man. I missed you, baby."

"I missed you, too, Mommy." Michael pulled back. "Daddy said they was wrong about you bein' in heaven, but that you was real sick. Now you're better, right?" He turned back to AJ. "Right, Daddy? I can go stay with Mommy at Grammy's Brownstone."

AJ's heart ached. "Sure, buddy. I'm sure your mother and grandmother would love that."

"But I gotta spend time with Daddy, too, Mommy." Michael looked at his mother. "I got a room there. It's really nice. And a backyard. Daddy and Courtney got me a swing set. It's really cool. You should come see it."

"I'd like that." Carly met AJ's eyes, and then Courtney's who had followed Michael to the door. "I'd like to see your room and swing set. If that's okay."

"Yeah." AJ nodded slowly. "Yeah, I think we can make that happen."

### **Brownstone: Front Steps**

Elizabeth sighed when she found Nikolas standing on the front step. "I was just on my way out—and I'm really not—"

"I need to apologize to you," Nikolas said as she started past him. He reached out as if to grab her elbow, but let his hand fall back to his side when she stopped at the bottom of the steps. "Elizabeth—"

"You should apologize to *Emily*. She still gives a damn," she bit out, but then closed her eyes. This wasn't who she was. Wasn't who she wanted to be.

She just didn't want Nikolas to have some sort of epiphany about their friendship when she was lying to everyone. Any ground they might regain right now—it would only be lost when the truth came out.

But that wasn't Nikolas's fault.

"I tried," Nikolas said when Elizabeth said nothing else. "But she was still too angry at me. Lucky's not thrilled with me either." He exhaled slowly. "After you left, Emily looked at me and—" He looked away, in the direction of the waterfront and piers. "I always knew Emily had a crush on me, you know? I never felt that way about her, so I tried so hard to be careful around her. I *never* wanted to hurt her."

"Nikolas—"

“But when she looked at me, I could actually see that love and affection—the respect she’d had for me? It was gone. I didn’t lose it when I slept with Katherine Bell—”  
Nikolas grimaced at that memory. “And I didn’t lose it when I started to date Gia, even though Gia had done so much to hurt her.”

Elizabeth sighed, looked down at the sidewalk. “I know. It’s been hard to explain to Emily why Gia and I are friends now, so—”

“But going after you, going after her brother on the day we *buried* him—” Nikolas shook his head. “That was the last straw for her. And I didn’t know...I didn’t understand how important it was to me that Emily respected me. Until it was gone.”

“She’s too nice to hold it against you for long,” Elizabeth said after a moment. “So, if that’s what—”

“I never—I never looked too hard at myself after everything happened. It was...that entire year—” He waited a moment. “It feels like I was somewhere else. An affair with Katherine? Losing my brother. Losing my uncle.” His voice roughened. “Katherine’s death, the lie about the baby—I kept doing and saying things, and I just couldn’t understand them.”

Against her better judgment, Elizabeth nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I know what that’s like —”

“I clung to you after Katherine—that night at your party—I thought I felt something for you.” He swallowed hard, his eyes dark. “I thought it was love. But it was loneliness. It was grief. It was trying to make *something* make sense. And you didn’t need me. I didn’t see it that way. I saw Jason taking you away from me.”

“Nikolas—”

“You weren’t my property, but that’s how I treated you.” He scrubbed his hands over his face. “And I kept getting angry because nothing was turning out the way I thought it would. My uncle was this stranger, and then Lucky came home—and God, all that pain was my fault. Helena brainwashed him to use him yes, but she tortured him about you because of me. She stole his love for you, forced him to say things I know *must* have hurt him—”

“Nikolas.” Elizabeth held out her hand. “Hey. None of that is your fault. What Helena did to Lucky? That’s on her. Don’t take that on.”

He nodded, exhaled with an angry short breath. “Yeah. Well, the crap I did when Jason was back in town—not correcting Lucky. He never believed you about Jason because of me—”

“That’s probably a little true,” Elizabeth said slowly. “Your suspicion didn’t help, but Lucky could see it in my eyes. He and I both lied to each other for years, Nikolas.

Lucky knew how I felt about Jason long before I was strong enough to admit it to myself.”

“I’m sorry for what part I played in all of that. And—and I’m sorry for lying last year. I thought it was for the best. I thought Lucky would remember, that you’d both be happy—but—” Nikolas shook his head. “I saw you this summer with Jason. I know you were happy with him. I hate that you’re doing this again.”

Pressure built behind her eyes, and she had to close them. Oh, God, and she had suffered for nothing. *Again*. Grieving a loved one who hadn’t died—being tricked and lied to—How was she supposed to keep going like this?

“Elizabeth—”

Tears slid down her cheeks as she finally opened her eyes again and looked at him. “It sucks,” she said flatly. “I’m tired of it.”

“I just—I’m sorry if I added to it last week. I’m sorry that it’s happening. And I’m sorry I couldn’t look past my own pride to be the friend you needed. That I couldn’t put Lucky aside to be a friend to you last year.” He hesitated. “I know it will never be the same again, but I just—I don’t want to feel like I have to avoid you. I will if you —”

“I don’t know where we go from here,” Elizabeth said slowly. “If we can ever be friends like we were, but you will always be important to Emily. We can start there.” She managed a smile. “I really do have to go to work now.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Thanks for hearing me out.” He stepped aside as she went to her car. She got inside and just took a minute to lay her forehead against the steering wheel. She wasn’t going to work but it was the only way to make Nikolas go away. To leave her alone. To get away from the sympathy, the kind eyes. The hints that the Nikolas she’d once considered closer than her actual family still lurked inside.

Another lie. She was beginning to choke on them.

She was tired of lying. Of being a liar, of being lied to—

She just wanted it to stop.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

*Don't think that I can take another empty moment  
Don't think that I can fake another hollow smile  
It's not enough just to be lonely  
Don't think that I could take another talk about it*  
- Bed of Lies, Matchbox Twenty

---

*Thursday, October 3, 2002*

### Kelly's: Courtyard

Bobbie had told her this morning it was too early to come back to work, and even Gia who knew the truth thought she should take a few more days.

She'd already taken a week. Waited for the lie to end. Waited for Jason to come back from the dead. To release her from the hell she was living in.

Sonny had finally come to see her a few days earlier to admit that Jason now knew the truth, that he was livid, and that Sonny had only a few more days for this plan to work. He'd apologized. She'd let him. And then she had sent him away.

It didn't change anything now that Jason knew the truth. She could see now that she *had* expected something to change once he knew. That...God, maybe he would have been so appalled, so heartbroken by the betrayal, he would have called her. That he would have ended it.

But the plan came first. The business came first. Jason was letting the lie stand for just a little longer, Sonny told her, his dark eyes full of worry.

Not regret. She knew even now that Sonny might be sorry that everyone was so upset, that it had gone so far—but he still believed he'd been *right*.

And part of Jason...God, Jason *must* agree with Sonny, right? Because why else was it still happening? And how the hell was she supposed to deal with that?

And since these were the thoughts swirling in her head sitting alone in her apartment pretending to study, sitting like a zombie through her classes, Elizabeth had thought taking just the lunch shift would give her something else to think about.

And it had. She'd lost herself in the mundanity of taking orders, grabbing food, filling



drinks, busing tables—back to the real world and life she'd built before Jason had come back.

Until the rush had cleared, and she had stepped out into the courtyard to find Carly sitting at the table, perusing a menu.

Like nothing had ever happened.

She knew that AJ had worked out some sort of deal with Carly—Courtney had sheepishly admitted it to her, trying to warn her. Elizabeth had merely nodded—it made sense. AJ was trying to move forward, trying to do right by his son.

She hadn't really let herself think about what it *meant*.

Carly now had her life back. She'd heard rumors that Jax had released her share of the club, and she was returning to management. She would now at least have visitation with Michael.

And she had probably already put another deposit down on a fast car with a bright, shiny paint job.

Back to normal.

Waiting for the next disaster. Waiting for Carly to be Carly and destroy them all again.

Elizabeth wasn't sure how long she stood there before Carly lifted her eyes, saw her. The blonde cleared her throat, put the menu aside. "Elizabeth. I, ah, I didn't know you were back at work."

"It's my first day since..." Elizabeth closed her eyes. The words froze in her throat. "What can I get you—"

"Oh. I'm not ready to order yet." She waited. "I'm waiting for AJ to bring Michael. We're having lunch."

Elizabeth pressed her lips together, fought back the bitter bile and venom that suddenly crawled up the back of her throat. "Must be nice." And before she could stop the words— "It's a shame Jason can't be here to see it."

Carly flinched but shook her head. "Don't. Let's not do this, okay? Listen, I know you're dealing with a lot. We *all* miss Jason—"

And all of the ugliness she'd kept inside for weeks exploded out of her.

"Shut up." Elizabeth slapped the notepad down on the table. "Don't speak his name. You don't get to pretend this *isn't* your fault."

Carly shot to her feet. “How dare you—”

“Do you really think I don’t know *exactly* why Jason was at that warehouse?”

Elizabeth shot back. At that, Carly’s face lost some of her pallor and she stumbled back a step. “Yeah, I’m not an idiot, Carly. Even if I hadn’t figured it out for myself, Sonny told me.”

“He—he wouldn’t—” Carly said faintly. “It’s business—”

“It’s *Jason*. And he’s gone because of you!”

Why wasn’t Carly ever made to suffer? Jason was putting everyone he loved through hell—there was no way Emily and Lila wouldn’t be heartbroken by this deceit, that Bobbie wouldn’t be devastated. Even if Jason hadn’t started it—he was allowing it to continue.

And Carly got to go back to her fucking life like she hadn’t destroyed everything?

Not this time.

This time, Elizabeth wanted *Carly* to be the one bleeding and broken in the snow.

“That’s not—” Carly swallowed. “It’s complicated—”

“You’ve been destroying Jason’s life over and over again for years,” Elizabeth hissed. “And you always come out stronger. You got a rich husband *twice* after you destroyed him. Who’s on deck this time, Carly? AJ looking good again with his trust fund? Or is someone else the target?”

“You have no right to talk to me like this—”

“I have *every* right! Jason was supposed to be the man I spent the rest of my life with!” Her voice broke even as the anger poured out. “He was supposed to be here. Building a life with me. But you destroyed that. You destroyed him—”

“If Sonny told you what happened that night, then you know what I went through!” Carly snapped back. “You don’t think that was bad? That I didn’t suffer—”

“I would have had a hell of a lot more sympathy for you if you hadn’t rolled back into town like you were the only one wronged. Maybe you got to be pissed initially, but you should have known Jason better than that. You wanted to prove to the world that Jason would always pick you.” The tears were hot as they slid down her cheeks. “Well, congratulations. He picked *you*. And now look where we are.”

“I know that!” Carly growled. “Why do you think I tried to make peace with AJ? It’s what Jason would have wanted—”

“What Jason wanted was for you to put Michael first. He shouldn’t have had to get

shot to make that happen. You are a selfish, hypocritical—”

“Elizabeth.”

AJ’s quiet voice had Elizabeth spinning on her heel to find Michael standing with his father. The little boy’s face was scrunched up as he took in his mother and one of his favorite people.

“Why you crying, Mommy? ‘Lizabeth?” Michael asked with worry. “What’s wrong?”

Elizabeth just shook her head. “I’m fine, Michael. I’m just—I’m sad. It’s fine.” She cleared her throat. “I’ll get someone to take care of you—”

She went into the diner and passed her section to Penny, who saw the tears and said nothing. Elizabeth went out to the alley and slid down until she was sitting on the cold concrete.

How was she supposed to do this?

The door opened next to her, and AJ stepped out. She didn’t look at him, even as he sat in front of her, crossing his legs.

“You have every right to feel like Courtney and I have betrayed you. Betrayed Jason,” he said with a sigh. “Because I feel it, too. She told me it was her fault somehow, and I didn’t want the details. I was afraid what I would do with that knowledge. I had to put Michael first—”

“It’s not that.” Elizabeth shook her head. “Michael missed his mother. Of course, you had to figure out something with Carly. It’s just...” She let her head fall back against the brick. “I loved him.”

“I know—”

“No, I mean—” She closed her eyes. “When Lucky was in that fire, I couldn’t see my future without him. I just thought it was going to be this long, empty life. That I had died with him. I was young, and I just couldn’t imagine loving someone else.”

“And you can now?” AJ said with confusion. “Elizabeth—”

“Because that’s how it works. You grieve. And you grieve. And then one day, you wake up, and you’ve grieved a little less. And your heart starts to wake up. To want that love again. And you fall in love again. I know that it’s probably in my future. I want a family. I want children. I just—” She shook her head. “I want that with Jason—*wanted* that.”

“Jason would want that for you,” AJ told her. “He loved you so much, Elizabeth. I could see it in him—half the reason he settled Michael’s custody with me was because he didn’t want you to be unhappy. And I didn’t want Courtney to be unhappy. So, we

found something that worked, and I'm glad my brother had that in his life. But he would want you to love again."

"I know that." Elizabeth weighed her next words carefully. "I know that Jason loved me. I know that like I know my own name. But he's gone because of Carly."

AJ hesitated, then grimaced. "I guess this is related to something Sonny told you about what happened. I don't know—"

"You shouldn't feel guilty about putting Michael first. I just—I think I have to figure out how to deal with Carly. Because I see her, and I see all the things I don't have. All the things Jason doesn't have. And I can't stop."

AJ rose to his feet and held out a hand to Elizabeth. She let him pull her up. "We'll go somewhere else for lunch, and I won't use Kelly's as a meeting place. I get it, Liz. And I'll do what I can to make this easier for you."

"Don't—" Elizabeth took a deep breath. "Don't do that. Avoiding it isn't going to change anything. I just have to figure out how to breathe. I'm still working on that."

### **Brownstone: Front Steps**

Somehow, she went back to her shift and finished it in Penny's section. She got through the day, worked on the books for Kelly's—

And when it came time to close, Penny had told her to go ahead. That she and Don would close up—that Elizabeth had worked hard but needed a break.

She'd agreed because the sympathy in her eyes wasn't different from everyone else's. Poor Elizabeth. Mourning another dead boyfriend. Broken hearted again.

Always left.

Always alone.

Gia wasn't home—she'd stopped by the diner during the dinner rush to let her know her mother had asked Gia to come down to Buffalo for a few days, so Elizabeth had the place to herself for the first time since...

Since everything.

When she got home, there was a package waiting on the front step, her name scrawled across the front in messy black marker. A thick manila envelope with no address, no return, no postage—just her name.

She picked it up—it was relatively lightweight. She fought the urge to open it out front—anyone could be watching her, she knew that. Knew that somewhere, Sonny's men lurked. She'd turned down a personal escort but had agreed to someone

following her.

She tucked it under her arm and reached for the front door.

Upstairs, she dropped everything else on the ground and ripped the package open. A small, black flip phone dropped in her hand. Attached to it was a fluorescent yellow Post-it note.

*Midnight.*

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose, looked at her watch, and sighed. Forty-five minutes to kill.

She busied herself with things she'd been putting off—putting away laundry Gia had brought home from the laundromat and left folded neatly in her room. She cleaned off the dining table where she and Gia always dumped their textbooks.

She had only a handful of classes this semester and was barely managing to get through them, but it filled her days and thoughts.

And still, even when all the little things were done—there was still ten minutes to wait. Elizabeth made sure her front door was locked, and then went into her room.

The bedroom was next to the living room and overlooked Elm Street. From her window, she could see the harbor and the warehouse district—where the Corinthos Morgan warehouse was still undergoing repairs from the explosion earlier that year.

It felt like a memory from another life when she and Jason had sat in this apartment talking about the secrets and danger that came with his profession. She'd scoffed then at worrying about Jason keeping secrets. She'd never thought it would come to this—

After all, hadn't Jason and Sonny had front row seats to the last time Elizabeth had grieved for a man not actually dead?

The phone in her hand finally rang, and Elizabeth hesitantly flipped it open and brought it to her ear. "Hello?"

*"Elizabeth."*

Oh, God. She pressed a fist to her mouth, tears sliding down her cheeks. She hadn't realized until this moment that a piece of her—

That somehow, she'd worried she'd hallucinated. That Jason was really dead, and this was all some kind of insane break from reality.

But there it was, his voice. Saying her name the way only Jason did.

*“Elizabeth?” he repeated, his voice a bit sharper.*

“I’m here,” she said quickly. “I’m sorry—I just—” She sucked in a deep breath. “Is this safe? Sonny said you couldn’t—”

*“Sonny doesn’t know,” Jason said, interrupting her. “I just—” There was a long pause. “I am so sorry—”*

“You’re sorry—” Elizabeth choked. “I—I should have told you. I wanted to—”

*“Elizabeth—”*

“I just...” She leaned back against her headboard, drew her knees under her chin. “There was so much going on in my head, and Sonny was worried—”

*“He was worried I’d blow the plan up if I knew what he’d done.” The words held heat, irritation. Annoyance. “I wanted to. I still do. I just—”*

“I know you can’t tell me,” Elizabeth said dully. “It’s business—”

*“It’s not that. I just—I hate this. I hate that you’re doing this. Going through it. Dealing with the lie. I hate that Sonny did this.” He was quiet for a moment. “I wanted to stop it,” he repeated. “But there are people involved that—they’re dangerous, Elizabeth. I’m afraid of what might happen if we don’t see it through. If we don’t give Sonny a chance to figure it out.”*

Okay. She could understand that. They’d come this far. It would be an insane waste if nothing came of it. “How long?” she murmured. “How long do I have to keep pretending?”

*“Tuesday,” Jason said. “Which is still too long, I know. Things are happening on Monday—they should be done by Tuesday. I—” He waited. “I need you to stay in on Tuesday. Can you do that? People are going to be in town. I don’t want them near you.”*

She exhaled slowly. “If it will make it easier for you, then yeah. I’ll stay out of sight those few days. Will you be able to tell me more when this is over?”

*“When this is over, I’ll tell you anything you want to know,” he promised. Another moment passed. “I love you, Elizabeth.”*

She closed her eyes. “I love you, too.”

*Monday, October 7, 2002*

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Sonny scrubbed his hands over his face and waited as Benny finished his phone call. It was nearly midnight. It was almost Tuesday.

And Sonny just...he needed to know that his sources had come through.

He needed to know that *one* goddamn thing would go right. That the people who were coming to the city today had arrived—that Nico's men had moved positions.

That anything was going the way it supposed to.

Sonny just needed a sign that he hadn't destroyed his partner, his best friend, his brother's life for nothing.

Benny nodded, then placed the receiver back on the hook. He turned to Sonny, his expression grave. "Roscoe met with Nico at the pier tonight. And then Lenny picked the Miami arrivals up at the airport. We're following them now, Boss. Something is going to break. The minute they make a move—"

"We need to give them a target." Sonny picked up his half-empty tumbler and tossed the rest of the contents down his throat, the liquid scalding. "I need to *give* them a reason."

"Sonny—"

"We got vests. We got things to protect me." Sonny grimaced. "Call a meeting of the Families. We'll hold it at the restaurant—"

"With less than twenty-four hours' notice, Sonny?" Benny shook his head. "They'll never go for it—"

"If Ruiz is in on it, he'll jump at the chance to have me in the open. And once Ruiz agrees, everyone else will be too scared to turn him down." He shrugged. "We'll call Nico about the meeting. Invite him to talk about Las Vegas."

Benny waited a moment. "Don't put yourself in danger to prove something to anyone, Sonny. No one's looking for any martyrs."

"I promised Jason this would be over tomorrow. I promised Elizabeth." Sonny looked at his adviser, his smile grim. "Don't you think I've lied enough?"

*Tuesday, October 8, 2002*

### **Elizabeth & Gia's Apartment: Living Room**

The days passed slowly between the phone call on Thursday night and Tuesday. Jason didn't call again, though Elizabeth kept the phone with her at all times. Today, it sat under the lamp next to her on the couch as she stood by the door with Bobbie, trying like hell to get rid of the kind-hearted nurse whose compassion was just too much.

She took the dish of lasagna from Bobbie with a tired smile. "You didn't have to—"

"I wanted to make sure you were eating." Bobbie touched her cheek. "You look tired. Thinner." She sighed. "I'm glad you didn't...let this hold you back from your studies, but don't let them drown you either."

"I'm just...using them as a distraction." Elizabeth handed the dish to Gia who took it into the kitchen to preheat the oven. "Gia and I have really been killing ourselves with this semester. I want to graduate and get on with my life." She hesitated. "Bobbie, about Kelly's—"

Her landlord smiled and nodded. "It's not your place. I never thought it would be."

"I just—I needed it. You gave me a lifeline this year, Bobbie. And I don't think I've told you what that meant to me. What it *still* means to me."

"Oh, Elizabeth—"

"Same goes for me, Bobbie." Gia stepped up to Elizabeth. "You didn't much like me, but you gave us both a fresh start. I know we're not paying market rate for the rent, but you gave us a place to start over."

"The minute you stood up for Elizabeth, I changed my mind about you," Bobbie said. "And I've never regretted it." She sighed. "I just wish the world would leave you alone." She looked at her watch. "I have to go in for the overnight shift. You girls staying in?"

"Taking the night off before midterms start next week," Gia told her. "We're gonna drink wine, eat lots of lasagna, and watch bad television. Distraction is the word of the day."

"Trying anyway." Elizabeth hugged Bobbie once more before she left.

When the door closed behind her, Elizabeth collapsed on the sofa and put her head in her hands. "I'm so scared, Gia."

"Yeah. I get that." Gia put the lasagna in the oven and came out to the living room, a bottle of wine and two glasses in her hands. "But this is Operation Distraction. So, let's think about something else. What's on the schedule tonight?"

"Oh." Elizabeth reached for the TV Guide. "Well, we can watch the bad sitcoms on ABC. Or the bad sitcoms on FOX."

"Choices, choices."

"Oh, wait—*Buffy's* on tonight. I haven't been able to watch it this year, and it's supposed to be the last season—" Elizabeth sighed, because just for a moment—she'd forgotten everything else. "You want to?"

"Sure. I figure it'll cheer us up." Gia sat down and poured the wine. "After all, your



boyfriend isn't trapped in a hell dimension."

"No. But he might as well be for all the good it does me." She pressed the button on the remote to change the channel and tried to put it away. "Gia—"

"You're thinking about breaking it off with him when he comes back from the dead, aren't you?" her friend said with a sigh. "I'm not an idiot. I can read between the lines."

"I'm just...this isn't the life I wanted." Elizabeth bit her lip. "And this won't be the last time I have to lie. You know that—" She paused. "I don't know. I'm tired. And I'm doing something I hate because it's what Jason needs. Is that love? He and Sonny... they made me go back."

"I know, but it wasn't Jason's idea—"

"No. But he's letting it happen. I know he said he had his reasons, and I believe that. But—" she sighed. "How is this different than Lucky? Because I'm in love with Jason? What about me? Don't I matter?"

"You do—"

"I've lied for Jason before. This shouldn't be different. But—" She sighed. "It just is. I can't make it come out right in my head. I love him so much. Thinking he was actually dead...you'd think I'd be happier it was a lie—"

"Why?" Gia asked with an arched brow. "Death, at least you can understand that. You know the life Jason leads. The odds that he'll die in his sleep from natural causes are minimal at best. You know this. Losing him sucked. And you were gonna grieve. But you would have got past it. One day."

Elizabeth closed her eyes. "Gia—"

"But he's not dead. And not only is he *not* dead, he got shot because of Carly. A woman you literally think is the worst human on the planet. A woman who, apparently, has made it her mission in life to destroy anything Jason gives a damn about. And then his best friend, who damn well should have known better, lied to you. And put you through hell."

"I don't need a history lesson—"

"The problem with you, Liz, is that you *always* think you're supposed to have the answers. Sometimes there just aren't any." Gia flipped her hair over her shoulder and turned her attention to the episode.

Elizabeth sighed and watched as Willow walked out of the gate of an airport and couldn't find her friends. "Wasn't she evil at the end of last season?"

“You missed the finale. Xander saved the world,” Gia said as she lifted her wine to her lips. “He reminded her that he’s had her back since kindergarten, and that he’d love her even if she destroyed everything.”

Elizabeth eyed Gia skeptically. “Is that supposed to mean something?”

Gia hesitated. “You’re mad because he destroyed your world. Yeah, Sonny started it and did the actual lying, but Jason is the one who is letting it continue, and he did it because Sonny convinced him. And you’re thinking you should cut ties now before something like this happens again. You’re just...he’s not done destroying the world yet, Liz. Let them do what they’re going to do tonight, let him come home. Let the chips fall. Give him a chance to make it right.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay. I just...I wish I knew what they were doing. Maybe it would be easier. But I guess that’s just something else I don’t get to know.”

### **No Name Restaurant: Front Entrance**

It was just after eight when the limo pulled up in front of the entrance to the No Name which had served as the neutral meeting place for those in the East Coast syndicate for the last fifteen years. It was in Sonny’s territory mostly because the syndicate worked out of New England, the Canadian border in Port Charles was the most lucrative, and Miami hadn’t really complained.

This would be one of the first times that the Families would meet after some power plays over the last five years, with Sammy Tagliatti taking power in Philadelphia, Daniel Vega consolidating the greater part of Boston, and Anthony Zacchara expanding into Manhattan after the fall of the Gambinos.

And Hector Ruiz would be making one of his rare visits north with one of his sons. Sonny hadn’t learned which one, but somehow, he doubted it was the priest.

He stepped out of the limo and buttoned his overcoat. Behind him, Benny and Max also climbed out. Max closed the door and tapped the top of it to let the chauffeur know he could take the car to the parking lot.

Sonny gestured for Benny and Max to go ahead of him a few steps, to secure the entrance and check on the party inside. He turned back to scan the road before going into the restaurant—

He saw the car driving slowly—the window beginning to slide down. He ducked away, moving fast towards the valet booth that had been left empty for the evening, but before he could make it to safety, the night exploded with gunfire.

*Pop! Pop! Pop!*

Sonny gritted as lead dug into his shoulder, the metal burning its way through skin.

Another in his leg.

But the gunfire didn't stop—bullets kept slamming into the brick façade of the No Name—

And then everything went black.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

*Rate yourself and rake yourself,  
Take all the courage you have left  
Wasted on fixing all the problems that you made in your own head  
But it was not your fault but mine  
And it was your heart on the line  
I really fucked it up this time  
Didn't I, my dear?*  
- Little Lion Man, Mumford & Sons

---

*Tuesday, October 8, 2002*

### Safe House: Living Room

Jason tossed the cell phone aside and took a deep breath. “There was a shooting at the No Name tonight,” he told Johnny who swore and immediately turned on the television. He tuned it to WKPC, and for a moment, watched the coverage.

The reporter gave no names—no one was in custody. Three men were shot and sent to General Hospital. Johnny scowled, wishing for once the vultures in the media would have been more helpful in giving them some goddamn answers.

“That was Benny on the phone,” Jason said. “He was treated and released. Sonny and Max are still—he doesn’t know their condition. They’re not releasing it.”

“*This* wasn’t the goddamn plan, was it?” Johnny demanded. He gestured at the television. “Sonny laid up in the hospital, the top security guard out of commission, we’re stuck—” He frowned when he saw Jason had picked up the phone. Not his usual phone, but the burner Johnny had arranged for him.

“Hey.” His voice was a little bit quieter when he spoke. There was a moment of silence. “I—I know. I saw the reports. I don’t know anything. I just—I wanted to warn you. I need to—I’m coming back tonight. I don’t know how it’s going to work out—I’m calling Alexis to pave my way. I just can’t let things—okay.” Jason closed his eyes. “Yeah. You should go to the hospital. I’ll try to meet you there if I’m not arrested—”

He closed the phone, squeezed it in his fist for a minute. “This is ending tonight. Elizabeth is going to the hospital. Bobbie’s there, and it just makes sense. That’s where anyone would expect her to go.”

“Okay. How are we—”

Jason opened the phone again. “I’m calling Alexis. The official story is that I had to go out of town, and I got into a car accident. Get our people on the records. Call Stan, make it look good. I was out of commission. Couldn’t call anyone. I don’t know anything about a damn dead body.”

“No one is going to believe it—”

“It just has to work long enough to keep me out of jail,” Jason told him. “They’ll take me in, but I need something for the official records. I don’t know what Sonny had planned. Talk to Benny, see if anything was already set up. I’ll go to the hospital first, that’s where Taggart will probably be.”

He dialed his lawyer’s phone number. “Alexis—it’s Jason.”

### **Gate House: Living Room**

Alexis tapped the phone against her mouth and closed her eyes, praying for the patience she was going to need to get through the next few days. She’d made a deliberate choice last month to confide in Ned that she’d been hiding a pregnancy—that she’d become pregnant in April from a disastrous one-night stand with Sonny and had said nothing to the father of her child.

In a few weeks, she would be starting her third trimester, and thanks to the glory of large purses, bulky clothing, and infrequent meetings all summer, she’d been able to hide it.

Ned had stepped up and had immediately volunteered. He liked Jason just fine—but Sonny? Sonny was no kind of father. It wasn’t about the danger—Alexis wasn’t a hypocrite. She’d been born to an evil man, had venom in her blood. Danger followed Cassadines like the tides followed the moon.

She was no innocent. But she wasn’t selfish. She wasn’t cold. She wasn’t deliberately cruel.

And it was nights like this that reminded her that for all of Sonny’s good traits, he was, at heart, not the man with whom she wanted to bring a child into the world.

“Alexis?” Ned got to his feet, his brows furrowed in concern. “You sounded upset—”

“That was Jason.”

“J-Jason who?” When Alexis didn’t answer, his face leached of color. Ned swore and strode towards her. “Alexis—”

“Morgan. Apparently, he went on a job for Sonny last month, got into a car accident, and was in a coma until earlier today.” Alexis looked at him, her lips pressed together

in a grim smile. “Imagine his surprise when he woke up to find himself dead and buried and Sonny in the hospital with gun shot wounds.”

“Are you—” Ned held out a hand, braced the other against the wall of his living room. Closed his eyes. “He’s alive.”

“Yes.”

“Jesus Christ. The family—they mourned him. They *buried* him—”

“Yes.”

Ned looked at her, his eyes dark with worry, concern, and anger. Not at her. God bless him, he seemed to understand right away that she hadn’t been involved. That she *never* would have sanctioned this. “And he put my grandparents—he put Alan and Monica—Emily—and—”

“Elizabeth. Michael. AJ. All of them.” Alexis sank into the desk chair, her hands absently rubbing the child she protected within. “Do you think any of them knew?”

Ned hesitated. “I should hope he would have told Elizabeth, but I don’t know. I saw her when he was missing. And she came by after they pulled that body—if she knew, she’s a goddamn good actress.”

“I don’t think Jason did this,” Alexis murmured. “I wondered—I wondered *why* Sonny never moved to have the estate disposed of in probate. He has the business partnership—it would have been sensible. Jason left money to Elizabeth—guardianship of Michael. So many loose threads in his life—and Sonny waited. I called, and he said he wasn’t up to it.”

Alexis met Ned’s eyes. “I think Jason was shot that night. That he went into hiding, and something went wrong. Something didn’t happen the way it was supposed to. But *Sonny* did this.”

“It would make sense,” Ned allowed. He perched on the arm of the sofa. “Do you think Jason would tell you?”

“I think,” Alexis said slowly, “that as much as I genuinely like Jason and hope for good things with him—that this is a good time to start transferring work over to my new partner. I’ve been able to keep the baby from Sonny up until now, and I want to keep...avoiding the question. But I think I need to be done with Sonny. And that means walking away from Jason.” She sighed. Looked away. “I’ll give Ric a call. He’ll have to get used to the late nights.”

### **General Hospital: Emergency Room Entrance**

Elizabeth stopped just short of the general entrance to the emergency room and took

a deep breath. She looked to Gia, whose worried dark eyes mirrored her own anxiety. “This is your last chance,” she told her roommate. “Because Jason is probably almost here. And *no* one is going to believe I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t,” Gia insisted. “You worried when he was missing, you grieved when they found that damn body. You didn’t know when it counted. And anyone who thinks knowing for five minutes makes *you* the bad guy in this is going to get their ass firmly kicked.” She took Elizabeth’s arm and steered her through the doors. “Stop giving me outs. We’re in this together. I knew, too, and I didn’t tell my brother.”

“Okay.”

In the bustle of the room, Elizabeth quickly found the administrative desk and asked after Sonny. When she was informed in a rather clipped voice that there was no information released to anyone but family, Elizabeth scowled. Even as angry as she was with Sonny right now, *she* was the closest thing the man had to family.

“Elizabeth?”

She turned to find Bobbie embracing her with a hug. “Hey. I saw it on the news, and I just—I had to come and find out.”

Bobbie nodded, drew her away from the desk. “He’s in surgery. It’s...critical. He was wearing a vest, but a bullet went through his femoral artery and they’re trying to repair the damage. Trying to keep up with the blood loss and get ahead of it.”

Elizabeth pressed her fist to her mouth, with a stifled cry. Why...*why* had Sonny done this? He’d worn a vest to this meeting. He knew that danger was coming. Why—

“It’s so much, so close to losing Jason,” Bobbie murmured. “Monica is in there right now trying to save his life. To stabilize him for surgery.” She rubbed her hand down Elizabeth’s arm, then up to her shoulder. “I’m so sorry, baby.”

Elizabeth’s chest was so tight she could barely force a breath out. “Is he—what about the other injuries? The news said there were other people hurt—”

“Benny, their business manager, was treated and released,” Bobbie said. “One of their guards—Max, I think—he got a bullet to the shoulder.” The redhead shook her head. “I expect Taggart and the rest of the PCPD to descend on us any minute—maybe I should—”

Monica stepped out of the curtain, her green scrubs stained with blood—the fresh red and dried scarlet. Elizabeth stared at the splotches, her vision dimming. “Elizabeth. Have you talked to Courtney—?”

“She’s waiting for our call,” Gia said quietly. “But she’s not close with Sonny. Not like Elizabeth—” Gia tensed when Emily burst through the doors.

“Elizabeth.” Emily joined them with a brisk hug. “Hey. I saw it on the news, and I called the Brownstone—Lucas said you and Gia—”

“How is he, Monica?” Elizabeth cut her friend off. God, this was like a goddamn car crash in slow motion. All of these people who mattered to her—she respected Monica so much, Bobbie was like her mother, and Gia and Emily were her closest friends.

And in minutes, Jason would arrive. And all of this worry would turn into bitterness. Anger. Loathing. She didn’t know how to prepare for that, didn’t know what to do. Why did Monica and Emily have to be here? How could she get away from them?

Wouldn’t they know the minute—

Before Monica answered her question, Taggart swaggered into the room, followed by Andy Capelli. “Monica, tell me we’re going to get lucky and get rid of this bastard once and for all.”

“Marcus, you fucking tool,” Gia hissed as Elizabeth’s face whitened, and Monica’s expression turned into a scowl. No one loathed Sonny more than Monica, but damn it, she was a doctor who took her oath seriously.

“We’ve stabilized Sonny for surgery—”

“You should have let him die,” Capelli said with a smirk. “He’s going to wish he did when we’re through with him. We got a call from the station before we left the scene, Dr. Q. Looks like your kid ain’t dead after all. That bastard in there faked his death.”

Monica stared at him as if the words didn’t quite sink in. “What?”

Elizabeth sucked in a breath. Was this how it would be then? The news reaching them first—before the shock of seeing Jason—

Was *any* of this the plan?

Bobbie braced Monica with one hand as Emily’s hands fluttered in front of her face. “What did you just say?”

“Morgan’s lawyer called. Apparently, he went out of town on business, got in an accident, and only just woke from a coma.” Taggart scowled. “And this hospital confirmed that body to be his. He sure as shit was shocked to find out he was supposed to be dead.” He turned his burning eyes on Elizabeth. “You got some *nerve*, Webber.”

“W-what?” Elizabeth asked, her voice trembling. His anger—that deep down incinerating anger at Sonny and Jason—was focused on her now. It hit her like a physical wave. “What—I don’t know—what’s going on right now? Are you—” She shook her head. Looked at Monica. At Emily. Bobbie.



All three of them were staring at her. All with mixtures of worry, disbelief, and anger in their eyes.

No one....no one believed she hadn't known.

"You better be goddamn sure of what you're saying, brother of mine," Gia said with a low growl. "You accusing her of something? In one breath you tell her Jason's alive, and now...what? You're saying she was in on it—"

"The only thing I know about Jason Morgan is that he would not do that to her," Taggert hissed at his sister. "Sonny? Yeah, that I'd expect. But not Morgan. He doesn't have that streak of cruelty in him. Of course, she knew."

And that would damn her, of course. Because Taggert was right. Jason never would have done that to her. He *hadn't* done this.

"Tell them you didn't know, Elizabeth," Emily said with a pleading in her voice. "You grieved with us. You buried him. Of course, you didn't know. I don't understand. How is this happening?"

"I didn't," Elizabeth said, but her voice faded. She couldn't make the words come out, couldn't figure out how to defend herself. Couldn't tell any of them the truth with Taggert and Capelli staring at her like that, ready to string her up just for existing.

"You never—you knew," Monica breathed. "You knew at some point what was going on." She squared her shoulders. "He was *never* out of town on business," she snapped. "You were as worried as the rest of us—"

"Monica," Bobbie murmured, touching her friend's arm. "Don't do this—"

"He's alive," Monica snarled, "and he played us all for fools. Just like you. I thought you were better than that." Her voice broke. "I thought he *loved* us more than that."

"No." Elizabeth shook her head. "Monica, I swear to God, I didn't know." And Gia was right—she hadn't known when it would have made a difference. She'd believed like all of them that he'd been murdered and dumped in the harbor. And the waves of grief crashed over her again as she tried to convince them. "Monica—Emily—"

"I was so angry at the reception," Emily murmured. "So angry that Nikolas said those things—"

"I ought to arrest you for obstruction of justice," Taggert said, jabbing a finger in her face. "You lied to us. You lied to me."

"Stop it, Marcus—you came and told her he was dead, don't you remember?" Gia said, shoving her brother back a step. "You told her his body was too decomposed to see. She believed he was dead." She whirled on Monica and Emily. "And you damn well

know her better than that. She killed herself with worry when he was missing. She cried herself—”

“Stop it, Gia,” Elizabeth said, voice almost a murmur. She didn’t need Gia to plead her case. To give them the truth. “Just—it’s not—” Her eyes burned.

She’d known it would be like this. That the people she loved most in the world would look at her like this. Even Bobbie with that mixture of disappointment and anger that Elizabeth’s mother had so carefully perfected over the years.

Looking at her, finding her wanting.

“You can’t even defend yourself,” Capelli said with a smirk. He removed a pair of handcuffs from his belt. “I think we should bring her down, Taggert—”

“If you lay a hand on her, I will have you brought up on charges of harassment so fast your head will spin.”

A smooth, urbane voice broke into the din and Elizabeth turned to find—

Jason.

He was standing next to the man who spoke. His facial expression was its usual mask of emptiness, but his eyes were apologetic. Worried.

And anyone who knew him—knew he was looking at her with an expression of guilt for having put her through this. No one would believe her now.

They would *always* think she was a liar.

With a cry, Elizabeth turned and fled down the hallway, away from Jason and away from everything.

Capelli hissed and moved after her, but the lawyer stopped him. Gia cast them all a dirty look and followed Elizabeth.

“Don’t even try it, Morgan,” Taggert said as Jason started to follow the cop’s sister. “You’re in enough trouble—”

“You don’t have a leg to stand on,” the lawyer snapped. “You can’t prove anything against my client, and if you try to use Elizabeth Webber to go after him, I will not only file harassment charges but bring you up on civil rights violations and bury your ass in paperwork until your grandchildren can’t dig you out—”

Taggert scowled and turned back to Monica. “Is Corinthos stable enough for questioning?”

“He’s still alive,” Monica said dryly, stepping aside. “Do what you want.”

The detectives disappeared behind the curtain, leaving Jason alone with his mother, sister, and...Bobbie.

"How could you do this?" Emily whispered. "How could you—what made you hate us all so much—how did you manage to convince Elizabeth—"

"She didn't know the whole time," Bobbie murmured. "Did she?" She tilted her head. "Did *you*?"

Jason hesitated. Looked at his lawyer. "I can't tell you much right now. But no, I didn't. And Elizabeth didn't know." He looked at Monica. "*None* of this was my idea, Monica. And it wasn't hers—"

Monica exhaled slowly, closed her eyes. "I can't do this right now. I have to go find the strength to save Sonny's life and remember that I took a goddamn oath."

"I have to go warn the family," Emily said. She looked at her brother. "I want to be glad it was all a lie, but I can't think that far ahead right now. You broke me, Jason. And if Elizabeth didn't know—then *shame* on you and Sonny for letting this happen. For letting Sonny think he could do this to you."

She stalked away, and Jason looked at Bobbie. "Bobbie, it would kill Elizabeth if—"

"Of course, she didn't know right away," Bobbie murmured. "Sonny never would have trusted her. And he kept you in isolation, away from the truth. She suspected you were shot, that you were laying low. Trusting Sonny to keep her in the loop. She didn't know. But at some point, she did know."

"Bobbie—"

"And if you think *any* of the anger I feel right now is directed towards her, then you don't know me very well. You let this happen, Jason." She shook her head. "At some point she knew. And you knew what Sonny had done to all of us. And you didn't end it. You let her walk around lying to people she loves. You did that to her. We can blame Sonny, but I don't expect much from him."

And when she turned those dark, angry eyes on him, he wished like hell he was anywhere else. He hadn't realized how much he valued Bobbie's respect for him, her place in his life. "Bobbie—"

"I expected better from you. I warned you she was delicate. That if you were going to be with her, then you'd have to take care of that fragile part of her that is still trying to figure out how not to be someone who wears a mask. You knew she spent years lying to herself and the world, Jason. And then you made her do it *again*."

"Bobbie..." He turned to his lawyer, who had mercifully moved away towards Sonny's curtain but had clearly overhead most of the conversation. "I never wanted any of

this—I've talked to her about my reasons—"

"Do you think she could remember any of them tonight? With Frick and Frack threatening to arrest her? Monica and Emily going at her?" Bobbie smirked, a sadness twisted in the expression. "Go after her, Jason, before she has time to convince herself that she was right at the beginning not to take a chance on you. Before Taggert and Capelli figure out how to arrest you."

### **General Hospital: Parking Lot**

Elizabeth burst out of the hospital doors and into the chilly fall night air. Her knees buckled, and she dropped to them, clutching her arms at her middle.

Oh, God. It had been so much worse than she'd expected, so much more devastating—

To have her mask torn from her, to see the people in her life turn on her. To suspect her. To be so sure she was a liar.

Of course, she was. She'd always been a liar. They knew better than to trust her, to expect better from her.

"Elizabeth..." Gia murmured as she heard her friend behind her. "Hey. C'mon, let's get out of here."

"I thought I was ready for it," she gasped, her chest rising and falling so fast that it burned to breathe. "I th-thought I knew how it would feel to have—but I can't do it. I can't do it."

"Elizabeth..."

"Even if they believe me that I didn't know at first—they'll always know I was lying. Emily, Bobbie—they'll never trust me again, and your brother will hate me for—"

"You don't worry about Marcus. He's an asshole who knows better, and he and I are gonna have words about this bullshit tonight." Gia took Elizabeth's arm and gently pulled her to her feet, directing her towards a stone column and helping her lean against it. "They'll come around. They're just so angry, and shocked, and surprised—it's a fucking mess. And we would have been better off staying at home."

"There's a lot of things I would have been better off doing," Elizabeth murmured. She closed her eyes, let the coolness of the stone seep into her bones. "Last year, after the wedding, we talked about leaving Port Charles. Why didn't we do that?"

"You thought you had something to prove." Gia tilted her head. "Is that what you want to do now? Toss in the towel?"

"Would you think less of me if I just said I wanted to disappear?" Elizabeth replied softly. "I can't think right now. Every time I try to remember this wasn't Jason's idea,

I can't seem to make it matter. I want to be angry *for* him—to be so angry that Sonny played God with all of us but right now—”

“Because you're a good person who sees through the bullshit. But, girl, you are allowed to take care of yourself first. Jason's had it easy up until now. You've been bearing the brunt of it. You take care of you first. That's where you go wrong, Elizabeth.” Gia scowled. “You think everyone else's damage has to come before your own. Fuck them. And fuck Jason, too. I don't care why he let this keep going. The point is that he did. And you get to be pissed about it. Stop trying to rationalize and reason it away.”

The doors swung open and Jason emerged. “Elizabeth—”

She looked at him, this man she loved more than anything in the world. Whom she wanted a life with.

And she couldn't make herself care anymore. Couldn't make herself want anything except to escape.

“Gia, can you go get the car?” Elizabeth said.

Gia scowled, turned to Jason. “You're an asshole who deserves to *burn in hell*.”

Once she was gone, Jason stepped toward Elizabeth, stopped when she held a hand up. “I can't do this right now. Please don't—”

“I told them you didn't know,” Jason said, his words tumbling around in an uncharacteristic rush. “And I'll tell them it was Sonny's idea—that I never did this on purpose—”

“But you did.” Tears slid down her cheeks, but she was past the point of noticing. “I know you had your reasons. I know you. I love you. But right now, I don't care why. I can't find the energy.”

“Elizabeth, can we just go somewhere—”

“Anger Boy,” Taggert declared as he and Capelli came through the exit doors, followed by Jason's irritated lawyer. “We're taking you in for questioning. Falsifying an insurance report.”

Jason scowled and did something he almost never did around the police. He spoke directly to them. “I didn't do any goddamn thing—”

“Jason,” the lawyer said with an exhausted sigh. “I know you don't have a reason to trust me, but there's enough probable cause to bring you in for questioning. Let's just—get it over with.” His dark eyes flicked past Jason toward Elizabeth. “Give everyone some space.”

Gia's car pulled up, and she got out of the car long enough to give her brother the finger. "You're an asshole, Marcus," she called. "I hope you rot in hell."

"You fake your death," Taggert grumbled at Jason almost in commiseration, "and somehow, my sister thinks *I'm* the bad guy."

"Elizabeth," Jason said, looking back at her, but she was already moving toward the car. "Wait—"

Elizabeth stopped just before climbing into the passenger seat. "I'm going to go to AJ and Courtney's," she told him. "I want to check in with her."

"Yeah, hopefully she's still talking to you," Gia said with another dirty look toward Jason.

Elizabeth tossed her an exasperated look as if to say, *enough is enough*. She turned back to Jason. "I think you're going to have your hands too full to worry about me anyway. Wouldn't be the first time."

She got into the car, and Gia drove away.

"So that last dig—" she said after a long moment. "Was that for my brother's benefit?"

"Not entirely." Elizabeth let her forehead rest against the window. "Let's go to Courtney's. If she's gonna yell at me too, I'd rather get it over with tonight."

"She won't. I only said that to get at Jason." Gia paused. "If my brother hadn't showed up—"

"He wanted to go somewhere and talk."

"Would you have gone?"

"No." Elizabeth sighed. "No. I can't—I don't know what I would say to him. I'm so angry, Gia. So hurt. I don't know what I'm supposed to be feeling. How I'm supposed \_\_\_"

"Stop worrying about what you're supposed to do, Liz. And just do what feels right. You want him to give you space while things settle? Then do that. You want him to get away from you because you won't be able to look at him again? Then do that. But stop worrying about what you're *supposed* to do."

## Chapter Thirty

*Wish I'd died instead of lived  
A zombie hides my face  
Shell forgotten with its memories  
Diaries left with cryptic entries  
And you don't need to bother, I don't need to be  
I'll keep slipping farther  
But once I hold on, I won't let go til it bleeds*  
-Bother, Corey Taylor

---

*Tuesday, October 8, 2002*

### **Port Charles Hotel: Penthouse Suite**

Hector Ruiz had arrived in Port Charles the day before, accompanied by his eldest two sons and Zander Smith, as well as several men he had agreed to loan to Nico Savarolli and Mickey Roscoe. It had been generally understood that no attempt on Sonny Corinthos could be made when Hector and the other members of the East Coast syndicate were nearby. No one wanted that kind of attention.

But Nico and Roscoe were not men of their word, and the gunshots outside the restaurant had sent everyone in the back private dining room diving for cover. Shaken, angry, Hector and his representatives had retreated to the hotel while Hector's men had gone to investigate.

Several hours later, only one of those men had returned—they had been ambushed at the Oasis Lounge where the rendezvous with Nico had been set—which meant that either Corinthos' men had gotten very lucky, or they'd been tipped off.

With time and space to settle down, Hector had regained his perspective and now needed to be sure his volatile, eldest son was reined in. Kept under control. Javier had always been quick to anger, quick to act, slow to consider—and the news from the lone survivor had only tapped into his always simmering rage.

"Alcazar disrespected us, *Papi*. He set us up to fail!" Javier snarled. "Our best men ambushed, taken captive—"

"They're already dead," Manny murmured. The middle son, the eldest of a pair of twins was the heir Hector wanted, the one he deserved. If only Manny was not so...

cruel and brutal, Hector could convince himself to dispose of Javier.

“We don’t know that,” Hector murmured. “Corinthos and Morgan could be questioning—”

“They would have said nothing.” Manny rose to his feet. He looked to Zander who had also remained quiet. “How soon will they dispose of them?”

Zander hesitated. “It would depend,” he admitted. “Sonny was clearly expecting something to happen—he wore a vest. They would have had an area set aside to question anyone they caught. And if Morgan were there to do it, he knows when a man won’t talk. Or how much they’ll take.”

“But Morgan was in hiding. We suspected it—” Hector tilted his head. “You convinced me we could act.”

“I was convinced Elizabeth didn’t know Jason was alive,” Zander corrected. “No way she gets left out. But Sonny could have put everything into motion once Jason was injured.”

“That’s his partner,” Javier snarled. “You telling me he destroyed his partner’s life without so much as asking him?” He turned back to his father. “You buying that?”

“I buy it.” Hector nodded. “Let’s sit back, my boys. Take stock of what we’ve learned. One, Luis Alcazar has a personal vendetta against Sonny Corinthos. No real interest in the territory. He’s playing cat and mouse games.”

“Setting us up,” Javier repeated with a growl.

“It just means he has something to lose,” Manny said in a quiet voice that caught Zander’s attention. “It’s the best kind of information. We know more about Corinthos now than we ever have. We know about his personal life. What he’d kill to protect. What he’s willing to sacrifice.”

“So we go all out.” Javier nodded. “We go after them hard—”

Zander hesitated, and Manny gestured at him. “Talk. You’ve been right all along so far. What’s the game? What’s the next step *you’d* take?”

“The next step would depend on what you want to get from all of this,” Zander said. “You want the territory, you need to be prepared to defend it. You want Corinthos, you get rid of Morgan. You want to go after Alcazar—” He shrugged. “I don’t know what you want.”

“I don’t particularly want the territory,” Hector admitted, and both his sons turned to him, stunned by this. “It’s lucrative and worthwhile, but I had no problems with Corinthos controlling it. I’d actually prefer Morgan. He’s colder, more rational. You



can depend on a man like that.” His eyes glittered as he leaned forward. “What I want to know is what Alcazar wants. Why is he going after Sonny? He can’t want the territory either. I’d understand if Tagliatti or Vega, even Zacchara—if any of them were involved. But Alcazar came to me.”

“*Papi*, the territory—the money—” Javier sputtered.

“We play this step by step,” Hector said, his voice sharp. “Alcazar went to a great deal of trouble and has little to show for it. What did he really get? What really happened? All the death is on his side of the column. Do we know about his men on the ground? His men in the organization?”

“I haven’t heard from Nico or Roscoe since we got word,” Zander said. “I know that Roscoe was planning to be in on the hit, and so was Lenny. Roscoe probably went down in a hail of gunfire. He’s like that.” He thought for a moment. “I’d be surprised if Sonny and Jason hadn’t really suspected Nico on some level, especially if they got Lenny. Lenny doesn’t move without Nico. But Nico never knew Alcazar’s name.”

“And only you knew the connection.” Hector nodded, satisfied. “So Alcazar is a mystery to Sonny. Good. He might think we’re involved, but he won’t want to rock the boat. Not right now.” He pursed his lips, considering the next move. “I want to know more about Corinthos and Morgan. If Corinthos faked Morgan’s death without permission and lied to the girlfriend, the fallout might be the wedge we’re looking for.”

“We need to get someone in there,” Manny said. “Someone other than who we got already.”

Zander frowned at that, but Hector didn’t pause to consider it. “Okay. We need someone else. I’ll think about it.” He looked to Zander. “And you, my friend, I’ve got plans for you.”

### **PCPD: Interrogation**

Jason sighed, leaned back, and tried not to snarl as his lawyer—a man he had never met before tonight—did battle with Taggert and Capelli. Ric Lansing had taken over Sonny’s account from Alexis who promised she would explain later. Whatever, Jason didn’t care.

He just wanted out of here. He had things to do. People to talk to.

He had to see Elizabeth. *Had* to talk to her. Find out where they stood. He’d never wanted her in the middle of anything, but walking into the emergency room—seeing her at the center of so much anger and disappointment—

And Taggert wasn’t helping.

Jason made it a policy not to listen to the things the cops said to him, especially Taggart, but he knew that a huge chunk of Taggart's ire this time was about Elizabeth. Though the detective had initially believed Elizabeth had known, somewhere between the hospital and the station, he'd apparently reversed that opinion.

And now, Taggart's righteous fury was on her behalf, and Jason couldn't even get annoyed by that. Couldn't work up the usual reticence.

Because everything Taggart said right now was *true*. He'd put Elizabeth through absolute hell. He hadn't started it, but he hadn't finished it.

"I had to be the one to tell her, Morgan, that she couldn't identify the body," Taggart snarled. "She wanted to see you, to make sure it was you—she didn't believe it—"

"Is there a question?" Lansing said with a bored drawl in his tone. "Or are you going to berate my client until he prostrates asking for forgiveness—"

"You know exactly what I mean, Morgan, when I tell you that girl deserves better than what you did to her." Taggart's eyes glittered with fury, his voice was hoarse. "You were there the night I broke her world into pieces, when I gave her that subway token—"

Jason exhaled slowly but his stomach was rolling and something sour was rising in his gut. He wasn't great with pictures, but man, he could remember memories and he knew the moment Taggart meant.

"You watched her grieve for Lucky Spencer. Months later, she was still trying to put herself back together. Months," Taggart repeated. "And I'll give you credit for helping her through it. When she went at me that day on the docks, I worried about her, but damn if part of me wasn't rejoicing to see her looking like something better than dead."

"Detective—"

"Two weeks, she waited in fear for you. Your boss kept turning her away. Lying to her. Refusing to see her."

And at that, Jason focused on him. Squinting his eyes. Just enough expression to cause a smile to spread across Taggart's face. "Yeah, *that* got you. You didn't know, did you, Morgan?" And then he sat back. "Holy shit."

"What?" Capelli raised his brows, looked back and forth between the two. "What?"

"You didn't *know*," Taggart repeated. "You got shot that night, didn't you? Went into hiding to wait until things cooled down. But Corinthos didn't do his part. He didn't give anyone any excuses. And he let Elizabeth dangle in the wind, terrified you were

dead.”

“I think we’re done here—”

“He faked your death.” Taggert shook his head. “And you let him. When did you find out? Before the funeral? Before your family put a casket in the ground? You let him get away that? Treating Elizabeth like garbage? You’re more damaged than I thought.”

Jason looked at Ric. “I want to be done,” he said, his voice low. Strained. “Am I under arrest?”

Ric arched a brow at Taggert and Capelli. “Well, detectives? What are the charges?”

### **AJ & Courtney’s Home: Front Porch**

Courtney pulled open the door to find Elizabeth and Gia standing on her doorstep. “Rough day?” she asked with a hint of amusement.

Elizabeth’s face crumpled. “Oh, God. I’m so sorry, I’m so *sorry*, I lied—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Courtney stepped back and let the duo in. “AJ’s putting Michael to bed now. The news came across the station we were watching about a half hour ago. I guess WKPC is on the ball.”

“You’re not mad,” Gia said with a frown. “*Why*? Your brother got shot—”

“How is he by the way?” Courtney asked, absently. She’d forgotten about him, to be honest. She probably gave Sonny as much consideration and thought as Sonny gave her—little to none at all.

“Hanging on, I think.” Gia said. “I’m not sure. He was going into surgery when the shit hit the fan.” She almost had to push Elizabeth to sit on the sofa. “It was like a three-ring circus.”

“I’ll bet.” Courtney sat next to her friend while Gia perched on the arm of sofa. Elizabeth’s eyes were bloodshot and puffy, her hands were shaking, her face was pale. “You said you lied, but you look like someone who just found out.”

“A week ago,” Elizabeth murmured. “I didn’t know until after the memorial.” She closed her eyes. “That’s where Sonny took me afterwards.”

“A week ago,” Courtney said slowly. She looked up as AJ came in from the back of the house where the bedrooms were, his dark eyes concerned. “Which means you thought he was dead.”

“I did.” Elizabeth’s tears spilled over again as AJ sat on the coffee table in front of her, took her hands in his. “I’m so sorry, God, AJ, your family—”

“They’ll get over it.” AJ exhaled slowly. “You don’t owe anyone anything, Liz. If Jason wanted you to keep the secret, that’s between—” He shook his head. “Why the hell did he put you—” But then he stopped. Closed his mouth. “He didn’t.”

“He didn’t know either,” Gia said. “When she came home last week, she just blurted it out to me.” She sighed. “And we decided not to tell you, Courtney, because we *really* didn’t want you to feel like you had to choose.”

“It’s not because I didn’t want to,” Elizabeth said fervently. “I wanted to—”

“Thank you,” Courtney said softly. “I mean that, I really do. Thank you.” She hesitated. “So, Jason didn’t know? I don’t—”

“It makes sense, though doesn’t it?” AJ murmured. “I bet Jason got hurt, and Sonny took advantage of it. He was dicking everyone around for weeks over Jason being gone. When did Jason find out?”

“After I did,” Elizabeth murmured. “Sonny thought—he thought Jason would end it if he found out what happened—so he wanted me to lie, and Jason—Johnny said he was hurt really bad. He almost died—” Her voice broke.

“Sonny played her like a damn violin,” Gia said bitterly. “And Jason let this shit all continue. But what happened tonight—I don’t think it was the plan, because Jason probably would have warned her. We didn’t know anything until the shooting happened.”

“So, we went to the hospital, but then Jason showed up, and Monica and Emily were there—and Bobbie...” Elizabeth scrubbed her hands over her face. “I couldn’t deal with it.”

“I’m sorry if my mother and sister—if they took any of it out on you,” AJ said quietly. “I don’t blame you, Liz, but you know what? That’s probably because I think I know you better than they do.”

She managed a small smile. “You’re too nice—”

“I’m fair. And maybe I’m in shock.” He looked to his wife. “I wanted Jason to be alive, so when I found out he was—I didn’t really care about anything else. And if Sonny did this to him, damn him for doing it to us all.”

“It must have been so horrible for you,” Courtney murmured, rubbing a hand over Elizabeth’s shoulder. “You’ve worked so hard to be up front and honest all year along, to really take care of yourself and now you’ve had to just—”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “Everything is all over the place, you know? I can’t keep my head straight. I can’t understand why any of it happened. Why did Sonny have to—Why did Jason let it go?” Her voice faltered, and she swallowed hard. “Emily is my

best friend, but I kind of expected her to act like that tonight. If you two hadn't—I don't think I could have stomached it."

"Hey. You've been through complete hell this last month," Courtney told her fiercely. "The last thing I'm gonna do is make it worse on you. Emily hasn't been here this last year. She hasn't seen you. And she wasn't here last month to watch you grieve."

"But Bobbie was," Gia said softly. "And I don't know where she is on any of this."

"I'm willing to bet," AJ said slowly, "that five seconds after you left, when everyone had a second, they realized the truth. Don't take any of that on, Liz. You take care of you. You get through this however you need to."

"How did Michael take it?" Elizabeth managed. "Jason's going to want to know—"

"Better than any of us," Courtney said with a sigh. "He decided Jason wasn't really dead because Carly wasn't dead. I mean, he was *right* but—"

"He's going to have a warped idea about death," Gia muttered. "You better make sure your insurance plan covers therapy."

### **General Hospital: ICU Recovery**

The world shimmered and swirled around him as Sonny fought his way through inky black darkness to open his eyes. "What—" but no sound emerged from his lips, only a dry puff of air.

He heard footsteps beside him—and he felt the scratchy thin material of hospital sheets, of a hospital gown. Was he—had he been shot?

"You'll live," Bobbie's flat tone broke through the grayness and he fought to turn his eyes. To focus on her halo of red hair, the green color of her scrubs. "Are you with me, Sonny? Do you *hear* me?"

"Yea-yes," Sonny said, his voice fading in and out. "Yeah."

"I want you to know," Bobbie said, her voice now fierce. Furious. "I want you to know that I will *never* forgive you. For as long as I live, I will spit on you and your name for what you put my family through. For the grief you gave Elizabeth. The way you played with Jason's life like you were God. What you did to my grandson. What my daughter went through because of you."

"Bobbie—"

"You think you have power and control, that we're all just here for your entertainment," she continued, the volume climbing, the words crashing into one another as Bobbie's ire grew. "You don't care about anyone but yourself, and I am so glad Carly got away from you, that you will *never* be a part of Michael's life—"

“Bobbie—”

“You knew what Elizabeth would do if she thought Jason was dead. You knew how she would suffer and grieve, and you *used* her to make your point. To make sure everyone else thought Jason was dead. No one doubted your sick little plan because she shattered. You used her. She may not be my blood, but she is my family. I will never forgive you, and I will make sure that no one else ever does either.”

And with that, Bobbie’s voice stopped. He dimly heard her footsteps as he faded back into darkness.

### **Brownstone: Front Steps**

Gia pulled her car to a stop in front of the Brownstone, behind Jason’s motorcycle parked at the curb. A dimly lit figure sat on the stone steps, his head bowed in his hands.

Elizabeth exhaled. “I didn’t think the PCPD would let him go so quickly,” she murmured. “I think...I think I thought I’d have more time.”

“Then take more time,” Gia said. “I’ll go up there and bash his head in with a log, so you can sneak past him. I want to hurt him anyway—” But she was half smiling as she said it. “I’ll keep driving, you know. We’ll go see my mom in Buffalo, or fuck it, we’ll ditch the rest of the semester and go to New York City. Anywhere but here. Just say the word.”

And for a moment, Elizabeth almost agreed. Not to any of those crazy plans but to the idea of turning the ignition back on and just driving—God, how much she wanted to do it. She just wanted to go. She wanted it to be over.

“If I talk to him tonight, I’m scared of what I’ll say,” she admitted. “Because this—this is what I was afraid of, you know? Of loving someone so much that I lost myself. I’m terrified I don’t know how to love someone without giving myself away—”

“Then let’s play Devil’s Advocate here,” Gia said slowly. “You go tell Jason, sorry it’s not you, it’s me. Though it’s a little bit you, you lying sack of crap—”

“Gia—”

“And you can tell him that you didn’t sign up for this. I mean, you did, sort of. You knew you’d have conflicts with his job—maybe not these ones, but you weren’t going to fight over Chinese or Indian for dinner. It was always going to come down to secrets. Keeping them, telling them. Not knowing enough. Knowing too much.”

“But that’s not it,” Elizabeth said with a shaky sigh. “That’s not—it wasn’t the secrets. I don’t even—” She swallowed hard. “I don’t *know* what it is.”

“Exactly.” Gia looked at her. “You owe it to yourself, and to Jason, to be sure you know exactly what’s in your head. You want to break up with him, I’m here for you. You want to make it work, I’m here for you. Whatever happens, I am here. But if you break up with him right now, if you walk out on him because you’re angry, because you’re pissed, because you are a goddamn mess because everyone else in your life doesn’t know you as well as they should—”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “If I walk away, I better be sure that’s what I want.” She turned to Gia. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I have to walk past the son of a bitch without stabbing him with my keys.”

They got out of the car and made their way toward the steps. Jason got to his feet, his eyes shadowed in the dim light of the Brownstone’s front entrance. Gia stared at him for a long moment, her keys in her hand. “Tonight, you live,” she decided and brushed past him to unlock the front entrance. She looked back to Elizabeth. “You okay?”

“I’ll be up in a minute,” Elizabeth said softly, and Jason looked at her with what might have been fear and resignation mixed together. When Gia closed the door, she sighed. “They let you go.”

“Nothing to hold me on,” Jason said. He stepped down a step but kept half the distance between them, instinctively understanding she needed that space. “Elizabeth—”

“There’s so much happening in my head, you know. I’ve been—this last month—I’ve been lurching from point to point, emotion to emotion—two weeks ago,” Elizabeth said, “Taggart came to me and told me you were dead. For a week, that was my reality, Jason. And maybe that’s not so bad. It wasn’t so long—”

“Elizabeth, I—”

“You let it continue,” she interrupted with a sigh. “I know you had your reasons, and I believe you—I know you so well, Jason. I *know* you think they were good reasons, and maybe, when I’m ready to hear them, I’ll agree. I just—” She looked away, down the street and into the distance. “There’s a large part of me that wants to get in that car and drive away. And never look back. Because I just want to run.”

“I get that, I do—just let me—”

“I made a promise to myself last year that I was never going to let fear run my life again. That I would never take the easy way out because I was afraid of what might come next. And I let myself trust my heart again. I let you in, Jason, when I swore to myself I wouldn’t.” Elizabeth met his eyes, those beautiful blue eyes—she could

barely see them, couldn't see the anguish she knew was there.

"For the last week, you and Sonny made me go back to that place. Of pretending. Of being something I'm not. Sonny—" Her voice broke. "He knew. He knew how scared I was of losing you. He knew, and he did it anyway, so that's something I have to figure out—how can I live with that? He's part of your life, Jason. I thought he was my family. I thought he loved me, valued me. I thought I could trust him. And I can't." Her eyes burned. "And now I have to understand how to go forward."

He dipped his head, nodded. "Yeah," he said roughly. "I have to—I have to do that, too. I never wanted any of this—"

"And knowing that—" Elizabeth sucked in a deep breath. "Knowing that is what keeps me from running. I just—I need some time, Jason. I just need to let my head rest. I need to let everything settle...and you know...I know there are things in the business—" She closed her eyes. "The fact I know damn well there are fires you should be putting out all over the place and that you're standing here because I'm important, that's going to give me strength. I love you, Jason. Please don't ever doubt that."

He took another step toward her and she didn't back up. Didn't resist when his lips brushed hers. She clung to him, her fingers clutching at the soft t-shirt, the bandage still wrapped around his upper chest. She poured herself into this kiss—all the desperation, the rage, the hurt, the love, the relief—everything.

"I love you, too," he murmured, resting his forehead against hers when he drew back, his breath shallow. "Whatever you need me to do, that's what I'll do."

"I know." She kissed him again, just the merest touch of her mouth, then pulled away. Without looking back, she went up the stairs and inside the Brownstone. She didn't look out the window, only rested her forehead against the door listening for the growl of his motorcycle as he drove away.



## Chapter Thirty-One

*Just give me a reason just a little bit's enough  
Just a second we're not broken just bent and we can learn to love again  
It's in the stars, it's been written in the scars on our hearts  
That we're not broken just bent and we can learn to love again*  
- Just Give Me a Reason, P!nk & Nate Ruess

---

Wednesday, October 9, 2002

### General Hospital: Hospital Room

The next time Sonny fought his way to the surface, sunlight was dimly shining between the cracks in the shades of his hospital room. He blinked, turned his head, and found Jason sitting at his side.

Waiting.

Sonny coughed. Cleared his throat. “You look like hell,” he said with a rasp. Jason’s clothes were wrinkled as if they’d been slept in, his eyes shadowed, the growth of a day-old stubble lining his cheeks, hair mussed. “You...you came back.”

“When I heard about the shooting.” Jason flicked his eyes to the doorway as if to make sure it was closed. “Max took out the shooter before he passed out, and some of his guys got the rest of the team. Lenny and Roscoe were with them.”

Sonny nodded, though the movement pained him. “Yeah. Yeah, I thought—I thought I saw him in the window of the car—”

“Lenny didn’t give up Nico, and Roscoe was shot in the crossfire.” Jason’s continued, his tone clipped. “We took Nico in, but he claims he doesn’t know who Roscoe was working for. He tried to cut a deal. He doesn’t have anything to give us.”

“Okay—”

“I’ll look into it, but we don’t have anything that convinces me the Ruiz family is interested in actively going after you right now.” Jason got to his feet. “The fires are out. The men are settled. It’ll hold until you get out.”

Sonny frowned at him. “Wait. You came back,” he repeated. “How did it—”

Jason turned back to him at the door. “How did it go?” he finished. “What do you

think, Sonny? Taggert and Capelli nearly arrested Elizabeth last night. Monica and Emily attacked her, then me. Alexis quit—she sent over someone else from her practice, she’s so fed up with us. I’ve got a mountain of paperwork to get myself declared legally alive. I have to go talk to Michael and hope he understands it, and you—” He stopped the uncharacteristic rush of the words.

“Elizabeth—” Sonny winced as he shifted. Tried to sit up.

“You knew what she means to me. You knew before I did,” Jason said quietly. He looked away. “And you knew how hard this last year has been. You let her believe I was dead.”

“I—” Sonny tried to defend himself, but the words died in his throat.

He knew that expression. He’d seen it before.

“I trusted you with my life. I trusted you with hers.” Jason shook his head, his hand on the door knob. “I don’t know—I don’t know, Sonny. I don’t even know if she’s going to be—So, don’t ask me how it went. You blew up my life, and I’m not even sure you regret it.”

And with that, Jason was gone.

### **Brownstone: Living Room**

The situation didn’t feel any clearer eight hours after Elizabeth had come in from the front step. She had hoped she might wake up with some distance and time—and have the answers.

“I don’t even know what I’m trying to figure out,” Elizabeth muttered as she pushed her toast around her plate. “What’s really changed?”

“Nothing,” Gia admitted as she sipped her coffee. She set it down, pursed her lips. “You just know more now. You always knew Sonny was selfish. Now you know how far he’s willing to go if he thinks he’s right. You always knew Jason was loyal to Sonny. Now you know what he’s willing to sacrifice. You knew you loved Jason. Now you know how it would feel to lose him.”

“Thanks,” Elizabeth said dryly, slumping in her chair. “But none of that tells me anything.”

“Well, what are you trying to figure out?” Gia huffed. “You didn’t break up with Jason last night. You just wanted time. What’s time going to do?”

“I thought you were on my side—”

“I am. I just...” Gia paused. “I just want you to define your terms. And if you don’t know, then fine. But don’t just...wander around here feeling sorry for yourself.”

“You were nicer last night.” Elizabeth shoved herself to her feet, but her voice lacked any irritation. “I don’t think time and space are going to solve anything,” she admitted as she crossed to the bay window overlooking Elm Street. “You’re right. Nothing’s changed. I am in love with Jason, and his loyalty to Sonny and Carly...is not news to me.”

Gia hesitated. “I told you last night to take your time with this, and I meant that, Elizabeth. You don’t have to do a damn thing you don’t want to do. I just...I don’t know...I keep remembering how much I pushed you last spring into being with him —”

“That’s *not* what you did.” She turned back to her best friend. “You pushed me to be honest with myself and not to be afraid. I made the decision to be with Jason. I’m not sorry I did. I guess I just—I know that this won’t be the last time I’m in this situation. As long as Jason works for Sonny—Sonny will have the power. And of course...”

“There’s still Carly.”

“Yeah. Whatever Carly told Jason that night, he went to the warehouse and nearly died. Instead of coming to pick me up, instead of dealing with Michael’s custody—he went there.” She chewed on her bottom lip. “And he let the lies continue after we found out. I know I’ll understand his reasons. I know that I’ll probably even agree with them.”

“But it doesn’t change what happened. What you went through.” Gia crossed the room to answer the knock at their door—and found Emily standing at the threshold.

“Hey.” Jason’s sister shifted her weight from one foot to the other and looked past Gia to find Elizabeth’s eyes. “I was hoping we could talk.”

“I guess.” Elizabeth shrugged.

“I have to get down to the office,” Gia said. “Alexis’s new partner is really bitchy about being punctual.” She grabbed her purse and let the two friends alone.

“I’m sorry,” Emily said as soon as Gia closed the door. “I am so sorry that I flipped out last night, that I blamed you at all, and I know my mother is sorry—I just had to think about it for five seconds and I knew you didn’t know—”

“I did, though,” Elizabeth said dully. She sank onto the sofa. “Not at first. But at the funeral—last week—I had just found out.”

“Yeah, but—” Emily joined her, curling her leg up underneath her body, twisting to face Elizabeth. “*After* it was all in motion. It’s not like you planned it with Sonny. Mom and I just—we just—we blanked.” Her eyes filled, and she shook her head impatiently. “I mean, it’s so stupid, you know? I’m so happy he’s alive, but I’m so angry at him. And God, at Sonny. It was his idea, wasn’t it? Jason said something

about not knowing.”

Elizabeth hesitated, unsure how much Emily was supposed to know, and then decided it was ridiculous to pick and parse out her words.

So, she told Emily everything.

She told Emily everything she hadn’t said at the funeral. Everything she hadn’t said in letters or phone calls or emails. About Jason coming home, about being terrified to go near him. The trouble with Lucky. The catastrophic return of Carly and her suspicions Carly had been involved.

The terrifying weeks Jason had been missing—that horrifying week Elizabeth believed him to be dead—the scene at the safe house. The guilt trip.

Emily said nothing as Elizabeth poured her heart out. When Elizabeth was done, Emily took a deep breath. “I really don’t know who I’m angrier with. Sonny or my brother. You know, I knew he left town because of Carly all those years ago. When she turned up pregnant, I just *knew* it was related.”

“Em—”

“For Sonny to betray him with Carly that way, which sounds insane since she was married to my other brother...” Emily exhaled. “I don’t know how Jason could ever work for Sonny again. I don’t know how he’s supposed to trust him, now, you know?”

“I think that’s what weighs on me the most,” Elizabeth admitted. “I remember how... lost Jason looked. I know how much he defined himself by his job—especially during that time when he’d lost Michael, and his job was all he had. He didn’t know if he could do it. And faking his death without—” She leaned back against the sofa, closing her eyes. “I can’t stand how hard this must be for Jason.”

“It’s worse now,” Emily insisted. “Because Sonny didn’t just sleep with someone Jason was kind of—whatevering with. He destroyed Jason’s *life*. My family was devastated, and I don’t know that Jason is going to tell them the truth. I mean, I can if he lets me. But they were getting closer. I could hear it in my mother’s voice. Grandmother was so excited when Jason went to AJ’s chip ceremony. How does he get that trust back?” She huffed. “And then what he did to you—Christ, Liz, Sonny not only let you think Jason was injured and missing, he let you think he was dead. And now you’re telling me he *drugged* Jason, so he wouldn’t notice?”

“Johnny—he was at the safehouse, too—he told me that Jason asked for me.” Elizabeth’s voice thickened. “Every time he woke up. He made Sonny promise to get me. To tell me no soup—” Tears slid down her cheeks. “He *needed* me, Em. And I couldn’t be there because of Sonny.”

Emily slid over a cushion and wrapped her arms tightly around Elizabeth’s upper

body. “That’s what you’re worried about, isn’t it?”

“What?” Elizabeth sniffled as she drew back. “What do you mean?”

“You told me you asked Jason for space to figure out what you were thinking. But you already know. You know what’s keeping you from him.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “I always understood that when it came to Jason’s job, there would be times when I wasn’t his first priority. I knew that. And I understand it. But...no, what I can’t accept is Sonny and Carly. The way they treat Jason like he’s their personal toy, like he only exists for them—I can’t.” She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. “How do I tell Jason that? How do I tell him I don’t think I can do this? I can’t play second fiddle to Sonny and Carly.”

“You think Jason isn’t coming to that same conclusion right now?” Emily asked with a frown. “Liz—”

“You don’t understand. I tried to do this already. I *tried* to tell Jason that I couldn’t stand by while Carly destroyed everything, I just—I thought Sonny understood.” Her throat was so thick, so tight, she could barely force the words out. “I told Jason I couldn’t do it. And I caved. I let him back in. And it happened. And it happened because he’s blinded by Sonny and Carly.”

Emily waited a long moment before speaking. “Do you think he’s not going to understand?”

“No, I think he will. He understood about Carly. He just...” Elizabeth sighed. “He asked me to give him time to make it right. And I just—I thought about all the times I hadn’t been there for him, and I couldn’t stand it. I knew what would happen, Em. And I ignored it because I knew it was what Jason wanted. That’s what I do. I damn well knew I was unhappy with Lucky, but I let myself keep going with him because I thought that’s what Lucky needed. Why can’t I ever learn?”

“Maybe if you felt like you had someone to back you up with Lucky,” Emily said after a moment. “That’s why you and Gia found each other. Because Nikolas and I failed you.”

“Em—”

“Never mind.” Emily was quiet for a moment. “You don’t really have any choices here, Liz. You know your line in the sand. You can’t deal with Sonny and Carly. You should tell my brother that. What he does with that information—that’s on him.”

“It’s so selfish,” Elizabeth murmured. She reached for a tissue from the box on the coffee table and blew her nose. “Asking him to give up people who’ve been in his life —”

“People who take him for granted and destroy his life on a regular basis,” Emily said acidly. “Yeah, it’s a great loss. It’s not selfish, Liz. It’s not like Jason broke a date to be with them. Sonny faked Jason’s death because Carly refused to tell anyone the goddamn the truth and the whole thing blew to hell. You have every right to remove yourself from this situation if that’s what you need. Christ, in a year or two, you could have kids with my brother. If he’s not putting you first, how can you trust he’d put your family—”

“We’re a long way away from kids,” Elizabeth muttered, crumbling the tissue in her hands.

“Then fine. Don’t do it for the future. Do it for the now. You matter, Liz. Jason matters, too. You can’t control what he’ll do. All you can do is worry about you. Take what *you* need. I think it’s about time you did.”

### **AJ & Courtney’s House: Front Porch**

Jason wasn’t prepared for the bullet that shot into his arms as the front door opened and Michael all but launched himself into the air.

Behind him, AJ stood, his hands in his pockets and a half-smile. “Hey, Jase.”

Hey, Jase. As if Jason hadn’t disappeared a month ago. As if AJ hadn’t been one of the pallbearers who put a fake body into the ground. Jason sighed and let Michael’s feet touch the ground. “Hey.”

“I told you he wasn’t dead,” Michael said with a confident smile to his father. “Just like Mommy. I knew Uncle Jason would come back.”

“Yeah, lucky you were right this time.” AJ ruffled Michael’s blonde hair. “We’re the idiots, I guess. You know it’s not always like that.”

Michael shrugged. “It is in Port Charles. Can I go play on the swings?”

“Sure.” AJ waited until Michael had gone through the back door into the kitchen before turning back to Jason. “So. You’re not dead.”

“I’m not.” Jason squinted after Michael. “I’m—I’m sorry. I didn’t—I *wouldn’t* have done that to Michael—”

“Elizabeth came by last night.” AJ closed the door after Jason had stepped into the living room. “She gave us the cliff’s notes.” He hesitated. “Pretty rough on her, but I guess it’s not much better for you.”

“I’m not the one who had to lie to everyone,” Jason said with a mutter, not really sure why he was here. He could have arranged to see Michael another time—could have had someone else run interference.

But after seeing Sonny, after going through the pile of paperwork with his new lawyer—Jason wanted...he wanted to talk to someone.

And almost everyone else in his life wasn't an option.

So here he was...with AJ. The older brother Jason had never intended to claim as such. A man Jason had once held so little respect for he'd claimed paternity of the man's son. Had orchestrated AJ's loss of custody on more than one occasion.

"You *are* the one who has to explain it," AJ said. "You have people who care about you. I've already talked to Emily, so I know she's pissed. Mom was at the hospital, trying to save Sonny's life, and you know...I saw Liz last night."

Jason's jaw clenched, and he looked away. "Yeah, well. I should be going—"

"When I thought you were dead," AJ said, "I didn't want to take a drink."

Jason squinted at him. "What? I don't—"

"You were missing for two weeks. My wife was upset because Liz was upset. Mom and Dad were worried. Carly was home—the custody issue was on the table again." He shook his head. "That's usually the time I tell myself—one sip. Just one. To take the edge off. To take a break."

"AJ—"

"But I didn't. I thought well if the worst happens, my family will need me. And someone has to make sure Liz is okay. That's something I can do. I can look out for her, because Sonny sure as fuck wasn't doing it." AJ exhaled slowly. "And I can be strong for everyone. I never once thought I could do that."

Jason frowned at him. "I'm glad it worked out for *you*—" he said, irritated. AJ had apparently done better with Jason dead.

"Elizabeth asked me to be a pallbearer," AJ interrupted. "Almost from the start, when she and Bobbie were planning things. She didn't know how you'd feel about it, but she thought—she thought it would be a good idea. Because that's what *she* was doing while you were dead, Jase. She was trying to do right by you."

"I know—"

"I don't think you do." AJ tipped his head. "That night you canceled the meeting? When you didn't show up? She waited in the diner for you for hours. Sonny never once called her, so she talked to Taggert. She just wanted some damn answers. And Sonny punished her for that. He lied to her. He turned her away."

"I—"

“Even the day your body was found,” AJ said, using air quotes when he said the words *your body*, “Liz went to him at the Towers, and he refused to see her. Gia was so angry when she told us—but Liz didn’t say anything. Sonny wouldn’t tell her anything, and when he did, he lied.”

“I know—” Jason shifted from one foot to the other. “I know Sonny lied to her.”

“But that day at the memorial, before he finally came clean, she couldn’t keep herself together anymore.” AJ’s jaw tightened, and he looked away, his voice a bit raspier when he spoke again. “She started to sob at the idea of you being in the ground. She wanted you to be free. Even at that moment, Liz was putting *you* first. She sat with Sonny, she went with him that day because she thought he was finally reaching out to her. That they could grieve together.”

Jason closed his eyes. “And instead he was bringing her to the safe house,” he said more to himself than AJ.

“Where he asked her to lie some more.” AJ picked up a few of Michael’s toys and tossed them in the box near the television. “My point to all of this, Jase, is that I know you don’t really think of me as your brother. That’s fine. But I’m done pretending that *I* don’t still claim *you*. You’re my little brother. I was supposed to look out for you because that’s what older brothers do.”

“AJ—” Jason shook his head. “I don’t—” He exhaled slowly. “I know you’re my brother.”

“I *never* took care of you,” AJ repeated. “You always looked out for me. Because that’s who you are. You find something worthwhile in a person and then you’re loyal to them. You give. And you give. But you don’t know how to stop. You got in a car with me and got your head bashed in. And you gave your trust to Sonny, and what did you get for your troubles?”

“Look—”

“So, I’m going to be your big brother for the first time in my goddamn life and start looking out for you because it’s clear you don’t know how to put yourself first,” AJ told him, roughly. “Liz fell apart because of all of this. Because of her grief. Because of the lies. But every step of the way, she was putting someone else first. I know she’s struggling with this. Because she’s never going to ask you for what she really needs. She needs to be first. She deserves that. If you can’t do that, you need to leave her the hell alone.”

“I do want—” Jason stopped abruptly. Nothing AJ was saying was a surprise. Of course, Elizabeth needed to be first in his life. She was. None of this had been his idea

---



"I've got to get going," he said instead. "I—" He shook his head. "Thanks. For taking care of Elizabeth. Of everyone." He waited a moment. "Your son knows I'm his uncle. We are brothers. You don't have to pretend."

When he had left, AJ released a long breath. "Well, okay then."

### **Kelly's: Courtyard**

Jason hesitated when he turned the corner and saw Bobbie at one of the outside tables with Felicia Jones. He started to step back, thinking this was probably not the best place to have this conversation and that maybe it was too soon to trying to talk to Elizabeth again.

But Felicia saw him before he could fully retreat and arched a slim brow at him. "Robin says hi," she said dryly. "She's glad you're not dead."

Jason winced. He rarely spoke to his ex-girlfriend—things had ended too badly for them to be on good terms—but he knew Robin had likely grieved the news of his death. "I—I'm sorry. I should call her."

"Hmm..." Felicia got to her feet. "I'm going to go inside and check on Georgie. Make sure Elizabeth isn't going to fire her on her first day."

When the blonde had disappeared into the diner, Bobbie remained seated though she was looking at Jason carefully. She looked as if she hadn't slept the night before, and Jason wondered just how many sleepless nights Carly's mother had suffered over the last month.

"Take a seat, Jason. I think we need to talk."

"I—" Jason swallowed the protest and followed her directions. "I'm sorry."

"For a moment, last night, when it was all happening, I doubted Elizabeth," Bobbie admitted. "I know how much you love her. I know you would never do that to her. Maybe the rest of us—maybe I could make myself believe you'd do that, but not Elizabeth."

"I wouldn't—"

"So, for a moment, I wondered how she had fooled me. And then I looked at her." Bobbie rearranged the silverware next to her plate. She met Jason's eyes. "And I knew. Even as Emily and Monica accused her. I knew her grief had been real. I've made my apologies to her, and I know Emily has as well. I'm sure Monica will seek her out in the next few days. But there will always be that moment where I doubted her. I can't take that back."

Jason's throat was tight, and he remained silent. What could he say? He could defend

himself, but it wouldn't matter. It wouldn't change anything.

"Elizabeth has already forgiven me though I don't deserve it. She doesn't see that she's been wronged. She's so worried about earning my love—deserving my love—that she didn't even stop to think that she'd done nothing wrong." Bobbie pursed her lips. "I can even pinpoint the moment Sonny told her. With some thought and reflection. The night after your memorial. Before we buried whatever Sonny planted in the harbor—she went with Sonny, and I can say now that something changed. She started to avoid all of us."

"I can't—" Jason shook his head. "I didn't want any of this, and by the time—Elizabeth actually knew before I did what Sonny had done," he confessed. His voice sounded rough even to his ears, and he swallowed hard, trying to clear his throat. "Sonny drugged me the first week. I told him to stop lying to Elizabeth when I found out she thought I was missing."

"But he kept lying." Bobbie rested her chin on her clasped hands. "And then he faked your death. How long were you drugged?"

"Just—the first week or so, I think. And then Sonny kept saying he'd tell her, but I knew—I knew he was lying to me. I knew he was keeping something from me, but—" Jason exhaled slowly. "I didn't stop it. And that's on me. Sonny lied. This was his idea. All of it. But I didn't stop it."

"I'm sorry any of this happened to you," Bobbie said finally. "That Sonny didn't value the trust you placed in him. That he didn't take care of Elizabeth. He and I have already had words on the subject, and believe me, they won't be the last." She waited a moment. "So what are you going to do?"

"What?" Jason shook his head. "I don't know. It's not up to me."

"I fear, Jason, that's where you're wrong. Because it's entirely on your shoulders. How you handle Sonny, how you deal with Elizabeth—"

"She—she asked for space," Jason said finally. "She—she understood what happened. That it wasn't my idea. But all of it—the grief, the lies—it's—she doesn't deserve to deal with any of it. It wasn't part of the deal."

"I want you to think very carefully about what Elizabeth has said to you these last few months," Bobbie told him. "Because, no, none of what's happened is your fault. Not really. But how you deal with it? That's you. What happened with Carly? That didn't need to be as bad as it was. You have a blind spot where my daughter and Sonny are concerned. Elizabeth has had enough of not coming first—"

"She comes first—" Jason bit off his protest because, more than AJ, Bobbie knew the truth. And Jason couldn't pretend that she was wrong. "I love her. She knows that."

“I don’t want to be a cliché, Jason, but sometimes—that’s not enough.” Bobbie peered past him into the diner. “She’s hurt, Jason. More than you think.”

“She needs time, I’ll give that to her. But I can’t—” Jason got to his feet. “I need to see her. I need her to know how much I love her, and that I’m not going away. That I won’t give up on her.” He hesitated. “I’m sorry, Bobbie. I never wanted you to—”

“I’m just glad you’re alive.” She stood up and embraced him. “Don’t do this again, do you hear me?”

“I won’t.”

He opened the door to the diner and ignored the way people looked at him as he approached the counter where Elizabeth was showing Georgie Jones how to work the coffee machine.

From the way her movements became stiff and forced, and the slight amusement in her eyes faded, Jason knew she was aware of him—but she never once looked at him.

He took a seat at the counter, next to Felicia who muttered something about stupid men, and waited.

Finally, Elizabeth took a deep breath and looked in his direction, letting her beautiful blue eyes meet his. His chest tightened and he drew in a sharp breath at the mixture of misery and anger he could see in her expression. He hadn’t really let him see it the night before—hadn’t really let himself process how much this had wrecked her.

He’d been in denial, Jason could now admit to himself, hoping that Elizabeth would be able to see past everything that had happened.

“Can I get you something?” she asked, her voice slightly husky. Her lower lip trembled for just a moment before she sucked it between her teeth and bit down. “A black coffee? To...go?”

“Yeah.” Jason swallowed hard. “Yeah. That’ll be good.” She handed him a temporary cup, and he left a twenty on the counter. He left quickly, not wanting to linger.

Elizabeth wanted time and space, she said, and this time he was going to listen to her.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

*Did you think we'd be fine?  
Still got scars on my back from your knife  
So, don't think it's in the past  
These kinda wounds they last and they last  
Now did you think it all through?  
All these things will catch up to you  
And time can heal but this won't  
So if you're coming my way, just don't*  
- Bad Blood, Taylor Swift

---

*Thursday, October 10, 2002*

### General Hospital: Sonny Corinthos' Room

Courtney stopped at the threshold of her brother's room and lightly knocked against the open door. Sonny, wincing as he pulled on his suit jacket, turned to look at her. Surprise lit in his dark brown eyes which made sense. Courtney could not remember the last time she had sought him out or vice versa.

"Hey. You're going home already?"

"I can't stand hospitals," Sonny managed as he leaned against the bed. "And it's just my leg." He grimaced. "And some bruising where the bullet hit the vest I was wearing. I'll be fine." He raised a brow. "I didn't know you cared."

"I'm not sure I do," she admitted. She leaned against the door frame. "Feels like I should, though. Dad said he came by earlier today."

"Yeah, to yell at me." Sonny winced again, and Courtney sighed.

"Maybe you should stay another day—you don't look so good—"

"I got things to do," Sonny said. He stood straight, keeping a hand braced on the table next to the bed. "You doing okay?"

"Better than my best friends at the moment." Courtney lifted an eyebrow. "Gia's brother isn't speaking to her, and Elizabeth looks like death." She smirked. "Though I guess that's accurate, since you destroyed her life along with Jason's."

Sonny scowled. “I—I know she was hurt, but—”

“I mean, you made her lie, Sonny. She told Gia about Jason being alive, but not me. And I get why she did it. She didn’t want me to have to choose between her and my husband.” Courtney pressed her lips together, then took a deep breath. “But she had to lie to me. And lie to the Quartermaines. To Bobbie. To people who care about her and Jason. And when she came over—”

“If you think you need to tell me what an awful person I am—”

“The thing is that I don’t know what kind of person you are,” Courtney cut in. “I wanted to know once. But you made it clear that you only wanted me in your life on your terms, and that doesn’t work for me. I don’t know if you’re a really a cruel person, but the man Elizabeth talks about doesn’t seem like he would be. I mean, God, Sonny, don’t you see that it’s so much worse because she thought you cared about her? She doesn’t have a lot of people in her life, and you’re just someone else who threw her away. The Spencers, Nikolas, even Emily—they all made Lucky the priority. She thought you were different.”

Sonny looked away, took a deep breath. “I know.”

“And I don’t know Jason all that well, to be honest, but it definitely seems like you were supposed to be his best friend. I mean, maybe you had your reasons, but Sonny —” Courtney stepped towards him. “Elizabeth isn’t speaking to him. Not because she doesn’t love him, but this broke her in ways I don’t think you saw coming.”

“I never wanted him to be in a position to lie to her,” Sonny murmured, shaking his head. “I planned it so that none of this was his fault—”

“Every day he knew that he faked his death and that Elizabeth had grieved for him and didn’t stop it—that made him part of this. You made them both liars, Sonny.”

She hesitated. “I’m glad you’re not going to die because Dad cares about you, but all of this just makes me really glad you and I never got close. I don’t think that’s going to change.”

### **Quartermaine Mansion: Terrace**

The early afternoon was slightly chilly, but nothing forced Lila Quartermaine inside for her afternoon tea until the first snow fell.

Jason found his grandmother, sister, and mother sharing that tea on the terrace and stopped just at the doorway. His grandmother’s eyes lit up when she saw him, but Monica and Emily’s expressions remained cooler. Even icy.

“Jason, my darling—” Lila held out her thin hand and Jason crossed to her, Emily sliding down the wicker sofa to make room. “It’s so good to see you.”

“I’m so sorry, Grandmother. For what happened,” Jason said immediately. “I didn’t —”

“Emily told us,” Monica said, bluntly. “She told us that you were shot, in hiding, and that Sonny lied to everyone before faking your death.” She lifted her chin. “I’ve already called Elizabeth to make my apologies.”

“I talked to her yesterday,” Emily said. She glanced at her brother, her fingers trembling slightly as she lifted the delicate white tea cup to her lips. “As usual, she’s just grateful we believe she didn’t know. Imagine that. Elizabeth didn’t even have the energy to be angry at us for not trusting her.”

Jason closed his eyes, took a deep breath. “I know. I never meant for any of this—”

“I always said that Sonny Corinthos would be the death of you,” Monica said, sharply. “How can you still see the good in a man like that? Selfish, calculating—” She stopped abruptly, looked away.

“I know that he’s all of those things,” Jason said after a long moment. It was always a struggle to open himself up to the Quartermaines, but Monica, Emily, and Lila were not the men of the family, and he knew he owed them more than that. He knew how the entire family had grieved for him.

It hadn’t been his fault—not directly—but it didn’t change how he felt about it.

“There are no words, nothing I can do to make this better.” Jason exhaled slowly. “All I can do is say I’m sorry, and that it wasn’t my idea—”

“But at some point, you knew. You knew that not only had Sonny not told anyone where you were for weeks, but that he had left us in terror,” Monica said, her teeth clenched. “You knew that he had faked your death—that we buried a body—who the hell did we bury?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know until after the funeral when Sonny finally told Elizabeth the truth and brought her—”

“I know that Mr. Corinthos has his good qualities,” Lila said, slowly, “but I cannot countenance what he put us through. What he put Elizabeth through.”

“She was devastated,” Emily said. Her dark eyes flashed at him. “Imagine burying someone you love twice and finding out it was a lie. Jesus Christ, Jason. When are you going to stop letting Sonny control your life? When are you going to get rid of him—and Carly?”

“It’s not—it’s not that simple.” Jason clenched his fists, looked down at them.

“Yeah, well, I thought maybe losing Robin and Michael had been a wake-up call.”

Emily set her tea cup in its saucer with a clatter. “But I guess you really are brain damaged if you keep letting Sonny and Carly destroy your life—”

“Emily!” Lila said sharply, as Monica grimaced, and Jason flinched.

Emily bit her lip. “I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I don’t mean that.” Her eyes were full of misery when they met his. “I love you. And I’m tired of seeing you lose everything because you’re too loyal to say enough is enough. You’re going to lose Elizabeth if you don’t learn how to put yourself first.”

Jason reached for his sister’s hand. “I know that. And I’m working on it.”

### **Elizabeth & Gia’s Apartment: Living Room**

“I’m glad we splurged on the good stuff,” Gia said as she surveyed the three empty bottles of wine and the demolished boxes of pizza. Her stomach lurched. “But maybe a pizza each was not the best idea.”

“I know it wasn’t.” Courtney groaned, laying on her back on the floor, an arm resting over her eyes. “Jesus. That hurts.”

Elizabeth sipped her wine and managed a weak smile from her corner of the sofa. “You actually ate three pizzas between you. I only had two slices.”

Gia gasped, stabbed a finger at her. “I knew it! You tricked us into eating your part! Don’t think this means you’re not splitting the bill—”

In the background, the television news at ten o’clock flickered on the television, ending whatever drama they’d been half-watching as they’d drunk themselves silly on Merlot and Cabernet. As it had been for the past three days, the leading story was the miraculous revival of Jason Morgan, and tonight, the news team had assembled a panel debating his story about the car accident.

“You know, maybe the world was a better place before mass media,” Gia said as she followed Elizabeth’s gaze. B-roll footage of the funeral ran, followed by what the reporters had filmed at the hospital during Jason’s arrest from a distance. She hadn’t seen that particular shot before—of she and Jason exchanging words before Gia drove her away.

“Cameras are everywhere,” Gia said, wrinkling her nose. “I bet the dinky camera phones we have now are going to just keep getting better and we’ll even be filming our own videos. Just wait until any Tom, Dick, or Beetlejuice can film you.”

“I think that saying is Harry, not Beetlejuice,” Courtney said, propping herself up on her elbows.

“My way is more fun.” Gia pursed her lips. “At least everyone believes you didn’t

know.”

“Yeah, now.” Elizabeth sighed, curling her legs up underneath her. “Is your brother talking to you yet?”

“No. I know he apologized to you for what happened at the hospital, but he’s still pretty sure we both knew something we didn’t tell him.” Gia shrugged. “Not the first secret I’m kept from Marcus. Won’t be the last.”

“Did you see Jason today?” Courtney sat up, folding her legs and pouring herself another glass of wine. “Georgie Jones said things were super awkward yesterday, but I was hoping—”

“I don’t—I can’t even look at him.” Elizabeth sighed. “Because every time I turn around, there’s another news article in my face, or a reporter sticking a microphone at me—I am constantly being reminded of how awful all of that was, and I’m just—it’s stupid to blame him all the way for it. He didn’t start it, and I know he was just finishing it the best way he knew how.”

“Just because he’s not the villain, it doesn’t make it any less shitty.” Gia tapped her fingernails against her glass. “Still. I feel like you’re edging away from time needed to complete separation.”

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth repeated. “It’s unfair to hold it against him, but that doesn’t mean I don’t.” She bit her lip. “Part of me wants to run screaming for the hills. I’ll graduate in December, and I’ll just leave. Maybe go down to Memphis with my grandmother and Steven. I know Gram would take me in while I got a job.”

“That sounds like something you’ve been thinking through.” Courtney tilted her head. “Is that what you’re going to do?”

“Maybe.” Elizabeth stared down at the dark red liquid swirling in her glass. “It might be nice to start over. To run away. I probably should have run away from Port Charles ages ago.”

“So why aren’t you packing your bags?” Gia asked.

“Because I love Jason,” Elizabeth said with a sigh. “And I didn’t have to wait a year for him to come back to me. He wasn’t brainwashed, he’s not telling me to be with someone else. There’s nothing about what’s happening that’s news to me. Sonny has always been a control freak, Jason has always been loyal to him and an idiot where Carly is concerned. The scale is—that’s what’s different. I never thought Sonny would destroy Jason. That he would purposefully set out to hurt me like he did—that his distrust of women was so deep that he dragged me along with it.”

She chewed on her bottom lip. “I just—I don’t know if running away is the right idea. I don’t know if staying is. I just—I don’t know. And until I do know, I feel like I owe it



to Jason not give him any mixed signals. Because yesterday, after I saw him, I had to physically stop myself from calling Gram and asking her to pick me up at the airport. He deserves for me to know what I'm doing."

"So, what, you're just waiting for some kind of magical epiphany?" Courtney asked with some skepticism. "I don't know if that actually happens."

"All I know is that right now I don't know *what* I want to do. Before, I used to pick the path of least resistance. Whatever asked the least of me, you know. I stayed with Lucky instead of leaving with Jason. I nearly married Lucky because it was easier than starting over." Elizabeth took a long swallow of her wine. "Is that I'd be doing if I stayed with Jason now? Nothing would change. We'd be happy for a while. But it would just all happen again. But if I leave, that means walking away from someone I genuinely love. It's not like it was with Lucky. I *am* in love with Jason. And I want a future with him. I'm just—"

"Scared that future has way too much Sonny and Carly." Gia nodded. She raised her glass in a mock toast. "So, here's to that magical epiphany. Let's hope it shows up fast."

### **Elm Street Pier**

When Jason saw Carly standing on the docks, he nearly turned back—nearly walked away completely. After putting in a full afternoon at the warehouse, he just wanted to go back to Jake's and have a couple of beers, putting the entire day behind him. But Carly was at the bottom of the stairs, blocking his way forward.

He hadn't seen her since everything had happened. Since that day at the warehouse when he'd learned the truth behind her disappearance, her involvement with Mickey Roscoe—

She brightened at the sound of his motorcycle boots and her eyes filled with tears. "I've been trying to get a hold of you for two days!" Carly rushed towards him, but Jason held up his arms to stop her.

"Jase—"

"You think anything has changed?" Jason asked, relieved at the anger he felt. Not worry. Not pity. No desire to set this right. Just...incredibly pissed that Carly had the nerve to think everything would go back to the way it had been. "Yeah, I'm not dead, Carly. So, what?"

Tears slid down her cheeks as Carly sucked in a sharp breath. "I-I told you the truth—I did—I told you what happened. That's what you wanted—"

"You told me you helped set up an ambush—" Jason stared at her and finally asked her the question that had plagued him for weeks. "How did you know who Mickey

Roscoe's wife was?"

"What?" Carly's eyes widened. "What are you talking about?"

"You said he never introduced himself, Carly." Jason swallowed hard. "You knew Faith Roscoe before any of this started. You met his wife at the club. That's what you said."

"Jason—"

"It never made sense to me," he said slowly. "Why anyone would go after you when you weren't part of Sonny's life. We thought you might be involved, but—"

"No, Jase, I wouldn't—"

"You wouldn't fake a car accident if you thought it would get me back in Port Charles?" Jason said. "How'd you know who Faith Roscoe was, Carly? How did you know Mickey Roscoe from the papers?"

Carly narrowed her eyes. "You think I set you up for that ambush? Go to hell—"

"I think that I don't know," Jason said slowly. He shook his head. "And that fact—and everything else that's happened since you came back—"

"You faked your death, too!" Carly shot back. And then she slapped her hands over her mouth, her dark brown eyes wide with shock. "That's not what I meant—"

Jason closed his eyes. All the pieces had come together. "It got out of hand, didn't it? You were just supposed to be gone for a few days."

"Jason—" She shook her head. "You just—you weren't coming home, and I was fine. I was good. I was strong. I was ready to be the woman you needed me to be, and I had custody of Michael. I was going to give him to you—"

His stomach twisted, and Jason looked out over the harbor. "You made a deal with Roscoe and his wife." He dipped his head. He didn't even know where to go with this. What to do with this information. How could he ever— "Well, the joke's on you, Carly."

"What does that mean?" she demanded.

"It means that I had already booked a flight home," Jason told her. "I was in Mumbai when I found out, and I was already coming back to Port Charles within a week or two. Because I knew Elizabeth had broken up with Lucky, and I wanted to see if there was a chance."

"No." Carly shook her head. "No. You would have come back for me, Jase. You did come home for me—"

“We’re done, Carly.” Jason sliced a hand through the air. “It’s over. It’s been over for years. This—this is just another one of your goddamn plans that didn’t work out the way you wanted it to, too. I’d feel sorry for you, but you created this mess. You got into bed with animals.”

He pushed past her, but she grabbed the sleeve of his shirt, trying to stop him. “No, no, c’mon. Don’t do this, Jason. You know me. You know I do insane things, that I don’t think things through—damn it, I got kidnapped—”

“And you think it makes up for the fact that you put it all into motion?” Jason jerked his arm out of her grasp. “You just better hope you never go to court for custody, Carly. Because this time, I’m not going to protect you.”

He climbed up the stairs, even as she called after him, her voice panicked at first and then shrieking that she wasn’t going to let him do this to her.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

*Is anybody out there?  
Is anybody listening?  
Does anybody really know?  
If it's the end of our beginning  
A cry, a rush from one breath  
Is all we're waiting for  
Sometimes the one we're taking  
Changes every one before*  
- Holding On and Letting Go, Ross Copperman

---

*Friday, October 11, 2002*

### **Kelly's: Courtyard**

Elizabeth stepped outside and stared at the man sitting calmly at one of her tables. She knew Sonny had been released from the hospital the day before because Emily had warned her, but to see him here—for the first time since he'd dropped her off the morning after she'd learned the truth—she couldn't quite make herself take another breath.

"Elizabeth." Sonny struggled to his feet. "I'm sorry to just—I thought you might not answer me if I called—"

"You'd be right," Elizabeth said slowly, clutching her order pad to her chest. She swallowed hard. "I'll get someone else to help you—"

"Is there nothing I can do to make this right?" he asked softly.

Her eyes filled at the anguish in his voice—God, she wasn't going to let him do this to her—wasn't going to let him make her the bad guy. She simply wasn't.

Elizabeth turned back to him. "I said everything I needed to say the last time we spoke, Sonny. You knew the situation, and you used me. You used my grief to sell your plan. You kept me out of the loop because you didn't trust me. I don't know what else—"

"I'm asking you not to take this out on Jason then." Sonny shifted, wincing as some of the weight fell onto his injured leg and he sat back down. "I know you're not speaking to him."

“No, I’m not talking to Jason. But it’s none of your business—”

“I did this, not him.” Sonny pressed his hand flat against his chest. “I went out of my way to make sure that Jason was never in a position to lie to you. To make that choice. I knew I could convince him that this was a good idea, but I never put him in that position because I didn’t—”

“Because you knew he wouldn’t agree.” Elizabeth shoved her order pad and pencil into the pocket of her apron. “Don’t feed me bullshit, Sonny. I’m past it. We’re done. You knew Jason would never agree to lie to me. You also knew he would never agree to fake his death, so you drugged him—” Her voice broke. “He trusted you, Sonny. You told him you’d come to get me. And then then you kept him unconscious, so he wouldn’t fight you. He was supposed to be your family. How could you do that to him —”

“Being in my position,” Sonny said slowly, “means that sometimes I *can’t* let that matter. The stakes were too high—Jason nearly died, Elizabeth.” He gestured to the table. “Please. Just...I promise. If you hear me out this once...because you’re not wrong.”

Against her better judgment, Elizabeth sighed and sat down, gingerly perching at the edge of the chair so that she could make a hasty escape if necessary.

“When he was shot, I was going to contact you,” Sonny said. “But the cops were all over the place and I knew I couldn’t get to you without them noticing. And...it wasn’t clear that Jason would make it out of surgery.”

“I should have been there for him,” she choked out, her fists clenched in her lap. “Not Johnny—”

“I don’t disagree with that. I put off calling you because I didn’t want—” He looked away. “I was afraid he would die, Elizabeth, and that I would have to be the one to tell you. So, I waited. And that was my mistake. By the time I knew he’d pull through, you’d already talked to the cops—”

“Don’t you blame me for that—I didn’t tell them a damn thing—”

“I know that,” Sonny said. “I was angry at first, but I realize now this partially started because of all the goddamn bad timing.” He rubbed his thumb against his lip. “And then I realized that I couldn’t bring you there right away. I knew Jason would want you to know, I knew you’d want to be there. I never intended—it was going to be a day or two.”

“But it wasn’t,” Elizabeth pressed. “It was *weeks*, Sonny—”

“You live in the same building as Taggart, you’re close to his sister,” Sonny said. “Those are the facts. I had to take that into account. And...then when I was going to

tell you the plan—to warn you about what was next—I realized how much you knew about what was going on. More than I wanted to you to know. More than Jason should have told you—”

“So, I was right. You didn’t lie to me to protect me or the plan. You lied because you thought I *already* knew too much.” She closed her eyes, swallowed the tears that never seemed to be far away. “Because you don’t trust me.”

“I don’t...” Sonny looked down at the surface the table, brushing his fingers against the surface. “I don’t think I trust anyone,” he admitted. “Because I kept Jason drugged. And I kept lying to you. And I kept telling myself it was the right thing to do.”

“You think because now you know it wasn’t,” Elizabeth said slowly, “that it makes it better? That it changes how—you think I can just let it go?”

“No, I think that I made choices that have made that impossible for us to be where we were.” He met her eyes. “I just don’t want my choices to be the reason you and Jason don’t make it. I can live with you hating me. I can live with him—” Sonny stopped talking.

“Sonny—”

“If I am the reason Jason loses you, that’s it for me and him,” Sonny told her in a low pained voice. “I don’t ever get a second chance. He could forgive what happened with Carly because she didn’t matter. You do. The rest of the people I hurt—Bobbie, Emily, Monica—they’ll move on. They’ll let this go. But—”

“I don’t understand.” Elizabeth squinted, tilted her head. “What does that mean? How is it—Jason still works for you, Sonny. He went ahead with this plan—”

“He came to see me in the hospital,” Sonny told her. “And then I haven’t seen him since. You know his position with me at the moment is fluid. He’s told you that. The only thing that kept him in Port Charles these last six months was you and Michael. Michael is settled. He’s happy with his father.” Sonny’s mouth twisted at that slightly, but he continued. “If Jason leaves this time, I don’t think he’ll come back.”

Elizabeth exhaled. “I can’t make any decisions about my life so that you can keep Jason around to fix your messes,” she said tightly. “I learned the hard way how loyal Jason is to you, how he will still put himself on the line for Carly. I told you—I told you before all this happened how it was going to be because of her. I take no pleasure in being right.”

“I don’t expect you to do anything for me.” He shook his head. “I have no right. But you need to know you’re not the only one whose looking at Jason’s relationships and realizing how one-sided they are. Jason is seeing it, too. That’s why I think he might

leave. Because there's nothing left for him here without you. I'm not saying that to guilt you but, so you know that I'm not keeping him here. Carly isn't."

Elizabeth's chest ached as she took a deep, shaky breath. "I've been terrified to tell him what I really think," she murmured. "That yes, I'm upset about the lies. About the way it continued. But that I can get past all of that. What keeps me up at night, Sonny, is knowing that at the end of the day, you came first. Carly came first. He promised me it wouldn't be like that."

"It wasn't," Sonny insisted. "I did this. By the time Jason found out, there were things that were in motion—but his concern for you came first." He stopped. "Thanks for hearing me out. What I did to you—how I treated you and Jason—I can't ever take that back. I can't ever make this right."

"He loves you, Sonny," Elizabeth said as he stood up, wincing in pain. "I love you. That's why this hurts so much. I had a family that didn't really care much about me, and I thought I had found a new one who did love me." She looked at him, the tears sliding down her cheeks. "You were supposed to be my family."

"I know." He sighed. "And that's something I can't ever change. I'm sorry."

*Saturday, October 12, 2002*

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Hallway**

Jason managed a smile when he saw Max standing at the entrance to the penthouse. "Good to see you back on your feet."

Max grinned, wiggling the fingers that stuck out of the sling he wore to protect the shoulder that had taken the bullet. "You know me, can't keep me down for long. Good to see you, too, Jase." The man's eyes glittered just a little as he continued. "You got nine lives."

"Yeah, well, I'd like to stop using them," Jason muttered, wincing as he opened the door to the penthouse. His chest still ached at times—he wasn't fully recovered, he knew that. But some things had to get done.

Sonny and Benny looked up at his entrance. Sonny started to stand but Jason waved him away. "I wanted to let you know that we took care of Nico last night."

Sonny sighed. "And he didn't give us anything new?"

"He didn't have anything to give us," Jason said as he took a seat across from Benny. He squinted at the paperwork strewn across the dining room table. "What's all that?"

"Expansion," Benny said sourly. "Nico was supposed to be taking point on this crap, but now we gotta figure out what to do next."

"If Nico didn't know who Roscoe was working with—" Sonny shook his head. "It's not like him not to demand details. He knows—he knew better than that."

"He was greedy," Benny said. "He would have done anything to get out of Port Charles and into Vegas. He cut corners. Not surprised he got into bed with Roscoe without knowing the full deal."

"The thing is..." Jason said after a moment, "is that I think Nico was protecting Zander." Benny and Sonny looked at him. "You told me that you thought Zander was involved," he reminded Sonny. "That he came here to test Elizabeth."

"Why would Nico protect Zander?" Benny said with a scowl. "Didn't we determine he was setting Zander up to take the fall for the drugs at the club?"

"Yeah, but why did Nico pick Zander in the first place?" Jason pressed. "He had to know Zander's background would make him an unlikely candidate to get anywhere. Even if I didn't come back—"

"I was pushing back on Zander," Sonny said. He rubbed his mouth. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking we don't know nearly enough about Zander," Jason admitted. "We never dug into his time before Port Charles. He flipped on Sorel, that was good enough for us for a while. And now he's gone to work for the Ruiz family. I know Nico had connections, but—"

"But Zander got a sweet gig in Miami," Benny pointed out. "He was already running his own crew at the docks. Not something I would have thought Nico could make happen."

"Hector Ruiz isn't going to come after us," Jason told Sonny. "He doesn't care enough. He doesn't mind making trouble, but I think someone asked him to take on Zander. We always knew Roscoe was working for someone else. We knew Nico couldn't be the mastermind. He's not that smart."

"So, it's someone with connections to the Ruiz family. Someone in that area of the world." Sonny shook his head. "Then why the hell come after me?"

"I don't know," Jason admitted. He hesitated but told them about Carly. "Carly was approached at the club by Faith Roscoe last year. I think Roscoe was feeling her out after the divorce to see if she could be used."

Sonny scowled. "Why the hell—" His face blanched and he sat back. After a long moment, he nodded. "So, we were right. Carly engineered the accident to make you come home."

"And I think that's all Roscoe wanted to do—was to help her go missing until I came



back. But that's the point where this other guy comes in. I don't think Carly was supposed to have a real accident—and she wasn't supposed to be gone that long.” Jason hesitated. “I don't know what to tell you, Sonny. I don't know if the threat still exists or if someone was just taking advantage of the situation.”

“All of this was for nothing,” Sonny scowled. “We don't know anything—”

Jason got to his feet. “I can look into some of this,” he said quietly. And he nodded to the paperwork in front of Benny. “And I can take point on this.”

Benny drew his brows together in frown, but Sonny didn't look surprised. “You're planning on leaving,” he said simply.

“Yeah.” Jason exhaled slowly. He looked out the window, at the skyline of Port Charles. “I think it's probably for the best.”

“Maybe,” Sonny admitted. He waited until Jason looked back at him. “Maybe you should talk to Elizabeth first.”

Jason shook his head. “It's been days. She hasn't—” He hadn't had the courage to seek her out after talking to Carly, after seeing once again the lengths Carly would go to. Elizabeth didn't need that in her life, and as long as Jason was around, Carly would be planning her next attack.

The only way to make it better would be to leave.

“I know that,” Sonny said. “And I know that you and me aren't going to be okay any time soon, if ever. I get that, Jase. You got no reason to trust me, to take advice from me.”

Jason pressed his lips together in a thin line. “Sonny—”

“But believe me when I tell you that if you leave town without letting Elizabeth know—or giving her a chance to sort through this—you'll regret it for the rest of your life.”

### **Elizabeth & Gia's Apartment: Living Room**

It was the best Elizabeth had felt in weeks as she and the people who meant the most in the world to her crowded around the coffee table in her apartment—Elizabeth and Emily on the sofa, Courtney sprawled out on her back, laying on some pillows, and Gia on the floor, her legs drawn up under her chin. They were surrounded by bottles of wine, cheese, fruit, and chocolate.

They didn't normally have a wine night twice in a week, but it was Emily's last night in Port Charles before she flew back to finish out the last of her program in California, and Elizabeth was determined to make sure that when Emily returned in the spring after graduation, that there would be a place for her here. Especially if

Elizabeth wasn't around.

Gia and Emily had spent the majority of the evening trying to outdo one another in stories about bad dates, and Elizabeth's sides ached from laughing so hard. She was a little bit tipsy, stuffed with candy and wine—she'd have a hell of a hangover when she woke up the next morning, but this...this gave her hope that everything would be okay.

"So," Emily said as she poured herself what was probably her fourth full glass of Moscato. "I have decided to forgive you for blackmailing me," she told Gia.

Gia raised her own wine glass in toast. "Thank you. I've forgiven you for being an irritating pest." She grinned. "See, Liz, we can be friends!"

For some reason that sent Courtney into an attack of the giggles, and she laughed until she couldn't breathe, turning over on her stomach.

Elizabeth snorted and reached for her drink. "Listen, there was a time when I hated both of you—" She raised her wine at Gia and Emily in turn. "Because you were.... a bitch," she told Gia who nodded, and at Emily's mystified expression, "When I could tell Lucky liked you more than me."

"Oh, God, if we're going back to high school." Emily rolled her eyes. "That first day we met, I knew you only defended me because Lucky was about to step in. You just wanted kudos."

"Uh, like, duh," Elizabeth drawled. "How else was I supposed to make him think I was cool, too?" Her phone rang, and she looked down at the screen. Her smile faded slightly. "It's Jason."

"Yeah?" Emily leaned over, intrigued. "He hasn't called you since he got home. Have you seen him?"

"Not since he came by Kelly's on Wednesday." She bit her lip, then answered it, waving her hand to tell the other three to keep quiet. "Jason?"

*"Hey. I—I hope it's okay I called."*

"No, it's okay." Elizabeth swallowed hard at the sound of his voice. "I'm just at the apartment with the girls. Em goes back to California tomorrow."

*"Yeah, I-I know. We had lunch today." Jason waited a moment. "I should let you go then—"*

"No, no, why did you call?" she said quickly. "You wanted something."

*"I just—I wanted to talk, but—"*

The words came out in a rush—she didn't think about it, she just said exactly what she wanted. "Pick me up in ten? I miss you."

*"Okay. I—I'll be right there."*

Elizabeth tossed the phone aside. "I'm ditching y'all for a man." She got to her feet and winced. "Is there time for coffee?"

"Are you sure about this?" Gia asked, climbing to her feet and handing her an unopened bottle of water. Elizabeth uncapped it. "You've been drinking—"

"That's good. I won't be thinking so hard how to say the right thing, and I'll just say what I'm thinking. Plus, Sonny told me Jason is thinking of leaving." She looked at Emily. "Isn't he?"

"He, ah," Emily bit her lip. "He told me he might come out to see me soon. Liz—"

"He doesn't think there's anything for him here," Elizabeth told Gia. "He's leaving Sonny. I didn't ask him to. I didn't say a word." Her heart felt a thousand times lighter. "I don't even need him to actually go. I just needed to know he would. That he was that angry at Sonny, too."

"There's that epiphany we've been waiting for," Gia told Courtney who just blinked her blearily. "Never mind. You're drunker than the rest of us. Lightweight."

"So, you're going to forgive him?" Emily said with a squeal. She jumped to her feet. "Oh my God, yay, we can still be sisters!"

"I don't know about that," Elizabeth said as she drank more water. She rolled her shoulders. She needed to be sober—or at least less tipsy for this. Jason had reached out—

And she wanted nothing more than to reach back.

### **Brownstone: Front Steps**

Elizabeth was waiting at the top of the stairs when Jason pulled the bike to a stop. He had called her without thinking about it—he'd just wanted to hear her voice. To see her. For months they'd been together nearly every day and every night. To not be with her these last few weeks...

But he had already nearly accepted that Elizabeth wouldn't be able to let herself trust him again—that she would walk away to take care of herself. He understood that—part of him had seen it coming even before he'd put an end to the lie.

But her voice on the other end of the phone—

And the way he could see her smile in the street lights—

As if the last time they'd faced one another on these steps, they hadn't known she was saying goodbye.

"Hey." Elizabeth said as she came down the steps and joined him at the curb. She nodded to the bike. "Let's go nowhere. Fast."

Without a word, he handed her the helmet. He didn't know what would happen next, but maybe there was still a future for them.

## Vista Point

Elizabeth leaned over the railing. The night was so clear she could see straight out to Spoon Island and Wyndemere. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "You remember the last time we were here?"

"Yeah." Jason put his hand on the railing but faced her. "Just before I got shot." He hesitated. "Elizabeth—"

"I haven't really known what to say to you," she admitted. "I mean, this was all so big. So...shattering. It's not just what happened to me—the lies, the grief—it's also been killing me what happened to you."

He dipped his head. "I'm okay—"

"Hey." Elizabeth put a hand against his chest, slipping it beneath the leather of his jacket. She furrowed her brow. "Oh. I forgot to give your jacket back."

"I thought it got lost when Jake packed up my things, so I got another one." He tilted his head. "You have it?"

"I took it. When the cops finally let me into your room to get my phone." She fished into her pocket and took out the little flip phone. "I left it there that last morning. God, it really sucked. Taggart told me they'd pulled your phone records, so I knew you'd called me, and I just.... they wouldn't give me the phone." She managed a half smile as she looked at him. "Once I got that message, I got Lucas to save it on a CD for me, so I could just...play it over and over again. I didn't want to forget your voice."

He closed his eyes, his features twisted in a grimace. "I'm so sorry—"

"And while I was out of my mind with worry and grief," Elizabeth said slowly, "your best friend—*your* family—was keeping you drugged unconscious, faking your death—I'm not the only victim here, Jason. Emily told me that you were talking about visiting her, and Sonny came by yesterday—"

"He shouldn't be bothering you," he cut in with a low growl. "I told him to leave you alone—"

"He thinks you're getting ready to leave. That Michael and I were all that kept you

here.” Her eyes burned. “Are you?”

“It’s—” Jason exhaled slowly. Looked away. “It’s why I called. There are—there are loose ends with what happened, and there are some things I could away from Port Charles. But it’s not—” He shook his head. “It’s not just because of what—It’s not just because of you.”

“Okay,” Elizabeth drawled out slowly. “Is it...is it like the last time? You’re leaving because of what happened?”

He took a few steps away from her and wrapped both fists around the railing. “I can’t be around Sonny,” he admitted. “I tried that earlier today. Tried to have a business meeting. Keep it simple. But, yeah, it’s like before. Only—” Jason looked back at her. “He slept with Carly that night I got shot. You knew that.”

“I figured that out eventually,” she said. “Jason—”

“I went to him and that’s when I found out. I didn’t even—” He took a breath. “It hurt because I knew why they’d done it. Carly wanted to hurt me because she saw us dancing that night at Kelly’s. And Sonny wanted to prove a point about Carly. And maybe about himself. That he shouldn’t be trusted.” Jason squinted a little, as if trying to find the right words. “I just—I needed to be away from that. I needed to get away from anyone who could make me feel that way.”

“So, you left,” Elizabeth said. A terrible ache started to spread through her chest. Oh, God, was he leaving anyway? Even if she— “Is that what you wanted to tell me? That you need to go? That even if I can get past what happened, it doesn’t matter—”

“Elizabeth—” Jason broke off abruptly. “I don’t know. I love you. I hate what happened to you. What you went through. I would never have done that to you, and if I stay in Port Charles, around Sonny and Carly, I don’t know that I can keep it from happening again.”

“So, you need time, too.” Elizabeth gripped the edge of his jacket and drew him closer. “What am I supposed to do, Jason? Just let you go? You had your chance to walk away. We both did. I don’t want to lose you.” Her voice broke. “Because I know what it’s like without you, and I don’t want to do it again.”

“If I stay,” Jason told her, his voice pained, “I know Carly is just going to keep coming at me. I pissed her off. And Sonny’s—I don’t know. You shouldn’t have to deal with any of that—”

“I make my own decisions,” she insisted. “So, if you need to go, then I’ll go, too.”

“Elizabeth—” He stared at her for a long minute. “Your entire life is here—”

“Give me six weeks,” she told him. “Because I really do want to finish my degree. I

worked hard, and I'm only six weeks away. I have to finish training Courtney to take over as manager. But I was already looking for the next thing. Even that last morning, you know that. I was ready to move on from Kelly's and college. Give me six weeks, and I can go."

"What about your family, your friends?"

"Gia, Emily, and Courtney are a phone call away, an email." Elizabeth spread her hands at her sides. "Bobbie, too. You asked me to go away with you once. I regretted not saying yes every day that came after."

Jason exhaled, bit his lip. "I'd...I'm looking into some things for Sonny. Even though I'm not going back to working for him the way I used to, what happened these last few months—there are still some things—" He nodded. "But I can do that during the next six weeks." A smile spread across his face. He held out a hand. "I want to show you the light in Italy."

She grinned back at him, sliding her hand in his. "There's nowhere else I'd rather go." He pulled into his arms and kissed her—

It had taken her more than a year to make the right choice, but she was never going to look back.

## Epilogue

*Sticks and stones they may break these bones  
But then I'll be ready, are you ready?  
It's the start of us, waking up, come on  
Are you ready? I'll be ready  
I don't want control, I want to let go  
Are you ready? I'll be ready  
Cause now it's time to let them know  
We are ready  
- What About Us, P!nk*

---

*Monday, December 16, 2002*

### Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

“So, we’re nowhere.” Sonny sighed, fisting his hands at his waist and dipping his head.

“We’re not nowhere,” Jason said a bit impatiently. “We’ll watch Zander and the Ruizes more closely. Knowing that Zander Smith has old ties to the Jerome crime family explains why Nico went out of his way—”

“I’d forgotten that Nico made his bones under old Victor,” Benny murmured, rubbing his chin. “I always think of him running numbers with you for Frank Smith, but yeah—I guess there was some leftover connections. I should have found Zander’s birth certificate before this.”

Sonny waved that away. “What about allies? Who does Hector depend on? Who would he go to the mat before?” He huffed, poured himself a bourbon. “Someone came after us last summer, Jason. It’s not enough to say we can’t find him.”

“The family does business with a lot of South American cartels,” Jason said, flatly. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Sonny. I watched Hector, I watched the sons. I talked to all our guys. We had Benny tracing all their financial transactions, Stan was monitoring their internet activity—there’s nothing there. Someone called in a favor. I don’t think it’s more than that.”

“So, I’m just waiting for this someone to come at me again.” Sonny hissed. “And that’s good enough for you?”

“No.” Jason shook his head. “But I’ve already given you two more weeks than I agreed to. I’m handing this off to Benny and Johnny.”

Sonny swallowed. “So, you’re really going. Just like that.”

“Elizabeth graduated on Saturday, Sonny. You knew that I was going to go when she was done. She’s handing over Kelly’s today.” He paused. “Yeah. I’m really going. There’s nothing else for me to do here.”

“There’s nothing we can’t handle,” Benny said quietly. He looked at Jason. “You’ll be in Italy at first?”

“I’ll keep in touch about where we are. I don’t want you to have to search a week or more like last spring.” Jason shrugged. “We’re starting in Italy. I don’t know if we’ll stay long, but I’ll stop in on Maximus Giambetti. Make the rounds.”

“Miss Webber will enjoy the winter in Venice, I’m sure.” Benny flashed a smile. “It’s a beautiful city for art. And she’s worked very hard.”

“Yeah.” Sonny sighed. “Yeah, I know Elizabeth has wanted to go to Italy for a long time—I’m glad—” He looked at Jason. “It’s never going to be the same, is it?”

“No.” Jason shifted. “I don’t know if we’ll come back. I mean, maybe eventually. Elizabeth will miss her family and friends—and there’s Michael.” He sighed. “And I’m worried what Carly might do. She’s been too quiet.” He met his friend’s eyes. “I need to go away, Sonny.”

“Okay.” Sonny extended a hand. “I don’t have to tell you to take care of Elizabeth. You’ll do that without trying. Show her world, Jase. You two have waited long enough.”

“Thanks.” Jason shook his hand, then extended a shake to Benny, who gave him a warm smile.

When he was gone, Sonny sat on the sofa, his head in his chin. “Well, you warned me.”

“He’ll be back, Boss.” Benny said as Max knocked and let them know that Sonny’s lawyer was there to sign paperwork for the expansion plans in Las Vegas.

“Yeah, yeah. Come on in, Ric.”

### **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

Courtney made a great show of dangling the gold keys on the hot flamingo key chain over her head. “The power is mine, all mine!” she said with a cackle. “No more morning shifts ever!”



Gia rolled her eyes as she flicked their best friend. “Stop acting so happy that we’re being abandoned.” She huffed to Elizabeth. “You know you’re breaking the lease.”

Elizabeth snorted, sliding her house keys towards Gia and nodded to Bobbie. “Bobbie doesn’t care, why should you?”

“I’m just happy that my girls are happy,” Bobbie told them. She stood up from the table and dropped a kiss on the top of Elizabeth’s head. “And that you at least trained your replacement.”

“Besides, I’ll pay my portion of the rent until May,” Elizabeth told her former roommate.

“What happens in May?”

“Emily comes home, and she said she’d be willing to take over my part of the lease.” Elizabeth batted her eyes as Gia scowled. “This way, when I get back, you and Emily will be the best of friends.”

“Listen, if we can keep ourselves from killing each other, I’ll be shocked,” Gia said dryly.

“So, you are planning to come back,” Courtney said, leaning forward. “Because you packed everything. And you’ve been all final and weeping these last few weeks. Like we’re never going to see you again.”

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth admitted. “I never intended to stay in Port Charles forever. And I’m excited to travel. But I also know that Jason is going to be paying, and that makes me less than thrilled—”

“He could care less—”

“And for a while, I’m not going to care either.” Elizabeth shrugged. “To be honest, I’m going because Jason needs to be gone. When he’s ready to come back...”

“She’s breaking up the band,” Gia muttered.

Elizabeth ignored her and joined Bobbie at the doorway where the redhead was peering through into the restaurant. “Thank you,” she told her.

Bobbie smiled, put an arm around her shoulders. “I’m so happy for you both.” She looked back through the restaurant where Carly was sitting with a sullen Michael. “I wish that things could have worked out as well for everyone else, but you’ve had a tough year.” She turned to embrace Elizabeth, squeezing her tight. “You may not be the daughter of my blood, but you’re like my BJ. The daughter of my heart. And I love Jason like he was my own. It gives me great happiness to know that you’ll be taking care of each other.”

"I never could have gotten this far if you hadn't given me and Gia that first leg up." Elizabeth's voice broke. "You took on your family—you took my side—and you gave me a place to sleep. I love you, Bobbie. You've been more of a mother to me than my own ever was." She stepped back as she heard a motorcycle rumble in the parking lot.

A few minutes later, Jason came through the archway. Bobbie smiled wanly at him. "You might want to stay there—Carly's inside."

Jason grimaced, then nodded. He looked to Elizabeth. "You ready?"

"Yeah, I just need to say goodbye to Gia and Courtney." Elizabeth looked at her best friends—the two people who knew her better than anyone else in the world.

"Nope." Gia shook her head. "You're not getting rid of me so easy. Goodbyes are for other people." She poked Elizabeth lightly in the chest. "We'll see you later."

"Yeah, we still need to win a bar fight," Courtney said with a grin even as her eyes filled with tears.

Bobbie joined Jason as the three women hugged each other. "I'm so excited for you both," she murmured, as she touched his arm. "This was a great idea, even if you are taking away the best manager I ever had. She was never meant to stay here. You take her where the light is beautiful and make sure she has all the art supplies she can handle."

"I rented a studio for her in Venice," Jason said, his eyes on Elizabeth. "It's already stocked with the basics. I'm going to surprise her when we get there."

"You'll do fine." She kissed his cheek. "Take care of each other."

With a few more hugs and tears, Elizabeth grabbed her carry-on bag and purse—everything else had either been put into storage or had already been shipped to Venice.

She waved to the trio of women as she and Jason went to the parking lot. He stowed her carry-on and then handed her the helmet. "You ready?" he asked.

Elizabeth grinned. "I was born ready."

## **Venezuela**

Zander arched his brows as he was led through the labyrinth hallways of Luis Alcazar's estate in Caracas. It had taken weeks for Alcazar to make contact again—Hector had started to lose hope that Zander would be able to get on the inside.

And then Alcazar had asked for Zander to join him for the holidays—to talk about the next step. Zander wasn't really sure what he planned to do once he arrived. He knew he was playing a dangerous game—that if he betrayed either Alcazar or Hector

his life was forfeit.

But he knew he was on the edge of something great—if he was just careful enough to select the right side and align himself with the victors—

People were going to remember Zander Smith's name.

"Ah, Senor Smith." Luis stood with a smile. "You've arrived. The trip was not too difficult, I trust."

"No. I was surprised to hear from you."

"Well, we've allowed the chips to fall and settle." Luis gestured for Zander to take a seat. "I'm sure the Ruiz family is none too pleased with how things worked out."

"Sonny's not dead, so you're not happy either."

"Well, I will admit a bit of disappointment." Luis sat behind the desk, took a cigar from a box on his desk and extended it to Zander. "The Carly business—it fell into my lap, but I was happy with the tension it created. You were correct—Nico and Roscoe were not worthy allies."

"Morgan's leaving town," Zander told him as he leaned forward for Luis to light the cigar. "I still know some of the crew—he waited for Elizabeth to finish school. If they're not gone now, they will be soon."

"Interesting," Luis murmured. "So, we managed to divide them at least. And I know that Sonny no longer has his normal trusted attorney at his side."

"How—" Zander squinted. "How did you know about that?"

"I know everything, my friend. It's time we discussed exactly how to destroy Sonny Corinthos."

Out on the veranda, just outside the windows of the study, a woman closed her eyes. A single tear slid down her cheek.

She was never going to be able to stop him. She would never be able to escape and leave this nightmare behind.

Brenda Barrett just wanted to go home.

**THE END**

## Second Epilogue

*I'm gonna hold you close  
Make sure that you know  
I was lost before you  
Christmas was cold and grey  
Another holiday alone to celebrate  
But then one day everything changed  
You're all I need  
Underneath the tree*  
- Underneath the Tree, Kelly Clarkson

---

## Murano, Italy

*December 24, 2002*

As their water taxi crossed the canal from the Sacca de la Misericordia marina, Elizabeth Webber thought the water of the Venetian harbor didn't look all that different from the dark, dank water of the harbor in Port Charles that looked out onto Lake Ontario.

When she said as much to her boyfriend, Jason Morgan, he didn't laugh exactly, but the corners of his eyes crinkled up, and he grinned. He put an arm around her shoulders and drew her closer as the boat closed the distance between the city of Venice proper and the famed glass making island of Murano where they were going to spend most of Christmas Eve.

"I think that was one of the things that surprised me the most," he told her over the dull roar of the water taxi's engine. "How much some things didn't change. The water does look the same, but—"

Elizabeth twisted in her seat to look at the city she could still see behind them. "Until you remember that you woke up in a house that's centuries old across from a church that's probably older. I mean, Port Charles has been around for five minutes when you think about it that way."

They reached the shores of Murano and Elizabeth stepped off, trying not to look while Jason tugged out some Euros to pay their driver. It wasn't the first thing he'd paid for since they'd landed in Venice nearly two weeks ago, and she knew it wouldn't be the last. She wasn't working right now, and her savings wouldn't get either of them

very far.

She offered to give him the contents of her savings to pay for her plane ticket or help with the rent on the house, but Jason had politely refused, telling her to save it for anything she wanted to buy while they were traveling.

She'd told Gia and Courtney before they'd left Port Charles that she knew Jason paying for the majority (okay, very nearly the entirety) of their travels would drive her crazy eventually—she'd just thought she'd make it longer than ten days.

“Ready?” she asked cheerfully as Jason joined her on the cobble stoned path that ran along the docks. “Where to first?”

“You want to just walk the streets?” he asked as they started down one of the small pathways that lined the canals. The paths were narrow, but Elizabeth was soon distracted by the gorgeous shops, all selling glass.

“Where did you buy the glass you gave me last year? The red one? I...I was hoping to find something in the same shade.” Elizabeth craned her neck to look through the doorway. “Maybe a bowl or a vase. Anything really.”

“I don't know. It was some street vendor. I was doing a favor for Maximus,” Jason told her, referencing the old Italian mobster that Jason had taken her to dinner with during one of their first nights in Venice.

Apparently, it was an old school tradition, and not checking in with Maximus Giambetti while in the region would have been seen as a sign of disrespect. “And I had to look like I blended in, so I stopped to watch the glassblowers I told you about.” He squinted, looked up and down the street. “I think it was on the other side of the island, maybe.”

“Well, we'll make our way over there eventually, I guess.”

They passed by the third gelato stand Elizabeth had seen since they'd docked, and she sighed wistfully. “We need more of these in Port Charles. That's definitely something we're missing.”

“Yeah, they're all over here in Italy. And I saw a lot of them in France.” He nodded towards the stand. “You want another limencello?”

“No. I'm saving my money for lunch. You promised you'd sit in a real restaurant and not just a panini place,” she teased. He rolled his eyes.

“I'm not that bad—”

“No, you just don't like people.”

They wandered all over the island, in and out of stores while Elizabeth kept rejecting

different pieces of glass. Some of them just weren't the right shade, but a lot of them were out of her price range. A small, glass vase came the closest to the color she was looking for but it was double what she wanted to spend the entire time she was in Venice, much less on one purchase.

She could tell Jason looked frustrated by that, but he said nothing. They went to a few museums, walked past the lighthouse and a lot of churches. They had their promised lunch in a beautiful stone building that overlooked the canal, then started to wind their way back to the docks to take a taxi back to Venice to finish out the day at the Christmas Market in San Marco before going to midnight mass.

"I'm sorry you didn't find the glass you were looking for," Jason said. He hesitated. "We can go back to Gino Mazzucato, where they had that vase."

"It's too expensive, and don't give me that look," she told him with a wag of her finger. "It's just glass, Jason." They turned down another small street, and the sun dipped behind one of the buildings, dropping the temperature ten degrees, to the high thirties. She shivered slightly and drew her jacket together, zipping it.

"Yeah, but—"

"Jason, you've paid for the house we're staying in for the next year and you put together that huge art studio on the third floor—" She stepped in front of him, stopping his forward progress. "That's...I could never pay for any of that in a million years. The plane ticket or most of the places we've eaten, either. It's way outside of my budget, and I'm trying hard to be okay with it. Because we both know I'm not here because you can pay for any of that stuff."

"Okay." He furrowed his brow. "So if it doesn't matter to you, then—"

"Because one day, my savings are going to run out and I won't have any money. And you will have to pay for literally everything. That's going to suck, I promise. But until then, I need to be able to pay for my own souvenirs. This isn't the last time we'll be on Murano, right? I mean, we're using the house as a base to store our things so we can go anywhere." She leaned up on her toes to press a kiss against his lips, chapped from the wind. "It's Christmas, Jason. Let me be stubborn about this for a little while longer."

"Okay, but...." Jason sighed, then pulled out a tissue wrapped bundle from his jacket. "Then you're really going to be mad about this, so let's get it over with."

Elizabeth frowned at him, then took it from him. She unwrapped the tissue to reveal a gold necklace. She lifted it into the air, letting the moon and star charms dangle in the air. Both pieces were made from a deep shade of crimson glass, the exact shade she'd been looking for.

“You were with me the whole—” She inhaled sharply. “When did you—where did you?”

“The first day we came, while you were sleeping off the jet lag. I came here to see if I could find the glassblower I’d bought the first piece from.” Jason shrugged. “I picked it up while you were ordering the gelato after lunch.”

“Oh.”

She stared at the necklace for a long moment, wincing. “And then I started lecturing you about money and being stubborn...man, I’m a brat.” She held it out to him. “Can you get the clasp for me?”

“Yeah.” He took the necklace and fastened it around her neck. “So...you’re not mad?”

“No.” Elizabeth turned, pressing her hand over the charm. “No, of course not. I’m sorry. You probably meant it as a Christmas present—”

“It’s okay.”

She kissed him again, lingering this time. “It’s beautiful, and now I’m even more glad I didn’t buy that vase. You listened to me talk about how much I wanted this color, that I wanted something special, and you got it for me. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He kissed her again, breaking away when a few passing tourists on the canal started whistling. “Can we go back to the city now?”

“Yes! I want to find the perfect gifts at the market to send home to Bobbie and the others.” She took his hand, lacing their fingers together, then tugged him towards the dock.

Later that night, after shopping and midnight mass, they returned to the house in San Marco that Jason had rented. Elizabeth stifled a yawn as they went into the foyer. When she headed for the stairs, he pulled her in the other direction, towards the living room where they’d decorated a tree their first week in Venice while Elizabeth had adjusted to the time difference.

He’d helped her with paper chains, and she’d spent some of her precious money on an elaborately painted porcelain bell she’d found in a shop around the corner, so she’d always remember her first Christmas with Jason in Italy.

“I know we talked about this earlier, but like the necklace, I’d already gotten this...” He took an envelope from the cabinet next to the tree and held it out to her. “I wanted to give it to you tonight.”

“Okay, but let me give you something first.” She set the envelope on the coffee table and reached for a gift-wrapped box underneath the tree. “It’s not much, but it...it feels right now. And I have something else I want to say.” They sat on the sofa as Jason unwrapped the gift.

When Jason pulled out a leather jacket nearly identical to the one he’d shed when they’d come in, he furrowed his brow. “It looks like my old jacket—”

“It is—” Elizabeth took the jacket and laid it flat between them so it covered his lap and hers. “I took it from Jake’s when they let me back in the room. After they pulled the body from the harbor.”

Jason inhaled sharply. “Elizabeth—”

“I was doing everything the way I had before. Trying to keep myself together, get my things from the room without losing it because I knew Gia was worried. And then I took this jacket. It’s the only thing of yours I took.”

She ran her fingers over the jacket. “I took it because I knew it smelled like you, and for a while, I could have that. And it would bring me comfort. Lucky left a sweater at my house before he died, and I wore that sweater for months. I used to cry myself to sleep in it. And then one day, I put it on, and it didn’t smell like him anymore.”

Elizabeth looked up at him. “And I was so upset about it, I got dressed up and went to Jake’s to make trouble. I met you. And until I found out Lucky was alive, I thought—it felt like the universe was giving me a sign, you know? Like...I’d waited long enough. Or maybe that Lucky was...telling me that it was okay. To stop missing him so much. To let someone in my life again.”

She bit her lip. “So I took the jacket because it would remind me of you, it would smell like you, and maybe one day, I’d get a sign that it was okay to stop missing you. Even if that felt wrong. Because that’s the worst part about loving someone and losing them a second time—you know the pain ends eventually. You know you can find love again. I think maybe that hurt more than anything else during that week I thought you were dead, the weeks you were missing because I didn’t want anyone else.”

Elizabeth picked up the jacket, brought it to her nose and took in the deep scent of leather and the subtle scent of Jason’s deodorant—now fading after all these months in her closet. “But I don’t need this jacket anymore. You know? It’s like Lucky’s sweater. I never took it out again after that night at Jake’s. I didn’t need to. I don’t need this jacket because I have you.”

She held out the jacket, and he slowly took it from her, carefully folding it and setting it back in the box. “Everything you went through this fall, Elizabeth—”

She cut off his words with a press of two fingers to his lips. “I didn’t give it to you



because I was upset or wanted to remind you about it. I just...it *was* terrible, Jason. But it was terrible for you, too. And holding on to the jacket was like holding on to everything that happened. And maybe that's why it's been hard for me to accept..."

She gestured around them. "All of this, you know? The fancy view, the studio, the money you spent at dinner—the little expenses, the big expenses...I don't know—it's like..." Elizabeth tucked her hair behind her ears and cleared her throat. "You needed to get away from Port Charles. And I'm basically tagging along on your escape. Except it feels like it's been all about me. And...that's not okay. What happened wasn't about me. And I think maybe I made it about me—"

"You—"

"Just like I made Carly all about me. I'm selfish that way—"

"Elizabeth—"

"And you're just trying to give me a Christmas present and I'm *still* making it about me—" Elizabeth huffed. "Honestly, I don't know why you even bother sometimes—"

He put his hand at her base of her neck and tugged her forward to cover his lips with hers, swallowing her complaints. Elizabeth slid her fingers in his hair and let him push back into the cushions, pressing her against the arm of the sofa.

"You know, you still talk too much," Jason teased, when he drew back. She swatted at his shirt as he sat back up, pulling her with him.

"Elizabeth, yeah. I needed to go. Like I needed to go three years ago. But I didn't know *where* I was going. Until you offered to come with me. I wanted to show you Italy. I told you that. And now I get to do that. I mean...." He glanced around the living room. "Maybe this isn't what I had in mind, but I told you—the real estate agent took me seriously when I said money didn't matter. All I wanted was a view for you to draw."

"And it really makes you happy to just...wander wherever I want to go?" Elizabeth pursed her lips. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. You're not selfish. None of what happened a few months ago had anything to do with you being selfish." He hesitated. "As hard as it was, I'm glad you took the time to deal with what you went through. And asked for space you needed. I know it's not always easy for you to put yourself first. The last thing I'd ever call you is selfish."

"Yeah, but—"

"This trip, spending time with you—that's what I needed. I promise, if there's somewhere I want to go, I'll tell you." He held out the envelope. "In fact...will you open this, please?"

Elizabeth slid out an airplane ticket, frowning slightly as she saw boarding passes with their names on it. “What...”

“Tickets to Sicily in January. After a few weeks here, I thought maybe you’d want to see another part of Italy. And I haven’t been there yet. I can change the date if you want—”

“But you want to go to Sicily.” She took a deep breath. “And so do I. I’ve seen the light in Venice. You’re right. It’s not like anywhere else in the world. So now I want to see the lights everywhere. Let’s go to Sicily.”

She set the boarding passes on top of the leather jacket Jason had set on the coffee table, then leaned in to brush her lips against his. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

## Author's Note

I'm sure a lot of you expected me to deal with Brenda when I brought up Alcazar, and in the initial drafts of the story, I had planned to do that. But as I continued to draft and plan, I just realized that in order to set all the pieces up, I was going to need to tell this longer story between Jason and Elizabeth. *Bittersweet* ended up being almost 10 chapters longer than I had envisioned, actually.

While drafting, I realized I could *really* rewrite the summer and fall of 2002, particularly the story that derailed the Liason buildup. I wanted to hit a lot of the same beats (a death is faked, Liz gets lied to, Carly is part of it) while doing something more interesting with Carly's accident earlier in the year other than just using it as a method to push Sonny/Carly back together. In fact, Jason gets shot and returned on the exact dates that Sonny did the same thing in 2002. I also ended up doing more with AJ/drinking and Lucky/Elizabeth closure than I had foreseen. Even Zander had a bigger role.

All of that meant that to continue dealing with Alcazar and Brenda would mean *Bittersweet* would probably be another 20-30 chapters, and I'm not a huge fan of telling stories that long without good reason. Stories should have a narrative that begins and concludes, and *Bittersweet* is Jason and Elizabeth's story.

They're going to travel and return to deal with all the baggage they left behind at some point. Alcazar is also going to regroup and lick his wounds, while Zander is going to have to decide exactly where he stands and where his loyalties lie. The sequel (tentatively titled *Malice*) will be published sometime in 2022.

I really loved returning to this early time period and digging into everyone's stories at this point in their lives. Thank you all for giving Gia and Courtney a chance to earn your love and support. This is the Courtney I used to love and the one I miss, and it's a pleasure to discover her again through writing. I have more planned for both of them as well.

Thank you for your patience and continued support. You guys make all of this worth it. Thank you to Cora and Angela for doing the beta reading, as well as my Patreon supporters who sent over copy edits as well. I literally have the best readers in the universe :)

<3 Melissa

## Coming Next

### **Mad World, Book 3** *October 2020*

The city of Port Charles weathered many scandals and tragedies in 2003 — from the nearly tragic kidnapping of Carly Corinthos and attempted murder of Elizabeth Webber to the serial rapist that stalked the city for months, leaving victims broken and shattered in his wake. The PCPD, having sworn to protect the city, faltered when they learned one of their own was the villain all along.

A few months later, the city tries to recover but they should be careful what they wish for. Ric Lansing still haunts the dreams and memories of the people he damaged — has he really left Port Charles behind for good?

Dante Falconieri breaks under the weight of family secrets and his own weaknesses. Kelsey Joyce wants to find out who murdered her father—no matter what the cost. Carly Corinthos just wants to move on with her life and keep her family safe. And Elizabeth Morgan wants to forget that Ric Lansing ever existed as she awaits the birth of her son.

It's time close the book on this mad, mad, mad world.

### **Fool Me Twice, Book 1** *February 2021*

In October of 2017, the city of Port Charles is stunned when a man with Jason Morgan's old face shows up at the Aurora Media re-launch party claiming to be the infamous enforcer. Though his identity is quickly proven to be true, the city will never be the same.

Drew Cain has a new name and new face, but none of his old memories. He's living Jason's life with Jason's wife, raising Jason's children. Who is he? Where did he come from? Jason Morgan has been gone for five years and nothing is the way he thought it would be. His wife has moved on — with a man she thought was him. His dead son has been miraculously resurrected and another son has been identified as his own.

Jason and Drew must learn to work together to find out who stole their lives and put their families in danger. They're not the only patients with memory issues — if Jason is Patient Six — well, who were the first five?

Someone has to pay for the lives destroyed by the twin swap and memory experimentation, but in Port Charles, sometimes it's hard to tell friend from foe.

### **Damaged** *May 2021*

Set Spring 2014. When AJ Quartermaine is murdered in cold blood, the question isn't who did it — everyone already knows that answer. It's up to the PCPD, under Commissioner Anna Devane, to get justice for AJ's family — for the beleaguered Quartermaine clan that's been decimated in recent years.

Michael has cut ties with the Corinthos clan, devastated by the betrayal of his adopted father, by the secrets of his mother, and the loss of the father he'd only begun to love. Monica is eager to welcome him into the family—he's all that she has left since she's buried all four of her children.

Or so she thinks.

Off the coast of Greece, Victor Cassadine hands Robin Scorpio a shocking assignment — wake Jason Morgan from the coma he's been in for the last five years. If she fails, she'll forfeit Jason's life and her own, never to return to her husband and daughter. If she succeeds — Jason can go home to take his life back from the con artist wearing his face—the man who went off the pier in 2012.

And maybe, just maybe, Victor will let Jason return with the other secret resident of Cassadine Island.

### **For the Broken Girl, Book 2** *September 2021*

Elizabeth Webber has never been happier. She's finally walked away from her toxic marriage and filed for divorce. She's working at a job she loves, raising the perfect little boy, enjoying her friends and family, and reveling in the love a man who loves every single part of her—even her flaws. With her estranged husband in a thirty-day rehab, Elizabeth can focus on herself for a change.

Then Lucky returns, sober and begging for another chance. His friends and family are eager to blame the drugs for his abuse and violence, and turn on Elizabeth for not being more understanding. The PCPD don't respect her restraining order and make excuses when Lucky violates it.

Elizabeth doesn't want to look back anymore—she's finally living a life without regrets and planning a new future. She's willing to pay any price to protect it—and it just might cost her everything.