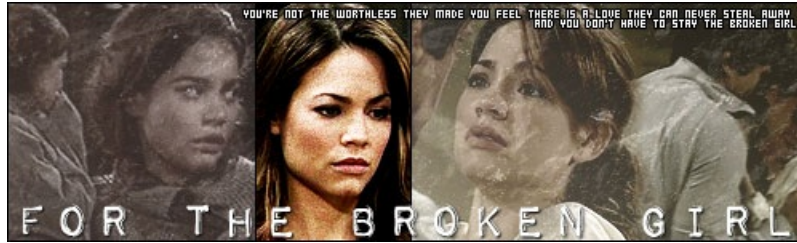


*To Angela for always stopping everything and reading whatever nonsense I had
written that day. I could not have done this without you.*

To J and A, for living through this, for trusting me, and for getting out and being free.



*Which mask will you wear today
How about the one with the pretty smile
To you it's just another day
In a life you haven't lived in quite awhile*

Inspiration

I've always wanted to rewrite the 2006 Lucky Drug Addiction/Liason reconnection so that it focused more on Elizabeth as a character and the toxicity of the LL2 relationship at that point. I've always felt that the show copped out and made drugs the entire problem between them, and Elizabeth ended up as the bad guy when Lucky was literally the worst. A few years ago, I had a plot idea that eventually morphed into this story.

Timeline

This picks just after virus storyline of 2006. I kept most things the same, except that Lucky wasn't kidnapped and taken to the Markaam Islands. He was instead injured in a car accident in Port Charles, re-aggravating the back injury he'd suffered in November as part of the train accident. I also changed the way Sam and Alexis deal with their family connection — Alexis already believes the daughter she gave up was missing, and Sam's search is a lot faster. For more, the search isn't important so much as what happens after Sam knows.

Media

Soundtrack: [YouTube](#) | [Spotify](#)

Playlist: [Revising Broken Girl](#), a vlog series.

Prologue

*It's hard to admit that
Everything just takes me back
To when you were there
To when you were there
And a part of me keeps holding on
Just in case it hasn't gone
I guess I still care
Do you still care?
- When We Were Young*

Monday, March 6, 2006

General Hospital: Nurse's Station, Pediatrics Floor

It had been just over a week since the World Health Organization lifted the quarantine placed on General Hospital.

Port Charles had turned the page on the deadly encephalitis epidemic that had raged within its town limits for nearly three weeks. It had taken the lives of more than sixty residents, including several doctors, nurses, and orderlies that had risked their lives to care for the sick and dying. Nearly everyone in Port Charles had lost someone or knew someone that had suffered a loss.

Elizabeth Spencer walked beneath a memorial wreath hanging on the wall by elevators, commemorating the student nurse assigned to Pediatrics that had died in the epidemic. She flashed a smile at one of her colleagues, Nadine Crowell, another student nurse who was looking at the wreath and the photograph hanging beneath it. "How are you holding up?"

"Well enough," Nadine said with a sigh as she reached for a chart. "Regina's parents left yesterday. They're taking her home to Buffalo for a funeral. I'm going to try to get a few days, but..." She offered Elizabeth a hesitant smile. "A lot of people are asking for time off for a funeral right now."

"Yeah." Elizabeth tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "I went to the last memorial service yesterday," she said. "For Courtney Matthews," she added when Nadine

looked at her, slightly mystified. “She’s the one that had the baby before she died?”

“Oh, right. Your brother-in-law’s...” Nadine pursed her lips and squinted her eyes. Still, there was no word really to describe the relationship between Nikolas Cassadine and Courtney, as it had begun while Nikolas was still married to Elizabeth’s best friend. “How is he?”

“He left for Greece this morning. He needed to get away,” Elizabeth said. “He went with Lucky’s sister, Lulu.” She tapped her pen against a chart. “I should call Bobbie, see how she and Lucas are doing.”

“Yeah,” Nadine began as an intern stalked into the hub to reach for a chart. He wasn’t paying attention as he grabbed it, knocking an entire stack to the floor. “Hey, watch it—”

“*You* watch it!” the intern snapped. “I’m covering twice as many students—” He looked at Elizabeth, his cheeks flushed. “You know, your best friend called out. *Again.*”

“Emily?” Elizabeth said. “What—”

“Must be nice to be the daughter of the chief of staff,” the intern snarled before taking the chart he’d come for and storming away. Nadine sighed and knelt down to clean up the rest of the charts.

Elizabeth shook her head and reached into her pocket for her cell phone. “I’m going to text her. Something must be wrong for her to have called out like this—I just saw her yesterday at the memorial—” She looked at Nadine, then frowned. “What? You’re making a face.”

“I *will* say it’s the third shift that she’s missed since the quarantine lifted,” Nadine admitted. “I thought maybe she was just sick or tired. I mean, we all are—”

“Yeah, but—” Elizabeth sighed, closed her phone. “Well, I’ll check in with her. See what’s up.”

The elevator doors slid open, and Jason Morgan stepped out. Elizabeth lifted her brows at seeing Emily’s brother on her floor. He wasn’t a regular visitor to General Hospital, and even less so to the pediatrics floor. “Hey,” she said as he walked up to the counter. “Are you looking for Emily? She’s not here.”

Jason furrowed his brow, shook his head. “She’s supposed to meet me here—” His

phone buzzed at that point, and he pulled it out of the pocket of his leather coat. He grimaced as he read a text message. “And—you’re right. Emily just told me she’s not here.”

“Yeah, I guess it was last minute,” Elizabeth said with a shrug. She picked up a chart, then stopped and sighed. “How’s Sam?” she asked, having remembered that his fiancée, Sam McCall, had been ill with the virus and lost a brother to the illness. “I didn’t want to ask if she was having a memorial for her brother, but—”

“Oh.” Jason cleared his throat. “Uh, she’s okay,” he said. “We didn’t—Danny’s not from Port Charles. So we went to Hawaii to spread his ashes.” He looked away. “But, uh, I know she said she wanted to thank you. I guess...you were Danny’s nurse?”

“Yeah,” Elizabeth said with a wistful smile. “He was really sweet, and I—” She took a deep breath. “We worked really hard, but we just couldn’t—” Her throat felt tight. “I’m just glad we didn’t lose more. Thank God you and Carly got the vaccine here.”

“Yeah. Well, I wish I’d been faster. I wish we’d saved Danny.”

Elizabeth opened her mouth to say something else, but then she heard it. A slight creak—the sound of a wheel that needed a spray of WD-40—then the footsteps. She looked past Jason to see the short bald man rolling his janitorial cart down the hallway towards them. He was a slight man, his olive skin heavily tattooed, his dark eyes already scanning the halls and area around him.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and forced a smile on her face. “Um, if you—” Her fingers shook as she reached for a pen as the custodian drew closer. “If you talk to Emily—”

“Are you okay—” Jason stopped as he noticed the custodian drawing towards them. His face tightened as Manny Ruiz flashed them both a smile and offered Jason a two-fingered salute. Then he slowly wheeled the cart past them, disappearing down another hallway.

“I hate him,” Nadine said as she came up behind Elizabeth, offered her fellow nurse a squeeze on the arm in support. “Doesn’t it always feel like he’s watching you?”

“Yeah,” Elizabeth said faintly as she looked to where Manny had disappeared. “Yeah, it does.”

Manny Ruiz had wreaked havoc on Port Charles for months before his capture at Christmas. He was one of Jason and Sonny’s rivals from Miami who had arrived after

the slaughter of his father and brother at the hands of Lorenzo Alcazar. He'd engineered a train accident that had killed dozens of Port Charles residents, injuring more than a hundred—including Elizabeth's husband. Then, he had held the OR at gunpoint to stop them from saving Jason's life that December.

And of course, Elizabeth had her own experience with the lunatic.

Last October, he'd grabbed Elizabeth from the hospital, taken her hostage, and forced her to tend to wounds he'd received. She'd managed to escape and put it behind her—but Manny Ruiz had stalked her nightmares for months.

Now, he worked at General Hospital as a custodian, thanks to Alexis Davis and Ric Lansing. They had argued Manny wasn't responsible for his actions due to a brain tumor on his frontal lobe. As if Manny's particular brand of violence and sadistic torment could be excused so easily.

"That's why I was meeting with Emily," Jason said. "We were—I know he started here in January, but that was right before everyone got sick, and he wasn't here during the quarantine. I didn't have a chance to do anything—" He squinted at her. "Elizabeth, are you okay?" he repeated.

She blinked at him, realized that she was still looking down the hall—as if making sure Manny was really gone.

"I'm fine," Elizabeth said finally. "Um, yeah, I think Emily said you were going to talk to Alan, try to convince him to fire Manny—" She wiggled her shoulders. "I'm sorry, I just—I *hate* him."

"Yeah, I get that." Jason tipped his head. "You see him a lot?"

"All the time," Nadine muttered. She flushed when they looked at her. "Sorry. None of my business. But he's always pushing that stupid cart passed the nurse's station. I get it, we're in the middle of everything, but—" She picked up her charts. "I hate him," she said. Then left the nurse's station to check on a patient.

"Does he hang around Emily a lot?" Jason asked, looking back at Elizabeth.

"I—" Elizabeth shook her head. "No. I mean, I don't know. Maybe he does. She and I haven't worked the same shift in a while—" She shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I'm just—I feel like he's *always* there." She chewed on her bottom lip. "I guess you weren't able to get Alan to fire him?"

“It’s not up to him, he said. Ruiz is here on some sort of community outreach, and the board is being stubborn. He’s going to keep working, but—” Jason scratched the edge of his eyebrow with his thumb. “Can you—is there somewhere we can talk?”

“Um, sure.” Elizabeth stepped out of the station. It was one thing to talk in public about a common threat, or even just to work together during a crisis like they had during the epidemic. She’d helped him, and Carly get the vaccine into the hospital when the authorities had refused to let him in, but somehow that felt different.

There was something uncomfortable about leading Jason into an empty conference room and closing the door behind her—the first time they’d been alone together since —

She furrowed her brow, staring at the cheap wood of the door. She couldn’t quite remember—maybe it had been here at the chapel, the night Emily had nearly died more than two years ago. Elizabeth shook her head and squared her shoulders. It didn’t matter if she and Jason were alone together, and it was silly to even think it did.

She turned to face him. “What’s up?”

“Alan is hiring two of my guys as orderlies,” Jason told her. “One to follow Manny around, and the other here on the Pediatrics floor because of Emily. But—you said you think Manny is watching *you*. And that other nurse—she said it’s like he’s always at the nurse’s station. Is she right? *Do* you think Manny’s watching you?”

“No,” Elizabeth said immediately. “Of course not. There’s no reason—” She folded her arms, looked at the floor. “I would never—I don’t matter—”

“Elizabeth.”

His quiet, reassuring tone gave her the courage to look up, to meet his eyes. He didn’t look irritated or annoyed. Just concerned. “I don’t think he’s watching me,” Elizabeth repeated. “Which is different than saying it *feels* like he is. I think I’m just being sensitive about it. I mean, since last October, when he grabbed me from the hospital —”

Jason held up a hand, and she stopped talking. “I’d forgotten,” he said quietly. “Some of the memories from before the surgery—” He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. When Lucky came to tell me and Sam, to look for Manny, I didn’t know—” He swallowed. “I didn’t realize I knew you.”

I didn't realize I knew you.

She let his words roll around in her head because, man, it was such a simple thing to say. And it was true. But it didn't feel like enough.

She shook her head. She wasn't doing this. "Oh. Well, yeah, I knew that. And it's okay. I mean, he just wanted me to take care of his wound. And obviously, it all worked out. Anyway, like I said, it's just—it brings back a lot. To see Manny—I had —" She sighed, stared at her fingers. At her wedding ring. "I had some nightmares. It all felt like it got mixed up with...other things."

"I'm sorry."

Elizabeth met his eyes, realized he had made the connection to what she hadn't wanted to say. That the way Manny had grabbed her, threatened her—that it had made her think about her rape. "I'm glad you're going to have someone watching him at the hospital," Elizabeth said finally. "Lucky said the PCPD couldn't do anything about it. Officially, the charges against Manny have been dropped. Even mine. So..." She flashed him a bright smile that she hoped looked more confident than she felt. "You're watching him."

"Yeah, but you tell me if you think he's paying too much attention to you, okay? Or anyone—" Jason grimaced and shook his head. "Never mind. I don't want you worried about him any more than you need to be."

"No—no, if I see Manny watching someone—I mean, the way he went after Sam and—I *want* to help. It'll make me feel better—"

"You are *not* going to help," Jason cut in sharply. "Don't get involved. Stay safe."

Safe. She scowled. "Oh, you mean, safe at the hospital? Where Manny grabbed me in the first place? Listen, if I see Manny hurting someone, what do you expect me to do? If he starts following someone around, do you think I'm just going to ignore it?"

"No, that would be too easy," he muttered. He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Fine. Fine," he repeated. "If you see something, then you can tell me. Or Lucky, I guess. I don't want to make problems for you. But do *not* get involved."

"I won't."

"I mean it, Elizabeth. Stay away from him."

Elizabeth arched her brow, folded her arms, and glared at him. “How dumb do you think I am?”

“I think that you’re incredibly brave and willing to put your life on the line to save someone else,” Jason said, with an irritated tone that made it sound less like a compliment. “So don’t.”

“If I see something, I’ll tell you.” When he just stared at her because apparently, he knew her better than she remembered, she sighed. “But you can’t be everywhere, Jason. You’re not Superman.”

“Elizabeth—”

“If I see him following someone or just doing something suspicious, I will call you.” She hesitated. “I, uh, don’t have your number. You—” Her cheeks flushed. “You changed it.”

“I had—” Jason took out his phone, went through his contacts, then paused. “I didn’t realize,” he said after a long moment. “I guess—”

“You haven’t needed to get in touch with me,” Elizabeth said with a nod. No point in getting depressed over it. “Yeah. I didn’t know either. Until we were in the middle of the virus, and I wanted to—” She shook her head. “Anyway. I’ll just tell Emily or something—”

“No—” He held out his phone. “Put your number in. I’ll save it now. And then I’ll call you, and you save mine.”

Their fingers brushed as she took the phone, and she nearly fumbled. But she pulled herself together, typed in her number, then pressed send. Her phone rang in her pocket. She handed his phone back to him. Quietly, they both saved each other’s contact information.

“Thank you for letting me know that you’ll have guys here. And when I find Emily, I’m sure she’ll feel safer, too. I should get back to work—”

“Actually—” Jason grimaced. “I was going to ask Emily if she could do me a favor, but—she’s not here. And I’d rather get it done as soon as possible. Would you mind—”

“Sure.” Elizabeth folded her arms and offered him a smile. “What’s up? What do you need?”

“I need a DNA test run,” Jason said after a long moment. “Without any names attached. Or anyone knowing. Is...” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Is that something you’d be willing to do? If you can’t—I mean, I know you’re married. To a cop,” he added as if it hadn’t been implied in the first half of the statement. “Or it might be against hospital rules—”

“It probably is,” Elizabeth admitted. “Patrick owes me a favor, and he won’t ask questions. I promise. You can—” She met Jason’s eyes, swallowed hard. “You can trust me.”

“I always could,” Jason said. He cleared his throat. “I’ll get you the samples then.” He started for the door, then turned back. “Thanks.”

“Any time.”

Chapter One

*Which mask will you wear today
How about the one with the pretty smile
To you it's just another day
In a life you haven't lived in quite awhile
Everybody knows your name
But they don't know who you are
But to them it's just a game
And I think it's gone too far*
- Just Another Name, Lifehouse

Tuesday, March 14, 2006

General Hospital: Nurse's Station

Two weeks later, Elizabeth found herself again looking at the black crepe memorial to Regina Johnson that was still up. Every time she walked past it, she couldn't help but think about those long, terrifying weeks they'd been locked in General Hospital. They'd been unable to leave, unable to see their own families, risking their lives to save others.

Elizabeth's life hadn't been the same since the virus had hit. Her husband had survived, but he might never be the same. A fact that haunted her every day she woke up and saw he was still in pain, still not able to walk and move freely.

"Hey."

Elizabeth blinked as Nadine joined her in the nurse's station, a stack of medical charts in her arms. She raised her brows at Elizabeth. "You okay? You looked a bit distracted."

"Yeah." She took a deep breath. "I'm fine. Do you need help with those charts?"

"Oh, what, you want to help me before you abandon us for the glamorous world of surgery?" Nadine rolled her eyes. "I mean, I don't know why you think it's cool to leave us like this—"

"I'll miss the patients," Elizabeth admitted. She liked working with kids, feeling

connected to them, and taking care of them until they were released. Working as a surgical nurse meant she'd lose some of that connection, but... "I can't turn down the hours. I'll be able to tuck Cameron in nearly every night—"

"I know, I know. But it doesn't mean I can't complain—" Nadine's voice dropped out as they heard the creak of the janitor's cart.

Manny smiled at them as he wheeled his cart past them down another hall. When he'd disappeared, Nadine exhaled slowly, pressing a hand to her chest.

"How is he *still* a thing, I ask you?" she grumbled.

"I know," Elizabeth murmured. "He's hurt so many people." She'd hoped that Manny would be gone by now. Jason's men were working at GH now, and she saw the one that hung out on the Pediatrics floor every so often. She felt mildly safer, but it didn't change the fact that it felt like they had a ticking bomb stalking their halls.

The last two weeks hadn't reassured her that the surgery had cured Manny of his violent tendencies, only that they were all living on borrowed time.

Waiting for Manny to make his move.

"You know, you'd *think* living in a town full of mobsters, they'd be able to take care of *one* crazy ass psycho," Nadine complained, then she winced, looking at Elizabeth. "Oh. Yeah. Right. Shouldn't say that to a cop's wife."

"Hey, *this* cop's wife watched a violent psycho get turned loose by the system because a tumor made him do it." Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "The system doesn't solve all our problems."

She accepted a stack of envelopes from a courier with a sigh, then sorted the test results and memos. She stopped when she saw Patrick's name on one of the envelopes with a patient number she recognized. Elizabeth ran her fingers over it, remembering the favor Jason had asked of her.

"Hey, Nadine, do you mind covering for me? I have to go make a call."

"Sure. You okay?"

"Yeah, just have to call a patient about some test results." She pocketed the envelope and headed for the locker room.

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

“Paulie, I’ll have...I’m not saying no, okay? I just have to think about it.”

Sam McCall sighed and set the phone back onto the receiver before checking off a name on the list she’d scrawled using a legal pad she’d found stashed in his desk. It had been a while since she’d stretched her research muscles. She’d forgotten how much fun it was to put together a profile on a mark — even if she was treating herself like the mark.

Jason hadn’t been happy when Sam made it clear she wasn’t going to leave her past alone. Or maybe he hadn’t been all that happy that she was planning to contact a lot of her father’s buddies from past jobs. Sam knew Jason accepted her past as a con artist, but she definitely knew he wouldn’t be happy if that past became the present.

The man in question emerged from the kitchen where he’d been doing dishes. She wrinkled her nose — she would never understand the domestic side of him. When you had as much money as Jason Morgan, you should never have to lift a finger.

“Any luck?” Jason asked as he leaned against the arm of the sofa, his head tilted to the side.

“No one knows why Cody McCall decided to adopt a baby girl all by himself twenty-six years ago,” Sam offered with a sigh. “But the general consensus is that he needed a cover for something he was pulling and kids...are good. Dad liked to target single women, and they’re suckers for a guy with a baby.”

Jason frowned at that. “Target them how?”

“Clean out bank accounts, use them for a place to stay.” Sam got to her feet, shrugging. “Could be anything. Sometimes, if the mark was good, he’d stay a year. Go to work at the company she owned — he *loved* powerful women.” She didn’t realize she was grinning as she spoke—

But Jason did. He grimaced, then shook his head, and listened as Sam continued to describe her childhood with Cody McCall and the games he’d run.

“You know, the women of the eighties loved to prove they didn’t need a man or a kid—they never saw Dad coming. He was pretty good at it for a long time, and Mom didn’t care as long as the checks kept coming.” Sam shrugged. “She wasn’t much of a mother, you already know that. But those were the good years. Dad was pretty

disappointed when Danny...”

The smile faded from her face. “Danny couldn’t go out on the road,” she said finally. “So he took me instead.”

She looked over to find him studying her, squinting the way someone might look at an insect. “*Don’t* make that face. I had a good childhood, okay? My father...he mostly loved me. And Mom didn’t care much as long as I wasn’t around. Makes sense now that I know she wasn’t my biological mother.”

“I guess I just...” Jason shrugged, straightened. “I guess I thought you were happy to have that behind you.”

“I am,” Sam insisted. She mostly was, anyway. Sometimes she missed the rush, but— “It has its perks, but it’s stressful, okay? And technology made some of the old games harder.” She bit her lip. “But...the last guy I talked to? He used to run real estate scams with my dad after I left him. And...”

“And what?” Jason pressed when Sam didn’t continue speaking.

“He said he has a spot open. A short gig, really.” She shrugged. “Maybe two days. Posing as a client to make the mark more comfortable.”

“And he wants...you?” Jason lifted his brows. She tensed at the way his tone changed.

“Yeah, this kind of stuff used to be my bread and butter when I was setting up the longer cons,” Sam told him. She tossed her hair back and lifted her chin, nearly defiant now. “It’s not easy to research a rich guy and figure out how to take him for everything he has. I had to pay the bills between gigs.”

He exhaled slowly. “You just said that you were happy to be done with it—”

“This is different. Paulie’s an old friend, and he’s in a pinch.” Sam chewed her lip. “It wouldn’t be for another week. Maybe two. He’s still putting some things together, but his usual girl can’t make it. And he might remember more about my Dad if I do this for him.”

“You...” Jason shook his head. “Sam, what about...” He gestured around them. “Figuring out who arranged your adoption? You said you were done with this.”

“I am. It’s just a one-time thing.” Sam planted her hands on her hips, narrowing her

eyes. “What are you getting so pissy about, anyway? You walk out that door and commit worse crimes than I ever did. What, you get to be the criminal, and I have to stay here like Suzy homemaker?”

“No, but—” Jason pressed his lips together. “I’m just surprised you want to go back, even temporarily. I know you’re going through a lot—”

“Going through a lot—” Sam rolled her eyes. “Yeah, okay. My brother—the last piece of family I had in this world—died. I found out my entire life was a lie because I’m apparently a piece of trash some girl dropped on the black market. She wanted me to disappear so much that someone set fire to any trail I might have used to find her. *None* of that has anything to do with wanting to do a favor for an old friend, Jason.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, neither really willing to back down. Jason hadn’t actually forbidden her from doing the job. He hadn’t really said anything at all that suggested he didn’t want her to do it—but Sam knew how to read him. He was pissed that she was thinking of dipping her toe back in the water and couldn’t figure out how to make her stop.

“This is something I’m good at,” Sam continued. “You know I haven’t been in the game since I came to Port Charles.” Not really anyway. Not since Sonny. Mostly.

She chewed on the inside of her cheek. Maybe those first few weeks she’d stayed with Jason, she’d played him a bit. But it wasn’t the same. That had been about survival. “I can make some quick cash, have something to do, and get my mind off all the crap I’m going through, okay?”

“Sam, listen—” Jason hesitated, then grimaced as his phone rang. He dug it out of his back pocket and answered. “Yeah? Oh.” He looked at Sam, and his face went blank. “Yeah, okay. No, no, I’ll come to you. I’ll be there in ten, maybe fifteen minutes.”

He closed his phone. “I’m sorry. Something came up. I need to go take care of this.”

She didn’t bother to ask him what was up — he wouldn’t answer her anyway. “Fine.”

He brushed a kiss on her cheek, then left. Sam scowled after him — what right did he have to make her feel guilty about doing the *one* thing she was good at? She’d been one of the best cons in the business and would probably have been able to retire to some sort of private island if she hadn’t given it up for him.

Not that he’d ever asked her to, but man, it was so fucking *typical* of a guy to have a double standard. *He* could go on a crime spree, but the minute *Sam* wanted to pull

her own job, he got all pissy about it.

“Men,” she muttered before calling Paulie back. She’d do the job. It’d be a cold day in hell before Sam McCall was pushed around by some guy—even if she’d promised to marry him.

General Hospital: Nurse’s Station

When the elevator doors buzzed open on their floor, Elizabeth glanced up and frowned when she saw her husband stepping off. Lucky Spencer winced as he leaned on the cane he’d been forced to use after being released from the hospital two weeks earlier.

He’d injured his back twice in the last six months—the first after the train accident caused by Manny Ruiz. Lucky had fought his way back to full health and active duty, only to be stricken with the encephalitis virus that nearly killed him. He’d passed out while driving, and the resulting car crash had re-injured his back.

He was back on disability and partial desk duty at the PCPD, and Elizabeth was hoping that his appointment with Patrick Drake would bring good news. Lucky was not a good patient, having spent way too much of the last year in General Hospital. He was impatient and short-tempered on his best day.

“Hey. You’re not done with your appointment already, are you?”

“No, I just...” Lucky grimaced as he stepped up to the station. “I just wanted to make sure you were still getting off work at six. I can’t pick Cameron up at daycare, but he can stay there until you’re done, right?”

Elizabeth hesitated, frowned. “Yeah, but they’re going to charge me for the overtime—what’s wrong? Do they need you at work or something?”

“They never *need* me at work,” Lucky said flatly. He seemed to hear the irritation and snap in his voice and sighed. “Sorry, it’s just...I’m tired. And my back hurts. There’s not a lot of call for a crippled cop right now.”

“But you’ll be back on your feet in no time,” Elizabeth said with a bright smile. “You’ll have your physical with Patrick, he’ll get your return date sorted and...all of this will just...” With a confidence she really didn’t feel, she finished, “it’ll just be a bad memory soon.”

“Yeah, I hope so. Anyway, can Cameron stay until six? I was able to get a therapy

session scheduled after my appointment, and every bit helps.”

She didn’t want to argue with him about it, even though staying late meant Elizabeth would have to find an extra hundred dollars at the end of the week. “Yeah, um, sure. That’ll be fine. I’d ask Gram, but she’s got dinner tonight with some old friends.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you at home.” He brushed a kiss against her cheek. “I’d better head down to Patrick’s office.”

The universe was on her side—no sooner had one set of elevator doors closed on her husband’s face than the second set of doors opened on another face — one that Lucky would not have been thrilled to see.

Jason strode towards the nurse’s station. “Hey. I came as soon as I could. You said the test results were in?”

“Yeah.” She reached under the counter to retrieve the envelope and held it out to him. He didn’t take them. She tipped her head. “You okay?”

“Uh, yeah. I guess...”

Jason shifted, seemingly restless on his feet, and her concern grew. Elizabeth couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen Jason nervous. She hadn’t let herself wonder too much about the test he’d asked to run, but now she wondered exactly what kind of trouble he was in, and how a DNA test played into it.

She looked at her co-worker. “Nadine, I’m just about done here. Can you do these last two charts, and I’ll owe you forever?”

Nadine rolled her eyes but accepted the folders Elizabeth handed her. “Oh, sure, make more work for me when you’re abandoning me.” She smirked at Jason. “Lucky you found her here at all since she’s about to leave us forever.”

Jason furrowed his brow. “Wait, what?”

“Oh, stop.” To Jason, Elizabeth said, “Nadine is just being dramatic. This is my last shift working this floor.” She stepped down from the station, the results in her hand. “Come on, we’ll go find a conference room or something.”

Before she could take him away, Manny shuffled past them, slowly wheeling his cart.

He offered them a smile before stepping onto the elevators.

When the door had closed, Jason turned back to her. "It's been a few weeks since my guys started. How is it going?"

Elizabeth grimaced. "Okay, I guess. He's still creepy, and I still feel like he's around too much, but I feel better knowing someone is watching him."

"Yeah, well, remember you promised not to help," Jason said. "If you see something —"

"Call you and do nothing, yeah, yeah." She sighed. "Come on. You probably want to see the results."

"So, you're moving floors?" Jason asked as she led him down a hallway and into an empty room with a conference table. Elizabeth switched on the lights.

"Yeah, I'm moving up to surgery tomorrow. Patrick and Monica are going to help me get the hours I need to certify as a surgical nurse." Elizabeth shrugged but couldn't fight her smile. "It was Bobbie's idea, after the quarantine, I mean. She said Alan was impressed with—anyway." She took a deep breath, held out the envelope. "Here you go."

"Yeah." Jason took the envelope, stared at it. "Uh, that's great. I mean, is it a promotion?"

"Oh." Elizabeth furrowed her brow. "I guess, sort of. I get better hours. Same pay, but I'll be able to put Cameron down most nights—" She pursed her lips. "Jason, you don't have to tell me anything, but...it's almost as if you're procrastinating. I've never known you to do that."

"Yeah. I know." And still...he didn't open them. "You said Patrick wasn't going to ask questions?"

"He said as long as it wasn't illegal, he was happy to do me a favor. I'm not asking questions, either, Jason, but..." She nodded at it. "I could open it if you want. There are no names—"

"No, I'm being—" He shook his head and ripped the envelope open. He pulled out the thin white piece of paper and unfolded it. As his eyes scanned the results, his shoulders slumped, and he closed his eyes. "Damn it."

“I guess it wasn’t the news you wanted?” Elizabeth asked. “Sorry.” She shook her head. “I promised not to ask questions—”

“No, it’s—” Jason dragged out a chair and sat down, looking more exhausted than he’d ever looked before—except maybe the time he’d been recovering from a bullet wound. He stared at the envelope and said nothing.

She waited. She knew he wasn’t the type to really open up—he never had been. Even when they’d objectively been friends, he’d always closed off what he was really thinking. She remembered back when he’d been shot and hiding in her studio—she hadn’t known until Carly turned up pregnant by Sonny why Jason had been angry with them.

Elizabeth pressed her lips together, nodded. Some things would never change. “Well, you have the results. I should get back to work—” She turned, put her hand on the doorknob.

“It’s a maternity test.”

He said the words so quietly she nearly missed them. Elizabeth turned back to look at him, but he was still staring at the paper in his hands.

“Oh.” Elizabeth pressed her lips together, shook her head. “Okay. I thought—” When Jason had wanted a DNA test, she’d hadn’t really known what to think. But he’d asked her for a favor, and she’d been curious enough—and secretly pleased he still trusted her enough to ask for something like this—to agree without asking questions.

“Yeah, I know. You thought it was a paternity test.” He set the paper on the table. He fell silent again. Then— “I don’t know what to do.”

Elizabeth raised her brows, a bit stunned. It was so rare that Jason admitted anything to her, much less—

She should tell him to call Emily. To go talk to Carly. Or Sonny. Or Sam. Someone who mattered to him. Who he trusted.

Who he’d let into his life instead of pushed away.

But she didn’t do any of that. Instead, she pulled out the chair next to him and sat down. “You know—whatever you tell me—it won’t leave this room. You can trust me.”

He looked up, then met her eyes. “I know that. That’s why I asked you to—” Jason exhaled slowly. “But this isn’t my secret.”

“If it’s a maternity test,” Elizabeth said slowly, drawing out the words, “then it’s probably for Carly or Sam. You should talk to them, Jason.”

“She doesn’t know—” Jason grimaced, looked away. “She doesn’t know I did this. That I ran the test. I didn’t think—” He pressed his lips together, looked back at the results. “I don’t know. I think maybe I was expecting them to come back negative. And then it would just be something I’d thought. I didn’t—I didn’t expect it to be true.”

“Ah.” Elizabeth leaned back in her chair, folding her arms. “So now it’s your secret, too, but you don’t want it to be.” She got to her feet. “Well, you know how to keep secrets, Jason. That’s something you’re good at it.”

Some things would *never* change.

“If Sam knew this,” Jason said, hesitantly, stopping her again as she started to leave. “If Sam knew this, it would be bad.”

Elizabeth pursed her lips. “Look, Jason, clearly you’re struggling with this. You did something behind Sam’s back, and now you know something she doesn’t. If you don’t want to talk to me about it, that’s fine. But—”

“I’m sorry,” Jason said. He shook his head. “You’re right. I just—I shouldn’t have done this,” he realized. “But now I have. And I don’t know what to do.”

“You tell her,” Elizabeth said flatly.

“I can’t—”

“Why?” she demanded, feeling more irritated than she had any right to. It was always the same damn conversation with Jason. “If it’s not about business, then what’s the big deal?”

Jason hesitated and looked at her. “After Danny died...Sam found out she was adopted.”

“Oh,” Elizabeth repeated. She sat back down. “That was probably rough.”

“Yeah, it—” Jason leaned back, staring at the paper. “She’s—she’s not taking it well. Danny was the only family she had left. And she had no idea. They never said anything.”

“I’m sorry—”

“We managed to track her adoption down to Maine and—” Jason cleared his throat. “Well, we got the rest of the information, but it was a fake identity. Sam was born in a clinic that shut down shortly afterward and adopted through an agency that only ever existed on paper. Her original birth certificate, uh, listed a woman named Natasha Davis as her mother.”

“Natasha Davis.” Elizabeth blinked. “Something about that...I don’t know. It sounds *familiar*.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. And then I remembered Alexis—”

“Davis,” Elizabeth murmured. “She was born—”

“Natasha Cassadine. And would have been sixteen the year Sam was born.”

General Hospital: Patrick Drake’s Office

“Have a seat.”

Lucky Spencer grimaced as the tall, dark-haired doctor gestured at the seat in front of his desk. “Do I have to? Can’t we just get this over with?”

“No,” Patrick Drake told him as he took his own seat. When Lucky had reluctantly lowered himself into the chair, Patrick opened Lucky’s file. “I’m sorry it’s taken a little bit of time to get this appointment in. I, uh...” He cleared his throat. “Tony had a lot of patients.”

“Yeah, yeah. Well, how many of *them* have you kept from going back to work?” Lucky snapped. He leaned back in the chair, folding his arms. He ignored the sharp pain in his back. “Just confirm what Tony said — I can go back to work next week—”

“Tony wasn’t able to conduct a full exam before he fell ill,” Patrick interrupted. “I have. I’ve seen the MRI and X-rays. I performed the initial surgery when you were brought in after the car accident—”

“It wasn’t *that* bad,” Lucky complained. “I just...I didn’t know I was sick—I just ran into the telephone pole—”

“At fifty miles an hour,” Patrick said dryly. “Look, I get it. You want to get back on active duty. I know you’ve been in physical therapy and on the desk since the train crash. But the fact is, Lucky, you aggravated your injury in the car accident.”

He’d known this was coming. Considering his back hurt as much today as it had the day Lucky had been discharged the first time back in December, he wasn’t too surprised. “So, fine. I can’t go back next week. When?”

“I don’t know. It took three months to recuperate last time.” Patrick tapped his pencil against the file. “I’m not comfortable giving you an exact date, but I understand for insurance purposes, you need it—”

“If I’m out on disability much longer, I might not be able to get back,” Lucky growled. “It’s already been three months, Drake. What? You telling me it’s another three?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. We’re not going to know that, Lucky, until we come up with a plan of action. You might need another surgery. I’m concerned that the disc you ruptured isn’t fully healed, and the MRI is backing me up.”

“I’m not having another surgery—” Lucky shifted with a grimace. “I’m almost at my lifetime cap on my insurance, okay? I was in the hospital last year, even before the first accident.”

Patrick exhaled slowly. “Ah, I thought that might be it. Look, we’ll try to avoid surgery. If I don’t see some good results in the next MRI or if you can’t get a decent range of motion in your next battery of physical tests, you might never get back on active duty.”

“Fine. Fine. So what? More therapy? More pills? I’m almost out of my last prescription, the one you wrote when I got released. And I don’t have any refills left.”

“No refills—Are you kidding—” Patrick swallowed hard. “Okay, if you’re almost out of the original *and* the refill I prescribed, then we need to talk about pain management. You’ve been on the steady dosage of oxycontin since November. That’s a long time—”

“What’s your point?” Lucky snapped. His fingers tightened around the grip of the chair. “You calling me a drug addict?”

“No.” Patrick’s voice was clipped. “I’m saying that if it’s not helping you manage the

pain, we'll need to look into other things. I'm not going to refill the prescription, Lucky. Four months of oxycontin is enough—"

"I got re-injured, didn't I?"

"I know. Which is why I wrote you a prescription that should have lasted six weeks. Not three. I'm not writing you another one. Not for at least three more weeks. I can refer you to the pain management clinic—"

"Fuck that." Lucky hurled himself out of the chair. "I'm a goddamn cop. I was injured in the line of duty, and you're treating me like some scumbag druggie—" He shook his head. "I want another doctor."

"I'm the only neurosurgeon at the hospital," Patrick snapped. "I took over Tony's neurology patients because the hospital is short-staffed. I'm the best in the state—"

"Tony Jones was—"

"Fifteen years ago, yeah. Maybe even ten years ago. But no doctor in their right mind is going to write you another prescription for opiates, Spencer." Patrick got to his feet. "You can either take the referral to the pain management clinic or get by on aspirin."

He held out the piece of paper. "I know you're in pain, but the oxy isn't going to help you. You've developed a tolerance—"

"I'm a drug addict, you mean. Just say it, Drake—"

"It's common to develop a tolerance," Patrick continued as if Lucky hadn't spoken. "Either I raise the dosage or take you off it—"

"Can't you write me a script for a different drug then? I'm in *pain*—"

Patrick just held out the referral. With a scowl, Lucky finally snatched it from him. "Go to the clinic. Keep working your therapy schedule. We'll meet back here next week and see how you're feeling."

"Yeah, thanks a lot."

Lucky stalked out of the room and headed for the elevators.

General Hospital: Conference Room

“Oh. Oh, God,” Elizabeth said as the horror of it set in. “Sam *hates* Alexis. Are you—are you telling me—” She took a deep breath. “You recognized the possibility, but you didn’t tell her.”

He shifted. “I didn’t want to worry or upset her. She’s been—losing Danny messed her up. She blames Alexis for his death. For her daughter’s death—for Manny Ruiz being on the loose—I just—I wanted to protect her. If it came back false, then—”

“But it *didn’t*. I feel so bad for her. I mean, *I* know Alexis is great, but I understand where Sam is coming from.” She hesitated. “Jason, you have to tell her.”

“I know.” But he didn’t look convinced.

“That’s not—this isn’t like you, Jason. It was one thing to run the test behind her back—” Elizabeth arched a brow at him. “It was a stupid thing, but fine. I could maybe get that. But now you *know*.”

“Elizabeth—”

“What happens if she comes across this information later, another way?” Elizabeth asked. “This kind of thing always comes out. You know that.”

“I don’t know.”

“Will you tell her you already know? Will you lie, pretend you had no idea—”

“No—” Jason pressed his lips together and nodded. “No, I wouldn’t, but—”

Elizabeth gestured at the paper. “If you’d told me before I did this, I wouldn’t have run the test. I get—I get you’re trying to protect her. But Jason...” She tilted her head. “If you don’t tell her the truth now about something like this—something that *matters* to her—”

She fell silent, cleared her throat, and got to her feet. “It’s none of my business. I need to get back to work.”

Jason also rose, touched her elbow as she turned to leave. “No. Finish what you were going to say.”

“You’re *already* lying to her. You know something that matters to her—you thought you knew something and didn’t tell her. Now you *actually* know it. You think she’s not going to see you’re keeping a secret and wonder what it is?” Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “I know you’re legendary for your stone face—”

Jason scowled, but she continued. “But you’re not a very good liar. I could always tell when you were lying to me.”

“You—” He blinked, swallowed hard. “What? When did I lie to you—I never—” Obviously remembering a moment too late, he snapped his mouth shut. “Right.”

Wishing she hadn’t brought it up, Elizabeth folded her arms, looked away. “When you were lying about Sonny. I didn’t know about what, but I knew you were lying. And...the other stuff that was going on—And you weren’t telling me. It hurt, Jason. And if Sam knows you at all, it’s going to hurt her—”

“I’m—” Jason started, but she shook her head.

“I don’t want to talk about it. We’re *not* talking about it,” she repeated when he opened his mouth as if to argue. “I’m just telling you I don’t recommend lying about something like this.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right.” Jason picked up the results, folded it, and put it inside his pocket. “Listen...I wish I had made different choices back then, Elizabeth. Been more honest. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well, we both ended up where we’re supposed to be, I guess. I need to get back to work. And you need to go home and talk to Sam.”

“Thanks for doing this, Elizabeth. I knew I could trust you.”

“Always,” she said with a smile, profoundly relieved they’d tiptoed around their past and managed to dance right over it. She opened the conference door. “C’mon, I’ll walk you to the elevator. I wanted to ask you something about Emily anyway.”

“Is she ignoring a lot of your calls, too?” Jason asked as they left the room.

General Hospital: Pediatrics Floor

Lucky stepped out of the elevator and scowled when he saw that the nurse’s station was empty. Where the hell had Elizabeth gone? He wandered down one of the halls, hoping to find her coming out of a patient’s room, but no such luck. Maybe he could

page his aunt or something back at the nurse's station.

Just as he rounded the corner to return to the hub, he saw his wife walk out of a room with Jason Morgan. Elizabeth was smiling at the damn thug as she walked him to the elevator.

Didn't she know how much pressure he was under at work? What the hell was she thinking smiling and talking to a fucking criminal?

He reached into his pocket and drew out the pills. He still had about twenty left. He could make that last for a week. If he wanted to. And then by next week, if he worked hard enough, he'd have kicked the pain and not need them at all.

He didn't even need one now, but he wanted to spite that damn doctor. He *didn't* need them. He just didn't think he should have to walk down to the parking garage with his back hurting like this.

He was a fucking cop, and he deserved better than this bullshit. He cracked open the bottle and tossed two pills back. Just to take the edge off so he could get home.

Chapter Two

*In every loss in every lie
In every truth that you deny
And each regret and each goodbye
Was a mistake too great to hide
And your voice was all I heard
That I get what I deserve*
- New Divide, Linkin Park

Tuesday, March 14, 2006

General Hospital: Break Room

Elizabeth grimaced as she stirred some sugar into her cup of coffee, then sipped it. Wincing at the awful taste, she turned to her best friend with a shake of her head. “You’re the daughter of the chief of staff. Make them buy a better coffee pot.”

“I asked Dad,” Emily Bowen-Quartermaine said with a sigh, “but he says terrible coffee builds character. Apparently, since *he* suffered as a resident, we *all* have to.”

“I remember when we were younger, splitting our packets of hot chocolate, swearing we’d never be like our parents and addicted to coffee.” Elizabeth took a seat at the table, then stifled a yawn. This was her last break until the end of her shift, which wasn’t for another two hours.

“Yeah, we were young and dumb. Coffee is how I get through the day and night.” Emily pursed her lip as she sat down. “You gonna tell me why my brother was at the hospital?”

“What?” Elizabeth frowned at her. “How did—”

“Gossip travels fast, and you know, there are plenty of people around here that love to gossip about my brother.” Emily leaned forward. “And some of them were working here seven years ago. You know...when Jason and Nikolas got into a fistfight—”

“Oh, God...” Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “So what?”

“So, a few of those nurses saw the two of you looking pretty tight, disappearing into a conference room for nearly a half-hour before walking him to the elevator, all smiles.” Emily lifted her brows. “Is there something I should know?”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose at the strange comment. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know. You guys worked together during the quarantine—”

“Two telephone conversations, through *your* phone, and then I helped him and Carly with the vaccine.” She rolled her eyes. “Emily—what’s going on with you? Last week, you ditched three shifts, you’re still avoiding my phone calls—” She raised her brows. “And now, what, you think I’m having an affair with your brother?”

“You say my brother like you didn’t use to have the hots for him. I’m just—like I said, people have a long memory. And you know, that Christmas party *was* infamous.” Emily leaned forward. “And you’re not saying no.”

“Well, *this* is me saying no. For one thing, I’m married, and for another, he’s engaged. And also, you know better than to listen to gossip.” Elizabeth shifted uncomfortably. “Why would people—this is so stupid. He just came to ask me something. I did him a quick favor, and that’s it. And it wasn’t a half-hour—ugh, this is how all that crap got started when Lucky came home. Everyone rushing to tell him I’m some kind of tramp —”

“Well, that’s not the way I remember it,” Emily offered. “And you weren’t a tramp back then. Lucky was supposed to be dead. He’d been gone for, God...” She sighed. “More than six months. I never blamed you for moving on, Liz. Just for not telling me.”

Elizabeth frowned. There was a lot about her friend’s statement that rubbed her the wrong way. “There was nothing to tell.”

“Sure.”

“There wasn’t—and there still isn’t. It wasn’t a half-hour,” Elizabeth repeated. “And I noticed that you’re ignoring how weird you’ve been lately.” Inspired, she continued, “That’s why we were talking. We were talking about you.”

“Me?” Emily pressed her hand to her chest, then shook her head. “Why? Why?” Her voice changed, a thin line of tension laying underneath it. “What about me?”

“You’ve been dodging his calls. He’s been trying to check in with you since the quarantine lifted, and you haven’t been interested.” Elizabeth hesitated. “And you ditched meeting with him about Manny. So I guess we were comparing notes.”

“And what conclusion did you come to?” Emily asked testily.

“None. I told him the quarantine took a lot out of both of us. All of us. I mean, we were in here trying to save lives. He was out there trying to find a vaccine. It was a lot, and we’re—” She waved her hand in the air. “We’re all trying to adjust. He gets it, Em. He was just worried about you, is all. You’re the one thing we’ve always had in common.”

“Fine. Just...” Emily shrugged. “Is that the favor he wanted?”

“The favor was separate.” Elizabeth sighed. “Do me a favor — if you hear nurses gossiping again, can you just...stop it? I’m married to a cop. The last thing I need is for Lucky to be here and overhear this crap. He already hates Jason and Sonny. Jason and I aren’t as close as we used to be, but we’re friendly, and I don’t want to have that argument with Lucky.”

“I guess, but wasn’t Lucky here?”

“He was—”

Elizabeth looked up as Patrick and Robin stepped into the break room, deep into another playful fight about how they’d spend their day next off together. “Hey—I was hoping to run into you,” she said to Patrick.

“Yeah? You enjoying your last shift down here in the dregs?” Patrick wiggled his brows. “You’re all mine tomorrow.”

Robin whacked him in the chest. “Turn it off, doofus. She’s married.”

“That’s why he flirts with me,” Elizabeth teased. “I’m *safe*.”

Patrick rolled his eyes. “Don’t ruin my reputation, Spencer.”

Robin snorted as she poured herself a cup of coffee. “Can’t get any worse.”

“Anyway,” Elizabeth interrupted before the two of them could continue snarking at each other. “I wasn’t able to catch Lucky before he left. How did his appointment go?”

Patrick hesitated. “I’m not sure if I should—”

“Oh, come on, she’s his wife and emergency medical contact,” Emily reminded the doctor. “What’s the big deal?”

“Nothing. I guess—I mean, he’ll probably want to be the one to tell you—and now I’ve worried you.” Patrick grimaced. “Fine. I told him that the return to work date Tony gave him before he got sick isn’t going to work anymore. He needs to get back into a full physical therapy routine, push out a return date for at least a month. We’ll need to consider surgery if he doesn’t show any improvement in physical therapy or if the MRI results haven’t improved.”

Elizabeth sighed, slumping in her chair. Surgery. Which might put him out of commission for another four or five months. “I was worried that might be the case. I knew he was in denial, but...God. That’s a lot.”

“Yeah, well, he’s not my biggest fan right now, but I have to do what’s best for him long-term. Putting him back on duty before he’s ready—it’s not doing him or his partner any favors, right?” Patrick sighed. “Sorry, Liz.”

“No, I appreciate you doing your best by him. We’ll...” She forced a smile on her face. “We’ll get through this. We’ve already gotten through the last few months. What’s another few more?”

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

Sam was ready to launch back into the argument as soon as Jason came home that night. She’d heard the key in the lock and got to her feet, bracing herself. No man was going to tell her what to do, especially someone who was every inch the criminal she was.

But when Jason walked in, some of Sam’s ire faded. He looked...worried. His brow was furrowed, and his jaw was clenched.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Did something happen...” She folded her arms. “Something with Manny? Is that what the call was about?”

“No.” Jason shook his head. “No, there’s nothing new with Manny. I’m sorry. I—” He took a deep breath. “Look, I should have said something last week when Stan gave us the report from the adoption records, but I guess...I just wanted to make sure. Or maybe I really just wanted to be wrong...” He drew out a piece of paper that was folded into three parts.

“Wrong about what? We didn’t get anything useful from the adoption records. Not even after Stan hacked them.” She folded her arms. “All we learned was that the woman never existed--

“I—thought I recognized the name. Natasha Davis.” He met her eyes. “Alexis was born Natasha Cassadine. She changed her name after Helena killed her mother. To protect herself.”

Everything simply stopped. She heard the words, saw his mouth forming the sounds, but she had to...

No. There was no way...

Of all the women in the world...

It couldn’t be...

“What—” Her mouth felt dry as Sam forced the words. “What are you saying?”

“I didn’t—I didn’t want to—if it wasn’t true—so I did a DNA test.” He extended the paper, but Sam didn’t look at it. Didn’t reach for it.

“You thought you knew who my mother was, and you looked into it without me.” Her ears were buzzing, and Sam couldn’t quite form a coherent thought. Couldn’t even begin to process the horror of what he was actually saying.

No, better to focus on the crime. Not the results. “You ran a DNA test without me? What, did you send my spit away to one of those stupid labs—”

“I didn’t want to wait that long, so I asked a friend at the hospital to run it. No names.” He hesitated. “Sam—”

“And you’re telling me which means—”

Her knees buckled as Sam sank back onto the sofa. “Oh, God. You’re telling me,” she repeated. “Which means the results—no. No, this isn’t possible, okay? It’s just not. There’s no way in hell that Alexis Davis is my mother—” Her stomach lurched even as she said the words. The woman who had browbeaten her until she nearly died—until her daughter *had* died. The woman who’d lived instead of Danny.

The woman who had set Manny Ruiz free.

No way in *hell* could Alexis be Sam's mother. It wasn't—it wasn't possible. It wasn't fair—

She shot up and snatched the paper from Jason, ripping it open. She scanned the gibberish until she found what she was looking for — a 99.99993 percent chance that Patient A and Patient B were related through the maternal DNA.

"Who ran this?" Sam demanded. "How do you know you can trust them?"

"Elizabeth Webber. You know her—"

"Yeah, yeah." Sam dredged up the brunette who'd looked after her and Danny in the hospital. "She was—" A bubble of hysteria rose in her throat. "She was really good to him in the hospital. Danny liked her. Said she sang him a lullaby."

Danny. He really wasn't her brother. She'd known that, but somehow—God, somehow, seeing this test made it so crystal clear. The one person in all the world that had ever loved her... didn't belong to her anymore. Wasn't hers.

She wasn't anyone's. She hadn't even realized until this moment she'd thought maybe her biological family could be somewhere she *could* belong.

But she could never be part of Alexis Davis's family.

"And she doesn't know anything about the test?"

Jason grimaced. "She didn't at first, but...Sam, when I got those results, I thought—I thought maybe I shouldn't tell you."

"You—" Sam took a step back. "You did this without telling me, and then you were going to...what...*hide* it from me? What the *hell*—"

"Elizabeth talked me out of it. So, yeah. She knows. She won't say anything. Not even to Emily. I trust her."

"You trust her—" Sam crumpled the white paper in a ball, curled it into her fist. "Oh, well, that's fine. Trust *her* with something you had no right to even *do*—"

"I know, and I'm sorry—"

“Well, it’s too fucking late for that, isn’t it?” she spat. Her skin was tingling, almost like she’d shoved a fork into a socket and gotten a jolt. Alexis Davis. *Alexis fucking Davis* was her *mother*. She’d been searching for answers, and Jason had handed them to her on a silver platter—

And had only told her at all because some nurse had convinced him.

Had she woken up in a nightmare? Her baby brother wasn’t hers. She wasn’t even really her mother’s daughter, and her father had probably adopted her to run a con.

And now she learned she’d been thrown away by Alexis Davis, the woman who’d stolen everything from her.

What a fucking joke her entire life had turned out to be.

“Sam—”

“I can’t do this right now. I can’t—I can’t even *think*—I can’t make this right in my head and the only reason I even—if you’d just told me what you thought, Jason, I could have—I could have had time to deal with it before we knew for sure—and maybe I wouldn’t have even wanted to know. But you forced it on me. This wasn’t your fight. This was *mine*, and you stole it from me.” Her eyes burned as she stared at the man she’d thought she’d known so well. “You took this from me. And you can’t ever make that okay.”

“Sam—”

“Sure, you were trying to protect me. But that’s not your job. I never asked you to do that.” She stalked past him and yanked her coat out of the closet. “I’m going to take a walk. And you’re going to sleep on the damn couch tonight.”

Cosmopolitan Hotel: Hallway

Emily stepped off the elevator, pressing a fist to her mouth as she stifled a yawn. She had hoped to go home tonight, but when the call had come—

Well, she couldn’t resist.

She knocked on the door lightly. “It’s me,” she said. The door opened, and she smiled at the man standing on the other side.

“Hey,” Sonny Corinthos said, as he pulled her inside and kissed her. “I didn’t know if you’d get my message.”

“I caught it after my shift.” She smoothed her hands down his chest, smiling at him. “I had to dodge *a lot* of questions today,” she teased as he led her to a table where glasses of champagne were waiting. “Elizabeth and Jason are starting to compare notes.”

Sonny frowned as he handed her a glass. “Since when do *they* talk?”

“I know!” Emily rolled her eyes. “I ditched a meeting with Jason about Manny Ruiz last week—I didn’t think it was a big deal, and you’d already told me that you were having him watched. But Elizabeth talked to him instead.” She bit her lip, stared down into her glass, then looked up to meet his eyes. “Should we tell them?”

“I thought we’d decided to wait,” Sonny said. “Until we knew if...if there was something worth talking about.” He leaned in, brushed his lips against hers. “You know what people are going to say.”

“I do. But Jason won’t. He knows I can make my own choices—”

“*Jason* will probably react the worst,” Sonny told her with a sigh. He shook his head. “You’re his little sister. And...it’s not like he doesn’t know the risks.” He winced. “And you hadn’t moved home yet, but I didn’t handle it well when he starting dating *my* sister.”

Emily pressed her lips together. “Maybe. But he’ll come around, and I can count on Elizabeth. Yeah, my family will hit the roof, and Carly will be a nightmare, but Jason and Elizabeth will come through for me. They always do.” She hesitated. “Then again...”

He raised a brow as he took her glass from her. “Then again?” he prompted.

“Maybe we *should* wait a little longer,” Emily suggested. “It’s...you’re right. This is still so new. And maybe we’ll hate each other in a few weeks.” She smiled. “Let’s just keep this between us.”

“Excellent idea.” He leaned in for another kiss, and the conversation slipped away.

Lucky & Elizabeth’s Apartment: Kitchen

Elizabeth grimaced as she lifted Cameron from his booster seat after thoroughly wiping his dinner from his cheeks and neck. His shirt was covered in the remains of his spaghetti sauce despite the napkin tucked into his collar. Her little boy was special like that.

“Mommy, Biderman.” Cameron grinned at her. “I go play?”

“Yeah, go ahead and play in your room.”

She looked up through the open arch of the kitchen to the living room as her husband slammed the door behind him. Lucky ripped his coat off, then scowled as he clearly aggravated his back. He didn’t even seem to notice as Cameron toddled past him into the bedroom. “How was physical therapy—”

“How do you *think* it was?” he snapped as he tossed the coat over the arm of the sofa. Lucky winced, shook his head. “Sorry. It was a crappy day, and it got worse after therapy. I still can’t do all of the exercises, and until I can, they won’t even consider putting me back on active duty.”

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured. He’d been so close to going back to work before the car accident, and now... “Patrick said he didn’t give you a return date.”

“Oh, nice of him to tell you about my case like it’s any of his fucking business—” Lucky scowled. “He won’t even refill my pain prescription, so I’m supposed to suffer, I guess.” He glared at her. “And then I leave my appointment and find you smiling at a damn criminal. What the hell were you doing with Jason Morgan?”

Elizabeth frowned, her shoulders tensing. She hadn’t expected that turn in the conversation and didn’t quite understand the accusation in Lucky’s voice. Jason and Lucky had known each other for years, and while they hadn’t been friends since Lucky’s brainwashing, they’d managed to co-exist just fine. In fact, Elizabeth knew that Lucky had gone to Jason for information about Manny after her kidnapping back in October.

Remembering Emily’s strange questions about her friendship with Jason, Elizabeth didn’t know why everyone was acting like she’d been caught kissing Jason.

They’d walked to a frickin’ elevator!

Elizabeth took a deep breath and decided to treat the question like it hadn’t been launched at her like an accusation of something way more nefarious. “I didn’t see you—why didn’t you come over and say something? Jason had a question about

something. I gave him some test results and walked him to the elevator. We were talking about Emily.”

“I don’t give a damn how Emily feels about him or if you used to be friends. You’re my wife, and I’m a cop. I can’t have you being friends with criminals—”

“I won’t waste my breath and talk about innocent until proven guilty because I know that’s not your point. I’m sorry, Lucky. But we’re both worried about Emily. She’s been acting strangely since the quarantine. And there’s Manny—”

“If you’re so concerned about Manny, why don’t you talk to the people who are supposed to take care of this crap? You know, the *police*?” Lucky charged.

“Maybe because the PCPD didn’t seem to be able to do anything the last time Manny was on a rampage,” Elizabeth shot back. Lucky’s eyes glinted with fury. “The system let him out, Lucky. Why the hell would I trust them to fix it now?”

“Oh, you trust a mobster more than your own husband?” Lucky demanded. “Doesn’t the law mean anything to you?”

“When it works. It couldn’t put Manny away. And it sure as *hell* didn’t get me justice with Tom Baker, did it? And Ric is still out there, practicing law no matter what he did. You can’t always trust the system. And when it comes to protecting myself and the hospital, I’m glad there’s someone that can take care of psychos like Manny.”

“I can’t fucking believe this—”

“You lived outside the law your entire life, Lucky. It wasn’t so long ago we were covering up the death of a police officer ourselves. And you haven’t always followed the rule, either.”

“Sure, throw that in my face again—it wasn’t my fault what happened to Emily—”

“I never said it was—” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “Look, it’s not like Jason and I are close. He came to the hospital with a medical question, and we talked about Emily. We saw Manny while he was there. *Stop* making this more than it has to be.”

She sighed when he just glared at her and said nothing. “I need to give Cameron a bath before getting him settled for bed. I’ll be back out later.”

When she’d closed the door, Lucky scowled and reached inside his pocket. He took out

his bottle of pills and looked at it. He'd started the day with twenty, but now...

He tossed back two more, grimacing. He'd taken two more after his therapy session, but he really needed to be careful with what was left. If Patrick refused to write him a script, Lucky wasn't sure what to do.

But his back was still screaming ten minutes later, so Lucky took two more pills. He'd start being careful tomorrow.

He looked around the apartment, the cramped one-bedroom that they'd been living in for the last eight months. This was hardly the life he'd wanted, the one he'd planned for himself or Elizabeth.

He hated these rooms. Hated the tiny kitchen, the lumpy sofa bed he and Elizabeth shared while Cameron slept in the bedroom all by himself. He'd never understood why the hell the kid couldn't have slept out here, but she'd insisted, and he'd given in. He *always* gave in with her.

No matter what Elizabeth wanted, he gave it to her. Just like now — she was refusing to give up Jason Morgan. Like she always did.

Absently, Lucky slid another pill between his lips, not realizing it was the fifth he'd taken in the last hour. He didn't even know it until he looked down and saw that the pills he'd started the day with had been cut by half.

He grimaced, got to his feet. "I'm going out," he called to Elizabeth.

"Where?" she called back, but he didn't answer. He dragged back on his coat and slammed the door behind him.

Jake's: Bar

Sam raised her hand to signal the bartender, Coleman, that she wanted another shot. She just wanted everything to go away.

Alexis Davis was her mother.

And Danny was not her brother.

She couldn't quite make any of that come outright. How could *any* of it be true? How could this be her reality? It simply...it didn't compute. It didn't add up.

Until she'd learned about her pregnancy, Danny had felt like the only good thing in her life. The only pure thing that kept her tethered to humanity. She knew that she wasn't a good person. Sam would never lie to herself and think she was decent or kind. She'd stolen, she'd manipulated, she'd done terrible things for money.

And yeah, sometimes it had been to take care of Danny, but it had also been *fun*. Sam was a damn good con artist, and part of her was itching to get back into the game. To get back to a life she understood.

Because this life? This life didn't make any fucking sense. Not since the day she'd targeted Jasper Jacks and that stupid hand of cards nearly three years ago. She'd not managed to close the deal with Jax, but Sonny—he'd been a terrific mark. Lonely. Rich. And the bonus of her looking just like his one true love, Brenda—

Sam thought if she'd just been able to get rid of Carly, maybe things could have been different. She could have really kept Sonny on the hook for decades.

She tossed back the tequila, feeling the alcohol burn her throat, then slammed the shot glass down. "Another!"

She didn't let herself think about that much anymore—those few months when she'd tried to calculate her way into Sonny's life and bank account. Sometimes Sam even tried to convince herself she'd really been in love with Sonny, but what was the point?

She knew the truth.

Sam had seen a rich guy who looked like he might not suck in bed. Port Charles was lousy with gorgeous millionaires, and Sam had wanted a piece of it. Until her daughter. Until her baby grew in her, and Sam knew she'd needed more. Wanted more.

She'd never let a pregnancy get past the first six or seven weeks before. Had always had an abortion before the baby became real to her. Once it had...it had changed everything. Sam sighed, stared at her reflection in the grimy mirror that was built into the back of Jake's bar.

She hadn't liked playing that game. It had been the first con Cody had taught her — the best one for a girl like Sam to play, he'd told her. She looked like trash, and no one wanted to have a permanent connection to trash.

Of course, the *first* time hadn't been a game. Sam drank another tequila and sighed,

thinking of the first. Of the first boy she'd been with who'd thrown her away.

She hadn't known then it was her own history she had repeated. Maybe that *was* Alexis's story. Some good looking boy who'd promised the world when she'd been sixteen to get her into the backseat of his Chevy, only to smirk when the bill came due. Had that happened to Alexis? Had she known the shame and humiliation of looking at a boy she'd thought loved her, only to have him laugh in her face

He'd offered to pay for the abortion, and Sam had gone to her father, sure that somehow her father, who always had a game to play, would know what to do. But Cody had just told her that was a woman's lot in life. Men had all the fun while women paid the price. Better to learn it now and make men pay. At least he'd offered to foot the bill.

Those were the games Sam was best at — making men want her enough to pay for it. She could tempt a man to leave his wife, to sell his soul, to give her anything she wanted just for a taste. She'd gotten pregnant again at eighteen. Then again at nineteen.

The fourth time, when she was twenty, after her fourth abortion, Sam decided to stop playing that game. She'd upgraded to rich men who wanted a pretty trophy wife. No more babies.

She wondered now why she'd stopped playing the game. She could have just started faking pregnancies. But she'd stopped using kids at all until she'd ended up pregnant with Sonny's daughter. Had part of her known she'd been thrown away? Had she somehow suspected it?

"I guess you're slummin' it," Lucky Spencer said he slid onto a stool, swaying slightly as he put up his hand to place an order for a beer. "What? Jason's mini-bar isn't fully stocked?"

Sam rolled her eyes and brought the shot glass to her lips. "Doesn't your dad own a bar club?"

"Don't want to see anyone," Lucky muttered as Coleman placed the Rolling Rock in front of him.

"Well, same here." Sam scowled at him. "So, leave me the hell alone."

"Yeah, I will if you keep your fiancé away from my wife," Lucky shot back. He dumped some money on the bar, then picked up his drink to stumble away towards the pool

table. Sam stared after him, blinking.

What the hell was that about?

Chapter Three

*I don't care what you think,
As long as it's about me
The best of us can find happiness, in misery
I don't care what you think,
As long as it's about me
The best of us can find happiness, in misery*
- I Don't Care, Fall Out Boy

Saturday, March 18, 2006

General Hospital: ICU

“Elizabeth, have you seen Alan around?”

Elizabeth glanced up from her chart to find Skye Chandler-Quartermaine standing in front of her, clutching some folders with her pretty red hair twisted up in a ponytail.

“No, he’s not usually up here this time of day. I can have him paged—”

“Oh, they said he was on the surgical floor.” Skye sighed, setting the folders down. She braced a hand at the small of her back, wincing. “How is it that my back is the first part that of me hurts? I’m barely even showing.”

Elizabeth managed a smile. “For me, it was my feet. I feel like they grew a size overnight.” She glanced down at her feet. “I’m not sure they’ve ever felt right again.”

“All the things they never tell you about being pregnant,” Skye sighed. “Anyway, I’m supposed to meet Alan about the charity auction he asked me to organize. To raise money for patients affected by the virus and having trouble paying the costs.”

“And he didn’t answer your page?” Elizabeth raised her brows and clicked into her OR rotation schedule screen on the computer. “Oh. It looks like he scrubbed in to observe surgery with Noah Drake. That’s weird.”

“Maybe he forgot I was coming by.” Skye sighed, lifted the folders again. “Well, I’ll leave a message with his secretary. I know he said he was nervous about Noah

getting back into surgery, so maybe he just wanted to be there.”

“Still.” Elizabeth shrugged. “I’ll keep an eye out for him and let him know he missed you.”

“Thanks.” Skye waved as she stepped onto the elevator. As Elizabeth looked down at her chart, she caught sight of the tan uniform the hospital janitors wore as someone ducked back down a hallway.

Elizabeth hesitated, then went towards the hallway only to see Manny Ruiz as he disappeared down a service stairwell. Had he...been watching Skye? Why? And if he hadn’t been, why had he rushed away?

Uneasy, Elizabeth returned to the nurse’s station and to her charts. She knew that Manny hadn’t done anything to make Jason’s men suspicious yet, but she couldn’t shake the way she felt when she caught him looking at her—as if he was just laughing at them all.

Jake’s: Bar

“Hey, man.” Jesse Beaudry clapped a hand on Lucky’s shoulder as he took a seat on the barstool next to his partner. “How’s therapy going?” He ordered a beer from Coleman behind the bar. “You get a return date yet?”

Lucky grimaced. “No.” He tossed back the shot of whiskey he’d ordered just before Jesse had arrived. “Drake isn’t going to give me one until I can pass a goddamn physical.” He looked at his friend. “Give it to me straight. How much longer is Mac gonna hold my position on the squad?”

Jesse hesitated, distracted himself by taking a long pull from his Budweiser. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “We’re swamped, you know. The Escobars are starting to get restless. Mac is under a lot of pressure from the mayor—”

“Jesse—”

“Maybe a few more weeks. Hey, look, they can’t fire you—”

“No, but I’ll get stuck on desk duty for months, even if I get a return date.” Lucky scowled. “Therapy isn’t working,” he admitted. “I’m trying to double it up, but I can’t do it as much as I want. Elizabeth’s grandmother can only pick Cameron up twice a week. I have to do it the other four days she works.”

Jesse frowned. “Why can’t Elizabeth get someone else to do it? What about the kid’s real dad?”

“His real dad is dead,” Lucky said. With a sneer, he added, “You should look him up sometime — Zander Smith. He died in a shootout with the PCPD. He never even met Cameron.”

“How’d she hook up with him?” Jesse said, furrowing his brow. “He doesn’t seem like her type.”

“Oh, she’s got a thing about criminals,” Lucky muttered. “She screwed around with Jason Morgan, too, before we were married.” He nodded at Coleman to order another shot. “*I’m* the outlier.”

“Oh.” Jesse cleared his throat. “Well, listen, man, just do what you can in therapy. I’ll try to get Mac to hold off. But you gotta put your recovery first. Tell Elizabeth to take some time off or something. Change her shift. Marriage is supposed to be a compromise, right?” He shrugged. “Why should you have to lose your chance to get back on the job because her kid needs a babysitter?”

Lucky winced. “Listen, it’s—I’ve been Cameron’s stepfather for almost a year. He’s not even two. I’m the only father he’s ever known—”

“And what kind of dad are you gonna be if you get stuck on desk duty?” Jesse pushed. “You’re telling me Elizabeth won’t put you first for a little while so you can *all* get back on track? Seriously?”

Lucky exhaled slowly, then nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. It’s hard right now, but Elizabeth has always had my back. And her supervisor loves her. She’ll do us the favor. Thanks, man.”

Greystone Manor: Foyer

Jason was already annoyed when he walked into the foyer that night — he’d learned from the guards at the entrance that Sonny wasn’t home yet. It had taken Jason three days to catch Sonny on the phone and set up a meeting to talk about the Escobars, and now it looked like Sonny was ditching him. Again

He frowned when he saw Rocco, Carly’s guard, lounging in the foyer with an irritated look on his face. “What are you doing here? Where’s—” He grimaced.

“Oh, that’s *real* nice.”

Jason turned to find Carly Corinthos, Sonny's ex-wife and Jason's sort of best friend, leaning against the doorway to the living room. She raised a brow. "You don't look happy to see me."

"I'm not. You only come over here to yell at Sonny, and I'm not in the mood for this tonight—"

"Well, don't worry." Carly rolled her eyes and stalked into the living room. Jason followed, closing the doors behind them. She poured herself a glass of water from Sonny's minibar. "He's not here."

"Yeah, they told me down at the guardhouse, but we're meeting tonight, so he should be here eventually—"

"Sure." Carly rolled her eyes. "Just like he promised Michael and Morgan he'd have dinner with us tonight, then didn't show up." She pressed her lips together. "You know, it's one thing to dick you over, but to break a promise to the boys?"

Jason frowned. Sonny didn't usually do either of those things unless—he closed his eyes. "Damn it."

"Oh, man, the last time Sonny was blowing you *and* the boys off, he was bouncing with his last mattress buddy." Carly winced. "I'm not in the mood for this. The boys both keep asking for Courtney, I'm trying to help Jax with little John—I do not have time for the car crash of Sonny's love life."

"Carly—"

She jabbed a finger at him. "It's *your* job to clean up after Sonny."

"It's really not," Jason said flatly. "I don't have time for *this*, either."

"Oh, right—" Carly pursed her lips. "Speaking of Sonny's mattress buddies, how *is* Sam doing? Her brother died, right?"

Jason shot her a dirty look, but Carly just stared at him blandly. "She's handling it."

"Hey, I indicated an interest in someone other than myself. I'm trying—" She tapped her foot. "Who do you think it is? Because the last time Sonny was hiding his romantic interests, it was because we were still married and he was trying really hard

not to lose custody of the boys—”

“Plus half of everything he owned,” Jason reminded her.

Carly smiled sweetly at him. “If Sonny didn’t think I was owed half of everything, then he should have asked for a prenup. Which reminds me — you better get Justus to take care of that for you. You don’t want Sam taking you for everything—”

“Carly—”

“Hey, I know what I’m talking about. It took a lot to get me out of my prenup with AJ —” She shook her head. “In retrospect, Sonny really should have seen my demands coming. He helped me out of the first marriage.”

“Yeah, I mentioned that.”

“I’m going home to the boys. I’m done waiting around for Sonny Corinthos. You tell him this is the last time he’s going to break a promise to the boys—”

“The last time?” Jason frowned. “He’s done it before? I mean, recently?”

“Last week.” Carly sighed. “I know I like to snark about Sonny—and torture him. But the boys—I know you and Courtney broke up, and it’s fine. But they loved her. Tell Sonny I’m not going to let him disappoint them anymore.”

“I’ll talk to him. Carly—” He touched her elbow as she left. “I’m sorry. I should have checked in on you. How are you holding up?”

“I’m dealing. Having Courtney’s son, taking care of him—” She flashed him a smile. “It’s helping. And the boys love their cousin. I just—I don’t want to make them part of this war with Sonny. He’s not leaving me any choice. I’m not going through this again with him.”

“I get it, Carly. I’ll talk to him.” Jason grimaced. “Eventually.”

Carly folded her arms, narrowed her eyes. “What’s wrong? You think I can’t tell when you’ve got a bug up your ass.” She lifted her chin. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Jason said. “I’ll talk to Sonny—”

“Look, I know—” Carly exhaled in a huff. “I know I said it was your job to clean up

after Sonny, but, Jase, you know I don't mean it."

Jason looked at her. "Jason—"

"I'm tired," she admitted. "I'm tired of this fight with him. Every time he gets distracted by someone or something else, the boys get put through this." She met his eyes. "Aren't you tired, too?"

"Carly—"

"It's not your job to clean up after Sonny all the time. Or me," she continued with a grimace. "I just—you look tired, too. And you won't tell me what's wrong. You never do." Carly hesitated. "You're not Superman. You know that, right?"

"I'll talk to you later, Carly."

Lucky & Elizabeth's Apartment: Living Room

Elizabeth dragged her hand through her hair and sighed as she cradled the receiver in the crook of the neck and cheek so she could finish tucking Cameron's toys away.

"No, Gram. I understand. I wish I could come, too. No, really—I'll figure something out with Cam—"

As Audrey again apologized for the short notice, Elizabeth sighed and grimaced as Lucky came through the door, leaving heavily on his cane. "Okay, Gram. Yeah. Okay. I'll talk to you later. Have a good trip."

She hung the phone up and picked up the cane from the floor where Lucky had let it drop to the floor after he'd sat down. "How was therapy?"

"Same," Lucky grunted as he laid back on the sofa, putting his feet up with a wince. "Nothing changed. Still hurts like hell." He lifted his head up slightly as Elizabeth finished putting away Cameron's toys and moved on to folding the laundry she'd picked up from the laundromat that morning. "What did Audrey want?"

"She's going to Memphis next week," Elizabeth told him. "And she's gonna stay for like a month."

"A month?" Lucky sat up, then scowled. "Who's gonna pick Cameron up? Why is she going now?"

“Steven just got engaged,” Elizabeth told him with a bit of a wistful sigh. She’d like to meet her brother’s fiancée, but there was no time off for her, and Steven probably wasn’t going to come to Port Charles anytime soon. “Gram wanted to go down and spend some time with him. My parents are supposed to fly in, too, and Gram hasn’t seen them in a couple of years.” She laughed absently as she folded one of Cameron’s shirts. “I haven’t seen them since I moved here.”

Lucky eyed her with a strangely panicked look. “You can’t go. You don’t even like your family, and we can’t afford it.”

Elizabeth frowned at him. What a strange thing to say. “I—” She blinked at him. “No, I can’t go. I was just...thinking about them, that’s all. They haven’t even met Cameron yet. At the rate we’re going, they probably never will.” It didn’t bother her that her family was so uninvolved. Not really. But it might have been nice to go for a weekend just to catch up. She’d always liked her brother.

“Anyway, I’m not sure what to do about Cameron. I work better hours, but I still work until six or seven most nights,” she pointed out. “And if we leave him in daycare past four, they charge double the hourly rate.”

“So you’ll have to cut back hours at work,” Lucky said. He hauled himself to his feet and shuffled into the kitchen, where he pulled out a beer. She grimaced as he pulled off the top. He really shouldn’t be mixing alcohol with pain medication, but she knew better than to tell him that. “I was going to talk to you about it anyway. I need to double up on my therapy sessions, so I can’t pick up Cameron anymore. You need to change your shift or cut back—”

Elizabeth held up her hand. “Whoa. That’s—that’s *not* an option. I can’t cut my hours, Lucky. I just transferred upstairs. I can probably move some of my shifts around and get out early, but then I’m still dropping him off early at a daycare, which is still going to cost money.” She hesitated. “You know the best thing—at least for a few weeks—”

“I’m not rescheduling my rehab—”

“You don’t have to. You can go earlier,” Elizabeth pointed out. “Mac told you that you could go to therapy during your work hours—”

“And have them carry me, pay me to do nothing?” Lucky glared at her. “You’re always complaining we don’t have any damn money, and now you want me to give up what little I do make?”

“It’ll cost us more than you make to keep him in daycare,” Elizabeth told him. Her stomach twisted as she continued folding clothes. She was trying very hard not to think about the fact that she was practically begging Lucky to take care of the little boy he’d promised to love as his own. “It would just be—”

“You think your job is better than mine?” Lucky demanded. “I’m a cop. I save lives, damn it! You just clean up piss and shit.”

And that was absolutely it. She’d had *enough*.

She shot her to her feet, incensed. “Yeah, the PCPD did a bang-up job with Manny Ruiz. I have to see that psycho every damn day! But tell me how you save lives?”

Lucky took a long swig of his beer, then dragged the back of his hand over his mouth, his glare deepening into something like that looked like hatred. “Oh, I bet your fucking lover boy Jason Morgan could take care of him, right? You’re always picking him over me!”

Elizabeth threw up her hands. “You know sometimes you’re just impossible! Jason has nothing to do with this! I told you Manny makes me uncomfortable at work. I asked you if Mac was gonna do anything about him working there—and he’s done nothing—”

“Nothing he *can* do,” Lucky bit out. “The system let him out. It’s not perfect, but it’s what we got. And he hasn’t done anything, so maybe the tumor thing is real—”

“Except today I saw him following Skye Quartermaine,” she shot back, planting her hands on her hips. “Mac can’t even get someone to follow him around the damn hospital?”

“Oh, come on, was he *actually* following her?” Lucky demanded. “You’re just pissed because I won’t drop everything to fix a problem that has nothing to do with me—”

Elizabeth stared at him for a long moment, her fury draining as quickly as it had risen. “Cameron has nothing to do with you?”

“I didn’t mean it that way. I just—” Lucky growled under his breath as he tossed his empty bottle into the trash. “It’s not my job to pick him up and change my whole life around. If I weren’t here, you’d have to pay the extra money, so just do it. I need my job, too, Elizabeth. And I’m getting tired of being expected to sacrifice my time so you can save a little money.”

She didn't know what to say to that. She didn't understand how he could stand there as Cameron's stepfather—the *only* father Cameron had ever known—and pretend that refusing to pick him up from daycare wasn't part of a bigger problem.

"So, it was just a lie then," she said softly.

Lucky hesitated, then frowned. "What?"

"When you asked me to marry you, you promised that Cameron would be ours. That we'd be a family. But he's still *my* problem to you." Elizabeth folded her arms, looked at him. "You said you'd love him like your own."

"I—I do." Lucky shook his head. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm just—God, Elizabeth, I'm just so frustrated." He collapsed onto the sofa, dragging both of his hands through his hair. "If I don't get back to work soon, off the desk, the department isn't legally obligated to hold my job open with my old squad. I could be permanently replaced. Stuck on the desk forever. I need to prove myself to Mac. I need all the therapy sessions I can get. And it's not like...I mean, your grandmother promised us she'd pitch in. *She's* the one screwing us over, not me. I'm just—I'm not handling it well, okay?"

"Okay." Elizabeth sighed, looked away. She didn't want to argue about this anymore. Not when she was afraid of where the conversation would go. "Let me make a few calls. I'll talk to Epiphany. Maybe she can—do something."

"Yeah." Lucky brightened. He got to his feet and took her hands in his. "Epiphany loves you. You know that. It's hard right now, and I'm terrible to be around. I know that." He brushed his lips over her forehead. "But as soon as I get back to work, it's all going to be okay. I promise. I'll make it up to you."

"I'll hold you to that," she murmured, squeezing her eyes closed and praying for a miracle. Because if Lucky was off active duty much longer, she might go insane.

Sunday, March 19, 2006

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

Jason scrubbed his hands over his face as Sam sullenly sunk into the corner of the sofa, reading the *Port Charles Sun*. For nearly a week, they'd managed to avoid speaking to one another. Not since she'd stormed out the night he'd told her about the maternity test.

They hadn't talked about the test or anything else.

Jason opened his mouth to try to say something — to apologize again or maybe to defend himself. Even if he'd knew now he was wrong, he still felt a bit...irritated that she refused to even *try* to understand that he'd just been trying to help.

But before he could decide exactly what he would do, Sam's cell phone rang. She leaned over and dug it out of the pocket of her sweat pants. "Yeah? Hey, Paulie."

He pressed his lips together, turned back to his paperwork, trying to hide his scowl. He listened as she talked with the man who had asked her to go back to being a con artist again.

"Yeah? Okay. Yeah. No, I get it. And you're right, it's not like I need a lot to do this. Not exactly rocket science." Sam laughed, the happiest sound she'd made since her brother had died.

He sighed, sat back in his chair. Maybe this didn't need to be a big deal. Maybe she'd just do this one thing, and it would make her feel like herself again.

But there was something about the whole thing that made him...uncomfortable. Like an itch between his shoulders he couldn't quite scratch. And she'd told him she would do the job in exchange for information about her past.

But they had the information now. Sam knew who Natasha Davis really was. She could just ask Alexis what happened. Why she'd been put up for adoption, how she'd ended up with Cody McCall, where her father was—who he was—

Sam didn't need to do this job. Which meant she wanted to.

And if she wanted to do it once, maybe she'd want it again.

"Okay. Sounds like a plan. I'll see you then, Paulie."

He heard Sam get to her feet and walk towards him, her feet quiet on the hardwood floor. "That was my dad's friend, Paulie."

Jason looked at her carefully blank face and sighed. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

"He wanted to let me know the date of the job." She held up her phone, then lifted her

chin. “And I’m gonna go. It’s in two weeks.”

“Okay,” Jason said. He got to his feet and walked away from the desk towards the closet.

“Is that *all* you’re going to say?” Sam demanded when he said nothing else. She scowled. “You don’t have an opinion?”

“What do you want me to say?” He turned back to look at her. Shrugged with a casualness, he didn’t feel. “You’re an adult, Sam. I don’t tell you what to do.”

“But you’re not happy about it, are you?”

He sighed, rolled his head back to look at the ceiling, before meeting her eyes again. “No. You don’t need to do this job. This guy—he doesn’t have any answers you can’t get by just calling Alexis—”

“Shut up—” Sam stabbed a finger at him. “*You* don’t get to talk about her. Not after what you did.”

“Fine.” Jason crossed to the closet and yanked his jacket out of it. “Then we don’t have anything to say.”

“Where are you going?” Sam darted forward, sliding in front of the door and blocking him just as he reached for the doorknob. “You’re just leaving?”

“What am I supposed to say? You don’t want to talk about Alexis, and you already know what I think about you pulling a job—”

“No. You’re dancing around it, but, no, I *don’t* know what you think.” She crossed her arms and glared at him. “Come on. Tell me.”

“You want me to tell you not to do it so you can fight with me and have a new reason to be pissed with me.” He shook his head. “I’m not going to be the bad guy. You’re an adult, Sam,” Jason repeated. “Do what you want.”

“I just—” Sam fisted her hands at her sides. “I don’t *get* why this bothers you so much. You’re in the mob, Jason. You smuggle all kinds of crap back and forth over the border. You break the law every day, so can’t I do the same?”

“It’s different,” Jason said finally. “But if you need to do this to make yourself feel

better, then you do what you have to do. It's not up to me."

Sam scowled and moved away from the door, so he could open it. He turned back to face her. "I'm sorry about Alexis. I'm sorry about the way I handled it. I was trying to protect you, but I was wrong. But don't pretend you're gonna take this job for answers. You want to do it. Don't lie to me or yourself."

He hesitated, but she said nothing, her dark eyes glinting with irritation.

So he finally told her the truth. "No, I don't want you to do this. Because this won't be the only time. You're good at it, remember? You told me so yourself."

"So?"

"So, remember the cons you were best at, Sam, and then tell me why I don't want you to go back to it."

He closed the door behind him.

Kelly's: Parking Lot

Elizabeth scowled as she approached her car and saw the back tire had finally given up on her. The little warning signal had been flickering on her dashboard for weeks, warning her that her tire pressure was low, but she kept putting getting it fixed and now—

Now she was stuck at Kelly's, the quick lunch she'd wanted to grab growing cold in the brown paper bag in her hands. She looked back at her tire, down at her lunch, then trudged back to the courtyard where she dumped the bag on the table and started to unpack it.

She wasn't wasting Ruby's chili by sitting in the parking lot waiting for someone to come help, though she didn't know who she'd call. Lucky was at physical therapy, her grandmother was with Cameron at her house, and...

Well, her options were limited. Nearly everyone she knew was working at General Hospital today—the same place she was due back within the hour. She grimaced. So much for enjoying her lunch hour for a change.

She heard the motorcycle before she saw its owner. Jason ducked through the gate that separated Kelly's from the parking lot and paused, seeing her with her lunch spread out on the table. "Oh. Hey."

“Hey.” She brightened. “I don’t suppose you have, like, any air pumps or something hiding on your bike, do you?”

“Uh, no—” Jason squinted, then pulled out the chair and sat across from her. “Why?”

“I procrastinated on routine car maintenance, and I have a flat. I’m just making a mental list while I eat my lunch before it gets cold.” She rolled her eyes. “You know, I’m more organized than I used to be, but like all of my energy is making sure Cameron is okay. Or my patients. I just don’t have the space to worry about my car.”

Jason smirked as he pulled out his phone and pressed a number, obviously calling someone on speed dial. “Hey, Max, you at the warehouse? Can you find someone with an air pump to fix a flat at Kelly’s? No, for a car—Yeah, okay, I’ll see you when you get here.”

“Thanks.” Elizabeth shook her head. “Normally, I’d argue with you about how I can do things for myself, but you know, I’m just—” She blew out an exasperated breath. “I’m too tired, to be honest, and I still have to get back to work.”

“Well, I’m glad I stopped for coffee.” He shifted in his seat. “You okay? I mean, is there a reason you’re tired, or is it just...” Jason raised his brows, waiting.

“Well, I’m getting used to my new job. I haven’t been able to scrub in on a surgery yet, but I’m learning about the paperwork and post-op. I mean, I knew all of it before, but now I get to do pre-op stuff, too. And it’s fun working with Patrick and Robin more. And Epiphany.” She sipped her soda. “But it’s a lot of stuff I need to get a handle on before Patrick will let me scrub in. And Cameron—” She grinned. “He’s into everything. He’s hitting that age — he’ll be two this year and he’s—I mean, he’s been walking for a year, but I think he’s figured out how to run.”

Elizabeth finally stopped, then laughed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to just go on and on like that. It’s just—”

No one who actually knew her had asked if she was okay in a long time.

“What about you?” Elizabeth bit her lip. “It’s none of my business, I know, but I guess I’ve been worried since you left the hospital last week.”

“Uh, yeah.” Jason scratched the corner of his eyebrow. “Well, you were right. Sam was angry.”

Elizabeth waited, but he didn't say anything else. Fair enough. They weren't friends like that anymore. She might tell him about her job or talk about Cameron, but she wasn't going to tell him about her fight with Lucky or search for cheaper daycare, so why would he open up about his own relationship issues?

Asking him for help with a flat tire wasn't the same thing as opening her heart up to him and pouring out all her troubles. That wasn't who she was anymore.

"Well, I hope she's okay," Elizabeth said, finally. She paused. "There is something, I guess—I don't know, I'm probably overreacting, and Lucky said I was seeing things, but it's about Manny."

Jason raised his brows. "Yeah? Did he say something to you? None of my guys said anything."

"Oh." Elizabeth sat back. "Then I guess I'm wrong. I mean, if they're watching him and he hasn't done anything, then..." She shrugged, picked up her soda.

Jason frowned, tilting his head to the side. "He hasn't done anything, no," he said, "but Beto told me Manny seemed to be...all over the hospital. Like he was trying to learn the layout. He thinks he might be looking for places to hide. Whether he wants to smuggle something in or out, or just have a place for himself, he doesn't know. I don't know what that means, but it made Beto uncomfortable."

When she didn't say anything, he lifted his brows. "Elizabeth, you work at the hospital every day. You know that place better than my guys do. What did you see?"

"It's probably nothing, but Skye was at the hospital yesterday and—I don't know, it just felt like Manny was watching her. I mean, I don't know why he would—"

"Actually..." Jason hesitated, leaned back in the chair, looking a bit disturbed. "No, that makes sense. She's pregnant, right? And seeing Lorenzo Alcazar." He grimaced. "Manny...blames Alcazar...for his brother and father's deaths last fall."

"Oh." Elizabeth blinked. "I hadn't—I forgot about that. Should I warn her? Or—I don't even think she had anyone with her. Why would Alcazar let her go to the hospital alone?"

"I don't know, but if he is watching her, then that's probably his motive. Manny Ruiz is...he's—" Jason paused. "I mean, you know his reputation. But he earned it. He's... known for his violence against women." He looked away. "At least three women he's been involved with have...disappeared."

“Oh,” she repeated softly. “Well....that’s...” *Terrifying.*

Jason leaned forward, his eyes on her. “I have two guys at the hospital,” he reminded her. “Beto is on Manny at all times. And Vic used to work on the pediatrics floor with you and Emily. I put him there to watch you both. I’m trying to get Alan to let me put someone on the surgery floor with you—”

“Thank you,” she said. She reached across the table to touch his hand briefly. “For looking out for us. I’m not worried about me. I’m worried about Skye. She’s pregnant—and—” Elizabeth grimaced. She couldn’t really explain it. “And I just—I had to tell someone.”

“I’ll let Beto and Vic know to keep their eyes out for that. Remember, don’t get involved.” He grimaced. “I was gonna tell you to let me know if you see something else, but you’re...I mean, you’re married to a cop—”

“I tried to tell Lucky about Manny and Skye. He told me there’s nothing he can do. So...” Elizabeth lifted a shoulder. “You know, I believe in the system. Most of the time. But the system isn’t built for someone who twists everything like Manny Ruiz. So if I see something else, you’ll be the first person I call.”

“But stay out of it,” he reminded her as he saw Max approach them. “C’mon, let’s go fix your car.”

Chapter Four

*Well if you told me you were drowning, I would not lend a hand
I've seen your face before my friend, but I don't know if you know who I am
Well I was there and I saw what you did, I saw it with my own two eyes
So you can wipe off that grin, I know where you've been
It's all been a pack of lies*
- In the Air Tonight, Phil Collins

Monday, March 20, 2006

Kelly's: Dining Room

Elizabeth sighed as she hung up her cell phone and looked at Cameron, seated in his booster seat and smearing applesauce on the plastic tray in front of him. "Well, Aunt Em says she can't come."

"That dumb." Cameron sighed, then shoved his applesauce covered fingers in his mouth and licked them. "Miss Em."

She sighed. She and Emily hadn't seen each other outside of the hospital in weeks, which is why she'd decided to spend her day off having breakfast with her best friend. But Emily had called at the last minute — something had come up. Just like every other time they'd tried to make plans.

This was not a good sign. Emily was in the middle of something and not telling anyone. Not that Emily couldn't have a secret, but Emily's secrets had a way of blowing up on a person.

Or being stored in a freezer on Spoon Island.

"Elizabeth?"

She looked up to find Skye smiling at her, a cup of tea in her hand. "Do you mind if I join you for a minute?"

"Oh, not at all." Elizabeth gestured at the empty seat in front of her. "Go ahead."

“Thanks. And thank you for catching Alan on his way out of surgery. He called later to apologize.” Skye sipped her tea and smiled at Cameron as he examined his applesauce-covered fingers.

“He’ll be two in May.” Elizabeth used one of the wipes she carried with her to clean Cameron’s hands.

“I can’t wait to have those moments,” Skye said. She sighed. “For a long time — I’m sure you know this—I didn’t think I could have children. This—” She rested a hand absently on her abdomen. “This is a miracle I never could have asked for.”

“I know what you mean. Cameron—” Elizabeth couldn’t fight the grin that spread on her face as her son gave her a wide smile with his baby teeth shining at her—then immediately plunged his hand back into his applesauce. “I had a miscarriage just before I got pregnant with Cameron, so he felt doubly precious.”

“The reason I wanted to...” Skye bit her lip. “And please, if I’m being rude or prying, really, I’ll back off. But you just—I feel like you might be the *only* person I could ask this question.”

“Oh?” Elizabeth raised her brows. “Is everything okay?”

“It is. I’m just...” The redhead hesitated. “You know that this baby—that it’s fathered by Lorenzo Alcazar.”

“I do.”

“And...it’s not like I didn’t know who he was before I got involved with him. And I’m not exactly some innocent civilian.” Skye laughed, her eyes twinkling with a bit of mischief. “I know how to make trouble, but my kind of trouble...well, it’s different from Lorenzo’s.”

“I bet.” Elizabeth pursed her lips and tilted her head to the side. “So...what can I do?”

“It seems silly, but...I don’t know, having a child with a man who...leads a life like this...I suppose I’m thinking about my choices. And...this is so intrusive—I’m sorry —”

“Skye...if you’re thinking about Zander being Cameron’s father, I mean...Zander died before Cameron was born—”

“Oh.” Skye shook her head. “No, I guess I was thinking about you and Jason Morgan. You...I remember that you were dating for a while. Before...” Her lips tightened. “When Lorenzo’s brother, Luis, was in Port Charles.”

“Ah.” Elizabeth leaned back. “Well, I mean, I guess you could call it dating, but we never...we never talked about family.” She tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear. “I never knew I wanted to be a mother until I got pregnant the first time, so it wasn’t in my head at all, to be honest. Honestly, Skye, Sam or Carly might be a better person to ask—or Robin.”

“Right. I’m sorry. I never should have—” Flustered, Skye started to stand, but Elizabeth sighed and put out her hand.

But none of those women would probably ever answer Skye’s question, even if she mustered the courage to ask it again. And maybe she wished someone had been there for her back when she’d been asking herself similar questions.

“Listen, I guess if I was honest with myself, the way Jason lives his life never bothered me the way it should have.”

Skye sat back down. “Oh?”

“I mean, yeah, it’s not...you know, my first choice. But it’s what he does. It’s what he did before we ever met. Before we were friends. And, I don’t know...” She bit her lip. “The worst things my life — they never had anything to do with Jason. I was...I was raped when I was a teenager.”

“Oh—”

“I’m married to a cop. And I believe in the law. I really do. I believe in the legal system. But the cops never caught my rapist. And he never paid for what he did to me. He went to jail for something else, but they couldn’t get me justice.” Elizabeth jerked her shoulder. “And look at Manny Ruiz. What did the system do for us there?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I guess the question you ask yourself, Skye, is if you’re pretending that the life Lorenzo leads has nothing to do with who you are when you’re together. Because you can ignore it for a long time, but not forever. And walking into a relationship with a man like Lorenzo...” She shrugged. “He’s living that life for a reason. What he does is a part of who he is. Otherwise, he’d be doing something else. It’s not all of it, but it’s part of it. So don’t ignore it. You have to be okay with it.”

Skye tilted her face to the side. “Is that what went wrong with you and Jason?” she asked softly. “You ignored it?”

Elizabeth exhaled slowly, looked at Cameron, who grinned at her, then looked back at Syke. “No, I accepted it. I mean, I fell in love with him taking care of him while he was recovering from a bullet wound. His enemies knew who I was, and they put a bomb in my studio. I’ve also been kidnapped and shot at.”

She pressed her lips together. “I never let my face change. I never flinched. But, you know, sometimes, it doesn’t matter what *you* do if the other person—” She sighed, slowly. It had been a long time since she’d thought of any of this. “It doesn’t matter how much you love someone. Not if they don’t love you back.” Her voice faltered slightly. “And he didn’t.”

“Oh,” Skye breathed. “Oh, I’m sorry—”

“No, no—” Elizabeth shook her head. “It’s okay. I mean, it was terrible for a long time, and I wish—God, I wish he’d told me. I had to figure it out on my own. But we’re okay now. We’re friends again. And I’m—I’ve got my little boy. And I’m...” She stretched her fingers out as if to emphasize her wedding ring. “Things turned out the way they were supposed to, I guess.”

She frowned slightly, looking back at the ring. That was the second time she’d said that this week.

Things had turned out the way they were supposed to. There was something wrong with that phrase. She didn’t know what exactly—

“I really am sorry to have pried, but—”

“But you’re about to become a mother,” Elizabeth finished. She smiled at Skye, a bit sadly. “There’s no question you shouldn’t ask if you want to be a good one. Being a mother—sometimes it makes you braver.” She looked at Cameron. He offered her a handful of applesauce, and she smiled.

And sometimes it made you even more of a coward — but that she kept to herself and Skye mercifully let the topic drop, and they talked for a few minutes about the hospital, about the charity benefit Skye was planning—

And then Elizabeth saw a flash in the window of Kelly’s. A face that disappeared almost as quickly as it had appeared.

Skye didn't see him, her back to the door, but Elizabeth had seen him. And it was the second time in three days she'd seen Manny Ruiz watching Skye. She swallowed hard.

That wasn't a coincidence. And she couldn't let it go.

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

Sam crossed her arms protectively in front of her as she stepped off the bottom step. She approached Jason as he sat at his desk — how much paperwork did a mobster even have? She wrinkled her nose over the thought as he turned to look at her.

"Hey." She perched on the edge of his desk. "So, I, um, feel bad about Saturday. You're right. I was...trying to pick a fight. And I'm sorry. I really am."

Jason sat back in the chair and looked at her. "I'm sorry, too. But I can't go back and...I can't undo it."

"No, I know. And, like, most of me gets it, you know? Like, you were trying to protect me. Why even bring it up if it wasn't true? It's just your bad luck..." She pursed her lips. "I don't know. I guess being mad at you means I don't really have to think about it? I like...not thinking about it."

"I know."

"And maybe it does bother me that Elizabeth Spencer knows. That she knew before me. I don't know why. I guess I don't want anyone to know."

"I shouldn't have—" Jason turned, took her hand in his. "I just—she told me the results were positive and I guess—I don't know—I knew I was going to have to tell you, then I thought maybe I wouldn't—I knew this would hurt you, Sam. That's the last thing I wanted."

"Yeah, so I guess I have to be a little grateful to Elizabeth for knocking some sense into you. It's nice that you have someone that can do that for you. I guess....you know, I didn't realize you were really friends. I mean, I knew you were once, but I thought it was over."

"We're not close," Jason offered with a shrug. "But we used to be. And I don't know, sometimes we can still talk to each other." He frowned when she just pressed her lips together. "Why—why does that bother you?"

"I guess I don't like thinking there's a woman out there that gets you. It's stupid, I know. But, like, she used to have a thing for you."

"Uh, yeah, well..." Jason cleared his throat. "All of that was a long time ago." He hesitated, wondering if he should add more because he could see that Sam was upset. He also knew it wasn't true that Elizabeth had had a thing for him—not the way she meant it. She made it sound like it had been one-sided.

But he didn't. He didn't know how to describe his relationship with Elizabeth. He never had. And this wasn't the time to start.

"What *are* you going to do about Alexis?" Jason asked finally.

Sam pursed her lips and frowned at him. But she allowed the change of subject. "I don't want Alexis to know. And I don't need any answers. Not anymore. Because, you know, they don't matter. She didn't want me. And it doesn't matter why Cody McCall did. He took me from someone who threw me away like garbage—"

"Sam, she was sixteen. Her father must have done all of that—"

"She still did it. And she never looked for me. All those connections—" Sam shook her head. "She could have found me. She didn't want me then, she doesn't want me now. It just—none of it matters. I guess—"

She tilted her head to the ceiling. "I don't know what I expected when I found my birth mother. I think...maybe I thought it would...all snap back into place, you know? Like I'd get the name, and I'd just—I'd feel like myself again. But knowing doesn't change anything."

Sam looked at him, met his eyes. "And if doing this job with Paulie makes me feel like myself again, then that's what I have to do."

"Okay."

"I just need to have a win, Jase. That's it. Just one win. I can do this. I'm good at this, you know. And I'll just—I *need* this."

"Okay," Jason repeated.

"But you're still not happy about it."

“It doesn’t—”

“C’mon, yeah, it does.” Sam slid off the desk and folded her arms again. “It matters that you don’t want me to do it. Why can’t you just let me have this?”

“I’m not telling you that you can’t,” Jason told her. “*You’re* the one making this a big deal. You said you need this. So go do it. It’s not my job to approve of what you do, Sam. You’re the one that has to live with it.”

“And I’m doing just fine,” she snapped. “I can sleep at night. And so can you. You’re no better than me—”

“I never said that I was—”

“Sure, but you think you are. You’re an honorable mobster, but I’m just a dirty con artist.” She scowled. “It’s bullshit. We’re both criminals. That’s what makes this work —”

“It’s not that simple—” Jason bit off his protest as his phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID, then answered the phone. “What’s up? Yeah. Yeah, okay. Stay there. I’ll meet you.” He hung up. “I have to go.”

“Jason—”

“We’ll—” Jason sighed. “We’ll talk later.”

When he’d left, she sighed and let herself drop like a stone onto the sofa. Talking later wouldn’t change anything. One way or another, Sam would get him to admit this damn double standard and figure out how to make him understand that she didn’t want to keep closing off a part of herself.

Not for anyone.

After another moment, she got up to get changed. She needed to take a walk and clear her head.

General Hospital: Patrick Drake’s Office

Lucky winced as he lowered himself into a chair and faced Patrick sitting at his desk, his face carefully blank—

As if he knew exactly why Lucky had called for an appointment a week sooner than Patrick had suggested.

“How’s your physical therapy going?” Patrick asked blandly as he opened Lucky’s file and pulled a pencil from a cup on his desk. “Did you want to schedule another MRI?”

“No, I—” Lucky took a deep breath. “I’m following the schedule my therapist wanted me, but it’s—it’s hard.” He leaned forward slightly to take the pressure from his back. Every inch of him felt like he was on fire.

“I know, but it’s necessary if you want to get back to full and active duty sooner rather than later.” Patrick sighed, then looked down at the file. “How’s the pain?” he asked finally, but he didn’t look up.

Because he had to know. Of course, the asshole knew exactly how bad Lucky felt.

“Unbearable,” Lucky told him. “I—I ran out of my prescription.”

Patrick sighed. “I...thought you might have. Look, Lucky—”

“I get why you’re—I get it, okay? And it pisses me off that I’m even doing this. This isn’t who I am, Patrick.” Lucky leaned forward even more, his voice pitched low, almost a growl. “I’m angry all the time because of the pain. I’m snapping at Elizabeth—I’m a terrible husband, a shitty stepfather—I’m in *pain* all, Patrick. And I just—I need some relief. Just a little bit.”

“I hear you, but the fact is...we have new dosage guidelines for opiates from the board, and I’m just...I’m not comfortable continuing to keep you on pain meds. You’ve developed a tolerance for the recommended dosage, and I’m just—I’m not going to increase it. You’ve also gone through this prescription too fast. I warned you —”

“I just—I’m working hard. I’m doing the program—”

“Did you call the pain clinic?” Patrick asked. When Lucky just glared at him, his doctor sighed. “They can help you manage the pain, get through the bad days. Get you through the therapy. You’re in a bad mood, Lucky, not just because of the pain, but you’re probably going through withdrawal.” He tipped his head to the side. “When did you run out?”

Lucky scowled. “Two days ago, but—”

“Yeah, that makes sense. It’s been four straight months of opiates, and two days without—”

“I’m not a fucking drug addict—”

“People rarely choose addiction,” Patrick said. His tone was kind, but Lucky just heard the asshole patronizing him as if he were a child. “And the number one way people develop one is through abuse of pain prescriptions.”

“Abuse?” Lucky shot his feet and grunted as fire danced up his spine. He took a deep breath, bracing his hands on the desk. “I took them the way I was told to—”

“If you took the recommended dose, Lucky, you’d still have half the bottle left. But you’re taking them when you feel pain. Not when the body can handle it.” Patrick also stood. “I’m sorry that you don’t agree with me. I really am. But it’s not responsible for me to continue giving you pain pills when you’re clearly developing a dependence. We need to get a handle on it now—”

“Fuck you. I’m a goddamn cop. I was injured in the line of duty, and you’re telling me I have to suffer just because I took a few extra pills now and again.” Lucky shook his head. “I’m not an addict. I’m just trying to get my life back—”

“I know. The pain clinic can help—”

“Fuck the clinic. I’m going to another doctor—”

“That’s your right. And maybe another doctor will see it differently. But they’ll be wrong. And they won’t be doing you any favors.” Patrick sighed. “Did you tell Elizabeth about the pain clinic—”

“No. And don’t you be telling her any of this bullshit about me being a drug addict. I’m the patient; don’t I have any goddamn privacy?”

“As your wife, she was allowed access to your records during your hospitalizations, but if you’re revoking that—”

“I am! I don’t need you filling her head with any of this. You’ll be getting a call from my next doctor. Because this is *bullshit*. Tony would have done this for me—”

“That’s probably true,” Patrick allowed with a shrug. “But he would have been wrong.

But you're free to get another opinion."

"That's exactly what I'm gonna do!" Lucky slammed the door behind him as he stormed out.

Elm Street Pier

Restless, Elizabeth sat on a bench, crossed her arms and stared out over the water. She just—she needed to clear her conscience about this. She would have told Jason what she'd seen over the phone, but he'd insisted on meeting her in person.

She wasn't sure if she really wanted to see him in person, which was crazy. She'd seen him a handful of times over the last few weeks—they could talk to each other like ordinary people again. There shouldn't be a reason for her to dread seeing Jason, of looking at his face.

Except for all the ways looking at him, talking to him suddenly felt more complicated than it had even a day earlier.

It wasn't just the fight with Lucky or the reminder from Emily that people still remembered that stupid Christmas party—and it wasn't the conversations they'd had about his lying to her about Sonny or that he'd taken her seriously about Manny —

None of that helped, but it was the conversation she'd had with Skye that morning, the mistake she should have stopped herself from making. She shouldn't have let herself remember the pain she'd felt at the end of their relationship or the agony of knowing her love for him hadn't been returned.

Remembering at all that she'd been in love with him, and he'd never felt the same way was something she didn't want or need in her life. Once this stuff with Manny was over, Elizabeth very much wanted to go back to pretending Jason Morgan was nothing more than her best friend's older brother.

"Elizabeth?"

She looked at the sound of Jason's voice as he stepped up from Pier 52; he must have parked at the Corinthos-Morgan warehouse. She got to her feet. "Hey. You really didn't need to come all the way down here—"

"I needed to get out of the house," Jason said but didn't elaborate. "You said you wanted to talk to me about Manny. What happened since yesterday?"

"I mean, I could be overreacting—I probably am—"

"Elizabeth," Jason interrupted before she could really pick up steam. "I told you. Whatever you see, you tell me. You let *me* decide if it's important."

"Right." She dragged her hand through her hair. "I was at Kelly's today—it's my day off, and I was supposed to have breakfast with Emily—she canceled again, by the way, so something is *really* wrong there—but Skye came over to ask me—" She stopped. Flushed. "To ask me something. It's not important."

Jason squinted. "It's not?"

"No." *Absolutely not.* "Anyway, we were talking for a while—I was facing the door, her back was to it—and I just—I saw Manny in the window. He was looking at us—at Skye, I mean. Not me. He has no reason to look at me. But then he disappeared. It's just—it's the second time—"

"Yeah, it's the second time you've caught him around Skye." Jason grimaced. "Are you sure it's...just Skye? That he's not *letting* you see him?"

"Oh." Elizabeth blinked. "I—I hadn't thought about that. Oh. Do you think he's... maybe he saw us at the hospital last week, and he's just—he wants to annoy you? Aren't there easier ways?"

"Yeah, but Manny plays games. It's his thing." Jason rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't like the idea of him using you to get at me. I mean, I don't doubt he's planning something against Skye." He paused. "He's not watching you any other time?"

"Uh—" She stared at him, her mouth dry for a moment as her heart began to race. "Wait. Wait. You think Manny—you're not kidding. There's—Jason, there are *easier* ways," she repeated. "Emily works at the hospital. Monica works there. They're actually—" She crossed her arms again, hiding her sweaty palms. Was she really having this conversation?

"Hey." He stepped forward, pitching his voice low. "I told you. I have guys on Manny. And I—" He grimaced. "I'd send one of my guys in to watch over you, just to make sure, but that's—Manny would know. And so would anyone else—"

"Which is a whole other problem." Elizabeth released a long breath. "Listen, I'm overreacting. It's about Skye. It has to be. I'm just—she's just talked to me twice. That's all it is. He's probably around her a lot more, and no one else is noticing."

“Yeah, probably.” Jason hesitated. “I don’t like taking the chance though that he’s doing something on purpose. Promise me you won’t confront him.”

“Not unless Skye’s in danger or someone else,” Elizabeth told him. Jason scowled, but she shook her head. “Look, if he, like, pulls out a knife or goes after him where I can see him—I’m—I can call you all I want, but it won’t be fast enough. I can’t let her—or anyone—get hurt—”

“It’s not that I doubt you’re brave enough to do something—”

“Don’t say brave when you really mean stupid.”

“I didn’t say you were stupid.” He hesitated. “Reckless, maybe—”

“Oh—” Her scowl deepened. She folded her arms and arched her brow. “You’re *going* to want a different word.”

Jason pinched his lips together. “Elizabeth—”

“You always do this—” She took a deep breath. “You always *did* this,” Elizabeth corrected, a bit more softly. “I’m not stupid, Jason. I’m not reckless. I know how to take care of myself. When Manny grabbed me last fall, I kept my cool, and I got myself out of that.”

“Elizabeth—” He exhaled slowly. “I’m sorry. I just don’t want you to get hurt. I know how much you care about other people. That’s all I meant. You care *too* much, and, sometimes, you jump in without thinking.”

“I—” She winced. “Okay. Yes, I do that.”

“That’s all I’m saying, Elizabeth.” He scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed. “Just—Look, maybe it won’t come to that.” Jason shifted. “I’m gonna go over Sonny’s ask him to do something.” He gestured to the bench. “Sit down for a minute. I don’t want anyone to overhear us.”

“Yeah, okay.” She sighed and sat down. She attempted to keep a few feet of space between them, but clearly, Jason didn’t seem to understand what she was trying to do. He slid closer, almost so that their thighs were pressed together.

This was more than she needed today. Not after that walk down memory lane with

Skye.

"I'm sure you're wondering why Manny is..." He sighed. "Still around."

"The thought has crossed my mind," Elizabeth said slowly, understanding that they were talking around something that Jason never *ever* spoke to her about. "But I figured...people are still watching him. If...he got hurt, you'd be the first...you and Sonny, I mean. So there's no point in doing...anything...until you've got a reason. You know, imminent danger or something."

Jason squinted at her. "Uh, yeah. I didn't—I didn't think—I mean—"

"Look, we don't have to say what we're talking about. We don't need to." She met his eyes. "But I get it, Jason. And you don't have to worry about me...saying anything." She stared down at her wedding band. "To anyone."

"I—" Jason pulled back slightly. "Thanks. But..." He trailed off and frowned at her.

"Why?" Elizabeth finished. She sighed. "I know it's insane, and I'm sure Lucky would think I'm...a bad wife, or whatever. But it's...I've always known who you are, Jason. And I know what I'm doing when I call you to tell you about Manny. I'm not an idiot."

"I never thought you were—"

"And it's—we haven't really had to have this conversation in a long time," Elizabeth said after a long moment, "but you don't have to worry about me. You can trust me, and I know that you'll handle the Manny situation. That's why I called you. You're taking me seriously. I don't *want* to be involved. He scares me."

She bit her lip, broke their eye contact, and looked back out over the lake. "Honestly, I'm terrified of him. And I'm terrified he'll hurt Skye. Or someone else. But I know I can trust you to take care of it. To care of her."

"*And* you," Jason pressed. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you either. I don't know if Manny is letting you see him on purpose, but I won't take any chances. Not with you."

"I know that." She looked at him again, their eyes holding. "Some things never change."

"No." A corner of his mouth hitched up in a slight smile. "No, they don't."

“I’m sorry to interrupt.”

A flat voice from the top of the stairs broke into their conversation, and Elizabeth blinked. She drew back, first just her head, then her entire body as she slid to one end of the bench.

Jason sighed and got to his feet. “Sam.”

“Talking about me *again*?” Sam demanded as she sauntered down the steps. “You looking for some more gossip?” she shot at Elizabeth, who slowly stood up.

“No,” Elizabeth said calmly. “I need to go. I dropped Cam off with my grandmother,” she told Jason, “but I want to spend the rest of my day with him.”

“I’ll call you,” he told her as she walked away, crossing over to Bannister’s Wharf before dropping out of sight. He turned his attention back to his fiancée. “We weren’t talking about you.”

“Oh, then why were you all curled up?” Sam demanded. “Practically drooling all over each other—”

Jason scowled. “What does—we were talking about Manny Ruiz, and I didn’t want anyone to hear us.”

Sam blinked, and some of the flushed color left her cheeks. “Manny? Oh. Elizabeth—is she watching him for you at the hospital?”

“Not officially. But she’s passing me any info she thinks I need to know. We’re friends, Sam. And I don’t want her to get hurt while she’s trying to help.”

“Oh,” she repeated. “I’m sorry. I just—”

“Yeah, well, I need to go. I need to go talk to Sonny. I’ll see you at home.”

“Jason, wait,” Sam called.

Her words were lost on the wind as he walked away from her and didn’t look back.

Greystone Manor: Living Room

Jason was still irritated after his brief encounter with Sam and more worried about Elizabeth than he had been already when he arrived at Sonny's. Then he was told by Max that he had to wait in the foyer because Sonny was busy.

He was tired of Sonny ditching meetings and avoiding him. It was one thing when it was penny-ante shit like the Escobars, but Manny Ruiz was a real threat. People were in actual danger.

Jason frowned at the guard. "Didn't you tell him what it was about?"

"You know..." Max cleared his throat, rubbed his hand over his chest, then tugged at his tie. "You know I did, but, ah, maybe I didn't do it loud enough. Or you know, I'm not good at remembering things—"

"Max."

The guard offered a sheepish smile. "I told him, Jase, but he said he was in the middle of something—"

Something more important than the psychopath that was currently stalking the halls of the hospital. Maybe Manny wasn't threatening anyone Sonny gave a damn about, but if there was even the slightest chance the asshole was going to go after Skye or Elizabeth—Jason wasn't going to let him get away with it.

Skye wasn't part of his family, but she mattered to Emily. His grandmother had adored her. And she was still considered part of the Quartermaine family.

And Elizabeth—

Well, her protection was non-negotiable. She was taking a chance to keep them informed about Manny, and Jason wasn't going to let her dangle in the wind. She had a little boy that depended on her.

And she just *mattered*. He wasn't going to let her down.

Finally, after nearly five minutes, Sonny jerked open the foyer door and gestured for Jason to come in. Jason stalked past him as his partner dragged his hand through his hair, the usually meticulous strands disheveled.

"What the hell were you doing?" Jason demanded as he spun on his heel to glare at Sonny. "I called you twenty minutes ago. I told you it was about Manny Ruiz."

“Yeah, but you said it wasn’t an emergency—”

“Not an imminent one, but—” Jason shook his head. “Never mind. Elizabeth told me yesterday that she caught Manny following Skye around the hospital. And then I just saw her a little while ago. She saw Manny hanging around Skye again today.”

Sonny stared at him for a long moment before arching a brow. “And? *This* is what you came over for? To tell me Manny is staring at a woman? I’ve seen Skye. She’s good looking.”

Jason squinted. “*And* she’s carrying Lorenzo Alcazar’s kid. The same guy Manny blames for his father’s death. For his brother’s death. He hates Alcazar more than he hates us. So yeah, it matters that Manny is following her around.”

“Maybe he’s looking for Alcazar’s weak spot.” Sonny shrugged as he walked past Jason to pour himself a drink. “And what is Elizabeth calling *you* for? She’s married to a cop. She should be bugging him.”

Jason didn’t know what to do with Sonny’s reaction. “There’s also the problem that he might be letting Elizabeth catch him on purpose.”

“Well, why would that matter? How would Manny know that would do him any good?” Sonny shook his head. “I get it. You’re worried about her. But Manny doesn’t know the two of you were friends. And that was ages ago.” He smirked as he sipped his bourbon. “There’s like five people left that remember, and none of them are our enemies.”

“Why...” Jason hesitated. “Why are you brushing this off? Even if it’s nothing, we need to stay on top of it. We’ve been wondering why Ruiz stuck around Port Charles. Maybe he’s going after Skye. And I was at the hospital last week. Manny saw me with Elizabeth—”

“Yeah? That’s weird. What’re you doing hanging around a cop’s wife?” Sonny wanted to know. He sat on the sofa, leaning back and lounging. “Did you break up with Sam, and I missed it?”

“No—but Lucky already told her there’s nothing he can do about it. Elizabeth is worried. She knows Skye. And Skye is pregnant.”

“Tell Elizabeth to stay out of it. And Skye can get Alcazar to protect her. It’s not *our* problem. Manny comes for us, that’s different. But we don’t need to be bringing

problems down on us right now. Not when things are running smoothly.”

“You mean because the Escobars are sticking to Courtland Street? You think that’ll last?” Jason scoffed. “And if Manny goes after Skye, people are gonna notice. Maybe he’ll come after us next.”

“And maybe he’s just hanging around for revenge. Look, if it bothers you so much, but another guy at the hospital. Maybe someone to just follow Elizabeth around. You seem to be mostly worried about her.” Sonny lifted his brows, then stood back up. “Is there something I should know there? Why are you hanging around her again? I repeat. She’s a cop’s wife, and her loyalties are different now. How do you know she’s not trying to get you to do something Lucky can arrest you for?”

“Are you...” The word *crazy* lingered on Jason’s tongue, but he swallowed it before he said it. “That’s not something Elizabeth would do. She came to me, Sonny. And I don’t like the idea of Manny using her. Yeah, most people don’t know—” He hesitated. “Most people don’t remember—”

He simply didn’t know how to put it into words. People didn’t know that he and Elizabeth had been close? That she’d once been the best way to get to him? For several years, only she, Emily, and Michael had mattered to him.

“Most people don’t remember,” Jason said finally. “But most *isn’t* no one. And all Manny has to do is ask the right person.”

“So, stay away from Elizabeth.” Sonny shrugged. “I’m not saying you’re wrong about Manny going after Skye. I’m saying I don’t know what you want *me* to do. We agreed that going after Manny while the PCPD is still watching him so closely will just bring crap on us we don’t need. Right now, he’s laying low.”

“So what? We wait for him to hurt someone—”

“I’m not in the business of saving people who don’t matter to me,” Sonny said flatly. “Skye is Alcazar’s problem. Not mine. Elizabeth gives a damn so much, maybe she should call him.”

“Fine.” Jason waited a moment before he turned to leave. “I don’t know what the hell has been distracting you lately, but I need you to get it together.”

“What does *that* mean?” Sonny demanded.

“It means that you’re not paying attention. You broke at least two promises to be with

the boys, and you haven't been showing up to meetings with me."

Jason shook his head. "Skye doesn't matter to you, fine. But she matters to people in *my* life. To Emily, to my grandmother—she didn't ask for a psycho to target her. I'm not going to abandon her—or Elizabeth—because they don't matter to you. Manny Ruiz and his crazy family came to Port Charles because of us. Because of Alcazar. That makes it our problem."

"Then go solve it. What do you need me for?"

Jason didn't answer that question out loud as he left Sonny in his living room and left the estate. But he was starting to ask himself that same question.

Lucky & Elizabeth's Apartment: Living Room

"Cameron, for the last time, you are not supposed to climb the walls," Elizabeth said as she dragged her toddler off the back of the chair he'd pushed against the wall. "What did you think you were going to do?"

"I tape my hands." Cameron showed her his little palms and grinned. "I climb like Biderman!"

"You fall like a human boy—" Elizabeth grimaced as someone knocked on her door. She tossed Cameron onto the sofa as he giggled. "You try to climb those walls again, buddy, I'm gonna tape you to your bed."

She opened the door, frowning when she saw Sam in the hallway. "Hey. I—" She frowned. She didn't even know Sam knew where she lived. "Hi."

"Look, Jason told me you're helping him with Manny." Sam pursed her lips. "That's fine. I'm glad. I hate him. But—" She looked away, then met Elizabeth's eyes again. "But that's all, okay? I don't want you talking to him about me."

"We—we haven't—"

"Really? Because I know you know." Sam folded her arms. "*Don't* tell anyone."

"I wasn't going to—" Elizabeth shook her head. "Sam, we haven't talked about it since that first day—and I'm—I'm sorry. I never would—"

"Whatever. You and Jason aren't friends. You weren't before any of this, and you're

married to a cop. So you should just remember that.”

“Uh, okay—” Elizabeth frowned as Sam stalked away.

“Mommy? Who that?” Cameron tugged on her pant leg. “Can I have popsick?”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth shook her head, then smiled down at her son. “Yeah, let’s go get some Popsicles.” She closed the door and put Sam out of her mind entirely.

Chapter Five

*And I don't blame ya dear
For running like you did all these years
I would do the same, you best believe
And the highway signs say we're close
But I don't read those things anymore
I never trusted my own eyes
- Stubborn Love, The Lumineers*

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

General Hospital: Break Room

“Oh, Bobbie, I’m so glad I caught you.”

Bobbie Spencer turned from the coffee pot and offered Elizabeth a warm smile. “Hey, sweetie.” She kissed her cheek. “How are you doing? We haven’t caught up in a few weeks.”

She mixed sugar into the coffee she poured. “How’s surgery?”

“A little boring. It’s been a lot of paperwork so far,” Elizabeth confessed. She folded her arms, leaned back against the fridge. “Patrick wants me to be familiar with a lot of the complications, to know the procedures before he’ll start letting me scrub in to observe or assist.”

“Makes sense.” Bobbie’s lips curved into a smile. “You could still change your mind. We need a nurse down in the ER—”

“I know, I know. But I have better hours upstairs, and that matters right now.” Elizabeth hesitated. “Listen, I wanted to ask you what your schedule was like. Gram is leaving for Memphis later this week, and she picks up Cameron from daycare a few nights.”

“Oh, yeah?” Bobbie sipped her coffee. “What’s Lucky doing?”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together, looked away. “Um—well, he’s doubling up on his

physical therapy. You know Patrick didn't give him a return date yet, and, uh—" She tucked her hair behind her ears. "I can pay you—"

"Stop it. We're family." Bobbie waved it away. "I was just wondering why Lucky wasn't jumping at the chance to spend a little more time with Cam." She tilted her head. "Have you guys started the adoption process yet?"

"Oh." Elizabeth laughed nervously, looking down. "No, no. We're—we're, um, holding off on that for a little while. There are, uh, filing fees. And you know, Lucky's his stepfather right now, so—" She stopped. "When things calm down," she said finally. "We're going to revisit it then."

"I see." Bobbie sat down at the table, nodded. "Well, I have Carly's boys a few times a week — to give Leticia a few free evenings while Carly works. She bought into the Metro Court, did you know?"

"I saw something about that. So, maybe Lulu or one of her friends could babysit?" Elizabeth frowned. "Or do you think they'll—"

"No, what I was going to say is that it might be good for Cameron to play with the boys. He and Morgan are a few months apart, and Michael does a good job with younger kids. I can probably give you two or three nights a week right now." Bobbie raised her brows. "How many did you need?"

"That'll work for now. Thank you so much. And I love the idea of Cameron playing with kids his age. I should get back to work—"

"Elizabeth?"

She turned back at the door to look at her aunt by marriage. "Yeah?"

"Is...everything okay?"

Elizabeth forced a smile on her face. "It's fine. Thanks again, Bobbie. My break is over."

General Hospital: Hallway

Patrick frowned when he saw Lucky pacing the hallway outside of his office. "Lucky? Did I forget an appointment?"

“No—” Lucky huffed. “I’m sorry. I know that I was—” He clenched his fists at his side and took a deep breath. “I know I was out of line at my last appointment. Do you have a minute?”

“I have a few before I have to go down for rounds.” Patrick unlocked his office and gestured for Lucky to come in. “How’s the pain?”

“Worse than when I left the hospital,” Lucky admitted. He cleared his throat. “Because I’m out of the pain meds and I was hoping—”

“You weren’t able to find another doctor?” Patrick leaned over his desk and dug Lucky’s chart from a pile on his desk. “I told you, Lucky. I’m not prescribing you any more.” He flipped it open, just to refresh his memory. “I mean, you’ve been in and out of the hospital for a while—and it looks like the train accident wasn’t the first time you’d been prescribed the oxy.”

“Uh...no, I had it after the coma last year.” Lucky rubbed his chest. “I had a rough year—”

“Shot in the chest, a stroke, impaled by a pole—” Patrick nodded. “Yeah, I get it, Lucky. I really do. You’ve been on oxycontin off and on for a *year*.” He hesitated. “I didn’t have the earlier records the last time we talked. When you told me about the other injuries, I got curious. You never...”

He met Lucky’s eyes. “You never went off the oxy, did you? You kept asking for refills, and the doctor kept refilling it. At the same dosage.”

“Because I’m *not* addicted. I just need to get through the day—those pills were why I was able to get back to work—I have a family—” Lucky scowled. “What the *hell* are you accusing me of?”

“Nothing. But knowing that you’ve been on these meds for a year now?” Patrick shook his head. “I’m not writing a refill. I haven’t changed my mind—”

“Bullshit! You weren’t my doctor last year! You have no right to judge me!” Lucky grabbed Patrick by the shirt and shook him. Despite Patrick’s height and health, he merely arched a brow as if curious enough to see where this would go.

“I’m a fucking cop! I got injured in the line of duty! I need to get back to work! I need to get through physical therapy! You have to refill—”

“You need to go to the pain management clinic.” Patrick looked down at the hands

holding his scrubs. “You gonna let me go, or do I have to call for security?”

“Fuck you!” Lucky spat. He shoved Patrick away. “You think you know what it’s like to be me? I was shot in the chest! I nearly died! I got a pole shoved through me—I’m lucky to walk! *I did that! I got back on my feet!*”

“You did. And maybe you’ll do it again. But not with those pain meds. A year is long enough, Lucky.” Patrick reached for his notepad. He scribbled something down, ripped off the sheet, then handed it to Lucky. “Here—”

Hoping it was a refill, Lucky snatched it out of his hands. Blood pounded in his ears as he realized Patrick had just, once again, written down the address of the pain management clinic. “You son of a bitch!”

He swung out with his left hand, intending to break apart his pretty face, but Patrick quickly sidestepped him. Lucky fell onto the desk, then rolled onto the floor, panting and wincing from the pain.

“You have a problem,” Patrick said quietly. “You need to get it under control. You have a beautiful wife, a son—”

Lucky shoved himself to his feet, wiped his mouth, and glared at him. “You *better* not be filling my wife’s head with this shit! I am not an addict! You have no right to tell her!”

“I haven’t.” Patrick grimaced. “I wish I had when I first took you off the pills. But you revoked permission, and I have to respect that. But Lucky—” He shook his head. “You keep going down this path, and Elizabeth will find out sooner or later.”

“Well, it won’t be from you!” Lucky tore the address into pieces and let them drop on the ground. “Go to hell.”

He staggered out of the office and made it to a nearby restroom. Lucky splashed water on his face, trying to get himself under control, to block out the burning fire in his back. He just wanted his life back.

And that was never going to happen unless he could make the pain go away.

General Hospital: Hallway

Elizabeth slid the last chart into the slot on the door and breathed a sigh of relief that she was finally done checking every last patient under her care. They were

stable, their meds were up to date—

She had been nervous about taking over the post-surgery ward as part of her training, but it had gone pretty well so far, and— Elizabeth checked her watch with a smile. It was time for her break.

She took the service stairs down a flight to get to the locker room—she wanted to call Cameron’s daycare and check on him. She never got to spend enough time with her little guy, and every minute counted.

But when she retrieved her phone from her purse, she frowned down at it. She had three missed calls from Lucky and one from Jason. She bit her lip, then dialed her husband first because that was the right thing to do.

“Hey—”

“Where the hell have you been?”

Elizabeth flinched at the anger in his voice. “I’m at work, Lucky. I don’t have my phone while I’m on shift. If you need me—”

“You weren’t at work! I just looked for you there! Nadine said you weren’t there! That you didn’t work there anymore!”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. “Lucky, I don’t work on the Pediatrics floor anymore. Don’t you remember? I got—I got promoted. To surgery. I’m on the sixth floor. Are you still here—”

“I—” He was quiet for a long moment. “I’m sorry,” he said, his voice calmer now. “I forgot. I’ve had a lot on my mind. No, I went home.”

“Okay—”

“I’ll see you later.”

The line went dead, and Elizabeth just stared at it for a long moment. She thought about running upstairs to ask Nadine what the hell happened, but...

She really didn’t want to know. Lucky had forgotten about the promotion that they’d argued about only a few days ago—her promotion which was the whole reason she couldn’t change her shifts around—

Pushing Lucky and all of it out of her head, she dialed Jason's number. Maybe he had good news—she hadn't seen the creepy janitor once today.

"Hey. You called? I'm sorry. I'm at work, and I don't have my phone on the floor—"

"It's okay," Jason said. "I wanted to know when your break was. Or ask if you can meet after work."

"Oh." Elizabeth blinked. "Is everything okay? I'm—I'm on break right now, but—"

"I'm in the area, so I can be there in ten minutes. Is that enough? I'll meet you on the roof."

"Yeah, uh, ten minutes is fine." She hung up the phone, then shook her head. It seemed like the day for weird calls. She grabbed her coat, hung it over her arm as she shoved her cell phone into the pockets of her scrubs, and closed her locker.

When she left the room, she stopped still as Manny Ruiz exited a hospital room on the other side of her. He flashed her a smile. "Hey, Elizabeth. It's nice to see you."

"Uh, hello—"

"Have a nice day."

Then he wheeled his cart down the hall, whistling as he walked. Elizabeth fought the urge to shudder, then went back to the service stairs. She didn't want him to follow her to the elevator and know where she was going.

General Hospital: Roof

As she stepped out onto the roof, she pulled her coat on—the winds were still brutal at this time of year, and she didn't know what the hell Jason was thinking, asking her to meet up here.

She blew warm air into her hands, rubbed them together. "Just because he can't feel cold doesn't mean the rest of us are so lucky," she muttered. She glanced over her shoulder as the heavy steel door to the hospital opened, and Jason stepped out.

"Hey—"

“Hey. What’s going on?” She walked towards him, shoving her hands in her pockets—she’d forgotten to grab her gloves. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I just—” Jason grimaced. “I’m sorry. I forgot how cold it is—I just didn’t want Manny to see us meeting.”

“Oh.” She shoved a piece of hair away from her face. “Fair enough. I hadn’t heard from you since the pier, so I guess—” She managed a half-smile. “I guess I thought the problem was almost over.”

“Yeah, I wanted it to be,” Jason admitted. “But Sonny—” He shook his head. “He doesn’t think we should do anything.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth drew her brows together. “Oh. Okay. I guess—well, maybe he’s right. Maybe I’ve overreacting—” When she saw him look away, she paused and thought about what he’d said. “He doesn’t think you should do anything,” she repeated. “That’s not the same thing as nothing needs to be done.”

“Skye is Alcazar’s problem,” Jason managed to say, though it looked as if every word had to be forced from his throat. “And—” He broke off, looked at the ground.

“I’m married to a cop,” Elizabeth finished. “So, you don’t need to do anything about either of us.”

“I didn’t—” He shook his head. “It’s not what *I* think, but—”

“But it’s what *Sonny* thinks.” She closed her eyes. Oh, man. Things never changed. “Well, that’s that. Thanks. Maybe I’ll talk to Alcazar—”

Elizabeth started past Jason, but he grabbed her elbow—stopped her from leaving. She turned back to face him. “What?”

“I know what you’re thinking—”

“You really don’t—”

“I told Sonny—”

“Jason—” Elizabeth held up her hands, palms out. “Look, I really get it. It doesn’t matter that Luke and Sonny were business partners, that Lucky was brought up in this world, too. You know? He’s a cop now. And I married him. I get that for Sonny, it

puts a huge dent in my credibility. I really do understand that.”

“Elizabeth—”

“And he doesn’t know Skye. Other than when she testified at your murder trial and tried to have Brenda convicted of murder—” Elizabeth winced. “She’s not someone who matters to him. And—” It went without saying that Elizabeth hadn’t really ever mattered to Sonny either. “I *get* it,” she repeated. She bit her lip, then shook her head. “I should get back to work—”

“What were you going to say?” Jason pressed, laying his hand on the door so she couldn’t open it. “Elizabeth—”

She hesitated, then sighed. “Honestly? It doesn’t surprise me.” She met his eyes, saw him frown. “It’s just—” She looked away. “I thought you were worried, too. When I told you I trusted you to take care of Manny—I don’t know. It seemed like it mattered to you.”

“It does—”

“Not enough,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “I don’t know *what* made me think things would be different this time.

Jason blinked, stepped back with a shake of his head. “This time?” he echoed.

“Sonny gave you an order,” she said softly. “And you’re going to follow it. Nothing’s changed at all, has it?”

He swallowed hard—and she knew now that Jason knew exactly what she meant. He’d remembered it when they’d talked briefly about Sonny faking his death, but she wasn’t sure how much of it had stayed with him.

“Elizabeth—”

“I think maybe I wondered...I wondered because of what happened with Courtney,” she said slowly, even as her brain screamed *shut the hell up!* “And then Sam’s daughter. I thought—but I get it now.”

“What—” He clenched his fists at his side. “What do you get?” he asked finally.

“Sonny gives you an order, and you follow it. Unless it matters enough for you to do

what you think is right.” She smiled, even as her vision blurred. “And this doesn’t.” She took a deep breath. “Skye doesn’t matter.”

She didn’t say anything else, but the unspoken conclusion hung between them, heavy in the chilled air.

I don’t matter.

“That’s not—”

“I was wrong back then. When I said you would always be Sonny’s enforcer.” He closed his mouth, pressed his lips together. “First, last—maybe. But not always. So, I guess there’s that.”

When he said nothing else, she nodded. “I’m going back to work. Thanks for letting me know.”

General Hospital: Lab

Robin glanced up when her door crashed open, and an angry neurosurgeon stalked in. “Hello,” she said blandly. “Having a bad day?”

She made a note with her pencil as she awaited whatever snark Patrick would offer—their usual routine. Then he just sat on the stool next to her and glared at the wall, she set down her pencil.

“What’s wrong?”

“Patient confidentiality is what’s wrong. You should never have friends.” Patrick glared at her. “This is *your* fault.”

“Because I encouraged you to be nice to people?” Robin asked. “Because I didn’t tell you to make *friends*.”

“No, but—” He scowled, dragged his hands through his hair. “I can’t tell you. You’re not a doctor on his case.”

“No, but I’m not stupid. And if I *guess* it, then you’re in the clear.” She pursed her lips. “You have a total of two friends in Port Charles. Elizabeth and me.”

“I have *other* friends—”

“Frat brothers scattered to the corners of the Earth, yes, I know.” Robin tipped her head to the side. “Something wrong with Lucky’s case? And he’s not telling Elizabeth? But it’s something she should know?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that.” Patrick grimaced. “But I really can’t deny it.” He stared at her sullenly. “He revoked her access to his files. Not that she cared, I bet. But it meant I could talk to her. And now I wish I’d said this thing to her before he revoked.”

“But you didn’t.” Robin hesitated. “I’ve known Lucky for years. He’s a good guy—”

“Who just took a swing at me—” Patrick shook his head. “I’m sure he’s a good guy who has had a lot of rotten luck. But he’s being a dick about it—”

“He really went after you? Did you call security?”

Patrick snorted. “Please. He’s got the strength of a fly right now. Anyway, can you think of a way around this whole friend thing? Is there a loophole? Because if I’m right, Elizabeth really should know this. As a human being on this planet, I want her to know—”

“Patrick, can you just—” Robin wrinkled her nose, then sighed. “Look, Elizabeth works at the hospital, so she knows about confidentiality. And she lives with him, so whatever he’s dealing with, she’ll figure out. The only loophole—which I’m sure you know—is imminent danger. If you know something about your patient—”

“I can contact the authorities if I think he’s going to hurt someone, himself, or otherwise break the law. Yeah.” Patrick flicked a pencil across the desk. “No such luck. I think he’s just making a dumb decision.” He paused. “I think...if things don’t change, I think it might be something that could get him in trouble down the line.”

“Okay.” Robin nodded. “So, we wait. We pay attention. I like Elizabeth, too. I haven’t worked with her as much as you have, but she was always a good person.” She touched Patrick’s hand. “I’m sorry we can’t do more.”

“I just—” Patrick shook his head. “There are things that I’m seeing that remind me...” He met her eyes. “They remind of my dad. And sometimes, when my dad got into moods, you stayed clear of him. And that’s all I can say.”

Robin sat back and swallowed the initial protest that she knew Lucky, knew that he wouldn’t do those things. “We’ll keep our eye out, Patrick,” she repeated. “And we’ll

stick by Elizabeth. We'll be her friend. That's all we can do for now."

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

Sam looked at the clock on the mantelpiece and frowned before picking up her phone to dial Jason's number. He'd said he'd be early tonight, and she wanted to talk to him—wanted to clear the air. Things had been tense and weird between them since their fight over the maternity test, and Sam wanted things to just go back to the way they had been.

She felt slightly mortified that she'd acted that way on the pier yesterday when she'd seen Jason sitting close to Elizabeth. They'd looked so...intimate. They'd been making eye contact, their bodies turned towards one another—

Sam had been sure something was going on she didn't understand—but then he'd told her it was about Manny, and Elizabeth had looked positively bewildered by the suggestion of anything else. Whatever weird flirtation they might have had in the past—it was over. Jason had told her that—

The door opened, and Sam turned around to see Jason walk in. "Hey, I was hoping—"

She stopped when Jason didn't look at her. He hung up his coat, then put his gun in the lockbox in the closet. "What's wrong?"

"What?" Jason frowned and shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

"You just—you look like something's wrong." Sam folded her arms. "I know we've been fighting, but—" She bit her lip. "You said you were going to talk to Sonny yesterday. I was asleep when you got home. Is—did something happen?"

"I—" Jason took a deep breath. "Maybe. I don't know. Elizabeth thinks Manny is watching Skye at the hospital, but Sonny doesn't seem to think—" He rubbed his eyebrow. "He doesn't think it's our problem."

"Manny isn't your problem?" Sam repeated skeptically. "How does he figure that? Is that what you and Elizabeth were talking about yesterday?"

"Uh, yeah. She'd just—she's worried. But Sonny thinks Skye is Alcazar's problem, and—"

"Since Alcazar decided to start taking over in Miami, he's fallen off your radar, right?" Sam shrugged. "Maybe Sonny's right. Alcazar should have a guard on his

girlfriend. Especially since she's pregnant. I mean, are you surprised that's what he thinks?"

"No," Jason admitted. "No, I guess I'm not. I just—I think Elizabeth was disappointed," he continued, his voice dropping just slightly as he'd continued speaking. Sam squinted at that, trying to understand his shift in tone.

"Because she'd thought you'd ride to Skye's rescue?" Sam asked. "Well, I mean, she doesn't get it. Right? I mean, you can't do anything crazy to draw attention to you, the PCPD is still watching Manny, and Skye's the one walking around without a guard."

"Yeah—" Jason rubbed his chest, absently. "Yeah, I know. That's all true. But—"

"But you still feel responsible for Manny," Sam said slowly. "Because you didn't kill him when you had the chance. So anything he does is on you." She wrinkled her nose. "Jason, that's kind of insane. I mean, Manny's done crap to a lot of people. Is *all* of it your fault?"

"No. No, but—"

"He's not coming after anyone you care about, is he?" Sam asked, arching her brows. "I mean, it's not like Sonny is telling you to abandon someone who matters. Skye isn't even really part of your family. Why do you care about her?"

"I don't, really," Jason said. But he frowned at her. "But Lila and Emily do. Alan does."

"Fair enough." Sam tilted her head. "You told Elizabeth what Sonny said?"

"Uh, yeah." Jason looked away, looked towards the desk. He put his hands on the back of the chair "I talked to her today. I just came from the hospital." He glanced at Sam for a moment, then looked away again.

Sam straightened her shoulders. "Jason, you said Elizabeth was someone you trusted, right? I mean, it's not like she's trying to get you to do something that you could get in trouble for to help her husband?"

Jason wrinkled his nose, almost in disgust. "No—no, that's not—she wouldn't do that. She's scared of Manny. Lucky already told her they couldn't do anything. So she's..."

“I just—I guess I’m trying to figure out why you’re so....” Sam wiggled her fingers. “So weird right now. You agree with me, you agree with Sonny — this isn’t your problem. Except for the fact you always take on the weight of the world. So, what, are you upset because you disappointed Elizabeth Spencer? I didn’t realize you were so close.”

“We’re—we’re not,” Jason said after a long moment. “But that doesn’t mean I like letting her down.”

He said this more to the surface of the desk because he didn’t look up when he said it. Sam narrowed her eyes. “Courtney said something weird to me once.”

Jason looked up, frowned at her. “What—”

“She said that no matter what,” Sam said, folding her arms, “I was never going to measure up to Elizabeth. I thought it was a weird thing to say at the time, and I mostly forgot it. I met Elizabeth later that summer, and I just got this weird vibe that the two of you had been something once.”

“Sam—” Jason exhaled slowly. “Once. A long time ago. It didn’t—It didn’t go anywhere,” he said, almost as if he were forcing the words out. “But we were always friends. We’re just—we’re not that close anymore.”

“But you asked her to run my test—”

“Because I knew I could trust her. And I’d already told her about the orderlies at the hospital watching Manny. Sam, it’s not—” Jason paused. “It’s not more complicated than that.”

“Okay.” Sam pursed her lips. “Then I’m sorry you disappointed a friend, Jason, but she doesn’t live in this world. She doesn’t get it. I mean, do you think Sonny’s wrong about not getting involved?”

“I think there are good reasons not to,” Jason said slowly. “But that doesn’t change the fact that Manny Ruiz is a dangerous psycho, and we’d all be better off if he were gone.”

“You’re not Superman,” Sam said flatly. “It’s not your job to fix the world.”

Jason looked at her for a long moment, and she had a strange thought she’d said the exact wrong thing. “I’m gonna head to the warehouse. We’re expecting a shipment.”

“Jason—” Sam just stared at him as he took down his gun, tucked it into his jeans, then put on his coat. “You just got home—”

“I’ll see you in the morning.”

“But—”

The door closed behind him, and she scowled. Just what the hell had gotten into him lately?

Chapter Six

*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, Jasmine Thompson

Friday, March 24, 2006

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

Jason made some final notations in the warehouse ledgers, grimacing as he thought about the tax records and paperwork that still needed to be dealt with before the tax deadline in April. They'd never hired another business manager after Benny Abrams had died three years earlier, not a permanent one anyway. It had fallen to Jason to deal with the taxes which he usually liked.

He liked working with numbers. They were straight forward and always added up or divided into the same thing. You didn't have to read between the lines or look for nuances or subtleties that he'd never been that great at grasping. Maybe, if things had been different after the accident, he'd have been an accountant.

Benny used to tell him that all the time and Jason shook his head at the memory. He didn't think about the man all that much anymore except during tax season, but he still missed him.

He looked over, saw Sam take a seat on the sofa with the tabloids and a cup of coffee, her usual morning routine. They hadn't spoken much since he'd gone to the warehouse on Tuesday night, and Jason was honestly relieved by that. If they weren't talking, they weren't fighting—

And she wasn't asking questions about his past with Elizabeth, questions he hadn't asked himself in nearly four years.

Sonny gives you an order, and you follow it.

He didn't know how to explain to himself or to her that he didn't like disappointing Elizabeth, of knowing that she thought he was better than he obviously was. Sam and Sonny were right — Manny wasn't their problem anymore, and Skye's safety was something Alcazar should worry about, not him.

Unless it matters enough for you to do what you think is right.

He rolled his shoulders and turned to another stack of invoices to look over. He had men watching Manny at the hospital, so there was no point in worrying. If Manny made a move that concerned them, then he'd be in a position to act.

And this doesn't.

Sam was right, Elizabeth didn't understand his life. She never had.

"Jason."

Jason frowned and turned to Sam. He hadn't even heard her walk across the room. He put down his pencil and turned to look at her. "What's wrong?" he asked as he took in her dark, concerned eyes.

Sam sighed, looked down at the paper she held, then set it on top of his paperwork. He furrowed his brow, then looked at the front page she'd given him. His sister's face stared back at him along with the profile of Sonny—as Emily was opening the door to him into a room.

Jason swallowed hard as he picked up the paper, then looked at Sam. "What—"

"She signed into the Cosmopolitan Hotel as Mr. and Mrs. Michael Smith," Sam told him. She leaned against the edge of his desk. "She arrived first, then Sonny. The clerk recognized Sonny, then went upstairs and took the photo. He knew who Emily was."

Of course he did. The Quartermaine heiress and the mafia don. Who could resist that story? The clerk had probably sold the photo for more money than he'd make in a year working behind the desk at a hotel. "How long were they there?" he asked flatly. He could read the story himself, but he had a feeling it would only make him angrier.

"I don't know. The clerk waited a few hours. They didn't leave and even ordered room service. She registered with cash—he must have sold the photo in the middle of the night to get it into the paper—" Sam broke off as Jason's fingers clenched, crinkling the paper. "Jason—"

Jason carefully set the newspaper down, took a deep breath. His hands were nearly trembling as rage boiled in his veins. His little sister. His vulnerable little sister who had been raped and cheated on last year. Whose husband had left her for another woman. Who had been attacked by Carly during her nervous breakdown.

Sonny had slept with Jason's sister. His much younger sister.

"Did the paper say whether it was the first time," Jason demanded. He shoved his chair back and got to his feet. "How long?"

"According to the clerk, it was the fourth time they'd signed in, and they'd always stayed the night before then." She bit her lip. "Jason, I know you're angry. I get it. I know Emily's had a bad year. She got close to Sonny last fall when she stayed in his guest house. You weren't there. You couldn't be, I know that. But—"

"That makes it okay?" Jason demanded, temper licking at his throat. He swallowed hard, shook his head. "I'm sorry, I—"

There was a furious knocking on the door as his sister's voice called out to him. "Jason? Jason? Please answer—"

Jason strode to the door and yanked it open to find Emily standing there, her eyes rimmed with red, her hair disheveled. "Emily."

She looked past him to find the newspaper on his desk, then turned her eyes back to him, her brown eyes distressed. "I tried to—I tried to get here—I didn't think you read the *Sun*."

"He doesn't, I do." Sam picked up the paper, rolled it up, and tucked it under her arm as she crossed them. "Are you okay?"

"N-No, not really. Um, Mom reads the *Sun*, so you can imagine how much fun breakfast was—" Emily clenched her hands together in a fist, pressed it to her chest. "You're not saying anything, Jase."

"What do you want me to say?" Jason demanded, his words short and clipped. "Is the paper lying?"

"No, no, it's all true, b-but I need you to understand why I didn't say anything. I knew—God, I knew how everyone would act, but I'm not a kid anymore, you know? And this—with Sonny—it just *happened*—"

“It needs to stop.”

The words were out of his mouth before Jason even realized what he was going to say. Emily’s eyes widened, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sam’s mouth open slightly. Because he never told anyone what to do. Not like that.

“It—” Emily took a deep breath. “You just don’t understand, okay? Sonny and I—it’s real, you know? A-And I know it’s going to take some adjustments, but—”

“It won’t because it’s ending. Today.” His voice sounded rusty, even alien to him. He knew he was doing this wrong—that he was saying the wrong thing. His sister’s pale face flushed with color as her shock and worry dissolved into irritation.

“*You* don’t get to decide that. I am an adult, Sonny is an adult—”

“He’s an adult who is going to hurt you,” Jason snapped. “You don’t know what you’re getting into—”

“It’s—I’m different. Sonny and I are different,” she insisted. “Do you think I’m an idiot? Do you think I don’t know who he is? Maybe you’ve been cleaning up his messes too long, but—”

“You saw what happened to Brenda. Damn it, Carly went after you and nearly killed you because *he* drove her to a breakdown. You aren’t going to be the next woman I have to—” He bit off the rest of his statement.

“You don’t know how we are—” Emily shook her head. “No, I’m not going to stand here and justify my relationship with Sonny to you. I am my own person, and you don’t get to make my decisions. So what if Sonny has hurt people? I have, too. What about what happened to Zander?”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re blaming yourself for his death—”

“No, but I was a part of it. I didn’t help. Sonny’s made mistakes, but he didn’t drive Brenda or Carly crazy.”

“Em,” Sam said softly. “Em, he’s just worried about you—”

“Oh, please, don’t even—” Emily rolled her eyes at his fiancée. “Please. Don’t *you* start. What, you think because Sonny used and threw you away, he’ll do the same to

me?”

Sam scowled, pressed her lips together, shook her head. “Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“No, I’m *dying* to hear your opinion, Sam. C’mon—”

“Knock it off, Emily—” Jason began.

“No, I want to hear what the con artist has to say about my life.” Emily’s brows lifted as she turned to Sam. “Let’s hear it. I mean, you know Sonny. You have to know and understand the mark, that’s how this works, right? You conned Jax by pretending to be some strong badass, you conned Sonny by being a whore, and my brother—” Emily’s smile was thin. “You conned him with a baby. Too bad *that* didn’t work out the way you planned—”

“You’re leaving.” Jason yanked open the door. “Now.”

“Jason—”

“You came over here to tell me about Sonny. Consider me told. You don’t get to throw Sam’s daughter in her face. You’re angry at me, be angry at *me*. You don’t take it out on her—”

Emily snorted and stalked out in the hallway, whirling around for one last dig at the threshold. “And the con just keeps going, doesn’t it, Sam? Hey, maybe you figured out how to keep it going. He’ll always feel sorry for the whore with a dead kid—”

Sam’s face was white as Jason slammed the door in his sister’s face. He exhaled slowly, and now the trembling in his hands wasn’t just anger. It was shock. He had no idea his sister had that kind of venom inside of her for Sam. For anyone.

He turned to look at Sam. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Sam exhaled slowly, a careful breath as she let her arms fall to the side. “Was she wrong?”

“What?”

She stared at him, her eyes dry. “Was she wrong?” Sam repeated. “I conned Jax, you already know that. And Sonny started as a con. So did you.”

Jason swallowed hard. “Sam—”

“It’s not like I planned it—not after Sonny. But I needed a place to be safe. To figure things out. So I picked you. And I stayed.” She exhaled slowly. “I used my kid. I knew it would work. I knew you were...”

He just stared at her as she trailed off. “What are you saying to me right now?”

“I thought it stopped. I thought I stopped conning you.” She clenched her hands into fists at her side. “But maybe I don’t know how to do that. I mean, I just—I don’t know. Maybe I don’t exist. I don’t. Samantha McCall never existed. I was just some baby Alexis Davis threw away, and Cody McCall ended up with. I had ten different names by the time I was fifteen, you know that? I don’t exist. Maybe I never did.”

She scrubbed her hands over her face, took a deep breath. “Thank you for making her go. I need to take a walk.”

“Let me go with you—”

“No. No. I need some air. I feel like I’m suffocating in here.”

Jason watched her go, then looked over as his cell phone began to ring. He could see the caller ID screen flash with Carly’s name. He grimaced, then reached for it.

It was going to be a long day.

General Hospital: Locker Room

Elizabeth tugged her scrub pants on, then cinched them at the waist with the tie. She sat down to put on her sneakers.

Then she heard the locker room door open so hard that it bounced against the wall with a booming *THUD*. She twisted on the bench as Emily rounded a row of lockers and threw her bag on the bench. It rolled over and fell onto the floor, cosmetics, pens, and keys spilling out onto the concrete floor.

Emily scowled down at it, then looked at her. “Well, go on. Let me have it. Be the fifteenth person to scream at me and throw me out.”

Elizabeth merely lifted her brows. “Good morning, Em.”

“*Don’t* pretend you don’t know. The entire world knows I’m screwing Sonny Corinthos.” Emily got on her knees and started shoving things back into her purse.

Elizabeth tied her second sneaker then tugged her hair back into a ponytail. She closed her locker. She’d seen the tabloids and hadn’t been as surprised as she thought she might be. “Well, by now, I guess they do. Who threw you out?”

“My brother. Can you believe it?”

Elizabeth hesitated as she pinned her ID to her scrub top. “Jason?” she asked with a frown. That didn’t sound like the man she knew. “*Jason* threw you out?”

“He demanded I stop seeing Sonny, too. It was like an alien zapped into his place. Like he wasn’t even my brother. And then Sam had the nerve to weigh in like anyone gives a damn what *she* says—”

Elizabeth scratched her temple, trying to understand. “Jason threw you out because you refused to stop seeing Sonny?” She could see Alan or Monica maybe doing that. Possibly Edward. But not Jason.

“Well...” Emily bit her lip. “Maybe he didn’t throw me out until I...” She looked away, sighed. “Until I accused Sam of using her dead baby to con Jason into marriage.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth nodded slowly. “Well, yeah, *that* would do it, I would bet. Em—”

“I didn’t mean it—”

“Yeah, you did. You’ve said the same thing to me.”

“Well, I didn’t mean to *say* it,” Emily said with a roll of her eyes. “But, like, where she does get off, telling me Jason’s just worried about me—” She scowled. “Oh, I know that look, Elizabeth Imogene. You agree with her.”

“I—” Elizabeth sighed. “I don’t know. I wasn’t there. But you know it’s not like Jason to just tell you what to do. He only does that when he’s scared.”

“He thinks Sonny will drive me nuts. It’s not my fault Brenda had a breakdown or that Carly spent time in Ferncliffe. It’s not even the first time she was there, you know? Like, they both had issues. I don’t—and I’m certainly not going to listen to a man who’s currently screwing Sonny’s *last* girlfriend—”

“Well, you’re forgetting about Reese,” Elizabeth reminded her, still at a bit of a loss at what had gotten into Emily. “Emily—”

“No. No, you don’t get to *agree* with my brother, Elizabeth. That is tremendously unfair. You are *my* best friend. He doesn’t even know you exist anymore. You have to take my side—”

“Emily, you have a vicious way of being an idiot when you get mad.” Elizabeth shook her head. “The same thing that makes you a good friend is what makes you an awful person to fight with.”

“What does that mean?”

“Because you are so compassionate and you read people so well—you know exactly where to drive the knife when you want to hurt someone.”

Emily stared at her. Folded her arms. “That’s not true—”

“No? Sam tried to defuse the situation with you and Jason, and you threw her dead daughter in her face. I mean, Christ, Em. Whether you like her or hate her, whether she’s a con artist or not — you know how hard that was for her. For Jason. They were —” She shook her head. “That was a bad time for them. And she loved her child. And you used it against her. Because you wanted her to shut up and leave you alone.”

“I—”

“Just now. I’m here, trying to be there for you, and you think this is a good time to remind me how it ended with him? He doesn’t know I *exist*, Em? What the *hell*.”

“I—” Emily’s lip trembled. “But—”

“First, it’s *not* true. I know it’s not true. But you know what happened between us at the end. You know how much it hurt me for him to treat me like nothing. You know that. So you used it. Just like you used Sam’s daughter. Because when you’re hurt, you need to take us down with you.”

“I’m sorry.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “It’s been a bad day, okay? I woke up to my entire family screaming at me. I tried to head off Jason, but Sam had already shown him the damn paper—if she wasn’t there, he wouldn’t have seen it. And I could have explained it to him—and why the hell is he so *mad*? He married Sonny’s sister, didn’t he? He quit his job over her. He—”

“I am aware of what Jason sacrificed to be with Courtney,” Elizabeth said dryly. “And so is he. What exactly do you think you could have said to him that would change how he handled it?”

“The paper makes it seem like some sordid affair. We’re not married. Neither of us, okay? We’re single. We’re adults. I have a right to be happy, Elizabeth. Don’t I?”

“Of course you do. But you don’t get to decide how other people feel about this. Because, yeah, Jason married Sonny’s sister. And that ended in disaster, so there’s that. And *he* was the one that broke Brenda into little pieces. You were at the wedding. You saw it happen. You saw her break down afterward. He’s watched Sonny with woman after woman, and you think he’s thrilled you’re next?”

“It’s different with me—”

“And maybe it is. But he didn’t hear about it from you. You knew he’d take it like this, Em. You knew everyone would. Lucky thinks I knew and lied to him about it, so that’s been fun for me.” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “You went into his home and ended up fighting with Sam. Is that all you said to her? Or did you maybe deserve to have him throw you out? And good for him. Because if you’d ever used either of my miscarriages against me in a fight, I would have thrown you out, too.”

She stalked away from her best friend and went to clock in. She didn’t have the patience for Emily right now. She adored her best friend more than anything in the world, but Emily could be incredibly naive and selfish.

And Elizabeth just did not have room in her life for that right now.

Courtland Street: Alley

Lucky cleared his throat and ducked behind a row of trash cans. “Santiago?” he called, pitching his voice low.

“Yeah, what you call for?” the irritated growl came from the shadows as a man with an average-height and olive skin sauntered towards him, his dark hair tucked underneath a backward baseball cap. “You wearing a wire? You tryin’ to screw me over?”

“No,” Lucky scowled. He glanced over his shoulder, making sure they were alone. “You got it?”

“Yeah, I got it, but I’m not convinced you’re for real. Maybe you’re setting me up.” Santiago lifted his chin, held out his hand. In his palm sat two round white pills.

Lucky raised his brows. “What, you want me to prove it by taking them in front of you?”

“Yeah. That’s the way of it. You want to do business, you gotta try the product.” He wiggled his hand. “So, let’s go.”

“Fine,” he muttered. Lucky grabbed the pills and tossed them down his throat. The taste was chalky on his dry throat but if they were the oxy Santiago had promised on the phone—

The pain would be gone soon, and Lucky would be able to breathe again. He’d be able to get through his therapy again.

He knew he was taking a chance buying the product on the street, calling old contacts he’d met while patrolling the streets as a rookie, but he was desperate. He’d gone to Mercy Hospital, and doctors there had refused another prescription.

Lucky was a cop, damn it, and he didn’t deserve being treated like a goddamn drug addict. He just needed to get through therapy, and how the hell was he supposed to do that if he couldn’t even think through the pain? Everything was always on fire, and he just wanted the fucking pain to stop for a minute so he could *think*.

“Satisfied?” he demanded. He shoved the cash at Santiago. “Take it. Give me what I asked for.”

Santiago pursed his lips, then shrugged. “Sure.” He dug a bag out of his pocket. “Just what you asked. Twenty pills.”

“Twenty—” Lucky scowled. “I told you I needed thirty—I paid for thirty—”

“You want me to sell to a cop, you gotta pay the price.” Santiago drew back his hand. “You don’t want it?”

“Give me the fucking pills.” Lucky snatched the plastic bag from the dealer’s hands as his money disappeared into Santiago’s jeans. “This had better be the real stuff.”

“Hey, a cop on the client list isn’t the worst thing to have.” Santiago shrugged. “You need a refill, you know where to find me.”

He slunk back into the shadows, disappearing down the alley until all Lucky could hear was footsteps.

He wouldn't need a refill. He'd make these last two weeks, and then he'd be able to get back to work. And then he'd never have to take another damn pill again.

Greystone Manor: Foyer

"Don't bother to tell me he's in a meeting," Jason all but growled at Max as the loyal guard attempted to stop him. "I'm going in—"

"Listen, Sonny said if you came in, he—" Max pressed his body against the double doors that blocked Jason from the living room. He spread his hands out.

"Max." Jason glared. "Do you think you can stop me?"

"No," the guard admitted, "but I got my orders, Jase. So I gotta at least try."

"Fair enough. Now move."

"Moving." Max darted past Jason and went outside to get away from whatever was going to happen inside there. He, and several others that worked at the estate, half thought Sonny had it coming. You just didn't date a guy's sister without warning him. Not when you'd known her since she was twelve years old.

Sonny scowled as Jason shoved the doors open. "Max!" he called.

"Don't bother. He's already gone."

The two partners stared at each other for a long moment, nearly a decade of friendship between them. This wasn't even the first time Sonny had done something like this. There had been that terrible night when Carly had waltzed down the penthouse steps, dressed in nothing more than Sonny's dress shirt.

That had hurt. Not only because Jason had half-believed he was in love with Carly, but because he'd known why Sonny had done it. Because he thought Jason needed to be taught who Carly was. Sonny had proved himself that night to be no different than Robin. He was just someone else who couldn't see that Jason was his own man, capable of making his own choices—even if they were mistakes.

They'd managed to somehow put that past them, but now—

"She's an adult, Jason," Sonny said finally. He calmly sipped his bourbon. "And you're not her father."

"Then why lie?" Jason demanded. "You've been avoiding me, not taking meetings, not taking care of business because you knew how I'd feel—Emily's been ditching work, her friends, me—you *both* knew how this was going to go, so you lied—"

"Because we knew you'd be unreasonable," Sonny said easily, but his dark eyes darted away, almost if he didn't believe his own words. "So we kept it to ourselves. I'm sure you're worried about her safety—"

"I'm not—" Jason clenched his fists at his side. "You think this is about *danger*? Emily's an adult. She's been around me long enough to understand it. That has nothing to do with it."

Sonny blinked at him, set the tumbler down on the bar with a thunk of glass. "What the hell then—"

"I should have seen it coming," Jason said flatly. "She was lonely and vulnerable. Alone. Desperate. That's your type."

"My..." Sonny trailed off as the corners of his mouth tightened. "My *type*."

"Brenda. Carly. Hannah. Lily. Sam. All of the women you've damaged. All of the women you've used. Brenda and Carly had nervous breakdowns. Lily is dead. Hannah gave up her career for you—"

"And you blame me for all of that?" Sonny demanded.

"I will not let my sister be next casualty!" Jason shot back. "Just because we're friends doesn't mean I don't know exactly who you are and what you do to women. *I'm* the one that cleans up after you!"

Sonny exhaled slowly. "I didn't realize you thought so highly of me," he said dryly.

"Is that why you've refused to do anything about Manny Ruiz?" Jason demanded. "Why *I've* been taking all the meetings? Why you've been distracted? This always happens—you fall in love, and you let everything go to hell. Not this time—"

“Fuck you!”

“If anything happens because of Manny Ruiz—” Jason began.

“What’re you gonna do?” Sonny taunted. “What? Some friend you’ve turned out to be ___”

Jason opened his mouth, but a sound behind them had them both pausing and turning to look as Sam entered, hesitant. “What are you doing here?” he asked, his voice tight.

“When I got back to the penthouse, you weren’t there. I was afraid you’d come here.” Sam put her hand on his arm. “You’re still upset. You’re not thinking clearly. Let’s go home.”

“Oh, look. Another one of my messes you’ve had to clean up,” Sonny snarled with a dismissive wave of his hand at the woman who had carried—and lost—his child.

Sam reeled back as if struck, and Jason winced, wondering how many more hits she was supposed to take today. It was one thing to take their anger out on each other—but Sonny had gone too far—

“Don’t talk to her—” Jason began.

“What? Isn’t that what you’re here to do? To prevent your darling little sister from being one of my pieces of roadkill?” Sonny snarled. The other man stalked towards them. “You clean up my messes — I’m just stating facts. You’re not wrong. Who let Sam live with him while I dealt with Carly?”

He shrugged, but the rage was almost visible in the trembling of his shoulders. “You don’t want Emily to end up crazy like Brenda and Carly, dead like Lily and Reese, out of a job like Hannah, or...” Sonny squinted at his former girlfriend, who glared at him. “What exactly is the nature of *your* damage, Sam? What terrible legacy have I left you with beyond shoving you at Jason?”

Sam took a deep breath and bit back whatever terrible thing she was going to say. Jason could see her shaking from the effort. “I am not going to let the two of you use me to hurt each other. I’m fine, Sonny. You never gave a damn about me or my daughter, and I knew that.”

Sonny smirked, then looked at Jason. “See? Proof I don’t ruin all women—”

Sam narrowed her eyes. “You can’t hurt someone who doesn’t give a shit about you, Sonny. You can’t damage something that doesn’t let you touch it. I never gave a damn about you either.”

Sonny stared at her, stunned. “But—”

“You were a rich man who was handsome and mildly good in bed. You were a mark. Until you weren’t worth the effort. So, please, leave me out of this fight. I’m not someone you need to fix or clean up,” she shot at Jason, and to Sonny, she said, “And the only worthwhile thing I got from you was my daughter. You can both go to hell.”

She stalked out, slamming the front door behind her, the sound echoing like a gunshot.

Jason exhaled slowly and looked back at Sonny, who was shell-shocked as if it had never occurred to him that the con artist he’d taken to his bed had only been using him the way he’d used her.

“You and Emily are going to do whatever you want. You’re adults. But you lied to me. You avoided me, and you’ve been ignoring business. Not just Manny Ruiz, but the Escobars. And if just one person gets hurt because of this—”

He trailed off because he honestly didn’t know what he would do. So he just let his threat hang in the air before he left.

Something had broken in his relationship with Sonny that day, but maybe it had already been broken, and Jason had simply refused to see it.

Chapter Seven

*Second chances they don't ever matter, people never change
Once a whore, you're nothing more, I'm sorry that'll never change
And about forgiveness, we're both supposed to have exchanged
I'm sorry honey, I passed out, now look this way*
- Misery Business, Paramore

Monday, March 27, 2006

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

“Carly, there’s nothing more I can do—” Jason pinched the bridge of his nose and looked across the room to Sam, who was still not talking to him—another problem he couldn’t solve.

She’d arrived home before him after that terrible scene at Sonny’s, gone upstairs to the guest room to sleep. That had been two days ago. She hadn’t looked at him, spoken to him, or returned to their bedroom.

And he honestly had no idea how to fix that.

Unfortunately for him, Carly had no problems with her communication. She was angry about the articles, about the insinuations, about the fact that Michael was getting snickers about his father at school and at basketball practice. This was very upsetting to Carly because Michael started a new school this year, and while Jason had no memories of elementary school, apparently sixth graders were vicious bullies.

“There’s always something to do,” Carly snapped. “You’re supposed to be the most feared enforcer on the goddamn Eastern seaboard. Why can’t you kidnap your idiot sister—”

“I’m hanging up now,” Jason told her before pressing end on his phone and setting it on the desk. He sighed and looked at Sam, who had turned her head to him. “Carly thinks I should kidnap Emily.”

Sam raised her brows, then sighed. “I’d ask why Carly cares, but she’s predictable. She might not want Sonny, but no one else gets him either. It’s the same crap she pulled two years ago.”

Relieved Sam was talking to him, even if it was in a flat tone of voice, Jason took a seat at the other end of the sofa and continued. “She says it’s because of the boys. Because of how much they love Emily. And every time a woman comes into Sonny’s life, she ends up leaving and never coming back.”

Sam snorted. “She’s not wrong. And you agree with her.”

Dangerous territory. Jason took a deep breath. “I agree that we need to make this stop. I just don’t know what I’m supposed to do.” He paused. “I’m sorry. About that scene with Emily, and then with Sonny—”

“I’m not a mess you need to clean up,” Sam said. She glared at him. “And if that’s why we’re together—because you like a damsel in distress, then you should go. Or I should go.”

“I never said—”

“I’m no one’s fucking damsel.” She shoved herself to her feet and started to pace. “I can take care of myself, Jason. I can always take care of myself. You think I can’t because I moved in with you and pretended to be all weak and alone, but I’m not fucking helpless—”

Warily, Jason also stood. “I never said—”

“Because I played Sonny like a goddamn cheap violin, and if it hadn’t been for Carly —” Sam broke off, shook her head. “Anyway.”

Jason grimaced. “Sam, c’mon. I know what you said to Sonny yesterday, but I was there, and I know you—”

She scowled. “I played you, too. I knew exactly what to do, to say, to make sure I could stay right across the hall from Sonny. I thought I could—” She pursed her lips.

“Emily was wrong. I didn’t—I don’t think I used my daughter. Not after she was gone. But before, I know I did.”

Jason just stared at her. What the hell did he say to that? “Sam—”

“You can’t make your sister or Sonny do what you want to do. You’re right. This will be a disaster. But you’re wrong, and Carly’s wrong. You need to just let this go. Let whatever is going to happen happen. Because I am not interested in being in the middle of *any* of this—”

He blinked at the change in conversation, then shook his head. “I don’t know if I can just sit back—there are things going on—”

“What choice do you have?” Sam demanded. “What choice do any of us have? Sonny is going to do whatever the hell he wants. You know that. And judging from your sister, I mean, she’s going to do the same. So, hey, maybe they are a match made in heaven.”

Jason had no idea how to handle this bitter and angry Sam, but he knew he had to say something—

He was interrupted by a knock on the door. Sam walked past him to open the door and scowled when she found Emily standing on the threshold. Jason shot to his feet. “What do you want?” Sam demanded.

“I came to see if my brother has calmed down enough to have a civil conversation.” Emily eyed Sam up and down, taking in her disheveled dark hair and gray sweats. Sam’s scowl deepened, and Jason strode forward, a bit worried they would have a repeat of before.

“Emily—”

“Look, it was pointed out to me that I have a habit of...” Emily pursed her lips. “Going for the jugular when I’m angry. I don’t like taking my problems out on my friends or...” She arched a brow. “Whatever you are.”

Sam snorted, folded her arms, and rolled her eyes but remained silent.

“I talked to Sonny last night—” Emily said, and Jason clenched his jaw. “He said you went over and threw a tantrum. You demanded he stop seeing me. And I’m sure he told you to go to hell. So I’m wondering if you’re going to stop being a jerk—”

“Is this you apologizing?” Sam demanded. “Because, wow, it sounds like more of the same—”

“I am *not* talking to you, Sam,” Emily snapped. “Nobody asked you.” She squeezed her eyes shut, took a deep breath. “I get that you don’t like what’s happening here. You’re not alone, okay? Mom and Dad are angry. Grandfather can barely look at me. Carly came all the way to the hospital yesterday to chew me out, and, of course, Elizabeth took your side like she *always* does.”

"I'm sorry you're unhappy," Jason said flatly. "But none of us are wrong."

"*All* of you are wrong. You know, I expected it from the Quartermaines. They'll hate Sonny until the day they die. Whatever. But you—God, you and Elizabeth." Emily's eyes burned. "I *really* thought you would be there for me. That you'd be angry at first, but that you'd understand that what Sonny and I have is real—"

"I never said it wasn't," Jason interrupted. "But that doesn't mean he's not going to hurt you."

"You think you can be in love with someone and not hurt each other?" Emily demanded. "You think *you're* so damned perfect? What about what you did to Robin, huh? Or lying to Courtney about sleeping with this—" She bit off whatever word she was about to say. "Or cheating on Elizabeth with Courtney? You think *you've* never hurt anyone—"

Jason blinked and shook his head. "I never—what are you talking about? I never cheated on Elizabeth." Stunned, he swallowed hard. "Did *she* tell you that?"

"*That's* the part you're focusing on?" Sam demanded. "How about the part where she called me a whore *again*?"

"I—" Jason looked at his irate fiancée. "I didn't—"

"Elizabeth didn't *have* to tell me," Emily snarled. She jabbed a finger at him. "How dumb do you think I am? She moved out in October. And then you were with Courtney five seconds later. Why do you think she left?"

"Elizabeth *lived* with you? What—" Sam held up her hands. "Wait a second."

"It wasn't—" Jason bit off the protest. "It wasn't like that."

"Sure. Because you are *so* perfect. You cheated on Robin with Carly. On Elizabeth with Courtney. Hey, maybe you *were* actually sleeping with this skank before you left Courtney. Where do you get off acting like some sort of saint who's never hurt anyone?" Emily's eyes burned into his. "You don't get to walk around telling other people what to do. I came here to see if you'd calmed down. Obviously—"

"It's time for you to go," Sam declared. She grabbed Emily's arm and shoved her across the threshold. "If he's not going to do it, I will. And don't bother stopping by anymore. You won't be allowed past the lobby without permission again." She slammed the door shut, then whirled on Jason.

“I—” Jason couldn’t quite take in what had just happened. How it had all turned on him. He knew—He *knew* that Emily and Sonny was a bad idea. He knew he had to stop it. But—

“Why the *hell* did you let her stay after she went after me again?” Sam demanded. “And why didn’t you tell me you lived with Elizabeth? And what the hell does that mean about Robin and Carly—” She narrowed her eyes. “Did you let her stay so you could find out exactly what Elizabeth told her?”

“She’s...” Jason exhaled slowly, trying to wrap his head around the scene that had just played out. “She’s my sister, Sam. I just—I just—I don’t know. Maybe.” He hadn’t thought about those last few weeks with Elizabeth in...years—not until a few weeks ago when Elizabeth had brought up the lie about Sonny—the lie he’d told her.

Did she really think—

“Hey.” Sam snapped her fingers, bringing his attention back. “*Focus*, Jason. Because whatever Emily said about before, it doesn’t change the fact that every time she goes after you, *I* end up in the crosshairs. I just told you—I do not want to be part of any of this bullshit. And you just let her continue to attack me so you could...what...pump for her information?”

“No, that’s not—” Except that’s exactly what he’d done, and he felt low. He scrubbed his hands over his face, took another deep breath. “You’re right. I’m sorry. She’s my sister, and she knows exactly what to say to me.”

“Yeah, Emily wasn’t wrong about always going for the jugular. It sounds like she went after her best friend, along with me. And now you.” Sam rubbed the heel of her hand against her chest. “And now she’s probably off to another victim. I mean it, Jason. I don’t want her just showing up here. Not until you figure out how to deal with it.”

“Yeah, I’ll tell Wally downstairs. Listen, about—about what she said—it’s true about Robin and Carly. Not in the way Emily means. But I hurt Robin a lot.” Jason shook his head. “I would never do that again. Not to anyone. I didn’t cheat on Elizabeth. Or Courtney.”

“No, but you do have a way of avoiding being alone.” Sam tipped her head. “I didn’t realize things were so serious with Elizabeth. You said it didn’t go anywhere.”

“It didn’t,” Jason said flatly.

“But she *lived* with you! *And* thinks you cheated on her—” She threw up her hands. “Why is this the first time I’m hearing about *any* of this?”

“Because it’s over.” Jason shook his head. “And I can’t change any of it, so why bother talking about it?”

Sam narrowed her eyes, but he didn’t volunteer anymore. He wondered if she was thinking about the conversation he’d had on the docks with Elizabeth and their argument about it. “I’m gonna go take a shower. You go to work. And keep your sister away from me while she’s foaming at the mouth. Let her go attack someone else for a change.”

General Hospital: Locker Room

Elizabeth’s shift was scheduled to start at the same time as Emily’s, so she found herself hurrying to get ready and out of the locker room before her best friend arrived.

But the world was not on her side as Emily stalked into the room just as Elizabeth was tying her sneakers. Resigned to another round of drama, Elizabeth sat on the bench and waited.

“Brothers are *ridiculous*,” Emily muttered. “They always have terrible taste in women, and they take the skank’s side. Can you believe Jason just sat there while Sam shoved me out the door?”

“Oh, man, you went *back* to the penthouse?” Elizabeth grimaced. “Why? Did you think Jason was going to change his mind? Em—”

“He’s just so—ugh—you know AJ used to call him Saint Jason? Walking around like he could do no wrong—”

If Emily was invoking her dead brother who had been smothered to death after kidnapping kids, faking deaths, and shooting his own father, she was *really* on a rampage. She could only imagine what Emily had said to get Sam to throw her out this morning.

“Emily, maybe you just need to stay away from Jason until he’s...” Elizabeth got to her feet. “I don’t know until this is over.”

“Over? You mean until Sonny dumps me? Is that you mean?”

Yes, but Elizabeth valued her life enough not to say so. She pursed her lips. “Or until Jason accepts it—”

“Why the hell should I go around on tiptoes because my family doesn’t approve of my boyfriend? Is that what you did when you were sleeping with Jason in your studio?” Emily demanded. “No. You gave everyone the finger and did what you wanted.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath. “Okay, well, first of all, I wasn’t sleeping with Jason back then. He told you that. I told you that.” And she was *really* sick of telling people that.

“Please, no one ever believed it,” Emily muttered. She stripped off her top and yanked her scrubs from her locker. “Don’t tell me you think we bought that *just friends* crap?”

“I—”

“I mean, honestly, if you weren’t married, I’d tell you to take another turn at him. You’d be better than his current whore—”

“Emily, just *stop*—” Elizabeth held up her hands. “What the *hell* has gotten into you? You’re attacking me just for standing here. And if this is the attitude you had at Jason’s, no wonder you’ve been thrown out twice—”

Emily huffed, then sat on the bench. “I’m sorry. I’m just—” She shook her head. “You all think I’m an idiot. Like I don’t know who Sonny is. What he’s done. I’ve known him half my life, Elizabeth. Do you think I don’t know what I’m getting into? Don’t *I* deserve someone who makes me happy?” Her voice thickened. “After last year, after struggling so hard to put Connor Bishop behind me—Nikolas was supposed to love me. To stand by me. And he didn’t.”

“I know.” Elizabeth sat down next to her. “I *know*. And I am still *so* angry at him for not giving you more time. For not being the man I thought he was. Em—” She bit her lip. “Look, you said you expected this from the Quartermaines. Because even though AJ and Jason ultimately made their own choices, you know they blame Sonny for what happened.”

“I expected more from you. From Jason.” Emily’s lips trembled. “I told him that. You think I’m making a mistake. And you’re taking his side—”

“I am not taking his side, Em. I don’t even know his side. But I know that going over

to his home, attacking him and Sam isn't going to make this better."

"I know that. I thought about what you said, but then I talked to Sonny, and I got mad all over again at Jason—but I wasn't gonna say anything to Sam. I promise. But then she opened the door and, God, she just had this *look* on her face, like nothing I would say would matter—" Emily scrubbed at her face. "I just wanted to hurt her."

"Why? Why did you want to hurt Sam? She's not even part of this. It's Jason you're mad at."

"I don't know. Maybe it's because I know she agrees with everyone else. She thinks she has the right to judge me. With everything that happened—with what she's pulled on my brother—"

"Em—"

"But I really—I don't know. I know you're right. I *know* you're right about me going for the throat when I get like this. Because I went for Sam, and you yesterday. And God, I went after Jason today. He was so—" Emily hiccuped as her tears slid down her cheeks. "He was *so* upset—"

Elizabeth put a hand on her shoulder. "What did you say to him?" she asked softly, knowing Emily would feel better if she admitted it. If she said it out loud. And—as much as she didn't want to be—she was worried about Jason. She knew he was having problems with Sonny, and she didn't think the maternity results had gone over great with Sam. The last thing either of them needed was another full frontal attack from Emily.

"I—I hit him where I know it hurts. I didn't use Michael. At least I can say that. But I—I know he's sensitive sometimes about the months after the accident. When, like, he didn't know a lot, and he was figuring stuff out. He hurt Robin so much. I know that still bothers him. I know it because it was tied up in what happened with Michael, but also because of what happened with Carly."

"Okay—"

"He wasn't Michael's father, you know. But he did sleep with Carly when he was dating Robin. And I know she forgave him, but it still bothers him. Because of her issues with HIV and sex—" Emily took a deep breath. "I know it bothers him," she repeated.

"Well, if you just apologize—"

“So, I accused him of doing it again.”

Elizabeth furrowed her brows, tipped her head to the side. “What? Like—when he lied to Courtney about when Sam’s daughter was conceived—”

“Well, yeah, that too.” Emily bit her lip and met Elizabeth’s eyes. “And you.”

“And me,” Elizabeth repeated. “Wait. What? I—” She slid away from Emily as her pulse began to race. No. “*What* did you say to Jason?”

“Um. God. Oh, God—” Emily’s breath started to hitch. “Oh, man. I’m sorry. I didn’t even think about—I just wanted to hurt him. And maybe I wanted to hurt Sam—”

“Emily, you didn’t—” Elizabeth’s hands trembled as her cheeks heated. “You didn’t tell him—I told you I don’t think anything was—” She turned away from her best friend, pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. “Oh, man. How could you—”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think about it being something you told me in confidence—”

“I told you that—” Elizabeth got to her feet. “What’s *wrong* with you? You told Jason that I thought he was with Courtney while I was still at the penthouse? How could—”

“I lied to him. I mean—” Emily sighed. “When I said it, he got this look in his eyes and, man, I thought, direct hit. You know, *bullseye*. And then he just—he looked so upset, Elizabeth. And he wanted to know if that’s what *you* told me.”

“We never—” Her stomach lurched. Why. Why was this happening to her? “You had no *right*—”

“I lied to him. I said I came up with it on my own, okay? I just—I said I assumed he had because you moved out and—” Emily wrung her hands. “I’m sorry. I just—I didn’t think—”

“No, you didn’t.” Elizabeth closed her locker, pressed her forehead against it. “You never do. And you took something that had nothing to do with you—nothing to do with this—and you made me part of it. You had no right—”

“I didn’t tell him any of the other stuff, okay? Like how he was always leaving you for Carly, for Courtney, and how part of you was glad when Courtney thought he was cheating on her because she deserved it—”

"I'm going to work," Elizabeth said. "I'm going to stop thinking about any of this. This—God, it was years ago. And it's mortifying, okay? Because he never knew how hard I took any of that, okay? Em? He never knew. He never knew I was in love with him. It never got that far. We never made it that far because he obviously didn't feel the same way. And I finally got to a point where I wasn't thinking about that with him, okay? We could—I could be in the same room with him. I could be happy he'd moved on. And you've just—you've taken a wrecking ball to that."

"I'm sorry—"

"You keep saying that. But you don't even know what that means. You know what? Maybe you're right. Maybe you and Sonny deserve each other." She started to storm out, then whirled around. "You said no one bought that just friends crap. About Jason and me when Lucky was gone."

"Uh—"

"What does that mean no one bought it?" Elizabeth demanded. "Who exactly didn't buy it?"

"Um. Listen. It was years ago—"

"Lucky got mad because Jason walked me to the damned elevator," Elizabeth snapped. "He was angry because I smiled at him, which is insane because I haven't spoken to Jason more than a few times in almost two years. So what the hell do you *mean* no one bought it? Are you telling me—"

She pursed her lips. God, was *this* why Lucky was still so angry when Jason's name came up? Because he thought she'd been lying to him back then? God, did that mean — "Does Lucky believe Jason and I were together then?"

"I don't know if he still does," Emily said, finally. "We haven't talked about it for a long time. But yeah, when Jason came back that August, Lucky asked me and Nikolas. And we told him—we told him you and Jason were really close. And you both said it wasn't like that, but that we didn't believe you."

Her eyes burned, and Elizabeth tipped her head to the ceiling, trying to control it so she could go get her job done. "Okay. Great. Well, thanks for that. Thanks for making me a liar. For your information, I *never* slept with Jason. Not once. I might as well have since everyone thinks I'm a liar and a whore."

“Elizabeth, wait—”

But Elizabeth had to go earn a paycheck and figure out exactly what she was supposed to do now that she knew there was no one she could really trust.

PCPD: Commissioner’s Office

Mac sighed. “Lucky, I’m glad therapy is going better—but I told you. If you’re out past April 1, I need to reassign Jesse to a new partner. Officially. Right now he’s just working solo—”

“I’m finally able to get through the routine every day. I just know that Drake is gonna let me come back in a few weeks. Just a little more time—”

“It’s been five months already, Lucky.” Mac leaned forward. “Look, your job is always here. We just can’t hold your spot on Major Crimes open indefinitely. But we always need guys in Robbery—”

“No, I worked hard for that promotion. This isn’t fair, Mac. I *deserve* that spot! It’s not my fault I got hurt in November—and I got injured in the line of duty—” Lucky swallowed his protests as Mac’s face didn’t change. Damn it. Not when he was this close to finally having everything back. No! It wasn’t fair to do this to him now.

“I know. But the union will back me on this. I need my best squad at its best, and we’ve been down a guy for months. We’ve been rotating in and out, but—”

“Just one extra week. April 7. Just give me two weeks from today. I can do this, Mac. I’m sure of it.”

“April 7,” Mac repeated. “And if you’re not back by then, you won’t get angry that I fill that spot?” He raised his brow. “Did Patrick actually tell you you’d be good to go in two weeks, or is that what you’re hoping?”

“That what I’m *sure* of,” Lucky said, flatly. “I promise, Mac.”

“Okay.” Mac set down the pencil he’d been twirling in his hand, leaned back in his chair. “Okay. Look, I know you’ve had it rough since the train accident, and that you’ve had one setback after another. I know you hate desk duty, and I wish I could do more, but I’ve got a department to run.”

“I know. But you won’t regret giving me this chance. I promise.”

“Yeah, okay. Good luck, Spencer. I hope we’ll see you back on April 7.”

“You will,” Lucky repeated. He hurried out of Mac’s office, then stopped in the men’s room to take out his pills before heading to another physical therapy appointment. He scowled—how—how could he be out of the entire bottle—

Damn it. He’d meant for these to last until he got back to work—

But he’d been granted a reprieve—one more precious week to pass the physical. And whatever he had to do to make it happen—

Well, it was worth it.

He took out his phone and found Santiago in his contacts. He pressed send, then put the phone to his ear. “Yeah. I need to see you. Yeah. The same, but, um, double it.” He grimaced at the price the dealer gave him, then glanced down at the gold band on his hand. “Fine. I need some time. An hour? Okay.”

He hung up the phone, put it into his pocket, then drew off his wedding ring. Lucky’s stomach rolled as he turned it over in his hand. He remembered Elizabeth’s wide smile as she’d shown him the ring the day she’d returned from the jeweler’s and her sheepish expression, apologizing that she couldn’t spend more. She’d been so proud to put this on his finger.

But she wasn’t proud of him right now. He was an angry, bitter shell of a husband who couldn’t stand to be in his own skin, to be around the people he cared about —

He hated to do this. Hated to let her down. But he was doing this for them. For their future and the family he’d promised her.

Lucky shoved the ring into his pocket and promised he’d get it back from the pawnshop with his first full paycheck. He could tell her it was lost or make up a story about it being repaired. She was working a lot lately — maybe she wouldn’t even notice.

Elm Street Pier

Even though Elizabeth knew she shouldn’t—Cameron was with Bobbie, and she really should pick him up—she took ten minutes to sit on the bench by the water.

She wasn't going to let Lucky's impatience with her being a bit late coming home from work interfere with something she did after every single shift. Something that gave her a minute to breathe and clear her head.

When she sat on these docks, she could remember all the better days she'd had here. Living under the docks when she and Lucky had run away, sharing a hot chocolate on this bench with Emily, or...

All the times she and Jason had sat here that fall and talked.

Oh, man. How was she *ever* going to look at him in the eye? How was she going to go home and face Lucky, knowing they had to have a conversation about what Emily had told him? If Lucky had always believed she'd slept with Jason that winter, had he spent all these years thinking Elizabeth had lied to him about her first time being with him?

And why had Lucky believed Emily and Nikolas? Why was he still so angry about Jason when she hadn't even really talked to Emily's brother in a year, outside of a few interactions at the hospital?

And how the hell had Sonny and Emily's affair screwed up *her* life? If she'd known that Emily was going to use Elizabeth's drunken and miserable confessions against Jason as a weapon, Elizabeth never would have...she just wouldn't have engaged in Jason's life again. She would have stayed far away from the whole maternity test business, not told him about Skye—

And she certainly wouldn't have referred to the fake death lie or her irritation over Jason always taking Sonny's side—

She scowled. Maybe it wasn't entirely Emily's fault they were going through this right now, but it made her feel better to blame someone else.

But Elizabeth didn't want to think about any of that right now. She just wanted to sit here, wrap her cardigan more tightly around her, close her eyes, and let her brain drift. For just a few minutes.

But then, because the universe absolutely despised her, she heard a familiar set of footsteps and someone clearing their throat as they stepped up from the pier.

Elizabeth opened her eyes to find Jason standing a few feet away from her, obviously on his way from the warehouse. "Sure. Why not." She looked up the universe. "*You* are a bitch."

“Are—” Jason hesitated. “Do you want me to go?”

“No. No.” Elizabeth sighed, then straightened, taking a deep breath. “Do you have a minute?”

“Yeah.” He sat next to her, keeping almost two feet between them. Thank God for that. She didn’t look at him and kept staring straight ahead.

If she looked at him, she would flee like the hounds of hell were chasing her, then have to leave town and change her name. No, better to get over this now. Put it behind them.

“Look, just let me say this once, and then we can forget this ever happened, okay? I’ll say what I have to say, and then you’ll go. And it will be over.”

“Okay,” Jason said slowly. “Elizabeth—”

“I am sorry that you and Emily are fighting. I know it’s been bad. She comes to work right after and—well, obviously you know it’s been bad. I’m sorry she’s put me and Sam in the middle of it. I am...”

Elizabeth looked up at the stars in the sky. “I am *mortified* beyond belief that she would use something so personal as a way to hurt you. And even though she does not deserve any goddamn favors from me right now, she lied to you when she said—she was trying to backpedal, realizing she had crossed a line—” Elizabeth shook her head. *You are an adult, Elizabeth Imogene. Get your shit together.*

“I told her what she said to you. I told her that’s what I thought. And I do *not* want you to address it. I do not want to discuss it, okay? I just—you don’t need to think Emily thinks those things about you on her own, okay? Things are bad enough without that.”

“Elizabeth, I need to explain—”

“No.” Elizabeth shook her head sharply. “No. I—this is bad enough. Bad enough she dragged up something I told her in fucking confidence *years* ago and launched it at you like a nuclear weapon. I am *not* having this conversation with you. It does not matter.”

“It does if you’re upset about it now—”

“I am not—” Damn it. Elizabeth closed her eyes. Looked at him, saw the distress in his expression. “I am not upset about it now. Not like I was, okay? It’s not about any of that, okay? It’s about the fact that Emily is on the warpath, and none of us is safe. I haven’t thought about that in years. It’s not important—”

“But—”

“Jason.” She pointed at him. “No. The problem is that Emily is, apparently, not above throwing me or Sam under the bus in order to hurt you. What’s going on has nothing to do with me or Sam, and we don’t deserve to be in the middle.”

“No. I know that.” Jason took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I never seem to handle this the right way. Sam’s angry at me—” His chuckle was harsh and bitter. “Well, she’s angry for a lot of reasons with me, but right now it’s because I can’t stop Emily from calling her names, and to bring up her daughter—”

“When Emily told me she’d said it—” she exhaled slowly. “I am so sorry she did that. To both of you. But that’s what she does.”

“She takes the thing you hate about yourself and uses it against you.” Jason shoved his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket. “Sam told me to just leave all of this alone, and I know—I know she’s right.”

“But Emily showed up on *your* doorstep twice demanding your approval, Jason. That’s on her. You tossed her out, and she came back.”

“Because I went to Sonny yesterday and told him to stop seeing her,” Jason admitted, looking a bit ashamed of himself. “And maybe I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Maybe?”

“I shouldn’t have,” Jason corrected. “Sam’s right. I know you’re right, too. But I can’t—he’s going to hurt her, Elizabeth. And—” He hesitated. “I can’t say this to her. Because she’d refuse to believe me. But *she’s* going to hurt *him*.”

And Elizabeth knew what he wasn’t going to say—she’d known Sonny long enough to know that his relationships often ended in chaos and disaster for everyone around him, especially Jason.

“That’s true,” Elizabeth said slowly. “But that’s how it works, doesn’t it? Even when both people are in love, you still hurt each other. Sometimes you can make it right.

And sometimes the hurt can't be fixed." She turned towards him slightly, feeling terrible for him. "You *know* that's true."

"Yeah, but—" Jason looked at her. "I should be able to stop it. I should be able to protect my own sister."

"Look, the thing is—" Elizabeth chewed on her bottom lip. What the hell, she was already mortified beyond the speaking of it. Go for broke. "Emily and I have something in common—we're both stubborn."

Jason's lips curved into a faint smile. "Really?"

She rolled her eyes but also smiled. "Yeah—and the more someone tells us we can't have something, that we can't do something—the *more* we go after it."

She clenched her hands in her lap. "And—" She sighed. "I know what it's like to...care for someone the entire world sees as a threat. As someone will hurt you, who isn't good enough for you." She met his eyes, saw that he understood what she meant. "Listening to Emily, the way she cried over how the Quartermaines are dealing with this, how you—and I—aren't there for her. It was like hearing my own life played back for this morning."

"So you think Sam's right. That I'm wrong for telling her—and Sonny—it has to stop."

Elizabeth hesitated. "The thing is, Jason, is it doesn't matter if you're right. I don't think giving her ultimatums is going to work, you know." She attempted a half-smile. "My grandmother tried that, you know. A few times. I ran away with Lucky the first time. I actually slept under these docks when that happened. And then, you know, I moved out of her house."

"Yeah." There was a hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth. "Yeah, I remember."

"Giving her an ultimatum, Jason, is only going to backfire," Elizabeth told him. "When I resisted and pushed back, it meant cutting people out and disappointing them. And when I tried to give in, I made myself miserable."

She looked away from him, back out over the water. "Living your life to make someone else happy—I've done that." She sighed. "I walked away from something that I really wanted because I wanted to do right by someone else. And I regretted it."

He exhaled slowly. "Yeah. I know you're right."

“And you might think you’re saving them both by demanding it stop now. But all you’ll do is make them both regret it. Emily will always think of this as the chance she didn’t take. I—” She sighed.

“What?” he asked when she didn’t continue. “Elizabeth—”

“Even though I hate how it ended—and we’re *still* not talking about it by the way—I know the decision to end it wasn’t anyone else’s. It was mine. I might wish...things had been different. But I made my choices. And that matters.”

“So, I should let Emily and Sonny make theirs.”

“Yeah. I guess that’s what I’m saying. I’m sorry. I wish I could tell you differently.”

“No, you’re not saying anything Sam didn’t. I guess—I don’t know.” He looked at her. “*Was* it your choice?”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “Jason—”

“Because I know I made it difficult. I—” He looked back out over the lake. “I wanted to apologize.”

“We’re really not talking about it this—”

“I was wrong. Not about the danger.” Jason hesitated, looked at her again, and waited for her to meet his eyes. “It was real. But you were right. It was your risk to take.”

She sighed, bit her lip. Too little, too late. “Well, it doesn’t matter now—”

“I know you don’t want to talk about it—”

“Jason—”

“That’s fine. We won’t. But it’s not true.”

She exhaled harshly. “Okay. Fine.”

“Elizabeth—”

They were both saved by the ringing of her cell phone. Elizabeth knew who it was and decided not to answer it. Jason frowned when she just let the phone ring. “Elizabeth,” he said again.

“I have to get home.” She got to her feet. “Look, I can appreciate that you feel bad. And you don’t want me to feel bad about what happened. I don’t. I’m mad at Emily. I’m embarrassed because I would have rather gone to my grave than to talk about it again—”

“But we haven’t talked about it, and I just—”

“Look, fine—” She closed her eyes, shook her head. Should have just gone home. This never would have happened if she’d just gone home. “*Fine*. Here’s the thing. You’re going to tell me that you never slept with Courtney while I was living at the penthouse. Except I know that. I know that’s true.”

Jason blinked at her. “But—”

“But you were clearly—” She huffed, irritated with the world, and with Emily for forcing herself to remember that terrible time in her life. “You were clearly interested in her, okay? Because five minutes after you talked to me in Luke’s, you were with her. You were basically living with her by January. I never told Emily I thought you cheated on me—not like that. We weren’t even really dating. And it was obvious that you didn’t care about me the same way—”

She pressed her lips together as he just stared at her. “You quit your job for her. You proposed to her. And *I* couldn’t even get you to tell me Sonny wasn’t dead. I’m not stupid, Jason. You were falling in love with her, and you didn’t know how to tell me. I’ve been there. I did the same with Lucky and—” She bit off the unspoken *you*, but they both knew what she’d been about to say.

She stopped and then just went for broke because what the hell. “Jason, you didn’t want to take the risk with me. But you took it with Courtney only a few weeks later. You met with her in secret. What am I supposed to think?”

He swallowed hard. “Okay, but—”

“I wish you would have just told me instead of making me feel like an idiot, but—” Elizabeth sighed. “What I said on the roof? About you following orders unless you think it matters—”

He winced. “Elizabeth—”

“I know I was talking about Manny and Skye, but what I meant was *I* didn’t matter. I didn’t matter enough back then to go against Sonny—I don’t matter now. At least this time...” She looked down at her wedding ring. “At least this time, I wasn’t pretending I did.”

“That’s not—” He stopped, then stared at her for a long moment before trying again. “Elizabeth—”

“Just—” She held up a hand. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I don’t know why the hell people can’t just believe me when I say things. I need to go home. Have a good night, Jason.”

Chapter Eight

*Maybe I've been here before
I know this room, I've walked this floor
I used to live alone before I knew you
I've seen your flag on the marble arch
Love is not a victory march
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah
- Hallelujah, Rufus Wainwright*

Thursday, March 30, 2006

General Hospital: Nurse's Hub

Elizabeth's smile was quick and warm as Skye stepped up to her at the nurse's station. "This is starting to be a regular occurrence," she teased the other woman. "Are you following me?"

"Of course," Skye said with a laugh as she put a hand on the strap of her purse, holding it to her shoulder. "I've decided my approach to motherhood is just to find the best one and follow her around."

"Hardly the best," Elizabeth replied as her cheeks flushed. "Are you looking for Alan again?"

"No, today, I'm actually on my way to an appointment with my OB, Kelly Lee. Do you know her? She just took over for Dr. Meadows."

"I do. She's the absolute best. You're in good hands." Elizabeth frowned. "But you're on the wrong floor. She's on the fourth—"

"Oh, I know that, but I know you work up here, and I just..." Skye sighed. "I felt a bit...I don't know...guilty about all those personal questions I asked you at Kelly's. It *really* wasn't any of my business—"

It hadn't been, but... "And if I hadn't wanted to answer them, I wouldn't have. It's really okay, Skye." Elizabeth grimaced. "Unfortunately, it's something I've been dealing with all week, so really — it's fine."

“Is everything okay?” Skye asked, lifting her brows. “Is it about Emily? You know the mansion is in an uproar over her relationship with Sonny. I offered my support, but she didn’t seem particularly interested. I know she’s arguing with Jason. She keeps telling everyone that no one is on her side, not even Sonny’s best friend.”

“Yeah, she’s been having some pretty vicious fights with...well, everyone.” Elizabeth shook her head. “You know the Quartermaines and how they fight.”

“Yeah, they stick together like glue except when they’re attacking each other. I’ve never seen a family more vicious. It’s like...” Skye shook her head with a rueful smile. “It’s like a game they play. How can I hurt this person as much as I’m hurting? And double points if you make them cry or storm out.”

“Yeah, well, Emily might be adopted, but she’s a pro.” Elizabeth shrugged. “Anyway. You had questions, Skye. I’m just sorry I couldn’t answer them—”

“No, you did. More than you realize. You made me...” Skye hesitated. “You know, it starts out like this...secret. This moment you share with someone else that you never would have pictured in your life. And you make this connection.” She bit her lip. “But then...something happens, and you’re forced to confront all the other parts of their life.”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth looked at Skye, clenching the pen more tightly in her hand. “That’s usually how it starts. By the time you remember what they do...”

“You’re already hooked.” Skye tipped her head. “But you were right, you know. That I had to think about whether I really accepted Lorenzo and his life. That I couldn’t pretend who he was wasn’t related to what he does for a living. I don’t think I’d thought about it that way before.”

“So, what did you decide?” Elizabeth asked.

“I’m not sure I *have* made a decision, to be honest. I know that the world isn’t simple,” Skye told her. “That things are never...all one thing or another. I do know that Lorenzo is a good man who didn’t...entirely pick this life. I know he’s tried to live another life. But this is who he was when I met him. It’s not fair to hold it against him now.”

“No, but it would be fair to decide not to make it *your* life,” Elizabeth pointed out. “I’m sure he is a good man. I know he was kind to Carly at a time he needed her. But I also know some of the damage he’s tried to do. I mean...”

“He’s the reason the Ruiz family came to Port Charles,” Skye finished. “I didn’t know you knew that.”

“I—” Elizabeth bit her lip. “Look...I think you should know, and maybe I should have told you—but the last two times we’ve talked, I’ve seen Manny Ruiz hanging around you.”

Skye straightened, her lips pressed together in a thin line. “You have?”

“I tried to tell Lucky, but—the cops just can’t do anything.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “So I told Jason. And...we talked about...well, anyway, you should be careful. And you should tell Lorenzo. You really should have a guard.”

“Yeah, I...” Skye exhaled slowly. “Yeah. I can...” She frowned. “You told Jason? Really?”

“I didn’t know if he’d do anything,” Elizabeth lied. It felt better than telling her that Sonny and Jason hadn’t felt like she was important enough to protect. “I felt better knowing he...was involved. I’m sorry—I should have said something—”

“No, no, I understand. And I appreciate the concern. You’re right. I should tell Lorenzo. I will.” Skye hesitated. “You said before...that I...had the right to decide that this doesn’t have to be my life.”

“This thing with Manny? It won’t be the last time someone tries to hurt you to get at Lorenzo. It doesn’t happen often, but there will always be someone who will go after you. And maybe even your child.”

Skye pressed her hand to her abdomen, some of her color sliding from her already pale face. “So I should...leave him?”

Elizabeth hesitated. “Plenty of people will tell you to do that. I won’t. It’s *your* life, Skye, and it’s *your* family. Whatever you decide to do, don’t... don’t let it be someone else’s choice.”

Skye slowly nodded. “You really did love him, didn’t you?” she murmured.

Elizabeth stared at her for a long moment. “Why do you say that?”

“Because you’re just...so nonchalant about all of this. You’ve lived through this, and it...it doesn’t faze you. You were—you said you were kidnapped. Shot at. Nearly

blown up.”

“I—” Elizabeth bit her lip. “Yeah. I really loved him. I accepted everything. And I would have—” Done whatever she needed to do to be in his life. To be a part of it. “But it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“No, I guess not.” Skye sighed. “Thank you, Elizabeth. I appreciate the time you’ve given me. The advice. I should get to my appointment—”

She turned and stopped suddenly as the janitor’s cart came around the corner, pushed by Manny Ruiz. The custodian smiled as he looked at the two of them. “Well, hello, pretty ladies.”

Skye just stared at him while Elizabeth picked up a pair of scissors that were lying on the hub counter, then let her hand fall to her side. “Manny. I thought you were on the Pediatrics floor today.”

“You know my schedule. I’m touched.” Manny pressed a hand to his chest with another smile. It might have been charming on another man, but his eyes were as cold as a shark’s. “What do such pretty ladies have to talk about?”

“Skye, why don’t you get going?” Elizabeth told her. “As long as Manny is up here, he can help me.” Her pulse racing as she locked eyes with the amused psycho. “We-we need a clean up in one of the post-op cubicles.”

“Anything for such a lovely face. You know, Elizabeth, you’re always so sweet to me. Smiling when we see each other.” Manny’s smile deepened. “It’d be nice if everyone was as polite as you.”

“Skye, you don’t want to be late.”

“No,” Skye breathed. “No, I don’t.” She turned and stalked towards the elevators. She jabbed the button.

“Manny, I’ll show you where we need you,” Elizabeth said. She picked up a file with her free hand, then brought it to her chest, managing to slip the scissors inside.

Just in case.

Courtland Street: Alley

Santiago smirked as he sauntered towards their meeting spot. “Again? My friend, I think you have a problem.”

Lucky scowled and shoved his hand into his pocket for his wallet, drawing out the last of the cash he’d earned after pawning his wedding ring. He was right — Elizabeth was working so much and so tired all the time—she hadn’t even noticed the absence of his wedding ring.

He hated how hard she had to work and told himself everything he was doing right now was so she wouldn’t have to do that anymore. She deserved better from him. As soon as he got back to work, he’d make it up to her.

He’d even finally accept Nikolas’s offer for a second honeymoon—a real honeymoon. Wherever she wanted.

“You screwed me the last time,” Lucky shot back. “You were supposed to give me twenty pills. There’s no way you gave me enough.”

Santiago’s brows shot up. “I did give you twenty pills, mi amigo. You got a problem,” he repeated, then shrugged. “But it’s profitable to me, so whatever.” He held out his hand. “Pay up—”

Lucky blinked. Had he really gone through twenty pills in four days? Damn it. “I’ve been doubling up on my therapy sessions,” he muttered as he slapped the five twenties into Santiago’s hand. “I got a week to pass my physical and get back to work.”

“Sure, sure. Until then, maybe you want something stronger?” Santiago prompted. He dipped down into a crate just behind a cluster of trash cans, then drew out a cardboard tube that looked like a toilet paper roll.

Lucky knew what it was immediately from his patrol days. “Fuck that. I’m not a drug addict. I don’t need to smoke that shit.”

“You sure? You don’t wanna chase the dragon?” Santiago shrugged. “You’re a good customer. I’d give you this one for free.” He pushed it towards Lucky. “You said you wanted the pain to go away.”

“I am *not* a drug addict,” Lucky repeated. He held out his hand. “There’s an asshole doctor who refuses to give me a prescription any other doctor would give me. He probably wants to screw my wife.”

“Yeah, she’s the pretty nurse, right?” Santiago grinned, a gold tooth flashing. “I can see why he’d want to dick you over. You get back to work, buy the pretty lady something nice.”

Lucky stared at the cardboard tube. He knew it was wrong. He knew all the reasons why he should walk away. Shouldn’t even take the pills Santiago was selling him.

It was one thing to justify the pain pills he was buying. He had a right to that relief—the asshole Drake was denying him treatment—but if he smoked the heroin...

He was a week away from his final deadline—April 7, Mac had made it clear. And the pain still wasn’t going away. He’d doubled up on the therapy, but he couldn’t always get through the second session. He’d seen guys get stabbed high on heroin and not feel a thing.

He just...he wanted to feel that way once. For the first time in five months—not to feel any pain—God, wasn’t it worth the try?

He’d do *anything* to make the pain stop.

“You’d spot me this once?” Lucky said, finally.

“Sure.” Santiago gave it to him. “Try it before you go. Just to make sure.” He took out a lighter, then flicked the igniter, his face lighting up in the shadows of the alley. “What do you say?”

Morgan Penthouse: Hallway

Elizabeth tapped her foot as she waited for the door to open. It had been an excruciating ten minutes spent with Manny Ruiz as the custodian had cleaned up the mess she hadn’t been lying about. She didn’t need to stay with him, but if he was with her—he wasn’t with Skye.

But Manny made her skin crawl, and she was worried that she’d made this worse—that she’d done *exactly* what Jason had told her *not* to do. She’d made Manny look at her, and not Skye.

Jason was going to kill her.

She’d debated for exactly thirty seconds whether or not she should tell Jason about the whole thing. They hadn’t spoken or seen each other since that incredibly awkward and painful conversation on the docks the week before, and Elizabeth was

really hoping to keep that streak going.

But then she'd remembered Jason making it very clear that she was *not* to get involved or bring attention to herself with Manny. She was pretty sure that standing in a room alone with him for ten minutes while Manny's target got away was the definition of getting involved.

So she'd told Epiphany everything, and her supervisor had practically ordered her to call him. When Jason didn't answer his cell phone or get back to her within twenty minutes, Epiphany had sent Elizabeth to find him, promising to cover for her.

Epiphany didn't like her son's line of work, but she liked Manny Ruiz even less after being held hostage by him in the operating room. Jason and Sonny were the only people that might be able to keep them safe. Epiphany was a practical woman.

Elizabeth sighed in relief when Sam opened the door. "Hey. I'm so sorry to just show up like this—"

"How did you get up here?" Sam demanded. She didn't open the door any wider, and Elizabeth blinked at her harsh tone. "We're just letting cop's wives have the run of the place?"

"I—" Elizabeth pressed her lips together. "I don't know. I guess...they never... revoked my access."

"Oh, right, from when you *lived* with Jason. Yeah, I heard all about it from his sister. Funny, you never told me that. Jason didn't, either." Sam arched her brows. "You here to plead Emily's case? Make me see that I should be *nicer* to her?"

"No, I actually—I haven't talked to Emily since..." Elizabeth frowned. "Sam, I'm sorry. I'm not exactly sure why you're so angry with *me*."

"Because it's like playing fucking Whack-a-Mole. I've gone my entire life in Port Charles not having to know you, and *now* I can't get rid of you," Sam shot back. "I get it. You used to date my fiance. You don't anymore, so why the hell are you still around?"

"Uh..." Elizabeth blinked, then remembered that she'd run the maternity test for Jason on Sam's behalf. Maybe Sam was just mad that she'd done that for him—or—

Sam had looked pretty irritated when she'd found her and Jason talking on the pier the week before. But Elizabeth really didn't get it.

“Um, listen, I just...I need to talk to Jason, okay? Whatever fight you two are having has nothing to do with me, okay?” Elizabeth held up her hands in mock surrender. “I’m just—he wasn’t answering his phone.”

“Maybe you should buy a clue then and stop chasing after him. God, you’re married to a cop.” Sam narrowed her eyes. “What, he’s not satisfying you? You couldn’t make Jason happy before. So, why are you bothering him now?”

“I’m—” Stung, Elizabeth took a step back. “I’m gonna go.”

“You do that. And while you’re at it, don’t come back.” Sam slammed the door, the sound of the heavy oak hidden the frame like a jolt Elizabeth felt down to her bones.

What. The. Hell.

Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut. *You couldn’t make Jason happy before. Jesus Christ, did everyone know?*

“That’s not important,” she muttered as she went back to the elevator. She just—she just wanted to talk to Jason about Skye. And Manny. And once Manny Ruiz was out of their lives for good, she’d go back to ignoring Jason’s existence.

And maybe this time, she’d be able to forget him for good.

Warehouse: Jason’s Office

Cody Paul, one of the guards assigned to the offices, knocked on Jason’s ajar door. “Hey, Elizabeth Webber is here to see you.”

Jason frowned, got to his feet, then took his phone out of his pocket, then winced. He had two missed calls from her — and one from Sam. “Did something happen? Is she okay? Let her in,” he added before Cody could answer either of the first two questions.

“Nothing happened that I know of,” Cody said as he gestured with a free hand towards the outside office. “He’ll see you now, Miss Webber.”

“Thanks.” Elizabeth strode in, dressed in a pair of pink scrubs, a white jacket hanging open over them. She had a white knit hat clenched in her hands, twisting it back and forth. “I’m sorry to just show up like this, but—”

“You tried to call,” he finished. “I’m sorry. I had—I had some things to do, and I—” Had been ignoring his calls, not wanting to talk to Sam. Or anyone else. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. We get busy. I, um,” Elizabeth bit her lip, pausing. Their eyes met, then she looked away, her cheeks flushing. “I’m sorry, I don’t have a lot of time. Epiphany is covering my shift, and I—I think I did that thing you told me not to do, and I’m sorry.”

Jason frowned again. He hadn’t expected to see her again, not after their last conversation on the docks. If she was here now—

He rounded the desk and took the hat from her, setting it on the desk. “Sit down. What’s going on?”

With a heavy sigh, Elizabeth set her purse and coat down on the sofa but didn’t take a seat. “I was talking to Skye at the hospital—she had an appointment and came up to...talk to me about something. Just—that part isn’t important,” she said quickly. “We were talking for a few minutes, and when she turned to go, she ran right into Manny. We didn’t even see him coming—he had to be just around a corner or something.”

“Okay,” Jason said slowly. He put his hands at his waist and squinted, not really sure how this was making anything worse. “And then what?”

“And then I was afraid if Skye went downstairs to her appointment, Manny would follow her. I told him I had something for him to do. So he had to come to clean a room. And I stayed with him until he was done, until I was *sure* Skye was at her appointment. And then I called Alan to make sure he’d be there to walk her out.”

Jason stared at her for a long moment. “What do you mean exactly by you stayed with Manny until he was done?”

“I mean, I stood in the room to make sure he did it.”

“You were alone with him.”

“Um...” Elizabeth bit her lip again and slide her gaze away. “For...a few minutes. Yes.”

He closed his eyes. “What was the *one* thing I asked you not to do?”

“Not to get involved, but in my defense, I *also* told you that I wasn’t going to sit by and let someone get hurt—”

“Elizabeth—”

“And I was fine. I took scissors with me. I hid them, so he didn’t know I had them. But I was armed—”

“With a pair of scissors,” Jason muttered. He stalked forward and yanked open the door. “Cody!”

“Yeah, boss?”

“You’re on Elizabeth until further notice.”

“Um...” Cody glanced at the irritated brunette behind Jason. “Okay.”

“That is *entirely* unnecessary,” Elizabeth told him as Jason turned back to her and closed the door. “I don’t need a guard—”

“It was bad enough when we thought *maybe* he was letting you see him on purpose. But you made a point to separate him from Skye. You put yourself between him and Skye. That kind of thing pisses him off.”

“Which is why I’m here telling you. And I also told Skye that he was following her. That she should tell Alcazar.” Elizabeth scowled. “And why *doesn’t* he already have a guard on her? She’s pregnant! What kind of mobster is he?”

Jason’s irritation only deepened. “Elizabeth—”

“Oh, I’m not supposed to say that out loud, I guess. Sorry. What does he pretend he really does? You’re coffee importers. What’s he again?”

She returned his glare with a bland expression. “That doesn’t matter. You told her to tell Alcazar?”

“Yes. I should have done it earlier, after we—after you said—” She gritted her teeth. “After we talked last week. But after Skye and I were talking today, I just knew I had to do something—” She shook her head. “But maybe I should have just let her deal with it—”

“I—” Jason hesitated, then leaned against the desk. “I’m meeting Alcazar tomorrow to tell him. It’s already set up.”

She stared at him for a long moment. “I thought you said this wasn’t your problem.”

“I said that’s what *Sonny* said.” Jason exhaled slowly. “And he was technically right — Skye’s safety should be Alcazar’s priority. But I decided I wasn’t comfortable waiting for him to get around to it. So I arranged a meeting.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth folded her arms, shifted her weight from one foot to another. “Oh,” she repeated.

“But you knew I’d change my mind,” Jason told her. When she frowned at him, “You’re here, aren’t you?”

“I—” A breath of air escaped her lips as she looked at her hands. “I wasn’t going to. Epiphany basically forced me. And then I called you, but you didn’t answer.”

“I’m sorry,” he apologized again, but she shook her head.

“No, it’s—look, I know what I said about you not thinking this mattered, but I guess —” She paused. “I knew that if I got myself in trouble, I could at least—” She lifted a shoulder. “I could tell you.”

“I’m glad,” Jason told her when she met his eyes. They held for a moment. “I know I told you not to help—but I know you didn’t feel like you had a choice. And I’m glad you told Skye. She’ll tell him what happened today, and he’ll be more likely to listen to me.”

“Right. So that’s...all taken care of then.” Elizabeth went to pick up her coat and purse, then sighed. She muttered something to herself. She turned back to him. “Listen. Is Sam mad at me or something?”

“No,” Jason said, but then he paused, a slow sinking dread rising in his throat. “Why?”

“Because I went to the penthouse first—” her cheeks flushed. “She was mad that the guards let me upstairs, and then mad that I was looking for you. She said—” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “Never mind.”

“What did Sam say?” Jason pressed. He stepped in front of the door, blocking any exit

she might try to make. “Elizabeth.”

“She told me to stop chasing after you. More or less.” Elizabeth finally looked at him, her eyes filled with confusion. “Why would she say that? Why—” She sighed. “This is about Emily, isn’t it? Emily said something.” Her cheeks drained. “Oh my God, I didn’t even think about it—Emily said all that—about—well, she said it in *front* of Sam—”

“Yeah, it’s been...” Jason sighed. He dragged his hands through his hair. “It’s been a long week. Sam and I are fighting about a lot of things. She’s...I guess I never really told her—I don’t know. It never came up.”

“Well, no, why would it?” Elizabeth blinked, then tried to step around him again, but Jason didn’t budge. “Look, I’m sorry Sam is mad at me. Or you. Or the world. And I’ll just avoid her until this cools down—”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea, but—” Jason grimaced. “Look, I know you said you don’t want to talk about it—”

“And I don’t.” Elizabeth shook her head. “So we’re not going to talk about it—”

“But I think we should—”

“Oh my *God*, what is everyone’s obsession with this right now?” Elizabeth demanded. She threw her bag and coat back on the sofa with a huff. “It’s been four years—”

“Three and a half,” Jason corrected, but she wasn’t listening to him anyway.

“And it was like this....blip that didn’t even *go* anywhere, but every time I turn around, Emily’s throwing at your face like a goddamn bomb, Sam is accusing me of something, and Lucky still thinks I’m picking you over him, Skye’s coming to me for advice, and now you—*you* want to *talk* about it!”

She jabbed a finger at him, her face flushed, and hair falling out of the messy updo it had been fastened in when she came in. “Blip?” he repeated because it was the only part of her tirade that he could really take in. “What does *that* mean?”

“Oh, man—” Elizabeth slumped onto the sofa and put her head into her hands. “I really did something to the universe this time. I pissed someone off, didn’t I?”

“Elizabeth—” He stopped. “Wait, why is Skye asking you for advice?”

“Who knows,” Elizabeth muttered and got back to her feet. “None of it matters. It’s over. It never even started. You told Courtney that once, remember? Well, you were right, and I got the message—”

She started past him again, but he grabbed her elbow and swung her back around. “What—what do you mean—how do you know what I said to Courtney?”

“I am going to staple my mouth shut.” Elizabeth pressed her lips together in a mutinous line. “I told you, Jason, I don’t want to talk about this—”

“I think we need to—”

“Why? Why do you want to hash this out now? What good could it possibly do?” She threw up her hands.

“I don’t know,” Jason admitted. “Probably none. But—” He paused. “Ever since we talked on the docks, since you told me—”

Elizabeth pressed her hands over her face with a low moan. “Oh, man—”

“I was not falling in love with Courtney while you were at the penthouse.”

Jason’s flat statement had Elizabeth lower her hands slightly so she could peer at him suspiciously. “What?”

“I never even thought about her that way until—until it came out of nowhere. In... December. After you made it clear at Luke’s that we were done.”

“You—” Her eyes widened, and she stabbed a finger in his direction. “You got married to Brenda—what the hell was I supposed to say—”

“Now, *why* the hell is Skye asking you for advice?” Jason demanded, losing his patience. “And is she telling Alcazar anything?”

Elizabeth blinked at him, shook her head a little. “What—why would—why would he care? And no, she’s not—” Her hands fell to her side, and resignation crept into her expression. “She didn’t think there was anyone else who would tell her the truth. And since I was a mother, I might be honest with her. She asked me about having a child with a man in this life since you and I used to date, and I guess she thought this was something we might have talked about.”

“Oh.” He was the flustered one now. “I—”

“I don’t think that’s something Alcazar would be interested in. Since she’s trying to decide if she’s having second thoughts. I told her that I wasn’t a good person to ask since—” With an exhausted sigh, Elizabeth continued, “since you and I never got that far.”

“Oh,” he repeated. He didn’t know what to say now. He wanted to ask her what her answer would have been if they—if they had gotten that far. But that was wildly irrelevant, and he couldn’t for the life of him think why it mattered—

Except Jason realized now that she’d all but told him she’d been in love with him that fall they’d briefly been together and, for years, she’d believed he’d been in love with someone else. And...he hated the idea that she didn’t know. That she’d *never* known how he’d felt then.

They stared at each for a long moment before Jason finally gave in to the desperate need to know. “What would your answer have been?” When she frowned, he continued, “If...we had talked about it.”

Elizabeth inhaled sharply, and he flinched. She wouldn’t answer, of course—it was none of his damn business—she was married. He was engaged.

But, for whatever reason, she answered the question.

“I told her that your way of life didn’t bother me. Not the way it probably should have. I told Skye that she needed to make sure that she wasn’t pretending Alcazar wasn’t who he was.” Her eyes shimmered. “Because if you walk into this life, you have to do it eyes wide open. What you do is not who you are, but it’s part of it. And if you ignore that, well...then it’s not real. You’re not real. And it won’t last.”

“That’s—” Jason rubbed his chest, his throat feeling tight. “I—”

“You never wanted to have this conversation back then, Jason. Because you were happier thinking I was stupid or reckless. So I guess it doesn’t matter what my answer would have been. You weren’t asking the question. You were never going to.”

She pushed past him and grabbed her coat and purse.

“I didn’t think you wanted me to.” He swallowed hard. “Elizabeth—”

“Well, we’ve had the conversation now. Great. You weren’t in love with Courtney back then. But you still—” Elizabeth stopped at the door and looked at him. “You still didn’t love me. So why are we doing this—”

“I didn’t know—” Jason bit back the words because they couldn’t possibly be useful now, but he just...he couldn’t stand that she didn’t know what she’d meant to him. “I didn’t know you needed the words.”

A tear slid down her cheek. “What does that *mean*?”

“It means I loved you. Then. I didn’t know you needed to hear it. I didn’t—I thought you’d know. But maybe I just wanted you to say it first.” He hesitated, but he couldn’t help himself. “You always mattered.”

Another tear fell down her cheek. “We never should have talked about this.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“But—” His voice sounded broken as he tried to force out the words. “It’s better to be honest, isn’t it?”

“No. Because now it’s worse. Because I didn’t know before. And now I do. Because I loved you, too. And we threw it away.”

She yanked open the door, and this time, he let her leave. He nodded to Cody, who followed Elizabeth out of the building.

Jason closed the door behind her, then turned to find her hat still sitting on his desk. He picked it up, then carefully put it into the drawer of his desk.

She was right. They shouldn’t have talked about it. Some things were better left in the dark.

Chapter Nine

*But I'm only human
And I bleed when I fall down
I'm only human
And I crash and I break down
Your words in my head, knives in my heart
You build me up and then I fall apart
'Cause I'm only human, yeah
- human, Christina Perri*

Friday, March 31, 2006

Elm Street: Outside of the Brownstone

Elizabeth pulled her car to a stop in front of Bobbie's house and just rested her forehead against the steering wheel for a moment. Instead of finishing paperwork at the end of her shift, maybe lingering for a few minutes to run downstairs and catch up with Nadine who had worked the same shift—

She was here, picking up her son.

Elizabeth had been standing in the nurse's station, searching for a pen that wasn't out of ink when Epiphany had given her a message from Bobbie. Not that it was an emergency or anything, Bobbie had told her, but that it was almost seven, and Lucky hadn't picked up Cameron yet.

Elizabeth had stared at the words on the paper Epiphany handed her and fought the urge to crumble it into a ball, to fling it across the room. She'd asked him this one thing—*one*—thing—Bobbie was having dinner with Lucy and Kevin, who were only in town for a few days, and she'd needed Cameron picked up earlier than usual.

It shouldn't have been an issue. Lucky didn't have physical therapy that day, and Elizabeth had only asked Bobbie to watch Cameron because he'd said something about staying late at work. She'd wanted him to have that—to have that connection to the job he was so desperately trying to get back to—

But he'd forgotten. He hadn't picked up Cameron. The one time all week she'd asked him to slightly adjust his own schedule—

She was trying so hard to keep things together, to put one foot in front of the other, but it just felt like the universe was against her this week. Manny and Skye, Sonny and Emily—and these insane conversations with Jason that felt like she was ripping her heart out and displaying it to him every time they spoke—

And what was the damn point? He was engaged. She was married. They'd both moved on. Why couldn't he—why couldn't she just let it go—

Elizabeth jumped as knuckles rapped sharply on her closed driver's side window. She turned and blinked at Carly's face, standing on the sidewalk, a hand on her hip. She rolled down the window. "Carly?"

"Mama was worried. Asked me to check on you." Carly pursed her lips. "You okay?"

Elizabeth sighed, switched off the engine, then grabbed her purse before she got out of the car. "Yeah, I'm just tired. It was a long day at the hospital—"

"And you weren't expecting to have to come over here to get Cameron, Mama said. Lucky was supposed to."

Together they walked towards the front steps. Carly stopped her a moment before she reached for the doorknob. "Listen, you know, Mama has had Morgan a few times this week. My kid likes yours."

"Oh." Elizabeth nodded. "Yeah, Cam said something about it. I'm—" She hesitated. "I'm glad. I'm trying to get Cam into nursery school next year, and it's good for him to be around kids his age. I know Morgan is a little older—"

"A few months, yeah, but they're getting to the age where that doesn't matter as much." Carly folded her arms. "I don't like you," she declared.

"I've never been a fan of you either."

"But," Carly continued, even as she tossed Elizabeth a glare, "there aren't many parents who...are eager to let their kids hang out with mine. Because of Sonny. I've tried...playdates. Michael has the same issue. I know—I know Lucky's a cop and everything, but I was hoping that you might not be annoying."

"Well, I'm sure you'll find another reason to call me annoying," Elizabeth said dryly. "But not about this. I don't know why Lucky would care. He grew up hanging out with Sonny, so I really don't want to hear his crap on this anyway."

“Fair enough.” Carly pushed open the door, and Elizabeth had to smile as she saw Cameron running after Morgan, who was a bit taller and steadier on his feet. “They’re playing...I’m not sure, but they seem to know the rules. Mama is upstairs, getting dressed for dinner.”

“Oh, well—” Elizabeth watched her son as he laughed, tackled Morgan, and pumped his fist in the air. “I should get Cam home, I guess.”

“Yeah. Or you could wait a few minutes for Mama to come down and talk to you because she’ll just hunt you down otherwise. The boys can play.”

“Mommy!” Cameron ran towards her, hugged her legs. “You say hi to Morgan.” He grinned at Carly. “Hi, Car. I like cars.”

Carly pursed her lips, but her eyes twinkled. “Car-ly,” she said, and clearly it was not the first time she’d instructed Elizabeth’s son on the pronunciation of her name. “Morgan, do you remember Elizabeth?”

“Uh-huh.” Morgan, who looked like a miniature version of his father with dark hair, dark eyes, and a dimple flashing in his cheek. “Ice cream. You buy it for me.”

“That was last summer,” Elizabeth said when Carly frowned at her. “I saw Morgan and Michael in the park with Leticia. I was getting Cameron ice cream, and...” She shrugged. “I’m glad you remember me, Morgan. You’re so smart!”

He grinned. “Bestest and most handsomest, right, Mommy?” He looked to Carly. “Cam leave?”

“Not yet, kid. You guys keep playing. We’re going to wait in the kitchen for Grammy.”

Morgan and Cameron ran back towards their pile of toys as Elizabeth followed Carly into the kitchen. “Michael isn’t here?”

“He’s at basketball practice. I like that Morgan gets to have this time with my mother. A nanny is nice for me when I’m at work, but I want him—” Carly looked at Morgan, who was giggling maniacally. “I’m trying very hard for Morgan to have a more normal childhood than Michael. Michael spent a lot of time with nannies.”

“They’re great kids, Carly. You’re doing something right.”

Carly frowned at her. “Did you just compliment me?”

“I think we’re both getting too old to fight over nothing at all.” Elizabeth sat down at the table and stretched her arm over her neck. “How are the boys doing? After losing Courtney...and with...” She grimaced. “The tabloids.”

Carly rolled her eyes. “Oh, God, right? It’s like one thing after another. They’re... adjusting. Courtney was a big part of their lives, but Morgan’s younger. Courtney will fade for him. It’s not fair—she took care of him so much when he was born because I was...in the hospital. And he won’t remember her at all.” She rubbed her face. “Michael’s managing. He looks at pictures of her, and we talk about her when he brings it up.”

She managed a half-smile for Elizabeth. “Thank you, though. For asking. I feel like Sonny has completely forgotten Courtney. I feel like—” Carly took a long breath. “I feel like everyone has. Jax hasn’t, but it’s more about John for him. And I know Nikolas is grieving. But it’s just—life went on. And it sucks.”

“I’m sorry,” Elizabeth said. “And I’m sorry if this thing with Sonny and Emily is creating more problems for the boys. Especially Michael. He’s in school, so I’m sure it comes up.”

“Oh, yeah, *that’s* been a real joy. You know—” Carly shook her head. “I knew something was going on with Sonny. Jason and I knew it weeks ago. He was ditching meetings with Jason, breaking promises to the boys—” She looked at Elizabeth. “Did you notice anything with Emily?”

“I did,” Elizabeth admitted. “She called out on a few shifts, and she’s—she broke a few promises to Cameron. I guess, with hindsight, we could see it coming. But I guess I thought she was over it.”

“And it’s *still* going on,” Carly said, disgusted. “Like, Sonny didn’t even stop to think how the way the news came out affects his kids—they don’t live with him, so he doesn’t have to feel it. A weekend here and there isn’t the same.” She grimaced. “Jason won’t talk about it, but I think he and Emily are fighting.”

Elizabeth hesitated, but she nodded. “Emily told me she’d been...” She bit her lip. “Well, you know how sometimes people who feel defensive go on the attack?”

“Know it? It’s pretty much my entire philosophy on life.” Carly wiggled her shoulders. “So Emily’s lashing out. At Jason?”

“Yeah,” Elizabeth admitted. “And—well, everyone. She thought Jason and I might come around on the whole Sonny thing, so when we didn’t both...I don’t know—I guess when we weren’t on board, she just—” She shook her head. “Anyway. It’s not been fun. She screams at Jason and Sam—they’ve both thrown her out. Then she comes to work, screams at me—”

“Jason threw her out? Huh.” Carly pursed her lips. “I’ve been bugging him about this. Trying to make him—I don’t know—fix it. But that’s not fair. I know that. I tell him all the time he shouldn’t spend his life cleaning up after Sonny and me, but I guess old habits are hard to break. When my boys are hurting, I can’t ask Sonny to help. He won’t. But I know Jason will.”

“No, but I get it. When things are wrong, and you can’t fix it yourself, Jason—” Elizabeth closed her mouth as Carly merely arched a brow.

“Jason what?” she prompted when Elizabeth didn’t continue.

“Sometimes, you forget that Jason can’t fix everything,” Elizabeth said quietly.

Carly tipped her head to the side, squinted at her, but clearly decided to let it go. “No, I guess not. Well, hopefully, this Sonny and Emily crap will run its course before we all lose our damn minds.”

“Carly? Elizabeth?” Bobbie’s voice from the foyer drifted back towards them.

“We’re in here, Mama!” Carly called. “I’m just having a pleasant conversation with Elizabeth, so you might want to mark down this date.”

“And it’s not even my birthday,” Bobbie said with a grin as she came into the kitchen. She kissed her daughter’s cheek, then Elizabeth’s.

“I should get going,” Elizabeth said. “I’ve been on my feet all day, and I want to get Cameron down to sleep soon.” She looked to Carly. “You should—you should call me. We’ll set up a playdate for Morgan and Cameron.”

“Yeah, that sounds great. Thanks.”

Elm Street Pier

Jason sat on the bench on the pier, stretched out his legs, then looked out past Bannister’s Wharf, towards the cluster of buildings where he knew Elizabeth’s apartment was located.

The apartment she shared with her husband and son.

I loved you, too.

He exhaled slowly. He wasn't entirely sure why his thoughts were drifting to her more and more these days. He'd been able to go entire weeks without thinking about Elizabeth. But asking her to run that maternity test for him had been a mistake in more ways than one.

Because now it's worse.

I loved you, too.

He heard the footsteps before he saw the man, and it gave Jason a chance to get to his feet before Lorenzo Alcazar reached the bottom of the stairs.

The two men eyed each other uneasily. There was a mutual loathing, to be sure, but at the moment, Jason had no problem with Alcazar.

"I was surprised to get your request for a meeting," Lorenzo said with an arch of his brow. "Until I spoke with Skye last night." The older man cast his dark eyes to the side before meeting Jason's gaze. "I owe your friend Elizabeth a debt of gratitude. For looking out for Skye."

"So, you already know."

"I do, and I suppose...I had offered Skye a guard, but she didn't want one." Lorenzo managed a half-smile, a bit pained. "I should have pressed her more. But she agreed to one last night, and she agreed to move to Miami a little early. She'd hoped to have the baby here, with her family, but..." He shrugged.

"Miami—" Jason frowned. "So you're taking over the Ruiz territory." He'd wondered why Alcazar had been laying so low these days, but it made sense—

"It's there, and...there's no room to expand here in Port Charles. Not without a lot of trouble." Lorenzo waited a long moment. "I'm concerned, though, about Elizabeth Spencer. If Skye told me her story correctly, Elizabeth...put herself in the line of fire. Can I offer any protection for her? A guard—"

"I'm taking care of that."

“I see.” Lorenzo paused and looked at him for a long moment. “Well, until next we meet, Morgan.” Lorenzo offered him a nod before going back up the stairs.

Jason exhaled his first easy breath as the other man disappeared behind a corner. Lorenzo Alcazar had never been a serious threat—he’d never had the connections. He’d been in a thorn in their side since the beginning thanks to Carly and her lingering affection for him.

He’d be gone now—but he was right. Without Alcazar or Skye to focus on, Manny would either follow them to Miami—

Or stay here for his revenge.

If Manny blamed Elizabeth for Skye’s disappearance...

He took out his phone and called Cody. “Hey—do you—do you have eyes on Elizabeth—No, I don’t want to know where she is. That’s—she’s okay? Okay. Yeah, you’re just—if she’s in danger. Manny might be targeting her. Okay.”

He hung up but still didn’t feel better. He needed to get rid of Manny Ruiz sooner rather than later.

Lucky & Elizabeth’s Apartment: Living Room

Elizabeth set Cameron down on the floor and watched as the toddler made a beeline for his toybox. She put her hands on her hips and glared at her husband, sprawled out on the sofa, watching the television with a glazed look in his eyes.

“Did you forget something?” she demanded.

Lucky blinked, looked at her for a long moment as if he couldn’t quite focus. “What? What did I forget?”

“Bobbie couldn’t keep Cameron until I was done my shift. You were supposed to pick him up at six—”

“Oh.” Still not seeming to engage in the conversation, Lucky cleared his throat. “Wait. What day is it?”

Frowning now, Elizabeth sat next to him, put a hand to his cheek. “Are you okay? You look sick—”

He slapped her hands away. "I'm fine. Leave me alone—"

"What's wrong with you?" Elizabeth demanded. "You forgot Cameron, you didn't come home last night—"

"I crashed at the club. I was with my Dad, and you didn't really seem to need me." Lucky shrugged. Closed his eyes. "Therapy's been taking a lot out of me. Double sessions."

"Yeah, but—"

"I'm sorry. I forgot Bobbie couldn't keep him." Lucky looked at her. "Did you have to leave work early?"

"Yeah, almost a half-hour. Not only did I lose that money, Lucky, but I also have a ton of paperwork I still have to do at the start of the next shift. You know that. Bobbie is doing us—me—a huge favor by taking him so much. I just—I asked you for one thing, Lucky. One. And you couldn't manage that."

He just stared at her without saying anything. Exhausted, Elizabeth shook her head and got to her feet. She went into the kitchen and started to pull together a meal for Cameron's dinner. "I'm so tired," she murmured. "And you don't even seem to care."

"I do care, but I can't...I'm sorry," Lucky repeated. But he didn't get up. Didn't even take his eyes off the television.

She let the subject drop because what would continuing the argument change? He didn't care he'd cost her money, time and energy—that he'd proven, again, how much Cameron didn't matter to him. She wanted to believe that it would be okay when Lucky went back to work—

But would it?

She stared at the fridge, at the photograph she'd pinned with a magnet of her wedding day. Of her and Lucky. That moment in time when she'd thought everything was perfect. Elizabeth put her hand on her own face, tracing the smile.

If it wasn't for her son, Elizabeth wasn't sure the last time she could remember smiling.

With her brain not occupied with her job, with being irritated with Lucky, it drifted back to the previous day.

She'd gone back to work after leaving the warehouse, but she hadn't been able to stop thinking about that terrible conversation she'd shared with Jason—of that moment he'd looked at her and told her—

"It means I loved you."

God. He'd really thought it'd be *better* if they cleared the air? She'd rather go back to thinking that he'd loved Courtney. At least then she could blame someone else.

How was she ever going to face him? She couldn't even get his voice out of her head.

It means I loved you.

I loved you.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and gathered her thoughts. "No point in thinking about it," she reminded herself. It was over. She'd gone on with her life. She had her precious little boy and—

She looked out into the living room where her husband was sitting. She had her marriage. And Jason hadn't exactly pined away for her either. He'd married another woman. Was engaged to a second one.

They'd both ended up where they were supposed to be, and it was no good to think about the road they hadn't taken. It was just...she was tired. And things were hard with Lucky right now. She just needed to get through the next few weeks—

It means I loved you.

Elizabeth huffed. How many damn times she was going to have to tell herself to let this go? "I need to have my head examined," she muttered as she set Cameron's dinner on the table. "Cameron, come eat dinner!"

I loved you.

Morgan Penthouse: Master Bedroom

Sam was packing a duffel bag when Jason came upstairs later that afternoon. He frowned at the clothes strewn across the bed. "So, I guess you're going."

“Oh, he speaks.” Sam raised her brows. She shrugged, then shoved a pair of jeans into the bag. “Yeah, I’m going to Florida. The job is starting sometime next week, but...” She sighed. “I need a few more things in the guest room.”

She eyed him when he said nothing. “You know, where I’ve been sleeping for the last *week*.”

Jason nodded. “I know. You were mad after that fight with Sonny. About how I handled it. I didn’t know what to say to you. It felt like I was always making it worse —”

“So, what—you decided to just let it go? Hope I calmed down—”

Jason winced because yeah, that was pretty much how he’d decided to handle it, but now he could see now it was a mistake. “Sam—”

“Didn’t it bother you that I was angry?” Sam demanded. “That I was upset enough to move out of our bedroom for a week?”

Jason exhaled slowly. The answer was no, it hadn’t bothered him. He knew he handled things badly, but he’d been irritated with Sam about the way she’d spoken to Elizabeth, and yeah, the fact that she’d decided to go back to being a con artist—

“Sam—”

Sam growled and turned on him. “Let’s get this straight. *I* am pissed at *you*. *You* don’t get to be mad at *me* because I’m pulling a job. You forced my mother down my throat, you let your sister attack me, you’re calling me a mess to clean up, and you’re...I don’t know...up to something with your ex-girlfriend—” She stabbed a finger in his direction. “So just remember *you’re* the asshole, not me—”

Jason exhaled slowly. “Some of that is true,” he admitted. “I made a mistake with the DNA test, and I’ve apologized for that. I didn’t *let* Emily attack you—”

She rolled her eyes. “Sure—”

“She’s not allowed upstairs without permission from now on. I threw her out the first day, you threw her out the second day.” He shook his head. “I never called you a mess I had to clean up—”

“I know what I heard—”

“You know what Sonny said to you. *I* never said it.” He shook his head. “You know, I don’t know what to tell you, Sam. You’re mad at me for a lot of things that aren’t my fault—”

“What about Elizabeth?” Sam threw back at him. “You’re going to tell me I don’t have a reason to be mad at you about that?”

“I told you. Elizabeth has been passing me info about Manny Ruiz from the hospital —”

“Oh, sure—”

“And yesterday, she had something important I needed to know. She knew Skye was in danger, that Manny had something planned.” He grimaced. “And you wasted her time and mine by refusing to tell her where I was.”

Sam lifted her chin, her eyes a bit defiant. “She’s a big girl. She can take care of herself. And she had no problem ratting me out. What, did she come over to cry on your shoulder?” She rolled her eyes and returned to her packing.

Jason was surprised when he felt his hands fist at his side. “She’s never done anything to you. You’re angry at her about the maternity test, but she never would have run it if I told her it was for you. You’re angry at Emily, at Sonny—fine. Take it out on me. On them. But leave her out of it—”

“You don’t even *hear* yourself, do you?” Sam shook her head. “You know, I don’t get it. If the two of you were so obsessed with each other, why the hell did you leave her? Was she bad in bed or something?”

“I—” Jason’s voice faltered. He looked at this woman he’d asked to marry him, who just weeks ago, he would have told anyone was the love of his life. The woman who understood him. And it was like she was a stranger. “That’s not fair. And you know it.”

Sam squeezed her eyes shut, clenching a t-shirt in her hands. “I’m sorry,” she said finally. “I know you’re right. I know that—I know that you didn’t do anything. I just—it’s like I don’t even know who I am. I thought I did. I thought I had things figured out, but I don’t. And you and I—”

She looked at him, her dark eyes wet with tears. “We just can’t talk. I keep trying,

and I *know* you're trying. But everything we say to each other—it just feels *wrong*.”

Sam sucked in a shaky breath. “And then there’s this woman who’s important to you, and I didn’t even know that. I *should* have known that. I know about Carly and Robin, I know about Courtney. But it’s like...either she didn’t matter enough to talk about, or she mattered too much. And she’s back in your life, and you talk to her. And she gets you. I don’t get you anymore. Do you know what it’s like to watch you with her, to listen to you talk *about* her?”

Jason said nothing as Sam shook her head. “Why can’t you just be honest with me?”

“What am I supposed to say?” Jason asked in a dull voice. He didn’t want to have this conversation. He didn’t want to talk about Elizabeth at all, and he certainly didn’t want to get into it with Sam.

Not after the warehouse.

Because now it’s worse.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Elizabeth freaking Spencer? Did she matter too much, or did she mean nothing?”

Because I loved you, too.

He didn’t think there was an answer that would make her feel better, so Jason went with the truth. “She mattered too much,” he said finally. “It was easier not to think about her. So I didn’t.”

And we threw it away.

She waited, maybe to see if he’d say something else But he didn’t. So she nodded. “Thank you for not lying,” Sam said finally. She put a toiletry bag into her bag, then zipped it. “Are you sorry?”

Jason frowned. “For...what?”

“That it’s not her in this penthouse? That you didn’t marry her? Have a kid with her? Are you sorry that it’s *me* and not *her* standing in front of you?”

Jason scowled. “That’s—that’s not a fair question.”

“Maybe, but it’s a simple one. Yes or no. And you didn’t answer it. So maybe while I’m gone next week, you can figure out why—”

“Sam—” Jason stopped her by putting an arm on her hand. “Don’t do this, okay? Let’s just—” He took a deep breath because she’d—she’d been right. He hadn’t been fair to her or given her any real space to deal with any of this. “Just—let’s just talk. Okay? You’re right. We’re not talking.”

Sam’s mouth curved into a smirk. “You want to talk? Now? When you’ve made it clear how you feel about me doing this job?”

“I want to talk about why you don’t trust me—”

“I trust you,” Sam told him. “Hell, I even trust Elizabeth Spencer. But I don’t trust *me*. I’m going to ruin this, Jason. I ruin everything.”

“Sam—”

“But sure.” She set the bag down. “Sure. Let’s try talking again.” Sam tilted her head to the side, let her hand slide down his t-shirt. “Or maybe we shouldn’t talk at all.”

Jason hesitated, just a moment, and her eyes hardened. She snatched up the bag and stalked out of the room. “Sam—”

“You had your chance,” she told him flatly as she walked into a guest room, tossed the bag on the bed. She put her hand on the door. “You don’t want me, fine. We can co-exist until I leave on Tuesday.”

“Sam, I never said—”

“Maybe *I* don’t want *you*,” she snarled, curling her hand around the edge of the door like a claw. “When I know you won’t be thinking of me when you’re screwing me. You know, maybe if you get drunk enough, you could even pretend—”

“Shut up,” Jason snapped, and Sam’s smirk only deepened—even as her dark eyes were wild with hurt and rejection. He hadn’t meant to do that—hadn’t wanted to hurt her at all. He just didn’t think jumping into bed was going to fix anything—

But now, as she slammed the door in his face, he didn’t know if what was wrong could be fixed. Or if even he even wanted it to be.

Monday, April 3, 2006

Lucky & Elizabeth's Apartment: Bathroom

Elizabeth enjoyed having days off during the week — Lucky was gone all day, she could take Cameron with her to run errands and get some snuggle time with him. He was racing towards his second birthday, and next year, if she could get him into a nursery program, he'd be in school. Before she knew it, he'd be grown up.

But for right now, he was her whole world, and she was determined to make up for the haphazard treatment from his stepfather. "It'll be different," she told her reflection in the mirror. "When he gets back to work."

And she wasn't going to let herself think about what would happen if Lucky's test next Friday didn't come back more positively—if he didn't make it back on active duty. That wasn't something she could allow for.

She left the bathroom, walked through Cameron's room, and into the living room where Cameron was constructing a Lego tower. "You ready to go to the bank, Cam?"

"No, want to stay and play." Cameron furrowed his brow. "Stay here."

"Mommy has things to do—" Elizabeth winced as her cell phone rang. She went over to her purse, hoping Epiphany wasn't going to call her in. She didn't recognize the number on the caller ID but answered it anyway. "Hello?"

"Hello? Elizabeth? It's Skye."

Elizabeth exhaled on a breath of relief. "Oh, hey. Skye. I was thinking about you the other day—"

"I just wanted to get in touch with you—I didn't want you to worry when you didn't see me around." Skye waited a moment. "Thank you for telling me about Manny, and for encouraging me to tell Lorenzo. Jason got in touch with him and told him his own concerns, so I'm glad I was in front of it."

"I'm just sorry I waited so long—"

"It's all right, really. I'm safe. Lorenzo and I were planning to move to Miami later this year anyway. For a fresh start with our baby. We just decided to move it up several months. Thank you again for taking the time and—" Skye hesitated. "The

risk. I'm worried about you, about what happened last week—"

"Don't worry," Elizabeth said.

"Lorenzo told me he'd offered Jason protection for you, but Jason assured him it was being handled. I supposed I just wanted to make sure—"

"I have a guard," Elizabeth said with a wrinkle of her nose. She'd mostly been able to forget that. Cody followed her in his car and hung around the hospital, but she hadn't really seen him other than that. "So don't worry about me. Manny might still follow you to Miami."

"Yes, well, I've taken your advice." Skye's end of the line fell silent. "All of it. I thought about the life I was choosing and whether it was one that I really wanted for me. For my daughter. Thank you. For taking the time to open up to me like that. I won't forget it."

"I'm glad I could help—"

"And I suppose I just wanted to—" Skye paused. "I don't know. I wish there was something I could do in return. Something I could say that would mean as much. I just—I'm glad I made the choice. That I thought about it. I don't want Lorenzo and our family to be one—not taking the chance to be something I regret."

"I'm glad," Elizabeth repeated. Her throat swelled. "Life is too short," she managed, "for those kinds of regrets."

"It is. Thank you again for taking the chance and helping me. If you ever need anything, you only have to ask."

Kelly's: Parking Lot

Jason swung his leg over his bike, adjusting the kickstand so that it stayed upright. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a dark sedan pull into another parking spot, on the other side, two down from his spot.

The same sedan he'd seen at the warehouse. And parked outside the Towers when he'd left the parking garage that morning.

Jason exhaled slowly and walked towards the diner. Instead of going through the courtyard, he headed for the alley behind the building. He quickened his pace—just slightly—so that it wasn't noticed but so that he could gain a few extra seconds.

Once he was in the alley, he ducked down behind the dumpster—and waited.

Until he heard footsteps. They stopped halfway down the alley, just feet away from him—as if the person following him wasn't sure if he'd simply lost Jason or if he'd gone inside the restaurant using the back door.

Jason frowned, realizing he knew the man—

And when his pursuer was only two or three feet away, Jason shot out of hiding, the momentum of his movement propelling him across the alley as he crashed into the man and shoved him against the brick back wall of Kelly's.

“Why the *hell* are you following me?” he demanded, as he shook the guard. He narrowed his eyes.

“Uh—uh—” Jimmy, one of the younger guards hired in the last six months—looked back and forth, his eyes bulging as Jason cut off the air to his windpipe. “Orders.”

Jason released the pressure slightly, stepping back. “Whose?” he demanded.

“Mr. Corinthos—”

Jason let Jimmy crash to the ground as the younger man rolled onto all fours, gasping for air. “How long?”

“Just since Saturday.” Jimmy looked up at him, his face white. “I'm sorry—”

“Tell Francis you need to go through the training again. I made you five minutes after you started following me. You need to change cars—” Disgusted, Jason shook his head. “Do you know why I didn't kick your ass five hours ago?”

“Uh—”

“Because—” Jason leaned down. “I wanted you to think I was going about my day so that I could ambush you. If I'd been anyone else, you'd be dead right now. You get it?”

“Yeah—yeah—”

“Go back to Francis.”

And then Jason stalked back down the alley, back towards his bike. He had someone to see.

Chapter Ten

*All the world is a stage
And everyone has their part
But how was I to know which way the story'd go
How was I to know you'd break
You'd break my heart
I've always been in love with you
Guess you've always known
You took my love for granted, why oh why
The show is over, say good-bye
- Take a Bow, Madonna*

Monday, April 3, 2006

Greystone Manor: Living Room

Jason stalked into the living room, past a worried and flustered Mac, then slammed the double doors of the room closed behind him. “You put a guy on me.”

Sonny arched his brows and looked at him as he sat in the armchair, lounging with a tumbler of bourbon. “You met with Lorenzo Alcazar without telling me.” He shrugged. “Some of the guys got worried.”

Jason doubted that. “So instead of talking to me, asking what was going on, you sent some rookie to tail me,” Jason spat as he stared at his clearly former best friend, his fists clenched. “I made him in about five seconds, Sonny. What was the damn point?”

“To remind you who is in charge!” Sonny spat. He set the liquor aside, then surged to his feet. “You don’t meet with *my* enemies without *my* permission!”

Jason fell back a step with a scowl and bewildered. “You *knew* there was a situation with Ruiz and Skye. It needed to be dealt with. Manny made a move—”

“Yeah? You didn’t tell me—”

“Because you wouldn’t have listened. And I’m tired of waiting for you to deal with it. Alcazar is gone. He took Skye with him to Miami to finish the takeover of the Ruiz territory. With any luck, Ruiz will follow him—”

“And you took our best warehouse guard off his detail to follow a cop’s wife—” Sonny snorted. “Going to the cops, going to Alcazar—you know, I never thought I’d see the day when you’d turn on me—”

“Turn on you—” Jason repeated. He didn’t even know how to respond to that. “Cody isn’t following a cop’s wife. He’s following *Elizabeth*. Elizabeth, who put herself in between Manny and Skye. She’s the reason Manny couldn’t make his move. All I’m doing is keeping her safe—”

Sonny’s fury only deepened. “Elizabeth had her chance to walk on this side of the line. She got too scared and ran, so you know, it’s her cop husband’s job to look out for her. Or Alcazar. Why the hell isn’t—”

Jason took a deep breath. He’d known for weeks that Sonny was teetering on the balance of that dark place. If Jason gave in to the anger right now, if he gave into the fury that Sonny expected Jason to walk away from *Elizabeth*, then he’d never be able to salvage this.

“This isn’t like you,” Jason said finally. He let himself see the other signs he’d been denying—the way Sonny’s gaze kept darting around, the way his hand fumbled—even the slightly disheveled hair. The physical signs were usually something he noticed first, but Jason had been distracted. Sonny was headed for another breakdown at the worst possible time. This was what he’d been worried about all along — what he hadn’t wanted Emily to go through.

“Oh, don’t start with me—”

“She’s not just a cop’s wife, Sonny. And Elizabeth didn’t get scared and run away. That’s not why we broke up.” Jason could say that now with a confidence he hadn’t entirely believed only a few weeks ago. “She’s never flinched from who we are. Even when she should have. She came to us because Lucky refused to help her. Because the PCPD let her down. You *know* Elizabeth better than that.”

Sonny stared at him for a long time, then swallowed. He sat down in the chair, bowed his head, and dragged his hands through his hair. “It’s happening again, isn’t it?” he murmured.

“Sonny—”

“I know you’re right. I—” Sonny looked up, took a deep breath. “What do you mean, Elizabeth got in the middle of Manny and Skye? How?”

Briefly, Jason told him about Manny showing up again during Skye's appointment — on a floor he wasn't even assigned to work that day. And how Elizabeth kept him from following Skye around the hospital.

"Even if he didn't make an actual move," Jason said, "Elizabeth tipped her hand. He's not stupid. He *had* to know she was deliberately separating him from Skye. And now Skye's gone. He's going to make the connection."

"That girl is going to get herself killed one day trying to protect other people," Sonny muttered. Jason breathed a sigh of relief. Because there it was. *That* was how he expected Sonny to react when learning that someone who had put herself on the line for them time and time again was in danger. "And you were already worried Manny was letting Elizabeth see her. Does he know about you and her?"

"That we—" Jason shook his head. "I don't know. He saw us at the hospital together a few weeks ago, but he'd have to be following one of us."

"And if he is?" Sonny arched his brow. "Would he have seen you two together?"

"Uh..." Jason hesitated, winced. "Yeah. A few times. It's not like that, Sonny. She's—"

"I didn't say that—" Sonny pressed his lips together. "You got Cody on her. She's at the hospital where Manny's got guys on him. Fine." He looked at Jason. "You...you haven't said anything about Emily in the last few weeks. Not since..." He hesitated. "Not since that last day here."

"No, I—" Jason shook his head. "I *hate* that you both lied to me. That you let yourself get distracted from things that were happening, and then refused to let me deal with anything. I'm not happy it's happening."

After a moment, when Sonny said nothing, Jason continued, "But it's not my job to live Emily's life or choose how she gets hurt. Or how you get hurt. I just—" He looked away. "She's my sister, Sonny. And it's not like it was with Courtney. It's not about the danger."

"Not that danger." Sonny nodded after a long moment. "None of the things you said before...were entirely wrong," he said finally. "But I never asked you to clean up after me."

Jason nearly called him a liar because Sonny had *always* put him in the middle — first by making Jason be the one to jilt Brenda and humiliate her — and then he and

Carly had both shoved him in the middle. But that wouldn't help anything if he pointed that out. So Jason just nodded. "Okay."

"And maybe it's time you stopped."

"Fine. Tell my sister to leave Sam and Elizabeth alone and stop dragging them into this."

"You could try telling her yourself—"

Remembering Sam's pale face and Elizabeth's mortification, Jason shook his head. "I'm not ready to be in the same room with her yet."

"She's not going to apologize to you, Jase—" Sonny shrugged. "She doesn't think she's wrong—"

"Did she tell you what exactly she said?" Jason demanded. "Because she *was* wrong. She told Sam she was a whore who'd used her dead daughter to con her way into an engagement ring, she told me that all I do is hurt people and accused me of cheating on Elizabeth, and she told Elizabeth—" Jason shook his head. "Sam and Elizabeth had nothing to do with any of this. She can come at me all she wants. Not them."

"Still juggling two women at a time," Sonny smirked, picked up his bourbon. "And you tell *me* I treat women like trash."

Jason blinked, shook his head, then took a deep breath. The mood swings were part of it. He just had to manage until Sonny either hit rock bottom or pulled out of it. "I am not—"

"I was pretty terrible to Sam, too. But you're not making me promise to leave her alone or demanding an apology on her behalf. And you've been here convincing me of *Elizabeth's* loyalty. Man, you really don't hear yourself sometimes."

"I'm going—"

"Emily's not wrong about Sam, by the way," Sonny called, but Jason didn't even bother looking back. It wasn't worth it.

Kelly's: Courtyard

Elizabeth stepped out of the diner and winced as Cameron saw Emily first and

wiggled out of her grasp to run over to where Emily was sitting at a table alone.

“Em, Em, Em!”

Emily picked Cameron up into a tight hug, kissed his cheeks, then tickled him. Cameron giggled manically. “Em!” He turned to look at his mother. “Mommy, it’s Em!”

“Yes, it is.” Elizabeth let Kelly’s door close behind her. “Hey, Em.”

“So, you’re talking to me?” Emily asked, with an arch of her brow. She let Cameron slid to the ground, but the toddler didn’t seem to notice the tension in the air. He climbed up into the seat next to her and looked his mother expectantly.

Elizabeth looked down at the brown bag that held their lunches. “He missed having breakfast with you last week. Can we join you?”

“Sure.” Emily’s smile was thin as Elizabeth sat down and set Cameron up with the food she’d ordered. “You haven’t returned my phone calls.”

“You mean the one time you called me last week?” Elizabeth shrugged. “Sorry I got busy. Gram’s out of town, and I had to find another baby sitter.” She handed Cameron his juice. “Are things better at home?”

“Well, Grandfather isn’t talking to me, but he stopped leaving the room when I walk in. And Dad and Mom have stopped threatening to throw me out, so I guess there’s that.” Emily lifted her chin. “Would have been nice to have your support, but I guess you couldn’t manage it.”

“You never gave me a chance to offer it,” Elizabeth murmured. “You came to work that first day ready to go to war. I tried to help you with Jason — I told him to give you a break—”

Emily snorted. “Yeah. A lot of good that did me when he stood by while his whore threw me out—”

“Stop it, Emily—” Elizabeth scowled and looked pointedly at Cameron, who blinked at his mother, but thankfully didn’t ask what a “whore” was. Emily winced. “I don’t want to get involved in this, I really don’t. But I’m sorry, I have to ask — did you even give him a chance to change his mind. Or did you go in the penthouse again to attack him? Did you attack Sam?”

“I—” Emily closed her mouth. “Why do you care?”

“I care because this—this is happening to me now, too. *You* dragged me into this.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Because Jason decided I *had* to know he’d never cheated on me. Which, you know, is a super fun conversation to have—”

Emily narrowed her eyes. “All I’m doing is the same thing *you* always did when it came to Jason.”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose, shook her head. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” Emily said, flatly, “is you told a lot of people to go to hell that December. Your grandmother, Nikolas, me—anyone who ever gave a damn about you. We didn’t matter as long as you had Jason.”

Elizabeth stared at her best friend for a long moment. “That’s not what happened. And you know it—”

“Oh, okay—”

“What *happened* was that I saved your brother’s life. And then a bunch of people who I thought loved me decided they had a right to know what was going on. Nikolas followed me back to the studio and burst in on me, changing Jason’s bandage, and then he attacked him. So if you think I was wrong to lie to Nikolas about my relationship with Jason so that he would leave him alone, then I don’t know what to tell you.”

“What about *me*? Why didn’t you tell me what was going on? If Jason was that sick and you really weren’t sleeping together—”

“Because I don’t owe you anything.” Elizabeth smiled at Cameron. “Hey, buddy, Aunt Em has to get to the hospital, so we’re going to take our lunch to go after all.”

“Okay.” Cameron sighed. “Sorry, Em. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Emily said with a sigh as Elizabeth started packing up his sandwich. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to argue with you again—”

“*This* is the difference between what happened then and what’s going on now. I told a lot of people to go to hell because I wanted to control my own life. And no, I was not technically with Jason back then. But I wanted to be. And I was tired of being sad all

the time. He didn't want me, Emily. Not then." And maybe not really ever, but she let that go.

She got to her feet. "None of that changes the fact that I *never* tore anyone else down to get what I wanted."

Emily also stood. "Elizabeth—"

"I never threw your past in your face—all I ever said was that seeing you happy made it hard for me some times. That's it. I never told your secrets to anyone else, I never used the thing you hate about yourself as a weapon. I *never* punched down, Em. And that's all you've been doing. Right now—"

Elizabeth took a deep breath. "Right now, I could use my best friend. I'm—" Her voice broke. "I'm drowning. And you don't see it. And I don't ask you for help. Because I know I can't go to you. You won't be there."

Stricken, Emily stepped back. "What—Elizabeth—"

"I told you what I told you about Jason in confidence. I never wanted to talk about it again. And now—" Elizabeth squeezed her hand into fists.

"Mommy?" Cam looked up at her, tugging on her pant leg. "You mad at Em? I like Em."

"I like Em, too," Elizabeth told her son. She looked at Emily. "I love you, Emily. I know you love me. I know you never meant to hurt me. And I know you love Jason. He's dying over this. But you and Sonny—I don't know, maybe you deserve each other."

She took Cameron by the hand and headed for the parking lot. Emily, thankfully, did not follow.

"Mommy?" Cameron sniffled. "Are we mad at Em?"

"No, sweetie. But Aunt Emily is in timeout for a few days," Elizabeth said with a sigh as they reached their car. She set their food on the driver's seat so that she could put Cameron into his car seat.

"She was bad?"

“Little bit.”

“Like when I climbed the walls, and you got mad?”

“No, more like when you got into my lipstick and drew all over the sofa and yourself.” Elizabeth eyed her grinning son. “We can still see the color on the side of the sofa.”

“I like red.”

“Yeah, so you said when I was scrubbing it off you in the bathtub.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes. She closed the back door, then got into the front seat, shoving their food onto the passenger seat. She reached into her pocket for her keys and knocked her cell phone out at the same time.

She frowned. “I have a voice mail—I didn’t even hear it ring—”

“Who calleded, Mommy?”

She flipped open the phone and opened her voice mails. “Jason.” She looked at the ceiling of her car. “A whole year. I went basically an entire *year* without being around him, and it was fine. Why are you doing this?”

“Who you talking to? Mommy?” In her rearview mirror, she could see Cameron craning his head to look up.

“The world.”

“Oh, okay.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath, pressed play, and put the phone to her ear. “Hey, Elizabeth. It’s, uh, me. Jason. I—I wanted to let you know—We need to talk. About Manny. Call me when you get this.”

She wrinkled her nose and dialed his number. Well, at least she wouldn’t have to see him—

“Elizabeth?”

“Hey. I got your call.” Elizabeth turned in her seat to check on Cameron again.

“What’s up?”

“Do you have time? Can—” She heard him pause. “Can we talk in person?” When she didn’t say anything right away, he added, “It’s important.”

No. Not a chance. She was changing her name and moving to Alaska. “Okay. Uh, can you give me about thirty minutes? I’m dropping Cameron off at Bobbie’s to play with Morgan.”

“Yeah, I’ll meet you on Elm Street Pier in thirty.”

Elm Street Pier

Elizabeth restlessly laced her fingers together as she watched Jason walk towards her from Pier 52 and the Corinthos-Morgan warehouse. She’d hoped for a few more days before she had to face him — what the hell had possessed her to tell him she loved him, too?

This...strange retread down memory lane with Jason was the absolutely last thing her life needed right now. Especially today, after that fight with Emily—

“Hey,” Jason said as he approached her. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket. “Thanks for meeting me.”

“No problem. You said it was important—” Elizabeth gestured behind her. “And Cody’s here. He said he’d keep out of sight—”

“Yeah, hopefully, you won’t need him much longer, but...” Jason hesitated and looked at her. “I talked to Alcazar. Skye had already told him. He moved her to Miami. They were already moving there, so he just...pushed up the time table.”

“Oh.” She wrinkled her brow. “Is that what you needed to tell me? Because that really could have been said over the phone.”

Jason hesitated, a bit taken aback. “Part of it—”

“Skye called me this morning. She told me—” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “She told me they were in Miami. She didn’t want me to worry. And she was worried about me.”

“Oh.” Jason cleared his throat. “Right. Well, you have Cody for now—but Manny—” He cleared his throat. “That’s still a thing.”

Right. And that was the whole reason she’d gone to him in the first place. It was

stupid to pretend that because Skye was on her guard and safe in Miami, that it was over. “At least for now.” Elizabeth chewed on her bottom lip. “Maybe he’ll leave.”

“We’re hoping. Not that I want Skye in danger in Miami, but Alcazar’s on high alert now, and hopefully so she is, too. If he follows them—”

“He’ll leave me alone.” Elizabeth sighed and sat on the bench. “You hope that’s what will happen, but you don’t think it will.”

“I—” Jason sat next to her, but this time made sure to keep a few feet between them. “No. I can’t afford to take any chances. Skye’s gone right after you put yourself in the middle. Manny’s not stupid.”

“You’re still annoyed I got involved.” Elizabeth looked at her hands in her lap. “I know you told me not to—”

“For all you knew, Manny would have jumped her in a stairwell or followed her after the appointment. You—” A corner of Jason’s mouth hitched up in a half-smile. “You told me you wouldn’t let someone get hurt. I should have believed you.”

“I should have thought about it more,” Elizabeth admitted. “It was stupid to do that. I could have offered to walk Skye downstairs or—” She frowned. “Or maybe Manny would have gone after us both. It’s not like I’m a lot of competition.”

“No, and maybe he wasn’t planning anything. He could have refused to go with you, he could have hurt you and gone after Skye anyway. He didn’t.” Jason exhaled slowly and looked out over the lake. “With anyone else, I might think he’d backed down and decided it was too risky. But that’s not Manny Ruiz. He plays games.”

“So, what do I do?”

“Stay on your toes,” Jason advised. “When do you work again?”

“Oh. Tomorrow. I’m on the 10-6 shift. Why?”

“I’m gonna call Alan, set up a meeting. You put yourself in danger to protect Skye, and he still thinks of her as his daughter. I want Cody at the hospital with you, but I don’t want anyone to know.”

“Okay, just keep me in the loop.” Elizabeth nodded. “And thanks. I appreciate it.”

“You took a risk coming to me with this info about Manny. And—” Jason jerked a shoulder, looked away from her. “I’m not gonna let anything happen to you.”

“Okay.” *Go. Now.* Elizabeth got to her feet. “I should go get Cam from Bobbie—”

“Wait—” He touched her elbow as he also stood. “Look, I just—about yesterday—”

She closed her eyes. “Can’t we just be done with all of that, Jason? I mean it. It’s been over for years. What does any of this matter anymore?”

“I don’t know,” Jason admitted. “I just—I don’t know. You were right. We shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Good, so—”

“But we did.”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together, turned, and faced him with a lift of her chin. “We cleared the air. It doesn’t matter.” It couldn’t matter. She didn’t have *time* for it to matter.

“If it doesn’t matter,” Jason said, his voice dropping slightly, “then why is it so difficult to talk about it?”

Her stomach rolled as Elizabeth struggled to speak past the lump in her throat. “It’s not *supposed* to matter,” she said softly. She met his eyes. “What do you want me to say? What’s left?”

“I don’t know. I guess—” Jason hesitated. “I always thought you left because I couldn’t tell you what was going on. Or maybe you were tired of being shot at. I don’t know.”

“And you never asked.” She tilted her head. “Are you asking me now?”

“I—” Jason swallowed. He stepped a bit closer to her. “I guess I am.”

She sighed, looked away for a long moment. She should tell him no. That there had been a time and place when it would have been useful to have this conversation. He hadn’t asked back then, and she hadn’t really pushed him. And there was a reason they hadn’t done the work. There had to be.

But she didn't tell him no. She looked at him, at those eyes that she had fallen in love with first, then sighed.

Because even though it was more than three years too late, even though she knew it was a mistake—

He was *asking*.

"It's been so long since I let myself think of that time," Elizabeth admitted. "I put it away. I had to. It was the only way I could breathe. By the time Emily asked why I had left, it was easier to tell her I left because of Courtney. But that just...that was just how I explained it to myself."

She folded her arms, looked at him again. "I left because you lied to me. Because I thought—I *still* think—I deserved to know the truth about what you and Sonny were doing. I thought—after all the lies I had told for you—*all* the ways I had protected you—that I deserved that much. I always understood I couldn't know everything. I don't want to know *everything*, but I think—"

Elizabeth broke off, shook her head. "Never mind."

"No, finish it," Jason said, his voice slightly hoarse. "What did you think?"

"I think—" She bit her lip. "I *still* think that when I—or anyone," she added hastily, "step over to your side of the line, when I put my life in your hands, I should get to know things that put my life at risk."

On a long slow breath, Jason exhaled, but he said nothing. Didn't look away. So she continued.

"And Sonny faking his death put me at risk. It put *Carly* at risk. Because anyone could have come in to make trouble. That's exactly what happened, wasn't it? I thought you were out there, running everything, not coming home—to the penthouse," she corrected, "and there were nights you didn't come back, you didn't call—I wondered if you were dead. If anyone would even remember to tell me."

"Elizabeth—"

"And I thought—" A tear slid down her cheek. "That I had already sat through one relationship where I didn't matter. Where I'd been patted on the head and lied to for my own good—and I just thought I deserved better. And I thought if you loved me, you wouldn't do that to me. So I left."

“I—” He shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well...maybe if you’d asked me that question four years ago—” Elizabeth shrugged. “But you told me it had nothing to do with me. And I realized you were right. Because I wasn’t part of your life, and you’d made that clear. So I left. And when it didn’t seem to bother you, I told myself it was because of Courtney. Because you’d been falling in love with her, and that...I could live with that.”

She met his eyes as tears continued to slide down her cheeks. “But that’s not true. You can tell yourself that you loved me back then, but you didn’t trust me. Maybe you didn’t think I’d stick around, but it’s not like you gave me a reason to.”

“No,” Jason said finally. “I guess I didn’t.”

Elizabeth wiped at her cheeks. “Is that it? Any other questions you want me to answer? Can we finally be done with this?”

“No, there’s nothing else.” Jason cleared his throat. “You’re right. I didn’t think you’d stay. So when you left, I just...I expected it. I let it happen.”

“I get it. Maybe I even deserved it. After everything I did—”

“No—” Jason shook his head. “No. I just—it wasn’t about any of that. It was just—” He looked away. “I don’t know. I don’t know,” he said again.

“Can we be *done* with this?” Elizabeth asked again. “There’s no point to drag this back up, Jason. We just—we made mistakes. And we hurt each other. It’s over. It’s *been* over for a long time. It’s time to stop. Thank you for looking out for me with Manny. But maybe when he’s not a threat anymore, we should go back to the way things were.”

“We can’t—” He hesitated. “We can’t be friends?”

“We’re not just friends,” Elizabeth told him, kindly but firmly. “And we haven’t been just friends in a long time, Jason. It hurts too much.”

“Okay.” Jason scrubbed his hands over his face. “Okay. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well, it’s four years too late for any of this, but I’m sorry, too.”

“I should—I should get back to work.” But Jason waited a long moment before breaking eye contact as if she might say something else. Change her mind. But Elizabeth had made up her mind, so he left.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then sat back on the bench to collect her thoughts. It was better this way. If she was going to make her marriage work, if she was going to deal with Lucky and the life she’d built with him, she couldn’t have Jason around reminding her of all the chances she’d thrown away.

“I think you and I should have a chat.”

Elizabeth turned at the voice, then sighed as Sam came round the corner, with her brows lifted. “Sure, why not?” she murmured to the sky. “Just keep kicking me.”

—

Clearly, Elizabeth was unhappy with Sam’s presence, but Sam didn’t really care. She’d gone to the warehouse to talk to Jason, to try and get past this, but she’d seen him leave the warehouse and walk towards the pier. She’d wanted to catch up with him—had nearly called out after him—

Until she’d seen who he was meeting. So she’d ducked behind a corner to listen. Because she *knew* something was going on. And he was never going to tell her unless she had something to confront him with.

“So, what exactly were the two of you talking about yesterday?” Sam demanded. “That you shouldn’t have talked about?”

“If you have questions, then maybe you should have asked your fiance.” Elizabeth got to her feet. “He’s the one that owes you answers, not me—”

“Oh—*not* so fast.” Sam put out a hand to stop Elizabeth. “No, woman to woman, I’m asking you what the hell is going on. Because—” she grimaced. “*You* are not the type of woman to have an affair. Maybe if Jason were single, I could see it. But he’s not. I just can’t see you doing that to someone else.”

“We’re not—” Elizabeth bit off a protest. “Look, a long time ago, we were almost something. But we both ran from it. We both assumed we knew why the other ran. It might sound insane, but it’s just—I guess we never talked about it. It’s just closure, Sam—”

“Almost something,” Sam repeated. “Then why does it seem to be such a big deal now? It’s been *years*, Elizabeth. Why—” Her voice faltered. “Why can’t he seem to stop asking you? I heard you. You kept shutting him down—but he kept *asking*. Do you get it? He was desperate to understand what went wrong—”

“I—” Elizabeth hesitated. “Sam, I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t live in Jason’s head.”

“But—”

“You should talk to *him*,” she repeated.

“I keep trying,” Sam admitted. She scowled. “But we just—it’s like we’re speaking different languages. We’re fighting all the time—ever since that stupid maternity test—” She grimaced. “Apparently, I have you to thank for making sure he told me at all.”

“He would have told you, Sam. He was just—he loves you,” Elizabeth told her. “And he just wanted to protect you. He was wrong. I told him that. But he just wanted to help—”

“I don’t need that kind of help. It should have been up to me—”

“Yeah, you’re right. But that’s not how it worked out. Look, if you and Jason are arguing all the time, that just—it *can’t* be my problem. And I can’t be someone—” Elizabeth huffed. “I’m not doing this. I deserve better than this from literally everyone. Go to talk to your fiancé.”

“Why can he just pour his heart out to you and not *me*?” Sam demanded as Elizabeth pushed past her.

“Is that what you think he was doing?” Elizabeth demanded as she spun around to face Sam again. “Were you even *listening*? I broke open a vein because he needed to know why the hell I left. And he couldn’t even be bothered to tell me *why* he treated me that way! I begged him to stop asking—”

“Then why did you answer him? Why even have the conversation?” Sam shot back.

“Because...” Elizabeth shook her head. “Maybe *I’m* selfish. Maybe I needed to know why he couldn’t love me. Why is it so hard to love me? To treat me with some damn respect? Is that so much to ask? Don’t I deserve that?”

“I—” Sam blinked. Because now they were having a completely different conversation, and she was less comfortable now. “Yeah. Elizabeth—”

Tears slid down the other woman’s face as her voice broke. “But there’s no way Jason loved me. No one ever has. Not my parents. My family. Ric. Lucky—he can’t even bring himself to love my son much less me—” She broke off with a shuddering sob as she tilted her head to the sky. “I don’t know what you *want* from me, Sam.”

“I don’t either,” Sam admitted on a shaky breath. “I don’t know what I want from myself most of the time. I guess—maybe it didn’t sound to you like Jason was opening up, but that’s more than he’s talked to me in weeks. I’m jealous. I want him to look at me like that, and I don’t think he ever has.”

Elizabeth looked at Sam. “Then why are you still here?”

“I don’t know,” Sam repeated. “Why are you? If Lucky doesn’t love you or your son—”

“Where am I going to go?” Elizabeth murmured. Her hands fell to her side. “Because if I’m not Lucky’s wife, who am I? That’s all I’ve ever been. No one even gives a damn about me. I don’t ever get to come first.”

“Because being unhappy and miserable is somehow better than being alone,” Sam finished with a slow nod. “I’m sorry. I should...I should take this to Jason.” She bit her lip. “But you know, you’re right. I don’t think you and Jason can ever be just friends. And that’s not fair to the people you promised to love.”

“No, it’s not. So, I’m just—I’m going to go home to my son and put all of this behind me. I’m tired.”

This time, Sam let Elizabeth go. She didn’t understand any of this any better than she had before she’d confronted Elizabeth, but she knew that this wasn’t the end of it. Despite Elizabeth’s protest, Sam had a sinking feeling that the worst was still to come.

Chapter Eleven

*I have never heard a silence quite so loud
I walk in the room and you don't make a sound, make a sound
You're good at making me feel small
If it doesn't hurt me, why do I still cry?
If it didn't kill me, then I'm half alive
- Something's Gotta Give, Camila Cabello*

Tuesday, April 4, 2006

Lucky & Elizabeth's Apartment: Bedroom

Elizabeth pressed her hand to Cameron's forehead and sighed. He was still running a fever.

He'd been fine yesterday, until sometime after dinner when suddenly, his face had looked flushed. He'd spent the entire night throwing up or using a lot of diapers. She'd barely slept, trying to keep him clean and calm, but now she and her son were both exhausted as Cameron lay on his back, looking at her with sad eyes.

"Tummy hurts," he managed.

"I know, sweetheart. But Mommy can't stay home—" She'd already asked Epiphany to move the schedule around enough with her grandmother out of town. Some of the other surgical nurses had complained about favoritism, and Elizabeth just knew if she called out sick today, she'd never hear the end of it.

"He any better?" Lucky asked from the doorway as he sipped a glass of water. "I barely got any sleep last night."

Elizabeth turned away from her husband and pressed her lips together. Lucky had complained from the sofa bed and had done nothing to help. But she couldn't worry about that right now. "He's not going to be able to go to the daycare. I'm not going to be the mother who makes other kids sick." She braced herself. "Can you stay with him today?"

"Elizabeth—"

“I know, I know, but—” Elizabeth twisted to face him. “I’m sorry. I can’t miss another day.” Not after she’d ducked out on Friday’s shift early because he’d forgotten to pick Cameron up in the first place. “I might be able to get Epiphany to let me leave at four, but there’s no way I can miss the entire shift. We can’t afford it, and she’s already done me enough favors—”

Lucky scowled. “I only have a few more days to pass the physical—”

“I know that, but he’s sick, Lucky. Can’t you go tomorrow? Bobbie can watch him tomorrow during the day. I already called her—”

“Can’t you call someone else?”

“There’s no one else—” Elizabeth broke off as hysteria bubbled in her throat. “Lucky, please. I *need* this promotion to work out. As soon as I can start scrubbing into surgeries, I’ll have better hours. But I need to put in the grunt work first. We need this to work.”

“We *need* me to get back to active duty so you can stay home with him more.” Lucky shook his head. “I can’t miss therapy—”

“Lucky, I don’t ask you for a lot. I—I know better—”

“What does that mean?” Lucky demanded, narrowing his eyes and stepping towards her. She backed up a step. “What are you talking about?” He clenched his hands at his sides.

Her heart skipped a beat as Elizabeth swallowed hard. It was just a flicker she’d seen. It was gone now. “I mean, I know better than to ask you to give up time from your rehab. I don’t. Not after you made it clear when Gram decided to go to Memphis. I got that covered, didn’t I? Between Epiphany moving my schedule around and Bobbie—I haven’t asked you for much.”

“No, I—” Lucky exhaled slowly. “No, not really. I know how supportive you’ve tried to be. I know you’re in a tight spot, Elizabeth. I wish I could help—”

Help. Oh, God. She swallowed a sob. “Lucky, *please* don’t make me beg,” she said softly. “I’ll call in any favors I have left so that you can go to therapy tonight. I’ll do my best. But I need to go to work.”

Lucky sighed, rubbed the back of his neck. “All right,” he said finally. “I’ll figure something out about therapy. Maybe I can find someone who can watch him. But this

is the *last* time. I need to pass that test on Friday, Elizabeth.”

“I know.” She managed a wobbly smile and didn’t even flinch when he kissed her cheek. “I know you need to pass the test.”

They all needed him to pass that test. If he didn’t get back to work soon, she was going to lose her mind. “Thank you,” she said. “This means a lot.”

When he smiled at her, she managed to keep her own expression upbeat. Even if everything inside her was screaming that something was terribly wrong with her marriage and this couldn’t keep happening.

“Anything for you,” Lucky said as he kissed her again. “I mean it.”

“I...need to get ready for work,” she managed as she ducked into the bathroom, closed the door, then pressed her head against the cool wood.

“Just a few more days,” she murmured. “I can do this a little longer. He’ll go back to work, and it’ll all be okay.”

Maybe if she said it enough, she would believe it.

General Hospital: Nurse’s Station

Elizabeth pressed a hand to her head and took a deep breath. She just...needed a nap. Maybe on her next break, she could manage twenty minutes.

“You okay?” Epiphany asked as she set down some charts. “You look beat.” She hesitated. “If you’re not well—”

“Cameron has a stomach virus,” Elizabeth said. “I needed to—I was up with him most of the night. Lucky has him now, but I didn’t sleep a lot. I can work, I promise. I won’t ask for any more time off.”

“Okay.” Epiphany sighed, then scowled as Manny pushed the janitor cart past them. He stopped to offer Elizabeth a jaunty salute. Her stomach pitched, then rolled as bile rose in her throat. Oh, man. She did not need that today. “I really hate him.”

“I guess he didn’t follow Skye to Miami after all,” Elizabeth managed. Her hands trembled as she picked up a chart. Maybe he hadn’t been planning anything nefarious for Skye. Maybe Elizabeth had overreacted.

Or maybe Jason was right, and Manny was just playing games.

“I need to talk to Stan again,” Epiphany said with a shake of her head. “You know, I hate what my boy does for a living, but you look at a man like Manny Ruiz, and you think...”

“Maybe sometimes taking the law into your own hands isn’t such a terrible idea,” Elizabeth muttered. They both watched as the janitor disappeared down the hall—whistling. “Jason said they’re watching him closely.”

“I bet it’s still too high profile. Another month, if we’re lucky, and maybe we can get rid of him.” Epiphany shrugged. “Anyway, I’ll try to get you some downtime in the break room—”

“Thanks,” Elizabeth said as the elevator doors slid open, and Jason stepped out of them. She winced as he headed straight for her. “Why does the universe hate me?”

“I ask myself that every day,” Epiphany said. “You want me to get rid of him?”

“No. If he’s here, it’s for a reason—” It had damn well *better* be.

Elizabeth stepped out of the nurse’s station and met Jason over in the waiting area. “Hey. What—um—why are you here?”

“I told you I had a meeting with Alan.” Jason glanced around. “Have you seen Manny today?”

“Yeah, just a few minutes ago. He—” Elizabeth swallowed hard. “He smiled at me and gave me a salute. So...you know, that was great.” She sighed. “What did Alan say?”

“Can we talk somewhere where Manny won’t see us together?”

Elizabeth scowled. “Why didn’t you think of that *before* you came to see me at my job —” She bit off the rest of her retort as the wheel of the custodian cart’s came into earshot. They both turned to see Manny rolling by again. He smiled at them both, a wide grin that did nothing to make Elizabeth feel any better.

“Oh. Good. That’s just—” She waited until the psycho had gone down another hall before grabbing Jason’s arm and dragging him towards an empty hospital room.

“Elizabeth—”

“Why? *Why* couldn’t you just call?” Elizabeth demanded. She dragged her hands through her hair. “Why? And he’s following me. You know he is. Because he just rolled that stupid cart by two minutes ago. It’s the *third* time he’s gone past the nurse’s station today—”

“I’ll tell Alan he needs to be reassigned—”

“I just don’t want *any* of this. I don’t want this—” She shoved down the hysteria that had been threatening to spill over since her argument with Lucky that morning. “I’m sorry,” Elizabeth said after a long moment and a deep breath. “I didn’t sleep well last night. Cam is sick. And I just—I know this Manny thing is something I brought on myself. I got involved. I’m not sorry I did, but I annoyed him on my own. That had nothing to do with you.”

“Elizabeth—”

“I just—I’m *asking* you not to make it worse.” She looked at him. “If you need to talk to me, call me. I don’t want Manny thinking anything stupid, okay? Maybe right now he hasn’t decided to do anything, but if he thinks—”

“If he thinks it’ll mess with me,” Jason said, “he might *actually* go after you. Yeah, I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I just—I wanted to tell you that Alan was on board with any extra security I wanted to add to make sure you were okay. To keep Manny from hurting anyone. He’s trying to get Manny let go, but he’s part of some community service program—”

“Right.” Elizabeth folded her arms. “Okay. I just—” She bit her lip, looked down. “I meant what I said yesterday, Jason. I can’t do this anymore.”

“Elizabeth—”

“So if it can be a phone call—”

“Yeah, okay. Hey—” He didn’t say anything else until Elizabeth lifted her eyes to meet his. “Is Cam okay? Can I do anything?”

Tears burned at the back of her eyes as she struggled to form words. Why did he have to ask the one thing she didn’t have a defense against? “He’s just—a stomach thing. It’s fine. But thanks.”

“Okay,” Jason repeated. “I don’t—” His voice was rough now. “I don’t mean to make anything harder. I just—” He looked away. “I just want to take care of—” He broke off abruptly. “I want to make sure you’re taken care of,” he said instead, even though Elizabeth knew what he’d nearly said.

I just want to take care of you.

“I can take care of myself, but I appreciate you looking out for me with Manny,” Elizabeth said. “I need to get back to work.”

“Okay.”

They’d no sooner stepped back out into the hallway when Elizabeth heard a screaming child—*her* screaming child. She and Jason both turned to look as Lucky rounded the corner, a wailing Cameron in his arms.

“What the hell—” Elizabeth started. She darted forward. “Is he okay? Did his fever go higher—”

Lucky didn’t seem to notice Jason following Elizabeth until after he’d shoved Cameron into her arms. The force of it nearly knocked Elizabeth back as Cameron buried her face in her shoulder. Elizabeth wrapped her arms around her shaking son. “Mommy!”

“Hey, it’s okay, baby—Lucky, what’s wrong?” she asked him again.

“Nothing,” Lucky said. He finally seemed to notice the other man, then narrowed his eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Why are you here?” Elizabeth demanded before Lucky could pick a fight with Jason. “Why is Cameron—”

“I watched him like I was supposed to. But I told you—I can’t miss another session, and I couldn’t find anyone to watch him—”

“What the hell is all this noise?” Epiphany demanded as she stalked towards them. She glared at the three of them. “Why is that child crying?”

Elizabeth pushed Cameron’s sweaty curls off his forehead as her son started to quiet down to just sniffles and occasional hiccups. “He still has a fever—and oh, God—” She found herself looking at Jason instead of Lucky as panic seeped in. “It’s worse than it was before.” She looked at Lucky now. “When did it get higher? Did you take his

temperature?”

“I don’t know,” Lucky shrugged. “But you’ve got doctors here. I have to go, or I’ll be late.” He frowned at her for a moment, swayed slightly, his eyes glassy as if he’d been the one to stay up all night. “I’ll see you at home—”

“Wait, I have to work—”

But Lucky had already gone, with a wave of his hand over his shoulder as he left, turning the corner like he hadn’t just dumped Elizabeth’s sick son on her like a sack of potatoes.

“Mommy, my tummy hurts,” Cameron whimpered.

“Elizabeth,” Epiphany began.

But then Cameron coughed, and then—

Then he vomited, the mixture of mucus, food, and stomach juices violently launching out of his mouth and all over Elizabeth’s scrubs, her arms, and onto the floor. Elizabeth gasped as Cameron continued to heave.

Epiphany went across the hall to grab a phone to page a doctor, then passed Jason a plastic tub and towel from a linen cart. Jason wrapped the towel around Cameron and held the tub near his mouth as the toddler continued to retch.

“Oh, my God,” Elizabeth managed to choke out as her son started to cry again, scared by everyone’s reactions and his own pain and discomfort. Her cheeks were flaming with embarrassment as Jason used the towel to mop at Cameron’s face and her scrub top, some of her son’s vomit getting on him.

“Oh, God, I’m sorry—” she babbled as Patrick jogged up, his handsome face frowning at the sight.

“Elizabeth, what’s wrong—” He shuddered. “Oh, *ew*. What—”

Epiphany smacked him in the arm. “I swear to God, boy, if you don’t get yourself together—”

“Yeah, yeah, grab us an examining room. Ow,” he muttered as he approached Elizabeth and Jason. “What’s wrong with Cam?”

“It’s—it’s a stomach thing, and he was supposed to be at home, but—” Her throat closed up, and she couldn’t force a single word out. Her baby should have been resting at home, comfortable in his bed, but instead, Lucky had dragged him out of the house and probably hadn’t been too gentle about it.

Jason accepted another towel from Epiphany and gently lifted Cameron from Elizabeth’s arms, wrapped the toddler in it, and held him in his arms. “It’s okay,” he told her as tears slid down her cheeks. “Let’s go get him checked out and you can clean up—”

“You don’t have to—” But she couldn’t finish that sentence as Epiphany herded them into an empty patient room. Jason set Cameron on the bed, and Patrick gave Epiphany a few things he’d need.

“I’ll bring back a fresh set of scrubs, too,” Epiphany promised Elizabeth. She eyed Jason’s stained t-shirt. “And I’ll steal Drake Junior’s extra shirt from his locker.”

“I’d argue with her,” Patrick said as the other nurse left, “but she’d just hit me again.”

“I’m sorry,” Elizabeth apologized again. “You’re not a pediatrician, and—”

“But I did my time in that ward, so let’s just take a look,” Patrick shrugged. “You’re right about the stomach thing. It’s ripping through the hospital. And—” He pressed his hand to Cameron’s forehead. “I’m concerned about the fever. I’ll want to prescribe him something to bring that down. He needs rest—”

“He was—” Elizabeth swallowed down a sob. “He was supposed to be at home. Resting. B-But Lucky—” She shook her head, closing her eyes. Jason put an arm around her shoulder, and she couldn’t stop herself from curling into his embrace for just a moment.

For just one moment, she didn’t want to feel so damned alone. Even if Jason Morgan was the last person she should lean on for comfort.

Mercifully, Patrick let it drop as Epiphany returned with clothes and the thermometer Patrick had asked for. He did a quick exam on Cameron, who had grown a bit listless and laid on the bed with a glazed expression.

“I’ll write the prescription for something to bring down the fever,” Patrick told her. “I wouldn’t normally on a kid this age, but I’m worried. And he looks like he hasn’t kept much down—”

“Some juice and applesauce mostly. I tried but—” Elizabeth shook her head. “I had to go to work. Lucky—he was—”

“Well, get some of that Pedialyte stuff,” Patrick told her. He looked away, uncomfortable as if he wanted to say more.

“But I—” She looked at Epiphany. “I have to work, and my grandmother is still in Memphis—”

“You go on home and take care of your baby,” Epiphany told her. “I’ll clear it. I know you don’t want to use any more of your sick time, but—”

“I don’t have a choice,” she murmured. “Oh. Oh, God. Lucky probably didn’t leave me the car seat. We only have one, and I left it in his car because he was supposed to be with him—”

How was she supposed to—

Jason spoke up. “I’ll take you home,” he told her. “I have the SUV, so you can sit in the back with him and hold him. You don’t live that far.”

“Jason—”

“I’ll have someone take your car home—”

“I can’t ask you—”

“It seems like a good idea to me,” Epiphany said briskly. “Now, Jason, go into the bathroom there and change. Elizabeth, go take a shower and change in the locker room. I’ll look after your boy.”

“I—” Elizabeth sighed. “Thank you. Epiphany, Jason, and Patrick. Thank you. I just —” She sighed. “I’ll go wash up.”

When she’d left, Patrick scowled. “How the hell did Cameron end up here?” he demanded. “This kid is sick and shouldn’t be outside—”

“Lucky brought him here,” Jason said, a bit unnerved with the way Lucky had dumped the screaming child on his mother, clearly unconcerned with Cameron or his health. Anyone could see the kid was sick. And it killed him to see Elizabeth looking

so lost, so fragile.

“He’s an asshole,” Epiphany muttered. “You make sure she has the medicine this kid needs, Morgan. You make sure she gets home and has everything she needs.” She turned her fish eye on Patrick Drake, who put his hands up in surrender. “And *you* make sure whatever prescription you gave her is covered by our insurance here.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. But she’d be better off losing the husband.” He hesitated, shook his head. Jason frowned at him.

“That is something none of us can fix. All I can do is take care of her here at work.” She looked at Jason again. “And we’d all be better off if that psycho Manny Ruiz wasn’t breathing down our necks.”

“I’m trying,” Jason said, finding himself feeling oddly defensive. “I have people watching him. I’m not going to let him hurt anyone else.”

“See that you don’t. Now go change out of that shirt before Elizabeth comes in here and gets upset all over again that you’re covered in her kid’s throw-up.”

Lucky & Elizabeth’s Apartment: Street

By the time Elizabeth pushed open her apartment door an hour later, she’d become numb. The mixture of humiliation, fury, and sheer exhaustion had rendered her incapable of feeling. She’d sat in the backseat of the SUV Jason had driven to the hospital, cuddling her sick baby while he’d gone into the pharmacy to get whatever Patrick had told him to get.

She probably should have offered to pay, but she couldn’t bring herself to speak. Instead, as Jason pulled out of the parking lot, she found herself dozing off slightly, her head slumping against Cameron’s.

She didn’t know how much time passed before there was a gentle touch on her elbow. Elizabeth opened her eyes and realized Jason was standing in the street, the door open. “Hey, let me get you upstairs, and you can both get some sleep.”

Elizabeth sighed, closed her eyes, then nodded. “Okay.”

“Here, let me take him up.” Jason reached in and easily lifted the dozing toddler into his arms. The bag from the pharmacy was looped around one of his wrists. She should offer to take it from him.

But it took everything she could muster to get herself out of the car and upstairs. She must have been running at the hospital on sheer willpower because the moment she'd left, taking a single step had become the hardest thing.

"Is his bedroom through there?" Jason asked quietly as he stood with Elizabeth in the doorway, taking in the shambles of her apartment. Lucky had left laundry strewn all over the place, and breakfast dishes were still sitting on the end table, his sofa bed still pulled out.

She stared at it, wishing that she could just close her eyes and make it all disappear. Without waiting for an answer, Jason opened the door. Dimly she could hear his voice, soothing as Cameron stirred, then he must have fallen back asleep as Jason came out and gently closed the door.

The humiliation fought its way past the paralyzing exhaustion as Jason began to fold up the sofa bed. She stepped forward and touched his arm. "No, let me—"

"I don't mind." Jason looked at her for a long moment, a touch of worry in his light blue eyes. "I can't make Cameron feel better, but I can do this. You look so tired, Elizabeth."

"I just—" Couldn't let herself depend on anyone. But she also didn't quite have the strength to stop him, so Jason closed up the sofa bed, steered her to sit down, and then took the dishes into the kitchen.

Elizabeth scrubbed her hands over her face. Almost from the moment Cameron had thrown up, Jason had stuck. Hadn't flinched when he'd been splashed with vomit or been confronted with her dingy, shabby apartment left a mess by the man who was supposed to love Cameron as his own.

When the water stopped running, Jason came back out and sat on the other end of the sofa. "You should get some sleep—"

"Thank you." She cleared her throat, made eye contact with him. "I should—I should have said that before."

"Yeah, of course." They stared at one another for a long time before Jason pushed himself to his feet. "Do you need anything else? I put Cam's medicine and the stuff Patrick told me to get him in the fridge."

"Thank you," she repeated. She stood up. "I—I had a moment at the hospital where I think I was going to fall apart. I didn't. I think part of me knew you wouldn't leave

until I was okay. And..." Her voice broke. "There are just some days when you need that."

"It's none of my business," Jason said slowly, "but I don't...understand what happened. Or why Lucky—"

"Didn't seem to care or notice how sick Cameron was?" Elizabeth finished. She shook her head. "I don't know. I could make a list of excuses. I probably will before he gets home. I've always been good at that." She offered a humorless smile. "I guess old habits never really die."

"Why?" Jason scowled. "Why put yourself through it?"

"Maybe you might not understand this," Elizabeth said slowly, "but there are just—there some things I can't think about. Not right now. I know that doesn't make the problems go away, but—"

"Elizabeth, I just—" He lifted both his hands. "You deserve better."

"Maybe." She could feel the tears sliding down her cheeks, the cool tracks they made on her skin. "But I can't do this right now."

"When?"

"Don't—" She pressed her hands to her face. "Don't ask me that. Please."

"Okay." Jason crossed the distance between them and pulled her into his arms, wrapping his strong arms around her for the second time that day. She let herself have ten seconds of that before she pulled away.

But she didn't step away. Elizabeth glanced up at him to find him already looking at her, their faces close. With one of his hands, he cupped her cheek and wiped away a tear with his thumb.

"It kills me to see you like this. Let me help."

"You did," Elizabeth told him. "I know it doesn't seem like a lot, but—" Impulse had her leaning forward slightly, tilting her head up just a bit to press her lips to his cheek. Stupid. Stupid.

Their breath mingled as she started to pull back, and instead of taking a giant step

away from him—she leaned in. His lips brushed hers gently, and the soft touch sent a shock down her spine. She so badly just wanted to sink into him, to lose herself—

She nearly did—nearly forgot everything—until his hand cupped her jaw. The feel of his fingers on her skin jolted her back.

Elizabeth jerked away, putting half the room between them. “No. We—*No*.” She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I think—I think you should go.”

“Yeah.” Looking as stunned as she was, Jason swallowed hard. Nodded. “But if you need anything—”

“I’ll figure it out. You should go before Lucky comes home.”

With a sigh, Jason nodded. “Yeah, okay. But get some sleep. I’ll—” He fisted his hand at his side. “I’ll see you around,” he said finally.

And then he was gone.

Elizabeth closed her eyes, pressed her fingers to her lips, and, this time, didn’t fight the tears as the sobs wracked her body. Oh, God. What was she going to do now?

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

Jason was still a bit shaken when he went home after leaving Elizabeth’s apartment. He hadn’t—He’d never planned to—

He didn’t even know *how* it had happened, and he knew it shouldn’t happen again. She was married. He was engaged. And Elizabeth was right—they couldn’t be friends.

He dropped his keys on the desk and scrubbed his hands over his face.

“Since when do you wear dress shirts to work?” Sam asked from the top of the stairs. He looked up to find her on the landing, a duffel bag at her feet.

“I—I thought you’d left for the airport.”

“Not yet.” She came down to the bottom of the stairs, gestured at the blue shirt Jason wore. “Did I miss a party?”

“Uh—” Jason had forgotten he wore Patrick Drake’s borrowed shirt. “I—” He looked at Sam and realized he didn’t want to tell her. He wanted to lie to her, to make her stop looking at him, and asking questions. And if he didn’t tell her the truth, didn’t that mean something about their relationship?

Didn’t that mean something about how much he trusted Sam? He’d just kissed another woman—a woman he would have sworn a month ago he had put in his past.

“Jason,” Sam pressed when he didn’t answer. “What happened to your shirt?”

“I was at the hospital,” Jason said after a long moment, “arranging security at the hospital for Elizabeth. With Skye gone, I’m worried Manny will target her.”

“I know, but that doesn’t explain the shirt—”

“It’s Cameron’s,” Jason said finally. “I went to tell Elizabeth what Alan and I talked about, and he threw up. He’s sick.”

“I—” Sam frowned. “What was Cameron even doing there? And why—” She took a deep breath. “Why did you have to go and tell her in person?”

“I probably should have called,” Jason admitted. “But Lucky showed up and just—” He broke off. It felt wrong to describe that scene for anyone who hadn’t been there. As if he were betraying some secret Elizabeth would have rather kept to herself. “I didn’t want to leave her alone with a sick kid, so I stayed with her until I knew Cameron was okay.”

Sam exhaled slowly. “You know, I wasn’t going—I wasn’t going to do this. I wasn’t going to say anything because I didn’t think I’d want the answers. But I was on the docks. Yesterday.”

Jason blinked. “Yesterday.”

“I heard your conversation with Elizabeth. The *entire* conversation,” Sam clarified. “From the part where you told her Skye had left Port Charles straight on through to where Elizabeth told you couldn’t be friends anymore because it hurt too much—”

“Sam—”

“And you should know—” With a quiet dignity he hadn’t expected, Sam lifted her chin. “You should know that from someone who was just listening, it sounded like two

people who'd never really moved on—"

"That's not—" He shook his head. "That's not how it was—" Except he was starting to think maybe that was exactly what it was, and Jason couldn't begin to understand what to do with that.

"I listened to you all but beg her to tell you why she left. As if the reason could *possibly* matter after all this time."

"Sam—"

"I don't need you to reassure me. I don't know if you could. I just—" She took a deep breath. "I need you to figure out what the hell is going on in your head. A month ago, Elizabeth Spencer wasn't so much as a blip on either of our radars. And now, it's like ever since you found out she thought you cheated on her, you've been obsessed with finding out why she left you. How do you think that makes me feel?"

He didn't have an answer for that. He knew Sam was right. He'd gone from not even thinking about Elizabeth to *only* worrying about her. He'd just kissed her. Despite the promises he'd made to Sam, Jason hadn't been thinking about his fiancée while standing in that apartment. And he didn't think Sam would be comforted by the idea that this...situation with Elizabeth hadn't started with the fight with Emily.

That he'd already been thinking about her.

And what kind of man did that make him?

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Because I think we both need to—" Sam looked away. "It's like we keep bashing our heads together having the same arguments. But neither one of us is saying anything. You hate the fact that I'm going on this job, but you refuse to tell me why. How is what I'm doing any different than what you do?"

This was something he could explain. Because he'd always known what his issue was with her returning to work as a con artist.

"The life I live..." Jason hesitated. "It's violent, and I commit crimes. I break laws. But the people who get hurt sign up for this life. The people I go after—they *choose* to be part of this. The people you pull these tricks on—they didn't."

“Oh, so what you do is honest, and what I do is a lie? Are you *serious*—”

“I didn’t say it makes sense,” Jason interrupted. “I said that’s how I see it. Manny Ruiz chose this life. His brother and their father—made that choice. But this woman you’re going to steal money from—she thinks the guy she’s dealing with is legit. You’re stealing from people who never asked to play the game. So, yeah, I think what you do is worse.”

Sam flinched, almost as if she’d been hit, then glared at him. “So you think a man who’s killed people and beaten people up for a living is somehow better than me? That’s what we’re getting to. You’re an *honorable* criminal, and I’m trash—”

“I never said that—”

“But somehow, my crimes are dirtier and more wrong.” Sam nodded. “Thanks. Thanks for clearing that up.” She pursed her lips, nodded again. “And while we’re being honest, *I* think you’re still in love with Elizabeth Spencer. I think that’s what Courtney meant when she told me I was a cheap substitute for you *and* for Sonny. She was talking about Elizabeth.”

“I—”

“And it was fine when you thought she’d left you because of your job. You could live with that. You could *settle* for me. But *now* you know she left because you hurt her and treated her like garbage. And it’s *killing* you. Because now settling doesn’t seem like it makes you happy anymore.”

Jason said nothing, and Sam nodded. “Thank you for not denying it.”

“I don’t know if anything you said is right, I just know—I know it’s not wrong,” Jason admitted painfully. “Sam—”

“She doesn’t *want* you, Jason. She has a husband and a new life. So you need to figure out if you can let her go. Because if you can’t, then I don’t know how I can stay.” She lifted up her duffel bag. “All I ask you is to just...*stop* having these heart to hearts where people can see you. Or hear you. I don’t deserve to be humiliated on top of everything else.”

“Sam—” he said again.

“I’m going to Florida. Let’s...both take this time to regroup. Because I deserve more than this. And so does she.”

Sam pushed past him, and Jason let her go. He didn't even know what he could say to her, except she was right. Everyone deserved better than the way he was treating them, and he just—he needed to get things under control again.

Elizabeth wanted him to stay away if it wasn't about Manny, and this time, he thought that was a good idea. Until he got his head on straight.

Lucky & Elizabeth's Apartment: Living Room

By the time Lucky came home from therapy around seven that night, Elizabeth had slept and felt slightly more human. She had decided to ignore the entire...incident with Jason and explain it to her brain as stress and hysteria. She'd lost her mind for a few minutes, but she was okay now.

Whatever had happened with Jason, no matter how guilty she felt about it—it didn't change what Lucky had done. Lucky had promised her to look after Cameron, and instead, he'd put his health at risk by dragging him out with a fever.

She gave Cameron another small glass of the Pedialyte juice Jason had purchased at the pharmacy. It was his second dose since he'd woken up from his earlier nap, and already he looked more comfortable. With Cameron feeling better, and a few hours of sleep behind her, Elizabeth felt ready to at least attempt to figure things out with Lucky.

Lucky dropped his keys on the coffee table and offered a sheepish grin. "Hey. Look, I know you're angry—"

"Angry isn't really the word." She took a deep breath. "I lost half my shift at work, and it would have been more if Epiphany didn't cover for me. You left me without a car seat, and Cameron had a fever. Did you even *give* a damn—"

"Of course I did!" Lucky's cheeks flushed. "Did *you*? I told you I couldn't miss another session—"

"And I—" She closed her eyes. "You agreed. Don't pretend you didn't. I had to beg you, but you *agreed*—"

"I only have three days before I lose my spot on the squad!" Lucky shot back. "Damn it, isn't *that* supposed to be the most important thing? Get back on active duty and full pay so you can take off a fucking day work to take care of your kid?"

Your kid. God, she'd seen it for months, but she'd ignored it. After a year, Cameron was her kid. Not theirs. Not his. But he was Elizabeth's responsibility, and Lucky had made it clear every time he put himself above what Cameron needed.

"No, the most important thing to me is my son. And he had a fever. Five seconds after you walked away, Lucky, Cameron threw up all over me and Jason. Epiphany had to call Patrick. He had a fever," she repeated. "And you left me without his car seat. How the hell did you think I'd get home?"

"I—I forgot." Lucky grimaced. "I'm sorry. I just—I figured if I left him with you, Epiphany would cover for you. She likes you."

"But she has a job to do, and she can't *keep* covering—" Elizabeth shook her head. "What is wrong with you, Lucky? You promised me—you swore we'd be a family—and every time I ask you to do something for Cameron, it's like I'm asking you to commit a crime. He was sick, and he's just a baby! How could you drag him all the way to the hospital and leave him like that? He was crying—"

"Oh, come on! This isn't fair! He was crying here, too. And hey, it looks like he needed to go to the hospital if he's still sick—"

Elizabeth could scarcely breathe as her throat closed, and the tears burned. "You said you wanted to adopt Cameron. You wanted us to be family. But Cameron doesn't matter to you at *all*, does he?"

"Oh, calm down. It's not that serious." Lucky rolled his eyes. He stalked to the kitchen and yanked open the fridge to pull out a beer. He shoved aside Cameron's orange Pedialyte and frowned at it. "What is this?"

"It's for Cameron. He can't keep a lot of food down." Elizabeth dragged her hands through her hair. "Lucky—"

Lucky's voice was quiet, almost contemplative, and she didn't know what to think about that. "How did you get home? Did Emily drive you? Did you call a cab?"

When Elizabeth didn't answer, Lucky frowned and turned away from the fridge, the Pedialyte still in his hand. "How much did the fucking cab cost? And what about *this*? Didn't the pharmacy have their own brand? How much money did you spend today?"

"Jason drove us home," Elizabeth said finally, and swallowed hard as Lucky stared at her, the color draining from his face. "He was there—you know that. And he was worried after Cameron threw up on me, on him—" She jumped as Lucky threw the

plastic bottle in the sink, the flush returning to his cheeks. “He did me a favor, okay? I didn’t have a car seat, and—he went into the pharmacy for me. To get Cam’s prescription and anything else Patrick told him to—”

“Patrick Drake? That doctor who likes to screw all the nurses? You sleeping with him, too?” Lucky demanded. “Screwing the doctor, taking favors from criminals—anything *else* you want to tell me, Elizabeth?”

“It’s not—he—” She took a step back before she even realized it, holding her hands up. “He just wanted to help, okay?”

“Because he’s so much better than me, isn’t he?” Lucky growled. He stalked over to the sink and grabbed the Pedialyte, twisting the cap off. “My wife isn’t going to owe any fucking mobster a goddamn favor—”

“No, don’t!” Elizabeth sprang forward as Lucky started to dump the Pedialyte in the sink. Cameron needed that, and they couldn’t get any more at this hour—the pharmacy had already closed. She grabbed his arms, trying to get a grip on the bottle so she could wrench it away. Her baby *needed* that to get better—

“Let me go, you goddamn whore—” Lucky shoved his elbow back, putting the full force of his body into it as Elizabeth went flying back towards the arch that divided the kitchen from the living room.

Her temple slammed into the doorway, and pain exploded in her head, her vision dimming, filled with stars—were her ears ringing?

Elizabeth slumped to the ground, clutching the side of her head, not even sure what had just happened. Had...had Lucky actually pushed her? Oh, God, why couldn’t she focus?

“Oh my God, Elizabeth—” His voice sounded like it was coming from very far away. As she felt his hands on her shoulders, she managed to swat them away.

“Get—” She choked. “Get away from me—” She crawled a few feet as her head ached. Her vision finally righted itself even as her head continued to throb. She leaned against the sofa, facing the kitchen, taking in Lucky’s stricken face. “Get away,” she managed.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—” He stopped his advance as she feebly kicked at him. “Let me get you an ice pack—”

“Stay away from me—” Elizabeth closed her eyes, swallowed the sobs. Oh, God. What did she do now?

“It was an accident. Oh, God, I’m so sorry. I would never hurt you. *Please.*”

Her Lucky was in those words, his voice, the boy she’d fallen in love with. She could hear him, but when she opened her eyes, she still didn’t know if she could see him. Lucky looked upset, but she didn’t—

She didn’t know what to do. What to think. Had he meant to hurt her? Send her flying like that? Or had he just reacted? And did it even matter?

“Cameron needs that...” Elizabeth finally managed. “Don’t...please don’t.”

“I’m sorry. I was mad.” Lucky got up and hurried to the sink. He showed her the bottle, half its contents gone. He screwed the cap back on and shoved it back in the fridge. “I was mad that Jason did something for you, and you’re right. I’m sorry. I never should have—I just—” He was crying now. “I’m *sorry.*”

“You should—” Everything hurt, and her head felt like she was swimming against a very rough tide. “You should go.”

“No, you need to believe me. I need to make this okay.” He knelt down, offering her hand. “Let me help you up—”

“D-Don’t touch me.” She slapped his hand away, and he backed away again. “Don’t—go away.”

“I can’t. If I leave, you’ll never forgive me. Please. It’s just—God, Elizabeth, I’m sorry. I just—I don’t know. I feel like if I could just get back on active duty, everything will be okay again, you know? You can stop working so much, and we can get a house. And we can be happy again. I’m sorry. Please. Please. I’d rather cut off my arm than hurt you.”

She wasn’t sure if she believed him because she needed to or if she thought he was sincere, Elizabeth finally allowed Lucky to pull her to feet and help her sit on the sofa. He hurried over with an ice pack that she pressed to the side of her face.

“I’m sorry—”

“Sorry doesn’t change anything,” Elizabeth murmured. “I just...I’m tired, Lucky.

And I don't want to argue anymore."

"We won't. I'm sorry. I won't—I'm sorry," he said again.

"I'm going to bed. I'm going to sleep in Cameron's room. I just—" She shook her head as he started to follow her. "No, I just—God, I need some space."

"Right, right. And he needs you, too."

Elizabeth closed the door on Lucky's eager, apologetic face, flipping the lock. She slid down the door, closing her eyes, and silently continued to cry.

Chapter Twelve

*Can you see me up here?
Would you bring me back down?
I've been living to see my fears
As they fall to the ground
I remind myself of somebody else*
- Somebody Else's Song, Lifehouse

Wednesday, April 5, 2006

General Hospital: Nurse's Hub

"Hey, how's Cameron this morning?" Epiphany asked as she stepped up behind Elizabeth in the hub and put a hand on her shoulder. "He doing better?"

"Oh, yeah." Elizabeth flashed her supervisor a tired smile. "Thanks so much for covering for me. The medicine and some cuddling really perked him up. He slept last night, and he was okay to go to daycare."

"Good, good. You know, we single moms have to stick together," Epiphany told her. Elizabeth opened her mouth to protest the description of her as a single mother, but she pressed her lips together and looked away.

"Did I ever tell you about Stanford's father?" Epiphany asked as the two of them continued their work. Elizabeth peered at her curiously, then shook her head.

"No. What happened to him?"

"We got divorced when Stan was younger. He wasn't a bad man, mind you. I think he even meant the promises he made me when he proposed. But...I think life just disappointed him. I got what I wanted—I wanted to be a nurse. I wanted to be a mother. But David just never really got together. He wanted to be a doctor, but we couldn't afford it. He was going to go back, but..." Epiphany sighed. "He just couldn't handle the setbacks, you know?"

"Yeah." Elizabeth exhaled slowly. "How...how did it end?"

"Without a lot of fanfare. We spent a couple of years drifting, mostly lying to each

other. I wanted to keep things together for Stan, but David just...he thought there was something else out there for him, so one day, he went to find it. And we...we never heard from him again.”

“Never?” Elizabeth repeated. “I’m surprised. Stan never looked for him?”

“I asked him once if he was going to, but Stan wasn’t interested. He said he knew who had raised him, and the man that left didn’t matter enough to find..” Epiphany lifted a brow. “You know what I really regret about all of that?”

“What?”

“Letting *him* be the one that walked. I should have gone first. But I had a little boy, and I didn’t want to raise him alone. *I* didn’t want to be alone. I didn’t really get that I already was. David was gone long before he left for good. You see what I’m saying?”

“It’s...more complicated than that,” Elizabeth said finally.

“It usually is. But just in case—I want you to know that there are some people who will stand by you. *You* are not alone.”

Elizabeth sighed, and without thinking, shoved a piece of hair behind her ear. She realized what she’d done when she saw Epiphany’s sharp inhale of breath. She turned and winced at the anger she saw on the older woman’s face.

“It’s not what you think—”

“What I *think* is that you have a bruise on the side of your face that looks like someone shoved your face into something hard,” Epiphany bit out. Elizabeth brushed her hair forward. “Oh, you can’t unring that bell—”

“I fell—”

“Oh, don’t you try that—”

“Epiphany.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “Yes, Lucky and I got into a fight last night. Yes, we were yelling at each other. But he didn’t hit me. He *didn’t*.”

“There are a lot of ways to cause a bruise on a woman without a man laying his hand on her,” Epiphany said. “Elizabeth—”

“I can handle this. We argued. It’s—” Elizabeth took a deep breath. Lucky had been gone when she woke that morning, and she, honestly, hadn’t come to terms with any of it. If she could be given a choice, she might not have come to work at all. When she’d seen the dark purple bruise blooming on her cheek, she’d been worried.

Because maybe she could convince most of the people that it was an accident, but there were others who would never believe her. And thankfully, she thought Jason would probably stay away from her, at least for today.

She knew she’d never be able to lie to him. Not yet. In a few days, when she’d settled—she might be able to manage it.

“I tripped on a carpet and fell. Lucky was upset—he blamed himself, you know. And it just—we’re under a lot of stress. He’s struggling. He just wants to get back to work. Things will be okay when he gets back on the job—”

Epiphany hesitated, clearly wanting to say something else, but then nodded. “Okay. I hope so. I’m here if you need me.”

“Thank you.”

Elizabeth flinched when she heard the wheels of the custodian’s cart as Manny Ruiz slowly rolled past them. He stopped in front of the hub and flashed them his bright white teeth. “Hey, pretty ladies. Having a good day?”

“I was,” Epiphany said flatly.

“Elizabeth, I haven’t seen your pretty redheaded friend around.” Manny’s smile seemed to deepen. “I’m sorry she had to leave.”

“I’m sure she’s sorry she didn’t get a chance to say goodbye,” Elizabeth said, even as heart pounded. “I’m surprised you decided to make Port Charles home. With everything that’s happened here.”

“Oh, well, this is just a stop in my journey. But it’s nice to hear you’ve been thinking of me. I’m so lucky to be surrounded by such beautiful women.” His smile faded slightly, the corners of his mouth curving down slightly, giving him a sinister air. “Beautiful inside and out.”

Elizabeth couldn’t dredge up a reply at first as her throat went dry. “I should get back to work.”

“Me, too. But, hey, we should talk again sometime soon. You can never have too many friends. See ya, Pretty Girl.”

With a whistle, Manny returned to his duties as Elizabeth closed her eyes. Damn. Damn. Damn. Neither she nor Epiphany spoke until Manny was safely on the elevator and had left the floor.

“Elizabeth—”

“I need a few minutes,” Elizabeth told Epiphany finally, cutting off her supervisor. She sighed and left the hub to go over to the waiting area where Cody had set up to watch over her. He had dressed casually as a visitor with a newspaper and magazine. He was already looking at her as she approached.

“Miss Webber.”

She furrowed her brow, realizing it wasn’t the first time he’d addressed her by her maiden name. “Hey, um, I don’t know if this is something you should tell Jason, but Manny Ruiz—”

“I saw.” Cody got to his feet as he slid his cell phone out of his pocket. “I didn’t hear everything—”

“He commented about Skye being gone. Called me beautiful and said we should talk again. That we should be friends.”

“That is not good.” Cody winced. He dialed the phone. “Hey, Vic—yeah, I know—but I need you to come up to the surgery floor and stay on Elizabeth. I need to go to the boss. Emily isn’t the target. Yeah, okay—”

“Do you *really* think that’s necessary?” Elizabeth began.

“I do. Jason told me if Manny so much as looked at you to let him know immediately. And I want to tell him in person in case he needs me to do...” Cody hesitated. “I have my orders. But I’ll wait until Vic gets up here—”

“I’ll be okay—” When Cody shook his head, Elizabeth sighed. “But you have your orders.”

“You don’t get left alone in the hospital. I follow you to your apartment, and then I’m relieved by a night guard. It’s not perfect, but—”

“Okay, okay.” Elizabeth went back to the hub to finish paperwork, studiously avoiding looking at Cody until a man in an orderly uniform got off the elevator, went over to Cody. The two men talked for a few minutes before Cody left.

“I know it’s wrong,” Epiphany said, as they watched Elizabeth’s guard leaves, “but I feel better knowing someone is with you. And Lucky hasn’t noticed them?”

“They know better than to let a cop see them.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “I thought about telling him,” she admitted. Or at least she had until last night. “But he’d never understand.”

“No, I guess he wouldn’t. Well, we better get back to work. Psycho or not, we got patients to help.”

Morgan & Corinthos Warehouse: Sonny’s Office

Jason and Sonny were going over shipment schedules when Max knocked rapidly on Sonny’s door, then opened it. “Jase, Cody’s here—”

Jason was out of his seat before Max had even finished his statement, having spied Elizabeth’s guard over his shoulder. “Cody? Is Elizabeth with you?”

“No, but don’t worry. I pulled Vic and waited for him to switch before I left the hospital. I just didn’t want to do this over the phone. I was afraid someone would overhear me.”

“What happened?” Sonny asked as he also got to his feet. “Did Manny do something?”

“I don’t know if Elizabeth saw him, but Manny made a point to walk past her three times today, including just wheeling his cart past a patient room while she was in it. Then two more times while she was at the hub. But then the fourth time—”

“*Four* times—” Jason flinched. “When did her shift start?”

“At eight. It’s only been four hours.”

“That’s pretty fucking deliberate,” Sonny murmured. “Do you think he made you watching over her?”

“No. I don’t think so,” Cody answered. “Elizabeth knows how this works. She doesn’t

make eye contact or even look at me unless she needs me. The reason I came over to tell you is Manny stopped at the hub and talked to her. Talked about missing Skye. He told Elizabeth that he was lucky to be around such beautiful women, inside and out. And that they should be friends. They'd be talking soon."

"That's...a pretty clear threat." Jason frowned. "Why bother warning her?"

"To see what she'll do," Sonny said quietly. They all turned to look at him, and Sonny shrugged. "Manny had to know Elizabeth is the reason Skye is gone. He's not an idiot. Elizabeth put herself in between them, then Skye disappears. Maybe he knows she told you, Jason. Or maybe he thinks Skye told Lorenzo. Either way, if he makes a threat towards her—"

"He thinks she'll go tell someone."

Jason took a deep breath. "And if she had come here today to tell me—"

"Manny might think there was a game worth playing. Instead, she might just be a nosy nurse who took away his plaything."

"Uh, which one do we want it to be?" Cody asked with a frown. "Because *both* of those sound like bad things."

"If he thinks Elizabeth mattered to me or even to Alcazar, he'd send us a threat. He'd want us to know. But he hasn't said anything." Jason hesitated. This was bad, but he didn't know exactly how bad it was or if there was something they should do.

"What do you want to do?" Sonny asked Jason.

Surprised by the question, Jason hesitated. "I don't know, but we need to do something." He wasn't interested in giving Manny any more time to focus on Elizabeth. He'd had long enough.

Sonny looked at Cody. "Stick to Elizabeth like glue. Make sure her night guard knows Manny remains a threat. See if there's an empty apartment on her floor. I'd feel better if we could get closer inside. For now, nothing changes but tell Elizabeth to stay on her guard and keep doing what she's doing. Don't piss him off."

"Yeah, all right."

When Cody had closed the door, Sonny looked at Jason. "If she weren't a cop's wife, I'd tell you to send her away. To get her out of town. If you want to take Manny out, make it clean and untraceable to us."

“I thought you said it was too high profile—”

“That was *before* he was making actual threats. If we wait on this, we might not get another chance.” Sonny sat down at the desk. “If Manny just disappeared, no body, I think the PCPD might not even bother. I know I’ve been shit on this, but I agree with you now. We can’t wait to deal with Ruiz anymore.”

Sonny hesitated. “If we wait, Jason, we run the risk of Manny finding out exactly *how* much Elizabeth Webber matters to you. And I think that’s the absolute last thing anyone wants.”

Jason frowned, looked at him with a shake of his head. “What does that mean?”

“It means that this is exactly the kind of thing a psycho like Manny would enjoy. A cop, his wife, and the mobster who...” Sonny hesitated. “I don’t know what you and Elizabeth are doing these days, but I know that look in your eye. And it’s not friendly.”

“It’s not that simple—”

“Yeah? Sam’s been gone a whole day, hasn’t she? You talked to her?”

Jason pressed lips together. Didn’t answer. But, no, he hadn’t spoken to Sam since she’d left the night before. And she was only in Miami—he could have called to see if her plane had landed, but he hadn’t.

“None of this matters, Sonny—”

“No? You telling me Manny wouldn’t find it entertaining as hell to play with the three of you like a cat hunting mice? You sure he wasn’t following her around *before* you put a guard on her?”

“I—No, I don’t know for sure.”

“Exactly. Why take a chance? Get rid of him. Make him disappear before he figures out Elizabeth is more than just some annoying nurse who got in his way.”

Miami, Florida: House

Sam had forgotten how much she loved the warmth and humidity of Florida. As soon

as she'd arrived in Miami the night before, she'd headed out to the clubs and enjoyed a night out for the first time in months.

It had been years since she'd remembered she was only twenty-six and didn't have to take life so damn seriously all the damn time.

The next afternoon, as she drove out to meet Paulie Rothstein, one of her dad's frequent partners, Sam realized she hadn't heard from Jason since she'd left the penthouse the day before.

It was kind of crazy to take a minute and just think about how much their relationship had fallen apart since Danny's death five weeks earlier. Before the quarantine at General Hospital, Sam would have said their relationship was as solid as a rock. She'd been confident not only in her future with Jason but in herself.

But what had she actually been so upbeat about? She'd been wandering around Jason's penthouse for nearly two years, and while it was nice to have access to his bank accounts without a lot of arguments about how she spent his money—Sam wondered if the restless feeling she'd developed in the last month had been inevitable.

Even on Sam's best jobs, she'd wanted to move on. Shed the old identity, slip into a new life, a new challenge. She'd been bored, and it had taken the destruction of her old life to see just how empty it had been in the first place.

She pulled into the driveway of a mid-sized house and grinned when she saw the older man waiting at the front door.

"Paulie!" Sam called as she stepped out. He ambled down to meet her, and she kissed his cheek. "How long has it been?" He'd been like a second father once upon a time, a big grizzly bear of a man with thick hair he'd let go gray and a full beard to match. Paulie just oozed trust and charm, a skill that Cody and Sam had relied on often.

"Ah, not since your dad loaned you out on that father/daughter gig we pulled in... Seattle?"

"I thought it was Portland." Sam shrugged and lifted the Coach purse from the passenger seat of her rented sports car. She'd had to stop at a store and stock up on her rich woman wardrobe—she'd discarded a lot of it ages ago when she'd gone after Jax. "All the Pacific Northwest towns feel the same."

"I was surprised when your dad told me you'd gone off on your own. I thought he'd

never let you get too far.” Paulie shook his head as he unlocked the door. “Where’d you end up?”

“I got tired of running the baby game,” Sam admitted. “I know Dad liked it, but...” She grimaced. “It got too hard.” And four abortions by the age of twenty—too risky for her health. Eventually, her luck would have run out.

“Yeah, I did warn Cody he might want to vary that one a bit, but you know your dad always thought he knew best. You probably made a mint at playing the trophy wife.”

“I did, but a lot of it went into Danny’s place in Hawaii.” Sam’s smile slid from her face as Paulie led her into the airy foyer. “You know it’s not cheap out there. I don’t...have to worry about that anymore.”

“I was sorry to hear about that. Danny wasn’t much use to your dad on the road, but he was a sweet kid.” Paulie shook his head. “I still can’t believe you were adopted, Sammy. Your dad never said a word.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of weird. Dad wasn’t one to run a game that needed kids. Not then. You don’t know what he was planning?”

“I think he was thinking about getting set up for a few years, and the single dad trick can give you a bit of comfort. Still, I thought Cody and I were close. Ah, well. I’m glad you decided to get back in the game.” Paulie raised a brow. “You *are* back, aren’t you?”

“This...” Sam bit her lip. “I promised my fiance this was a one-time thing, Paulie. He’s not a big fan of this.” She looked around at the large home with the acres of sunlight shining through. “It’s not like I can go back to my best tricks. I can’t run the trophy wife anymore.”

“No, I guess not. But real estate is always a solid investment. And I could always use another girl on a regular basis.” Paulie slung his arm around her shoulders. “You had a gift for this life, Sam. It’s a shame to see it go to waste.”

“I’m just visiting the old life,” Sam told him. “I live in the real world now.”

“That’s a shame, but I appreciate you doing me this favor. Let me get you up to speed.”

Lucky & Elizabeth’s Apartment: Living Room

Elizabeth had managed to get out of work by four that day and get home to be with Cameron while Lucky went to a late physical therapy session. She was sure Lucky was just avoiding her as her husband had barely spoken a word to her since he'd shoved her into a wall.

And that suited Elizabeth just fine. She didn't even *know* what she'd say to Lucky at this point — she knew she'd lied when talking to Epiphany earlier that day about her bruise.

No, Lucky hadn't hit her. But he'd shoved her so hard she'd been unable to stop herself from slamming her into the wall.

And every time Elizabeth glanced into the mirror, she saw the bruise. She'd taken the classes about domestic abuse—she knew that's what had happened. But somehow...

Somehow she was still here. She hadn't kicked him out. Hadn't taken her son and left.

She didn't really know why. She told herself and anyone who asked that things would be okay once Lucky was back at work, but Elizabeth didn't really know if she believed that. Because, yeah, Lucky would be working again and they'd have more money.

But would that change Lucky's relationship with Cameron? Could she really let her little boy grow up in a home where he wasn't loved? Hadn't that been difficult enough for her?

Elizabeth didn't want to think about that now. Not on this night when she was alone with her son and could just cuddle on the sofa with him, watch some cartoons, and just enjoy him. She didn't really get to do that all that often.

She grimaced at the knock on her door, then sighed as she went to answer it. "Don't worry, buddy. We'll send whoever it is away and go back to Spiderman," she promised him.

"Okay, Mommy." Cameron snuggled into the corner of the sofa more, laying his head down on the pillow, his eyes glued on the television screen.

Elizabeth visibly flinched when she opened the door to find Jason there. "What are —"

"I'm sorry," Jason said at the same time. She scowled, stepped back away from the door, and grabbed his arm to yank him inside.

“Get in here before the neighbors see you,” she muttered. The last thing she needed was someone mentioning his visit to Lucky. “What are you—”

“I knowed you.” Cameron sat back up on the sofa, rubbed his eyes. “I trew up on you.”

“Uh—” Jason hesitated, then knelt down as the toddler rolled off the sofa and padded over to him. “Yeah, I guess you did. You were pretty sick. I’m surprised you remember me.”

“You didn’t yell,” Cameron said plainly. “Sorry I trew up. I trew up on Mommy, too. All night. And I messed up da bed. But she not yell too.” He looked up at Elizabeth with a bright smile, his tiny baby teeth flashing like pearls. “Mommy nice.”

“Yeah, your mom’s great. Are you feeling better?”

“Lots. Mommy says I need cuddles and juice. I gots both today. We watch Biderman.” He took Jason’s hand and led him over to the sofa. “You like Biderman?”

“Uh, can’t say I’m familiar with it—” But Jason, a bit mystified, sat on the sofa as Cameron climbed up next to him.

“It’s awesome. Biderman, Biderman,” Cameron sang. “Bider can!” He grinned at Jason. “He nice too.”

“It’s Cameron’s favorite cartoon,” Elizabeth said finally as she took a deep breath. She sat on the sofa, pulled Cameron into her lap. “Hey, can you do me a favor, baby? Why don’t you go to your room and pick your absolute three favorite toys to show Jason?”

“Tree?” Cameron repeated. He pursed his lips. “What about five?”

“Four.”

“Five.” Cameron nodded as if it had been agreed to. He slid down from Elizabeth’s lap and ran into his room.

“That’ll take him fifteen minutes, at least. He takes his favorite toys seriously.” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “Thank you. Cameron was scared yesterday, and I didn’t realize he’d remember you. But he did. And it’s a good memory now, not a bad one. I—I appreciate it.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m just glad he’s okay. He looks a lot better.” Jason looked back at her, his eyes narrowed. “What happened?” he asked, gesturing at her face.

“Oh.” She’d forgotten to leave her hair down. She pressed a hand over the tender skin. “It’s so silly—I was so tired yesterday, and I tripped on the rug going into the kitchen.” She stood up and walked away from him, hiding that side of her face. “Why are you here? I mean—”

“I’m sorry. I know you asked me to stay away.” Jason cleared his throat, also got to his feet. “I checked with your night guard, and he said Lucky had left. I’m not using them as a spy—”

“No, I appreciate you making sure he wasn’t home.” Elizabeth crossed her arms. “Is this about Manny?”

“Yeah. Cody came by the warehouse—I mean, you knew that.” A bit flustered, Jason looked away, scratched his temple. “I just—I wanted you to know that Sonny is taking this seriously—I am too, but I already was. But he—” He hesitated. “Manny isn’t going to be a problem much longer.”

“You could have given that message to Cody,” Elizabeth said. She found the courage to meet his eyes. “You could have called. Why are you *here*?”

“I—” Jason exhaled slowly. “I wanted to apologize. For yesterday. You—you were upset and tired. I took advantage—”

“I *was* upset and tired,” Elizabeth agreed. She bit her lip. “And man, I’d love to blame it on you. On that. But you didn’t take advantage. I—” She looked away, towards the bedroom door where she could hear Cameron rustling through his toys. “I had a weak moment, Jason. You should be used to them with me.”

“Elizabeth—”

“Look, I’m not going to pretend my marriage is...everything it should be. And right now, it’s not good. Okay? I can’t lie about it. And you—I don’t know. You were there, being kind at a moment I needed it, and I just—I lost my mind for a minute.” Her throat tightened. “I can’t afford to be weak, Jason. I have a little boy who depends on me—”

“You’re not weak, Elizabeth. You never were—”

"I wish I could always believe that," Elizabeth paused. "We've been stirring up a lot of old memories, Jason. And I don't think it's a leap to say neither of us is happy with our relationships right now. But I married Lucky. I made promises to him. And you made promises to Sam. They both deserve better from us."

"I know that."

"If you need to get in touch with me about Manny, you need to call me. Or go through someone else. Cody. Vic, the other guard. Hell, send Sonny. But this *needs* to be it, Jason. Because I just..." She dipped her head down.

"Okay." Jason stepped towards her, though, stopping just a few feet from her. "I don't want you to be unhappy, Elizabeth. I'm sorry if anything I've done or said—I just want you to be okay. You and Cameron. So if me staying away is what you need—"

"I'm not even sure what I need," Elizabeth admitted. She looked up, and their eyes met again for a long moment. "I'm just trying to get through this."

"Okay," Jason said again. He nodded. "You know if you ever need anything—"

"Yeah, I know." She managed a half-smile. "Thanks."

"Okay, Mr. Jason," Cameron announced from his doorway. They both turned to look at him as he dragged one of his little yellow storage boxes behind him. "I know Mommy said five, but I counted just like Dora. I got eight."

Elizabeth laughed, pressing her hands to her face as a few stray tears slid down her cheeks. "Cameron—"

"Eight of your favorite toys?" Jason asked, turning away from Elizabeth. "Let's see what we got."

Even though Cameron would have loved to linger over every toy and tell Jason elaborate stories about each and every action figure he'd dragged from his room, Elizabeth kept her eye on the clock. The absolute last thing she needed was Lucky to walk in and find Jason in his living room.

But she didn't have the heart to hurry Cameron, and Jason didn't look impatient. Her precious baby didn't often get this kind of undivided attention from anyone other than Elizabeth or her grandmother. She couldn't help but wish that Lucky could find it in himself to share this kind of moment with her son.

And wishing even for a minute that Lucky was as good with Cameron as Jason was... that was not the way to get herself together, so finally, after nearly a half-hour, Elizabeth flashed Jason a meaningful look, and he nodded.

“Thanks for showing me all your cool toys,” Jason told Cameron as he handed Cameron the Spiderman figurine. “I had a lot of fun.”

“Me, too.” Cameron offered his new friend a shy smile and climbed into his lap to hug him. “I gots lots more. You come back.”

“We’ll see,” Jason said as Elizabeth visibly relaxed, realizing Jason knew better than to make a firm commitment to a little boy. He hugged Cameron back. “I’m glad you’re feeling better. Have a great time with your mom and Spiderman.”

“Okay.”

“Go put away your toys,” Elizabeth told Jason. “Before Daddy gets home.”

“Okay, Mommy.” With a happy smile and a dance in his step, Cameron dragged the yellow box the way he had come.

“You should go, but...thank you. He...he had a lot of fun.”

“He’s a great kid.” Jason turned towards the front door just as they both saw the doorknob twist. Elizabeth’s throat closed tight as Lucky stepped inside the room.

Her husband frowned at first at the sight of Jason, as if not entirely understanding what he was seeing. “What the hell—”

“He came over to check on Cameron,” Elizabeth said quickly. “I told you, Jason drove us home yesterday. He just wanted to make sure Cameron was feeling better.”

Lucky scowled, then glared at Jason. “Get out of my house!”

Jason’s jaw clenched, but he looked at Elizabeth and nodded. “Yeah, no problem.” She relaxed only slightly when she realized he was really going to go without a fight or a scene. Of course, he’d never make things worse for her.

And she couldn’t blame him for still being there—Elizabeth should have sent him on his way a long time ago.

Lucky slammed the door behind Jason as the other man left and spun around to glare at Elizabeth again, his eyes reddened. “What the fuck was he doing here?”

“Keep your voice down,” Elizabeth hissed, keeping her eye on Cameron’s bedroom door, which was wide open. But Cameron remained in his room. She could see his curly head ducking down behind his bed. Her heart broke open. “I *told* you. He was worried about Cameron—”

“You keep that fucking criminal out of my house and away from my wife—I’m not going to put up with this bullshit—”

“What bullshit?” Elizabeth demanded, forgetting herself. “Someone giving a damn about my son? Yeah, I can see why that would piss you off—”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Later, Elizabeth would wish she could relive this moment and control her damn mouth. But she couldn’t stop herself. “It *means* that Jason has shown my son more kindness and compassion in the last half hour than you have since the day we moved into together!”

Lucky’s eyes narrowed into slits, and he strode forward to grab her arms. He wrapped his fingers around her forearms. He yanked her forward, then shook her. “Are you fucking him again? Is that what this is?”

“Get your hands off me!” Elizabeth shoved back at him. “Are you insane? No! I told you!”

“Because I’m not going to be humiliated in front of the whole town! Not again!”

“I never humiliated—”

Lucky grabbed her again, and when she tried to push him away again, twisting her arm behind her back. Elizabeth gasped as pain radiated up to her shoulder.

Oh, God, oh, God—

“Lucky—”

With a hiss, Lucky released her abruptly, his face pale and his eyes wide. The pupils were so large and black that the blue of his irises was all but gone. He swallowed

hard, then looked down at his hands. “What did I just do?” he murmured.

Silent tears rolled down Elizabeth’s face as she stared at her husband, at the boy she’d loved so much and for so long, and wished like hell she had the courage to grab her son and run. Jason probably hadn’t even managed to get to the front door of their building.

But her feet were like concrete as her heart pounded, and her mind screamed at her to move. She couldn’t make this work in her head—she couldn’t *understand* how this was happening.

“Mommy?”

Cameron’s plaintive voice from the doorway had both of them turning to look at them. His lower lip stuck out as his voice trembled. “Mommy, can we watch Biderman?”

“Cameron—” Elizabeth’s voice broke.

“I have to go,” Lucky cut in. He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I have to go.” He turned and left the apartment abruptly.

“Mommy.” Cameron slowly crept out of his room. “Did you hurt your arm?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth managed. She closed her eyes, sucked down a hysterical sob. She was this little boy’s world, and she needed to pull herself together. “I’ll be okay, though, baby. Come sit on the sofa, and I’ll go get an ice pack.”

“Okay.” Cameron climbed up, his Spiderman figure clutched in his hand. “I’m sorry you’re hurt.”

“Me, too,” Elizabeth murmured. She disappeared into the kitchen and pressed her head against the wall, trying to get herself under control and stop herself from running like an insane person after Jason.

She knew she’d just have to say the word, and he’d take her someplace safe. He’d pack Cameron and her up and take them someplace Lucky could never find them. She could call him now, and he’d be back before she’d be able to hang up.

But this wasn’t his problem to fix. It was hers. So she took an icepack from the freezer and went to watch cartoons with her son.

She'd fix it tomorrow.

Outside the apartment in the hallway, Lucky sank to the ground, standing at his hands like they didn't belong to him. He'd put a mark on Elizabeth's face—that terrible bruise on her delicate skin—and he'd shoved her, twisted her arm—

Lucky squeezed his eyes shut. He was just *so* angry, so upset that he'd let her down so much. He didn't know how to stop letting her down, and she had the nerve to throw that criminal in his face like Jason Morgan was so much better than him—

Well, fuck that.

He'd run out of the last refill Santiago had given him. He didn't have the courage to take the dealer up on his suggestion to buy the heroin, even if the sample taste had done more to eliminate Lucky's pain than any amount of oxy.

He wasn't a drug addict. He just needed to get through two more days so he could take the physical on Friday, pass, and go back to work.

He had to get back to work so he could treat Elizabeth the way she deserved it. She was only leaning on Jason Morgan because Lucky wasn't doing right by her. She was weak like that—but Lucky had to be the strong one.

He took out his phone and slowly dialed Santiago's number. "Yeah. Yeah, I need more. No—not—just the regular. Yeah, I'll see you in thirty."

Lucky closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then forced himself to his feet. Two more days and he could go back to being the one in charge, and Elizabeth would be the sweet girl he knew again.

Just two more days.

Chapter Thirteen

*But I set fire to the rain
Watched it pour as I touched your face
Well, it burned while I cried
'Cause I heard it screaming out your name,
Your name
- Set Fire to the Rain, Adele*

Thursday, April 6, 2006

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

Jason scowled at the tax paperwork and flipped over a form for what must have been the third time that morning. He'd always been able to focus—always been able to shove out everything else in his brain to concentrate on what was in front of him but lately—

But not today. Less than a month ago, his life had been under control. Sure, Sam was struggling with Danny's death and looking for her birth mother, but that was a problem Jason could solve. He could be there for her, find the answers—

And then that had blown up in his face. He knew he never should have run the test behind Sam's back, and in hindsight, asking Elizabeth, in particular, had been a mistake. He'd never gotten in the habit of thinking of her like an ex-girlfriend, but everyone else had.

It just felt like he'd never been able to get back on the right foot with Sam. Fighting about the test, about Alexis and Elizabeth—everything had been going wrong even before she'd decided to get back into cons. And then Emily—

Jason scrubbed a hand over his face, took a deep breath. None of that mattered. He just had to get things under control. Lucky would go back to work at the end of the week, and Elizabeth would be fine. She and Lucky always managed to work things out.

Jason knew that better than anyone. The last few weeks—the last few *days*—had just been...they'd just drifted towards each other the way they always did when things got tough. It didn't mean anything.

It *couldn't* mean anything.

He was grateful when the knock on the door came. Jason shoved himself away from the desk and crossed to the door, frowning when he saw Beto on the other side. He jerked the door open. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be on Manny—"

"I wanted to tell you in person—we lost him." Beto shook his head. "He went to the motel last night like always, but he never came out this morning. I called Vic—Manny isn't at the hospital either. He didn't show for his shift."

Jason grimaced and rubbed the back of his neck. This was the last thing he needed. "Everything okay at the hospital?"

"Vic said things were good on his floor. Manny hasn't been there much in the last few weeks. Never bothered Emily at all."

Jason frowned, turned back to him. "What about ICU? Did Vic go to the sixth floor?"

"He went up there, but Manny wasn't there either—" Beto hesitated. "This is good, right? He probably split after Alcazar and his lady."

Probably, but it just—it felt too easy. Jason rubbed his chest absently, frowning. He could call Elizabeth, he could ask her—

But she'd asked him to stay away, and judging by the look on Lucky's face, the last thing Jason wanted to do was make more trouble for her. He never should have gone to the apartment the night before.

He pulled out his cell phone and called Cody instead. "Hey. You got eyes on Elizabeth? She's okay?"

"She's good, Jase," Cody answered. "We're at the hospital, up in ICU. Just like always. Why?"

"Beto said Manny checked out of the motel at some point and never showed for work. Don't—" Jason hesitated. "Don't tell Elizabeth. We don't know anything yet, and I don't want to worry her. Just—just don't let her out of your sight."

"Got it, Jase. Nothing will happen to her on my watch."

Jason stared at his phone for another long moment, wondering if he was making the right choice not telling Elizabeth Manny had disappeared.

“What do you want me to do? Should I go tell Mr. C?”

Jason blinked, looked up at Beto. “No, uh, I’ll do that. Ah—” He frowned. “We need to find Manny, but I want someone else at the hospital. Vic should stay on the fifth floor, but I want someone walking around on six. In case Manny makes a grab at Elizabeth—”

“Might be hard—that’s the ICU, and you need special permission to get around.”

Which meant Jason had to call Alan and ask for another favor. His father might agree—he hated Manny Ruiz, too. “I’ll take care of it. Just head over. Stick with Cody if nothing else.” He sighed. “I’ll contact Alcazar. Put him on alert.”

Beto raised his brows. “We’re...helping him?”

Jason glared at the guard. “If Manny goes after anyone else, it’ll be Skye. Alcazar should know Manny has disappeared. He can take care of Miami. And if Manny shows up down there, I want to know.” This was the problem of thinking in black and white, of always taking things personally. Alcazar had been a threat while looking for control in Port Charles, but in Miami, they’d need to work with him once in a while.

“Right, right. I’ll get moving. Maybe it’s over?” Beto suggested as Jason walked him to the door. “Wouldn’t it be great if it ended like this?”

“I don’t think we’re going to get that lucky,” Jason muttered. He closed the door, then leaned his forehead against it for a moment. He needed to call Sonny, put the organization on alert. Everyone needed to be looking for Manny.

He opened his phone again, intending to call Sonny but it rang before he could. He stared at the screen for a long moment when he saw Sam’s name scroll across, wondering if he should just let it go to voicemail.

And then he felt guilty for that, so he flipped open the phone and answered it. “Hey, Sam. What’s up?”

“Is this a bad time?” Sam asked. “You sound like you’re in a hurry.”

“I’m in the middle of a couple of things,” Jason bit out, but then took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry. It's fine. How's it going down there?"

"I can call back—"

Jason clenched his jaw, then forced himself to stop being so damn *annoyed*. It wasn't Sam's fault she'd called at a bad time. Nothing that had happened was her fault.

"It's fine," he repeated. "How's Florida?"

"Do you really want to know?" Sam asked after a long moment. "I know you were mad —"

"I really want to know," Jason told her. "I was going to call—" He winced because that might be the first time he'd actually lied to her. "I didn't think you'd want to hear from me."

"I wasn't sure I did," she admitted. "But I didn't want you to worry. Look—" She was quiet for a moment. "I know you don't like what I'm doing. I know you have issues. But I need you to know that—God, Jason, this has been *amazing*. I forgot the rush. The *thrill*. You know what I mean. You *know* that's what you like about your job."

His stomach sank as he closed his eyes. "Yeah. Yeah, I know."

"It's never boring, and I didn't even realize how *bored* I was. I ran the game with Paulie yesterday, and we're running another one in a few hours. It's just—he offered me a regular gig. A few times a year. Just doing the same thing."

Jason scrubbed a hand over his face. Great. Just what he needed. "So, you'd keep going."

"Yeah, but just this. Just the real estate, you know? I don't want—I'm not going back to all the old games. I can't run them if we're together—"

"And how long before you get bored with just the real estate?"

Sam was quiet. "There are a lot of things I can do that have nothing to do with the trophy wife or mistress, Jason. Can't you *trust* me to find a way to make this work for us?"

He realized that she'd sounded almost happy when he'd answered the phone—lighter than she had in weeks—he realized it now because her tone shifted. Dulled. He closed

his eyes again.

What right did he have to judge her for finding her own way out of the depression she'd sunk in after her brother's death? Sam had done nothing wrong in the last few weeks—nothing to deserve the way he'd been treating her.

He didn't know what was going wrong, didn't understand how it had started or why it always seemed to get worse. Sam hadn't changed. He hadn't changed.

Nothing had changed—not really. He knew why Elizabeth had left him. That was all. Nothing earth-shattering about any of it.

"I don't know," Jason said, finally, because he didn't want to lie to her again. "But I'm willing to try."

She took a deep breath. "That's all I'm asking. I'll be home on Saturday. We'll—we'll make this work—and this—we can just go back to how it used to be. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Jason said faintly. "That's what I want."

"I'll see you on Saturday." Sam paused. "I love you."

"I love you, too." He hung up the phone, then stared at it for a long moment. For the first time since he'd said those words to her a year earlier—

They felt like a lie, and he didn't understand it.

He didn't *understand* what had changed for him in the last month. He didn't know how to explain why just being in the same room with Elizabeth, knowing that he'd broken her heart—that it had been *his* to break seemed to rip apart everything else.

He'd been with her the night before—sitting on the sofa, Cameron between them listening to the toddler talk about his toys in a mixture of toddler-speak and English. He'd caught Elizabeth's eye a few times as they'd enjoyed Cameron and his enthusiasm.

Are you sorry...that it's not her in this penthouse? That you didn't marry her? Have a kid with her? Are you sorry that it's me and not her standing in front of you?

He hadn't been able to answer Sam when she'd asked him that question, but she'd

shoved that thought in his head—

And for a moment—just a moment—last night, sitting on that sofa—

He'd wanted Cameron to be his—to have put that ring on Elizabeth's finger—

He'd wanted that life to be his.

Jason exhaled slowly and opened his phone again to call Sonny. It was useless thinking of things that could never happen.

It didn't matter what had or hadn't happened four years ago. It didn't change anything, and there was no point in pretending things could be different. She was right.

They couldn't be friends anymore. He needed to get rid of Manny Ruiz, make sure Elizabeth and her son were safe—

And then get out of her life.

Kelly's: Courtyard

"We'll just grab something to go," Emily told Sonny as they walked into the courtyard. "I know you want to get back to Greystone in case something happens."

Sonny frowned at her, stopping a few feet from the door. "What do you mean?"

Emily blinked. "I just—I talked to the guard on my floor earlier, Sonny. Vic, right? He told me Manny didn't show up for work. He said Jason didn't want Elizabeth to know, but I don't have a guard, so he thought I should." She furrowed her brow. "You *do* want to get back to Greystone for that, right? Isn't that what you meant when you said you didn't have a lot of time?"

"Yeah, but I wasn't going to get into it," Sonny said with a scowl. "And Vic shouldn't tell you anything. I'll talk to him. Jason doesn't want Elizabeth to know anything because there's no point. That's why we gave her a guard."

Emily pursed her lips, frowning. "No point? She might be in danger—"

"Emily—"

They both turned when the door swung open, and the woman in question stopped out. Elizabeth raised her brows, her hand wrapped around a to-go cup. “Am I interrupting?”

“No,” Emily said. She took a deep breath. She and Elizabeth hadn’t spoken in a few days—not since their blow up at Kelly’s. And because she had a bad feeling, she lifted her chin. “Did you see Manny at the hospital today?”

“Oh.” Elizabeth shook her head. “No. But he’s not always assigned to my floor.” She sighed. “Not that it seemed to matter, but—” She tilted her head to the side. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“Emily,” Sonny said with a shake of his head. “Let’s go inside—”

“Stop,” Emily said, slapping his hand as he tried to take her arm. “*Stop* it. She deserves to know. I don’t care if Jason doesn’t want to worry her.”

“Deserves to know what?” Elizabeth demanded. She stepped forward. “What’s going on—”

“Nothing,” Sonny began but was startled when Elizabeth shot him a nasty look. “What—”

“I get it, I’m not *your* problem. You made that loud and clear,” Elizabeth retorted. She took a deep breath, looked at Emily. “Em—”

“Manny’s missing,” Emily declared. “He didn’t show up to work, and he left the motel. Vic—the guy on Pediatrics? He said they’re trying to find him, but they don’t know where he is.”

Elizabeth’s face paled as she closed her eyes, took a deep breath. “And no one thought I should know.”

“What difference does it make if you know?” Sonny asked. “Your guard knows—”

“I might not have stopped for coffee—” Elizabeth pursed her lips. Shook her head. “Some things will never change,” she murmured. “I’m going home. Thanks, Emily.”

“Of course.” Emily offered her a smile. “I’m sure it’s fine. You know, he probably went after Skye, you know. Dad said she moved to Miami with Alcazar.”

“Does everyone know *everything*?” Sonny muttered.

“I’m sure that’s true,” Elizabeth said, “and Cameron hasn’t been feeling well, so maybe Jason didn’t think—” She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. Good night.”

“Good night—”

“Elizabeth,” Sonny said as she passed them. Elizabeth sighed, then turned back to face her. “Look, I’m sorry. I know—I know you wanted something done a while ago about Manny. I told Jason it wasn’t our problem.”

“You *what*—” Emily’s words sputtered as Sonny continued speaking.

“But I changed my mind. As soon as Manny made his first threat—and you’ve had Cody for almost a week—”

Elizabeth just stared at him for a long moment. “*You* changed your mind.” Her voice sounded a bit rusty as if she were forcing the words out. “When?”

“When?” Sonny repeated, then frowned. “Why does—” He nodded. “Yesterday,” he said finally. “Anything before then—that’s on Jason.”

Elizabeth stared at him for a long moment as Emily frowned. Why did it matter when Sonny had changed his mind? When Jason had given Elizabeth a personal guard?

But Elizabeth didn’t say anything to answer that question. She just nodded. “Okay. I need to go home.” She left then, and Emily blinked after her, before looking at Sonny with confusion.

“What was that about? What did she mean you told Jason it wasn’t your problem? *What’s* not your problem—”

Sonny exhaled slowly. “I’m not getting into it right now, Emily—”

“Oh, don’t even try it—” She flattened her hand against his chest, looked at him, trying to understand what was going on. “You didn’t want me to know what was going on. You didn’t want her to know. You weren’t even going to help her with Manny.”

And how had Emily not known Elizabeth was struggling with Manny for so long?

I’m drowning. And you don’t see it. And I don’t ask you for help. Because I know I

can't go to you. You won't be there.

Emily swallowed hard. "Why weren't you going to help Elizabeth? How long has this been going on?"

Sonny grimaced, looked away. "Emily—"

"She's my best friend, Sonny. And she's hurting. I need to know—" Emily took a deep breath. "I need to understand why. Please."

"Since before you and Jason had the fight—" Sonny admitted.

"That's—Sonny, that's like *three* weeks." And she hadn't seen it. God, Elizabeth was right. Emily hadn't noticed a psychopath was going after her best friend. "And you weren't going to help her? Why?"

"She's married to a cop—"

"She's *Elizabeth*," Emily said flatly. "She's always defended you. *Always* looked out for you and Jason. And you were going to let her twist in the wind because she married Lucky? She didn't ask Lucky for help. She asked *you*—"

"She asked *Jason*," Sonny retorted. "And I told him it wasn't our problem."

"But he didn't listen." Emily exhaled. "He gave her a guard—"

"Eventually. After Elizabeth made it clear she wasn't going to let it go. This is why I don't want you to know anything. Because you see what happens?" Sonny demanded. "Elizabeth thinks she knows so much better than everyone else—she put herself in danger—"

"What—"

"She was trying to help Skye, but she doesn't understand this world. And neither do you if you think I'm going to talk about it with you—"

"This world," Emily repeated. "Manny's a psycho who already tried to kill my brother—who might be trying to kill my best friend—and you think that I shouldn't—" Her stomach rolled, a sick, twisting, almost sour feeling settling in. "He's been watching her," she murmured. "For months."

Sonny frowned. “What—No—that’s not—”

“We both used to work on the Pediatrics floor. We saw him all the time. That’s why I called Jason.” Emily took a deep breath. “Before the quarantine.” Before things had changed between her and Sonny. “But after—after he put the men at the hospital, I didn’t see Manny a lot. I thought it meant it was safe.”

Sonny frowned. “But Elizabeth saw him all the time—Jason told me—”

“She moved floors. She got promoted and went to the sixth floor. And kept seeing him. Because he followed her there.” Emily scowled. “If you’d just *told* me she was in trouble, maybe I could have seen it earlier. *I* could have told you that Manny is never on my floor anymore. But, apparently, he’s always on hers. And Skye isn’t someone who comes to the hospital a lot.”

Sonny swallowed hard. “So, he didn’t get the job trying to get to Skye.”

“No. No, he didn’t.” Emily’s eyes burned. “I missed it. I would have seen it, but I ignored her for you. She told me—”

I’m drowning.

What else had she missed?

“But *you* should have told me,” Emily said. She jabbed a finger at him. “You should have told me Elizabeth was in trouble. You knew three weeks ago, and you said nothing.”

“You know how this works—”

“Bullshit,” Emily spat. “This is not a movie, Sonny. You are *not* Michael Corleone, and I’m not the kind of woman you can lie to and shut out. Not when people I love are in danger.” This—*this* is what Jason had meant when he’d told her she’d get hurt.

Because Sonny didn’t see her as a partner, as an equal. “You didn’t even want Elizabeth to know Manny was missing—”

“Neither did Jason—”

“No—” Emily shook her head. “No! That’s not the same. It’s *not*. He was trying to protect her, to keep her safe. You just didn’t want me to know, you didn’t want her to

know. Because it's not her business. Why? You had no problem using her to get information about Manny—"

"I wasn't using her—" Sonny scowled. "That wasn't me. That was Jason." He grimaced. "He always tells her more than she needs to know—"

She lifted her chin. "Maybe that's because he trusts her."

Sonny hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah, he does." He shook his head. "And maybe she's earned it over the years in some ways—"

"I could have earned it, too. But you're not even going to let me try." She waited for him to deny it, but he just stared at her for a long time.

"Emily," Sonny said, almost painfully. "It's complicated more than that—"

"It's really not. Someone I loved was in danger, and you shut me out to the point that it's made everything worse." Emily stepped back from him, seeing him more clearly now than she had in months. "I need to go."

"Emily—"

She turned and walked back towards the parking lot.

And didn't look back.

Lucky & Elizabeth's Apartment: Living Room

Elizabeth hesitated when she pushed open the door and found Lucky sitting on the sofa inside. She sighed, set her purse down next to the door where she could grab it in a hurry, then returned her attention to the cell phone at her ear.

"Thanks, Bobbie. No, it's really fine. I'm glad Cam's having so much fun—No, I can come get him later."

She hung up the phone and tucked it into her purse, then turned her attention to Lucky, who kept staring straight ahead at the television. She stared at him for a long moment before walking into the kitchen.

She should say something to him—they should, at least, *talk* about what had happened over the last forty-eight hours—

But Elizabeth was just tired.

She hadn't told Lucky that Manny Ruiz had talked to her or that one of Jason's guys was following her around, so she could hardly tell him now that Manny had disappeared—

She wished *Jason* had told her, but he was doing what she'd asked. Staying away. Keeping his distance. Cody was with her, and she knew she was relatively safe but—

Dealing with her marriage was just not something Elizabeth wanted to do tonight. She opened the freezer to take out a tray of ice cubes. When the Manny situation was sorted out, she and Lucky would deal with all of this—

She sighed, closed the freezer without the tray. She was just putting it off. Just—ignoring it. What would change if Manny was found in two days? Tomorrow?

Nothing. Lucky would have still—

She looked down at her wrist, gingerly pushing the sleeve to look at the angry marks on the underside of her arm. She touched them lightly with her other hand, then pulled down the sleeve.

Waiting wouldn't make it go away. Wouldn't make it not be true.

Lucky might not have punched her. Might not have slapped her—

But he'd hurt her. He'd put his hands on her, intending to inflict pain, and that was always going to be true.

She went back into the living room towards the doorway, not even realizing why until she was standing next to her purse, the doorknob within reach—

"We should talk," Elizabeth said. Lucky blinked at her, turning to look at her. He stood, his face lined with exhaustion, his eyes bloodshot as if he hadn't slept.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"For what exactly?" Elizabeth asked, with an arch of her brow. She gestured at her temple, where the bruise was still a harsh, angry purple at her hairline. "For this?" She shoved her sweater sleeve up. "What about for this?" she asked, revealing the

angry purple fingerprints on her arm. She needed to hear him say it, to *admit* it.

“For all of it,” he said hoarsely. He raised his eyes from her arm to meet her eyes. “I’m ashamed. I’m no better than my father.”

“Your father?” Elizabeth repeated, taken aback by that. She hadn’t expected— “What —”

“I’m no better than Tom Baker. Or Connor Bishop.”

“No, that’s—” Some of her anger eased. “You’re not—you’re not a rapist, Lucky. But you need—you *need* to get yourself together. I have a little boy to raise—”

Lucky frowned at her. “What does that have to do with anything? I didn’t hit Cameron—I didn’t even hit you. Not really—” He scowled. “Are you telling people I hit you? Because I *didn’t*—”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together and fought back an angry response. It wasn’t worth the energy to argue over whether or not he *technically* hit her. She didn’t understand—he’d already admitted what he’d done was terrible—why did it matter what *words* she used? “I didn’t tell anyone—”

“I just—I lost my temper.” Lucky took a deep breath, and some of the angry red flush faded. “You just—I *told* you to stay away from Jason Morgan, and there he was again, in my face—in *my* house, with *my* wife—”

Elizabeth frowned and shook her head. Not this again. “I told you, he just wanted to check on Cameron. He’s always liked kids—”

“Well, he’s not going to like *yours*. Where the hell is Cameron? What, did you let Jason babysit?”

She couldn’t track the conversation, couldn’t predict what he’d say next or how he’d react to anything she’d say—His hands were shaking as he drove them through his hair. “Lucky, have you been drinking or something? You’re not making any sense—”

“Oh, because I don’t want my wife fucking a criminal, *I’m* the crazy one?” Lucky demanded as he stepped towards her.

“What are you talking about?” Elizabeth threw up her hands, her patience completely gone. “I just—you’re not acting like yourself—”

“I’m fucking *tired*! I’ve been in pain for six months, I’ve been killing myself in therapy and at work trying to keep my life from falling apart. You’re off gallivanting with criminals, letting them fucking *buy* you stuff! What the hell do you expect?” His nostrils flared. “And you didn’t tell me where Cameron is. Is he with Jason?”

“He’s with Bobbie, I told— I was on the phone with her when I came home—she was babysitting Morgan, and Cam’s having a good time—”

“Morgan? Sonny fucking Corinthos’s kid?”

“And *Bobbie’s* grandson—”

Why was she arguing with him? *Why* hadn’t she just picked up her purse and made that exit—

Because he might not let me leave.

Was she fast enough? Could she get the door open before he could grab her—

Oh. God.

“Lucky—”

“That fucking kid is *not* going to take after his whore of a mother and hang out with fucking criminals—”

Lucky started for the door, shoving Elizabeth to one side as he reached for the doorknob. Panicked now, Elizabeth grabbed at his arm, tugging him backward.

She couldn’t let him go, *couldn’t* let him go after her little boy—It didn’t matter what he did to her—she had to protect Cameron—

Lucky whirled around, grabbed both of her wrists, and shook her. He jerked her back and forth so hard she felt like her teeth rattled.

“Why do you keep making me do this?” he screamed at her, his eyes bulging, his face flushed. “Why do you keep *making* me so fucking mad? I asked you for one thing! *One thing!*”

“Let me go—” she tried to choke out the words, her heart pounding so hard in her

chest she thought it might burst. “Lucky, you’re hurting me—”

He let her go abruptly, flinging her away from him with a violent shove. Elizabeth went flying backward into the end table, crashing into a heavy lamp that shattered on the floor. The table collapsed, and her shoulder slammed against the sofa before she finally hit the ground

She laid there for a moment, trying to understand—trying to *think*—her shoulder was screaming—her wrists were on fire—her cheek was throbbing—how—

Then she heard the door slam.

Elizabeth shook her head, trying to clear it, trying to turn it to the side to look—Lucky was gone.

Oh, God. Oh, God.

He was going to Bobbie’s.

Chapter Fourteen

*When your tears are spent
On your last pretense
And your tired eyes refuse to close
And sleep in your defense
When it's in your spine
Like you've walked for miles
And the only thing you want it just to
Be still for a while*
- Beside You, Marianas Trench

Thursday, April 6, 2006

Lucky & Elizabeth's Apartment: Living Room

Her shoulder was on fire, her face was throbbing, but Elizabeth couldn't think about the way *she* felt. She had to get to a phone—she had to get to Bobbie—

She had to *stop* Lucky from getting his hands on Cameron.

She pushed herself up on her elbow, wincing and biting her lip as pain radiated down her arm. She half crawled, half slid short distance between the sofa and the door where she'd left her purse. She fished inside and found her phone, then pressed the speed dial for Bobbie.

"Elizabeth! I was just going to call you," Bobbie said, her voice bright and breezy. "Cameron is having such a great time—Carly wanted to know if he could spend some time with Morgan this weekend."

Elizabeth leaned against the door, closing her eyes as tears slid down her cheeks. She bit her lip again, then took a deep breath. "Hey, um, we can talk about that later—"

"What's wrong?" Instantly, Bobbie's tone sharpened.

"I'm f-fine," Elizabeth managed to say. "I just—" She swallowed a sob. "Listen. Lucky is—I think he might come over to get Cameron. Can you—"

What did she even say? Keep your violent, crazy nephew away from the kids? Would Bobbie even *believe* her?

“Elizabeth?” Bobbie prompted.

“He’s worried about Cameron playing with Morgan—”

“With Morgan? What? Why?”

“Oh—” Elizabeth pulled herself to her feet, taking another deep breath. The pain in her shoulder was starting to fade to a dull ache. “You know, he’s Sonny kid, and—”

“That’s *ridiculous*—”

“Yeah, I know, but Lucky, he’s just—” Her voice faltered. “He’s under a lot of stress right now with the physical coming up.” She pressed the heel of her hand against her eye. “Um, can you just—can you just not let Lucky pick him up?”

Bobbie was quiet for a long moment. “Elizabeth,” the older woman said. “Morgan has a guard here. Would you like me to have him to keep Lucky from coming inside? So that the boys never even see him?”

“I—” She squeezed her hand around the phone and sucked in a deep breath. “No. I, um, maybe Lucas is around. Can he take Cameron away? Before Lucky gets there.” She paused, trying to find the words that would make Bobbie stop asking questions and just do what Elizabeth needed her to. “We’re just having a fight right now. And I don’t want to make it worse. You can just tell him Lucas is driving Cameron home. That I called. That I realized he was right.”

“Elizabeth—”

“Please. Bobbie, it would mean a lot to me.”

“All right.” There was a heavy pause. “I’ll have Lucas bring Cameron home—”

“No—no. Wait.” Elizabeth looked around the apartment, a place that was no longer safe for her. The lamp was shattered on the floor, the end table flipped over—one its legs snapped off. She stared at the shards of ceramic on the ground. “No. I think—can he bring Cam to my grandmother’s house? I’ll meet him there.”

“All right. Elizabeth, I love you. Please remember that.”

“I will.” Elizabeth closed her phone. She jumped as the phone vibrated in her hands a second later—

She looked down to find Emily’s name on the screen—then a notice that she had three missed calls. All from Emily. She sighed and put the phone in her purse. She couldn’t deal with anything except getting out of this apartment and to her grandmother’s house.

Because if Lucky showed up there, Elizabeth knew her guard wouldn’t let him in. She knew she’d be safe.

Quartermaine Mansion: Parlor

Emily scowled as her phone call to Elizabeth went unanswered — again. She just wanted to talk to her, to check in on her—

Maybe she should go over to the apartment and demand—

Emily took a deep breath and shook her head. No, no. That wasn’t the right way to handle any of this—

“Emily?”

She turned to find her grandfather standing in the entryway. She blinked—Edward hadn’t spoken more than a handful of words to her since this mess had started. “Grandfather.”

“You’re pacing.” Edward gestured at her. “What’s wrong? Has that reprobate hurt you? I *knew* he would—”

Emily sighed, then sank down on the sofa, setting her cell phone on the table. “No, not the way you think. I just—” She looked at him. “I’m worried about Elizabeth.”

“Elizabeth?” Taken aback, Edward frowned. “Why? What’s happened—”

“Manny Ruiz.” Briefly, Emily brought her grandfather up to date as he took a seat next to her. She told him about the kidnapping the previous fall and Manny being at the hospital—

“I’m sure Dad told you he let Jason send him two guys to work as orderlies at the

hospital as extra security,” Emily said. “One of them stayed with me on Pediatrics, and the other has been following Manny around.” She stared down at her hands. “But someone should have been with Elizabeth weeks ago. He took the job to be close to her.”

“That is...upsetting,” Edward said finally. “But you said Jason had someone following him—”

“They lost him today. Maybe because of Skye going to Miami, but I just— Grandfather, *I* could have told them weeks ago that Manny was targeting Elizabeth. I should have seen it—”

“Emily—”

Emily pressed her lips together and looked at her grandfather. “But I didn’t. I was being selfish. Because Elizabeth didn’t immediately jump to my defense or take my side—I froze her out. And she didn’t tell me. I didn’t know Manny was watching her, that she was *still* seeing him all the time—I didn’t see it, Grandfather. And what’s worse—” Her lips trembled. “Sonny did know. He’s known for *weeks*.”

“Ah.” To his credit, Edward didn’t immediately launch into a diatribe against Sonny. “And you’re angry that he said nothing to you?”

“It’s—he knew she was in trouble. He knew that Manny was targeting Skye and possibly Elizabeth—but he didn’t think it was his problem. He didn’t want Jason to do anything to help—” Emily looked away. And how much worse had she made it by throwing their past in Jason and Elizabeth’s face right when Elizabeth needed Jason to keep her safe?

“And your brother *listened*?” Edward demanded.

“No, he ignored Sonny. He put a guard on Elizabeth, and he’s part of the reason Skye moved to Miami early—but—” Emily hesitated. “I threw away everything, Grandfather. I fought with everyone about Sonny. And it—it doesn’t matter.”

“Emily—”

“I thought he was different,” she murmured. “I really thought—” She closed her eyes. “And now my best friend needs me but doesn’t think I’ll be there. She tried to tell me, but I couldn’t hear her. I *wouldn’t* hear her,” she corrected.

“That might be true, and maybe Elizabeth isn’t ready to talk tonight.” Edward picked

up the phone and handed it back to Emily. “But if you keep trying, she might be ready tomorrow—”

They both turned when they heard Alice’s voice in the foyer, raised as she told someone that they couldn’t just barge in—

“Emily!” Lucky bellowed. He pushed past Alice just as Emily reached the doorway to the family room. “Where is she? Is she here?”

“Is she—” Emily closed her mouth, looked back at Edward, who was crossing to join her. “Is *who* here—” She frowned at her oldest friend. “Lucky, what’s going on? You look like hell—”

His eyes were bloodshot, his hair disheveled, and were—were his hands shaking? “Lucky—”

“Elizabeth. She—” Lucky wiped his mouth with the back of his mouth. “We had a fight. I went to pick up Cameron, but Bobbie said Elizabeth had asked Lucas to take him somewhere. She wouldn’t tell me where—she’s not home—”

His eyes darted around wildly. “Is she upstairs? Where is she?”

“She’s not here, Lucky,” Emily said flatly. She folded her arms. “What did you fight about?”

“Nothing—” Lucky scowled. “None of your damn business. Just tell me where she is —” He stepped forward, towards Emily who found herself taking a step backward. Alice scowled and put herself between Lucky and Emily.

“It’s time for you to *go*,” Alice told him. “You can either go on your own, or I’ll toss you out. If that’s okay with you, Mr. Quartermaine.”

“That’s fine by me,” Edward said stiffly. “And you can be sure I’ll be calling Mac tomorrow—”

“Fine. I’m leaving. Just—” Lucky scowled. “Just tell Elizabeth to call me. She’s being dramatic—” But his hand was still shaking as he shoved his hands through his hair. “Tell her to stop hanging out with criminals, and we won’t have any problems.” His scowl deepened. “*You* should take that advice—”

“Out—” Alice said, pointing towards the door. “You have thirty seconds—”

"I'm going," Lucky muttered. He jerked open the front door and slammed it behind him.

Emily let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. *I'm drowning*. Elizabeth had told her that—but now she wondered if Elizabeth had been talking about Manny that day—

Or if things with Lucky were really *that* bad.

"Emily?"

She looked down at the phone in her hand again, then at her grandfather. "I'm fine. I just—I need to find a way to help Elizabeth. Even if she won't let me."

She pressed a speed dial on her phone and waited for the call to connect—praying that Jason might look past all the damage they'd done to each other and answer the phone.

She sighed in relief as her brother's curt and irritated voice came on the line. "What?"

"I need to talk to you."

Hardy House: Front Porch

Elizabeth paced the small porch, back and forth, waiting for a pair of headlights to turn up the driveway. She could see Cody in his car, parked in front of the house. He'd been there since she'd pulled in the driveway, but hadn't checked on her or asked any questions.

If he had come close to her at that point, Elizabeth knew it would have been difficult to keep him from calling Jason. If he'd seen her face—

When she'd arrived at her grandmother's, she'd gone into the bathroom to wash her face, only to realize that she had a cut on her cheekbone with dried blood flaking on her skin. Her eyes were bloodshot, the bruise at her temple was turning a sickening green—

She looked like hell.

Elizabeth washed her face, carefully cleaning her cut and arranging her hair so that

it hid the worst of the bruise. The dull ache in her shoulder was starting to sharpen again the more she used her shoulder—

She didn't have a game plan, didn't have the next step worked out—

She just wanted her little boy in her arms, safe and sound. She wanted to shut her door and lock away everyone—knowing that Cody would keep all the demons at bay. She couldn't think too hard about Manny Ruiz right now—with any luck, he'd left Port Charles and was out of her life.

She couldn't find the energy to worry about him.

Elizabeth sighed as a car finally pulled into the driveway. She saw Cody get out of his car and lean against it, waiting to see if she needed him.

Lucas pulled his car close to her bumper, then switched off the ignition. She stepped down off the porch and met him at the car as he opened the back door to get Cameron unhooked from his car seat.

"Thank you so much for doing this, Lucas," Elizabeth said. She smiled brightly at Cameron, who blinked at the house behind her. "Hey, Cam. Did you have fun with Aunt Bobbie?"

"Yeah, but—" Cameron scrunched up his face. "Why we at Gram's?"

She looked at Lucas, who arched his brow. "Lucas—"

"Mom said to remind you that she likes *you* more than Lucky," Lucas said dryly. "Particularly right now because babysitting Morgan is easier with Cam around." He hesitated, tilting his head to the side. "You okay? You want me to stick around in case Lucky shows up?"

Elizabeth bit her lip, then shook her head. "No—I have—" She nodded towards Cody at his car. "I have someone here."

"Okay," Lucas said, drawing out the word. "I'll leave you alone then. Take care, buddy. Next time, I'll show you how to play Mario Kart."

"Bye, Lucas!" Cameron waved as Bobbie's son climbed back into his car. She didn't wait for Lucas to drive away or for Cody to get back into his car. She went straight into the house and locked the door behind her.

Greystone Manor: Living Room

Max had the good sense to get out of Jason's way as he stormed past the guard in the foyer to confront Sonny in the living room—where he was, as usual, drinking.

"Were you even going to tell me?" Jason demanded.

Sonny turned to look at him, raised his brows, then sat down in the armchair. "Tell you what?"

"Don't play with me, Sonny. Manny is missing, and Emily just told me that Manny hasn't been on her floor since Elizabeth transferred—"

"So?" Sonny shrugged and sipped his bourbon. "We already knew that—"

"No—" Jason bit off his retort, tried to find the patience. "We knew that Manny was hanging around Emily and Elizabeth when they worked the same floor. We knew that Manny was hanging around when Skye was there. We did not know that Manny had stopped hanging around Emily—"

"Did you or did you not put Beto at the hospital so he'd know where Manny was?" Sonny demanded. "Don't put this on *me*—"

"Manny was assigned all over the hospital," Jason cut in sharply. "He was still on the Pediatrics floor. But he wasn't *following* Emily. And Emily and Elizabeth weren't working the same shifts anymore—Damn it, Sonny. You knew Elizabeth was having trouble with Manny weeks ago—"

"And it's my fault that no one asked Emily about this?" Sonny got to his feet, went to refill his drink. "Maybe if you hadn't thrown a hissy fit about my relationship with her—" He looked over his shoulder at Jason. "If you hadn't encouraged Elizabeth to get involved—"

"I didn't—" Jason scowled. "I didn't *encourage* her—and it doesn't have anything to do with that—Manny kidnapped her months ago when she wasn't even in—" He took a deep breath. "She wasn't in my life in October, and Manny went after her then. He obviously got the job to stay close to her—"

"That doesn't make it my fault—"

“No, but you knew Emily wasn’t talking to Elizabeth. You knew she and I were fighting. And it didn’t occur to you once to let Emily know what was going on with Elizabeth.” And Jason couldn’t understand that—couldn’t *understand* how Sonny had seemed so oblivious to all the crap Emily had gone through because of their relationship—

He didn’t seem to care that Emily wasn’t talking to her best friend—the same way he hadn’t cared that Elizabeth might be in danger—

“Manny is missing,” Jason told him. “You knew that this morning. You knew hours ago that Elizabeth was probably the target, not Skye. And you said nothing to me.”

“I see Emily sucked up her pride to call you.” Sonny shrugged again, but his shoulders were tense. “Now, you know. And Elizabeth knows Manny is missing thanks to Emily.” He scowled. “When did we start telling women everything? What happened to the rules?”

Jason just stared at him, dumbfounded. “What are you talking about? Elizabeth is the one in danger— from a man you decided wasn’t our problem. How do the rules—” He stopped. “When you ask someone to be a part of your life, Sonny, you ask them to cross a line. They deserve to know when they’re in danger.”

Sonny’s smile was sour. “That sounds like something someone else told you. Was it Elizabeth? Is *that* how she talked you into letting her help with Manny?”

“No, that’s why she left me,” Jason said roughly. Sonny looked at him, a bit taken aback by that. “She deserved better from me. From you. And it sounds like you’re making the same mistake with Emily.” He shook his head. He hadn’t wanted to be right—part of him had hoped that it would be different this time—

But he wasn’t surprised.

“I don’t care if you don’t think Manny is our problem or not,” Jason told him. “I told Francis to put everyone on this.”

Sonny pursed his lips. “And if I told you to back off?” he asked quietly. He swirled the alcohol in his tumbler, then met Jason’s eyes. “If I reminded you that Elizabeth is married to a cop—”

“*Is* that what you’re telling me?” Jason said. He lifted his chin. “Are you telling me to drop it?”

“I have a feeling,” Sonny said slowly, “that I would lose that argument.” He looked down at his tumbler. “You’re making a mistake getting involved with her again.”

“It’s not like that—”

“No?” Sonny smirked, finished his bourbon. “You should listen to yourself once in a while—”

Jason just shook his head, scowling as he took out his phone. “I’m not having this argument with you,” he said. “I’m calling Cody. Elizabeth needs to know that she was probably the target all along.”

He needed to figure out how to keep her safe while not making more trouble with Lucky, but if it came down to it, he could live with Elizabeth hating him as long as she was safe. Emily had mentioned briefly that Lucky and Elizabeth were fighting again, but he hadn’t asked her for more details. He needed to deal with Manny, not worry about Elizabeth’s marriage.

“Cody, hey. You have eyes on Elizabeth?” Jason asked, waiting for the guard to tell him that she was safely at home or at the hospital.

“Uh, yeah, I do.” Cody’s voice sounded strange—hesitant even. “What’s up? Is there word on Manny?”

“It looks like Elizabeth might have been his target all along.” Jason pinched his nose and turned away from Sonny, who had poured himself yet another drink. “I need—I need to know if it’s okay if I come over. Is Lucky there?”

“Uh, actually, Jase—she’s not at the apartment. She’s at her grandmother’s house.”

“What?” Jason asked. “Why? Isn’t she in Memphis—”

“I guess, but Elizabeth came here on her own, then paced out front for a while until Lucas Jones arrived with Cameron. She went inside, and I haven’t seen her since. Do you want me to check on her?”

Jason exhaled slowly. “Yeah. Let her know I’m on my way to talk to her about Manny. That it’s important, or I wouldn’t bother her.”

“Got it.”

Jason hung up the phone. “I have to go—”

“Wait—” Sonny held up a hand. Jason sighed, but his partner shook his head. “Look, I get it. She’s in danger, and me being me not telling Emily anything—if that’s made it worse, I’m sorry. I was wrong. We should have done something sooner. As soon as Elizabeth got involved.”

Jason frowned at him “Sonny—”

“I might not like you being close with someone married to a cop, but you were right. It’s Elizabeth. And we should have done more.” Sonny hesitated. “*I* should have done more. So whatever you need, get it done. Keep her safe, and let’s get rid of Manny Ruiz for good.”

Hardy House: Living Room

She’d settled Cameron down on the sofa with the Spiderman movie DVD she always carried in her bag. She knew she needed to figure out something for dinner, but she was broke until payday, and her grandmother didn’t have much in the house since she’d planned to be gone for so long.

Her cell phone rang again, and Elizabeth looked at it, expecting it to be Emily—but it was Cody’s name that lit up the identification screen. With a sigh, she realized she couldn’t entirely ignore the world. At least the part of it that was determined to keep her safe. “Yeah?”

“Miss Webber, I wanted to let you know that Jason is on his way over. He, ah, needed to tell you something about Manny, so I had to tell him you were at your grandmother’s. Uh...sorry,” Cody added when Elizabeth remained silent.

Elizabeth flinched. She really didn’t need this tonight, but if Jason had news about Manny--

“It’s okay. Thanks for letting me know, Cody.” She hung up the phone.

“Mommy?” Cameron asked. He frowned at her. “Mommy, I’m hungry.”

“I know.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “Okay. Okay, I can do this.”

“You can do anything,” Cameron said, loyally. “Did you bring my toys?”

“No, but you have some upstairs—” Elizabeth rubbed her shoulder absently. The levels of pain came and went, but she didn’t want to get an ice pack in front of Cameron. And what was she going to do about dinner? Maybe she could check the balances on her credit cards again or find some dry cereal—

The doorbell rang before she could make a decision. Determined to get rid of Jason as quickly as possible, Elizabeth got up to let him in.

“Jason. Hey. Cody just told me you were coming by,” she said. She kept the door halfway closed, wondering if it was possible to keep him from coming in. She really wasn’t up to this tonight.

Jason frowned at her, and she looked away, hoping that he didn’t notice the way she was favoring her shoulder or that she had a cut on her face just below the bruise he’d yesterday. “Hey. I know we talked about me not coming by,” he said, “but something happened with Manny.”

“Yeah, Cody called.” She looked at him, waiting for him to volunteer the information. When Jason glanced at the door, then back at her, he exhaled slowly.

“Right. Uh, well—” He scratched the edge of his eyebrow.

“Mommy?” Cameron tugged on her pant leg as he came to the door. He peered out from behind her. “Hi, Mr. Jason. Did you come to see my toys?”

“Hey, Cameron.” Jason’s face relaxed as he knelt down. “No, but Morgan said you had the best Legos he’d ever played with.”

“I gots lots of Legos here.” Cameron looked at Elizabeth. “Mommy, is Mr. Jason staying?”

Jason met her eyes as he got back to his seat. “Uh, no—”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said at the same time. She stepped back, opening the door wider. She didn’t really think about it. Maybe she should have, but she just—she couldn’t turn away an opportunity to distract Cameron—to give him a bit of happiness.

“Are you sure?” Jason asked softly as he walked past her into the house. Elizabeth closed the door behind him.

“No,” she admitted, “but I know you wouldn’t come all the way over here if it wasn’t

important, and Cameron—” She ruffled her son’s curls as he grinned at her. “Cameron does have a lot of Legos here.”

“Mommy, can we eat? I’m hungry.” Cameron looked at Jason. “I like pizza. Do you like pizza? We don’t got pizza here. Grammy is in Memdis forever—”

“For a few weeks,” Elizabeth corrected. “Cameron—” She wrinkled her nose, already regretting the impulse to invite Jason in. She folded her arms, wincing as her shoulder protested.

“Bobbie was gonna have pizza,” Cameron continued, “but Mommy made me come here.” He pursed his lips. “I like pizza,” he repeated.

Mortified beyond belief, Elizabeth just closed her eyes. Jason knelt down to match Cameron’s height. “What kind of pizza?”

“All pizza is good. Mommy says there no bad pizza. ‘Cept the ones with green stuff. We don’t like green stuff. Do you like green stuff?”

“Sometimes,” Jason said. He got back to his feet. “Do you want me to call for something?” he asked Elizabeth quietly.

“I—” Elizabeth took a deep breath. Her son came first. He *always* came first. “Yes. And I—I have to owe you. I don’t get paid until tomorrow.”

Jason nodded. “Yeah, sure.” She sighed—he’d never take the money from her, but she couldn’t deal with that right now. Cameron needed to eat. Jason stepped away to make a phone call while she looked at her son. “Cameron, why don’t you go upstairs and put together your favorite Lego pieces so you can show them to Jason?”

“Okay.” Cameron hesitated. “But no lights. Mommy, don’t like no lights. Dark.” He looked up at the dim stairwell and the dark hallway beyond it. She could switch on the lights for the stairs, but the hallway light was at the top of the stairs.

And she couldn’t lift him to take him up the stairs. Her throat felt thick as she struggled to think through the fog of it all. Her shoulder was still throbbed, an eternal reminder of why she was at her grandmother’s in the first place—

She just—God, she just wanted this to be over.

“Cameron,” Jason said from behind her. “Do you know which room is yours?”

“Yep!”

“I’ll take you, and Mommy can wait down here for the pizza, okay?” He lifted the toddler into his arms, looking back at Elizabeth. “Do you want me to call Emily? Or Bobbie?”

“I didn’t even want anyone to call you,” Elizabeth managed miserably. Emily and Bobbie might feel sorry for her, but they also might just tell her that she should think about Lucky—that she should give him another chance. He was so close to getting his job back.

And hadn’t she told everyone things would be okay when he was back to work? Hadn’t she told herself that?

“Okay,” Jason said, not looking remotely hurt by that. So he went upstairs, and Elizabeth sat on the sofa, trying to figure out how to get through the next few hours without Jason finding out exactly why she’d dragged her son to an empty house without any food.

A few minutes later, Jason came down with a plastic monitor in his hand. “Cam said his gram uses this when he plays alone.” He handed it to her, and she could hear her little boy singing to himself. “Biderman, Biderman, does a Bider can,” came his sweet voice.

“I know you don’t want to talk about what happened,” Jason said. She looked at him. “And I’m not going to ask. You’re here. You’re safe. Cody isn’t going to let anyone come in here. I promise.” He hesitated. “With Manny missing, I was hoping you might let one of the guys stay in the house tonight.”

“I—” That would be safest, wouldn’t it? But she hated the idea of it. She just wanted to be alone.

“But that’s not an option, I can see that now,” he said smoothly. “So I’ll set up shifts. Cody or someone out front. And then someone out back. They can sit on the back porch. I’m hoping we’ll have him found within a day or two. Can you stay here that long?”

“Yes.” Elizabeth took a deep breath, finding her feet again. “Yeah, I can manage that.” She looked at him. “Something happened that you’re not telling me because I’m upset. Something more than Manny going missing. You know I know that already.”

“I do, yeah, but—” Jason hesitated. “I came here to tell you, but I just—I don’t want to make things worse, Elizabeth. This last week—” He pressed his lips together. “I know it’s been tough.”

She nearly told him that Manny Ruiz and his threats had almost been a relief as it gave herself something else to worry about beyond her marriage. “I know. And I appreciate it. But you want me to be guarded twenty-four seven. You wanted someone down the hall from me. I have Cameron to think about.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.” Jason rubbed the back of his neck. “We think Manny might have taken the job at the hospital to get to you.”

She jolted at that, then got to her feet, putting some distance between them. “No, no, that’s not—there’s no reason for that. I don’t matter—You and Sonny—I didn’t *matter*—”

“Elizabeth—” Jason slowly stood, the frown on his face deepening. “You always mattered. But, no, there wouldn’t have been much of a reason for Manny to make a connection between us. Not then. But that’s not why he wanted you.”

“What—” Her stomach rolled over. “Oh. Oh, it’s not about getting to you. It’s just about *me*. You-you said Manny—women have gone missing.”

“Yeah. There’s never been any proof, but he’s got a reputation. I think—after he kidnapped you—”

She might have been targeted by a psycho killer who liked to hurt and torture women. Elizabeth closed her eyes, took a deep breath. “Okay. Well, then, in that case, please put a man in every single guest room of this house. And if you could find some sort of armor that covers houses—”

“Elizabeth—”

“No, no, I’m not being flippant. I’m not making a joke. I *mean* it. Lock this place down. I can’t—” Her heart started to pound again, and her lungs felt a thousand times too small for her chest. “He rapes women, doesn’t he?”

“I—” Jason took a few steps towards her. His hand raised slightly at his side as if he was going to reach out and touch her. He let it drop as he swallowed hard. “He’s not going to get to you, Elizabeth—”

"I know you mean that. I know that you are doing everything you can. But we both know you're not Superman. And I don't expect you to be." Elizabeth took a deep breath, covered her face again, even as her shoulder protested. "If someone stays here tonight—in the house, I mean—can it be Cody? Or Vic? Marco still works for you guys, right? He was on your door when I lived with—" She hesitated. "Or Francis—Just someone I know?"

"Yeah." He hesitated. "Not me," he said finally. "It can't be me."

"No." Elizabeth managed a smile at him as they both looked away, uncomfortable with the suggestion. "No, it really can't be you. Not after—it just can't."

"Okay. Can you stay home tomorrow? With Cameron?"

"I—" Elizabeth shook her head. "No. I mean, Epiphany could probably cover my shift if I had to, but I've been...I've missed a few since I started upstairs, and some of the nurses are—" Less than friendly. "I'm not making any friends. And I *can't* afford to lose the hours—"

"I could—"

"And even if you told me you could make up the difference, it doesn't resolve my long-term problem. I can't keep asking Epiphany for favors. And it's not something we can take to the chief of staff. Because it doesn't change the fact I have to work with these people when Manny is just a memory."

"Okay. Cody stays on you at the hospital. He drives you to and from, though. You don't go on your own."

Thinking of Lucky and how he'd take that information, Elizabeth grimaced. "Okay."

"I'm sorry—"

"Why are you apologizing? You're keeping me safe from a psycho who wants to rape and torture me. I just wish I could lock myself in here until this was over. But I can't." She sighed. "I'll find a way to explain it to Lucky."

Jason paused. "You...I thought you were here for a reason."

"I am," Elizabeth said. But she hadn't entirely wrapped her mind around any of that, and it was just—it was a reflex to think of how to manage Lucky's anger, which was a

depressing realization. “Which means on top of everything else, I don’t need another argument with Lucky about me owing criminals favors. Even if I went to the cops, they couldn’t do anything.” She lifted her chin. “And we’re *not* talking about Lucky.”

“Okay.” He hesitated.

“But Cameron—” Elizabeth shook her head. “I can’t take him to daycare.”

“No, but Morgan will be at Carly’s tomorrow with Leticia and Michael. They have guards. Carly said Cam has been over to play with Morgan a few times.”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth’s chest eased. “And I know how seriously Carly takes Michael and Morgan’s safety. Cameron would feel safe there, and he’d have a good time. He wouldn’t think anything was wrong.”

“Are you—” Jason hesitated. “This is a lot—”

“This is necessary. And I am okay.” She *was* okay, Elizabeth was realizing. She’d had a terrible couple of days, but she’d left. She’d gotten out. And even though she was in danger from another threat, she knew that Jason would do everything he could to look out for her. If Manny got to her anyway, it wouldn’t be because Jason hadn’t tried to protect her.

“I’m okay,” Elizabeth repeated. “I can handle this.”

“I know you can. You always handled this kind of stuff well.” Jason hesitated. “Maybe better than I ever gave you credit for. You never flinched from any of it. From the bomb, from the guns, from Sorel. From Roscoe’s guys. Alcazar. I should have trusted that. I should have remembered that—”

Elizabeth shook her head. She tried to fold her arms again, wincing as she’d forgotten her shoulder again. She rubbed her hand over the sore area. “We’re *not* talking about it,” she bit out. “Now, if you want, because Cameron will probably ask, you can stay for dinner. You can let him tell you all the stories he wants about his toys. He might even ask you to watch Spiderman before I put him to bed. You can do that if you want. Because he needs kindness and comfort right now. But we are *done* talking about everything else.”

“I—” Jason stared at her. “Elizabeth—”

“Because at the end of the day, it doesn’t matter. It happened. I’m glad we understand each other better, but we can’t go back. And it’s not fair to anyone else,

including Sam—and Lucky—for us to keep dragging all of that up.”

“No. No, you’re right. I’m sorry.” He shook his head. “I won’t do it again. I’m sorry. But if it’s okay, I’d like to stay until Cameron goes to bed. I’ll make some calls, make you sure have food and supplies here, so you don’t have to go out in the open,” he told her as she started to open her mouth. “You’re going to work tomorrow because you have to, I get it, but I’m sorry, I can’t—” He hesitated. “I would appreciate it if you’d let me do this.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“And I’ll track down someone you know to stay the night. In addition to the guards at the back,” he told her. “I don’t think we’ll need to use every room, but I’ll make sure you’re safe here before I leave.”

“I know you will.” She took a deep breath. “Thank you.”

“This will be over soon,” Jason told her as she went towards the stairs to check on Cameron. “I promise.”

“One way or another,” Elizabeth murmured.

Chapter Fifteen

*Wake me up inside
Wake me up inside
Call my name and save me from the dark
Bid my blood to run
Before I come undone
Save me from the nothing I've become*
- Bring Me to Life, Evanescence

Friday, April 7, 2006

General Hospital: Nurse's Hub

Elizabeth winced and rolled her arm again, trying to gingerly move her shoulder. She'd asked for the paperwork detail again because it would keep her in one place longer. It also allowed Cody to watch over her better as well as doing a favor for the other nurses who hated paperwork. It might go a long way to boosting her reputation with them.

But she really just wanted to crawl back into bed with an ice pack. She'd slept uneasily, even knowing that Cody had taken one of the guest rooms down the hall and that there were two more guards outside the house. Jason had stayed for dinner and nearly all of Spiderman 2, but with Cameron there to keep them from conversations they should *not* have, it had been almost a relaxing evening.

If she didn't think about the reasons she was at her grandmother's with Cameron or why Jason was there.

She glanced up as the elevator doors opened, and she saw Bobbie step out with a frown on her face. Elizabeth wrinkled her nose as Lucky's aunt approached her.

"Elizabeth, I was hoping I'd see you today. Do you have a minute?"

"I have so much paperwork," Elizabeth began, but then Bobbie just arched her brow, and Elizabeth remembered how much she owed this woman. With a sigh, she set down her pen and followed Bobbie over to the waiting area where Cody sat, pretending to be interested in a newspaper.

"I know you," Bobbie said to him. "You—I've seen you at Sonny's—"

Cody winced, then got to his feet. "I'll be over by the elevators," he told Elizabeth, folding his newspaper under his arm. Bobbie watched him go, her eyebrows knitted together.

"Why do you have a guard?" Bobbie asked. "*What* did Lucky do—"

"Oh—" Elizabeth flushed, and smoothed her hair, making sure it was arranged over the bruise. "Oh, that's nothing. That's about Manny." She briefly told Bobbie about Manny and the reasons he might have targeted her. "It's just a precaution."

"Is *that* why Lucky was so mad about Cameron hanging out with Morgan? Because I talked to Carly and she said—"

"Carly's doing me a favor by letting Cam play with Morgan today," Elizabeth interrupted. She folded her arms. "I didn't want him in daycare. And Lucky—it's *fine*. It's not like the PCPD can do anything."

"Elizabeth." Bobbie pressed her lips together and stared at her for a long moment. "You called me last night, sounding upset. You didn't want Lucky to pick up his own son—insisted I have *my* son drive him to Audrey's when she's out of town—Lucas told me you had a cut on your face and that you'd been crying—"

"I fell," Elizabeth insisted. "I was tired, and I tripped on the carpet. C'mon, Bobbie. You know what the hours are like here. And I have a toddler—"

"I do know that." Bobbie stared at her for another long moment. "Let's sit."

"I should get back to work—"

"Just for a moment," Bobbie said, a thin thread of steel in her tone. With a sigh, Elizabeth sat on the sofa. Bobbie sat next to her. "Have I ever told you about one of my first husbands? D.L. Brock?"

"I—" Elizabeth shook her head. "No, I guess I didn't—I really only knew about Tony and Stefan."

"Well, D.L. came a lot earlier. Before Tony. He was not a kind man." Bobbie hesitated. "He was abusive—"

“Bobbie, I don’t know what you’re thinking—”

“I’m thinking that you need to stop interrupting me,” Bobbie said gently. “Because I have something I’d like you to hear. He beat me one night, and I had to have a hysterectomy. That’s why there’s only Carly. Why Lucas was adopted. Because I trusted someone who hurt me.”

“I’m sorry that you went through that,” Elizabeth managed, her eyes blurring with tears. “It’s horrible.”

“It was. But what was *more* terrible was thinking I was alone. That I couldn’t tell anyone. I don’t know what’s going on with Lucky, Elizabeth. But don’t *you* ever forget that I love you, too. Every bit as much as I love my nephew. You are part of my family, and that has *nothing* to do with his marriage to you.”

“Bobbie—”

Bobbie leaned forward and gently tucked Elizabeth’s hair behind her ear, letting her fingers drift over the bruise, the angry purple fading into a sickening mix of green and yellow. Over the cut by her cheekbone. “I love you,” she repeated. “And when you need someone, you come to me. Because *you* are *not* alone. And I know that Lucky is not the boy we knew.”

Elizabeth wanted to tell her so desperately, but she couldn’t form the words. She didn’t know why. Bobbie clearly knew. And she was ready to hear it.

But Elizabeth wasn’t to say it.

“I have to get back to work,” Elizabeth finally said. She got to her feet. “Thank you for coming by. And for helping so much with Cameron. He loves you.”

“I love him,” Bobbie said. She kissed Elizabeth’s cheek, just above the cut. “When you’re ready, you know where to find me.”

“I know.”

Bobbie left then, and Elizabeth watched her go. Cody returned to his post in the armchair, armed with his newspaper. She looked at him. “No news?”

“Not a single sighting.”

She sighed, rubbed her face. “That’s not good, is it?”

“No,” Cody admitted. “If he’d just left town—” He shrugged. “Don’t worry, Miss Webber.”

“I won’t. I know you won’t leave me alone.”

General Hospital: Pediatrics Floor

Emily frowned as she walked past a patient’s room, stopped, and backed up a few steps to find her brother in a room with Epiphany and Alan.

“What’s going on?” she demanded.

“Emily,” Alan began, but Emily wasn’t in the mood to be batted aside by another well-meaning man. Not today.

“Is Elizabeth okay? Is Manny in the hospital? Where’s Cameron?”

Jason sighed and looked at Alan and Epiphany before looking back at his sister. “Em, give me a minute, and we’ll talk.” He turned back to Alan “Thank you for letting Stan into the security room,” Jason said. “I know this makes you uncomfortable.”

“It does,” Alan said with a sigh. “But I didn’t want the board to hire Manny. And the PCPD has their hands tied. I don’t love this, Jason, but if you’re right, then one of my nurses has been targeted under my watch. I won’t stand for it. Whatever you need. Just—” He grimaced. “Catch this psycho.”

He left the room, then, and with a pointed look at Jason, Epiphany followed. Emily folded her arms. “Well?”

Jason closed the door and turned to his sister. “You said that Manny used to hang out on this floor all the time. Until Elizabeth got moved.”

Emily nodded. “Yeah, and then it was like I never saw him.”

“But Skye was here a lot the last few weeks, wasn’t she? Doing a charity thing for the hospital?”

“She was—” Emily frowned. “But Manny was never around. He was always upstairs—Oh, man.” She swallowed, letting her hands fall to her sides. “He really *was*

watching her. Oh, God, Jason. I thought she was just overreacting—”

“I did, too. But she’s got a guard, and I’ve got people on her grandmother’s house—”

Emily exhaled slowly. “So she went to Audrey’s. I was wondering—do you know why? What happened?”

Jason shook his head. “You should ask her about it—”

“No—” Emily touched his arm. “No. C’mon. What’s going on?”

“You should ask Elizabeth,” Jason repeated gently.

“Hard since she’s not talking to me,” Emily muttered. She looked away, then flashed her brother an irritated glare. “This is mostly *your* fault, you know. If you hadn’t been such a...jackass...I never would have—” She stopped.

“Attacked me?” Jason demanded. “Told me something you knew Elizabeth would be embarrassed about? Do you want me to apologize to you, Emily? Because I don’t really know what the hell *I* did wrong.”

And sometimes when Emily thought about it, she couldn’t quite put her finger on it either. “Well, you should have let me make my own choices because I figured out pretty quick that Sonny is...not a good idea.”

Jason frowned at her. “What? What does that mean?”

“It *means*,” Emily said through gritted teeth, “that you were right. I *hate* it, but you were right. Sonny doesn’t—he doesn’t respect me. He refused to talk to me about Manny even though he’d already told you it wasn’t his problem. He can’t have it both ways—”

Jason exhaled slowly. “Sonny has a thing about women and the business.”

“Yeah, I’m sure there’s a good reason for that. But this *isn’t* business. This is a psychotic asshole who might try to hurt my best friend. And it’s bullshit because you let Elizabeth help all the time and clearly he doesn’t have a problem with it—” She broke off when she saw Jason hesitate. “What?”

“I didn’t plan it. But—that winter when I got shot—Elizabeth just—she fell in the middle of it. And then the bomb in her studio—I mean—look, it’s not important. It’s

just—Sonny really doesn't want Elizabeth involved either. I always...*almost* always," he corrected softly, "told her more than he wanted."

Emily swallowed hard. "Almost always," she repeated. "Except that one time. When Sonny didn't want her to know about faking his death."

"Yeah. And I listened to him. I shouldn't—" Jason stopped. "It doesn't matter anymore. I'm sorry you're hurt, Emily, but—"

"But Sonny doesn't respect women," Emily said. "Even women he says he loves." She nodded. "Okay. Well, that clears up a lot. He doesn't respect or trust me—"

"That's—probably a little harsh, but—no, not really."

"And that's what you wanted to protect me from." Emily folded her arms, hugging her patient's chart to her chest. "I figured it out on my own, Jason. I can take care of myself."

"You're my sister. I'm always going to want to take care of you. Stop you from getting hurt."

"Yeah. I know. You're my brother. And I'm always going to want to take care of you," she told him. He flinched. "Hey, what's good for the goose and all that, Jase—we both went about it the wrong way, but neither of us was wrong. You told me that Sonny would hurt me. That he'd never be what I needed. And you were right."

"Emily—"

"And maybe I did it the wrong way, but *I'm* not wrong. You deserve better than Sam McCall. I'm *glad* I told you what Elizabeth said. I wish I'd done it three years ago when it might have made a difference."

Jason looked at her for a long moment. "Why didn't you?" he asked finally.

Emily frowned. "Because I—well, you'd moved on with Courtney. And I guess—I don't know. I thought it was true. And if you really did cheat on Elizabeth, then maybe she was better off." She tilted her head. "*Would* it have changed something? Has it changed something?"

"I need to get going."

Jason started past her, but Emily grabbed his arm. “Jase, she’s married now.”

“I know that—”

“And she’s dealing with a lot. Lucky’s not doing great with this setback, I know that. They’re fighting a lot. He told me that—”

“You’ve seen him?” Jason turned back to her, his interest engaged again. “When?”

“Last night. He came to the Quartermaines looking for Elizabeth. I guess—you said she’s at Audrey’s.” Emily sighed. “He said something about you hanging around and it’s—it’s—I don’t know. I’m just worried. Judging by how he looked last night, he’s probably going to fail his physical today, and it’s going to make things worse.”

“Worse,” Jason repeated. “So...you haven’t seen her?”

“I saw her yesterday, but—” Emily frowned. What didn’t she know? How bad were things with Lucky and Elizabeth? “You’re not telling me something.”

“It’s—it’s nothing. Elizabeth already told me we can’t be friends. I’ve accepted that. You don’t have to worry, Emily. I’m not trying to get between them.” He shook his head. “I learned that lesson a long time ago.”

He left this time, and Emily stared after her brother, troubled. “You never had to *try*,” she muttered as she left the room. Jason seemed to drive a wedge between Lucky and Elizabeth simply by breathing.

She couldn’t wait for this Manny crap to be over, so everything could just go back to the way it used to be.

Luke’s: Back Office

Luke frowned as his sister walked in. He pulled his feet off the desk and got up. “Barbara, was I expecting you?”

“No, but I was hoping you might know where to find your son.” Bobbie set her purse down and took off her jacket. “Have you seen him lately?”

“No, he’s been avoiding me, truth be told, since he borrowed money to pay their car insurance—” Luke shook his head. “I tried to tell him he could move into the house, save themselves some rent, but he refused.” He gestured for Bobbie to take a seat, but

she shook her head. “They both have good jobs — I don’t know why they’re struggling —”

“Speaking like a man who’s never had to worry about child care,” Bobbie said sourly. “Lucky’s on half-pay because he can’t work a full shift. And part of Elizabeth’s paycheck goes to daycare. They’re stretched pretty thin. And that’s before the hospital bills.”

“How—” Luke hesitated. “Does he tell you all this?”

“No, but I made it my business to find out. Audrey went to Memphis for a month to visit her grandson, and *your* son refused to change his schedule around, so Elizabeth didn’t have to pay extra for daycare.” Bobbie tilted her head to the side. “I’m afraid Lucky is more like his father every day.”

“Well...” Luke cleared his throat. “That doesn’t, ah, sound very complimentary, Barbara Jean.” He got up and walked towards the front of the club, where he poured himself a drink. “What did my gender do now?”

“Not your gender. Your bloodline. You weren’t, and still aren’t, very fond of your stepson—”

“Oh, come on—” Luke set the bottle of whiskey down with a thud. “That’s not fair. The Dark Prince is...” He wiggled his fingers. “*Dark*. He’s a Cassadine—”

“And you made Laura’s life hell because of it. Forced her to choose. To feel guilty.”

Luke scowled and sipped his drink. “I love when you stop by, sister dear. Always a boost to the ego.”

“Lucky is doing the same thing to Elizabeth. He doesn’t...” Bobbie shook her head. “He doesn’t love that little boy.”

“That’s not—” He sighed. “How can you *possibly* know that?”

“I asked Mac. And he said that he offered to cover Lucky at work so he could use that time to go to physical therapy. If Cameron stays in daycare between four and seven, Elizabeth has to pay nearly two hundred extra dollars a week. Lucky refused to take Mac’s offer, not even to save Elizabeth money.”

“I—” Luke hesitated. “He’s...” But there weren’t words. “Okay, so he’s selfish. No

crime in that. And maybe he's just too focused on getting back on the job—"

"Elizabeth asked me to help. I already watch Morgan a few nights a week, and I rearranged my schedule to make sure I could be there. Because Lucky outright refused. I tried to ask him why, and he told me it's not his problem. Elizabeth asked him to pick Cameron up from my place exactly once. And Lucky forgot."

None of this was good evidence. "Okay, so Cowboy isn't a good father. That..." Luke winced. "That *does* run in the family."

"I think he's hurting Elizabeth."

Luke stared at his sister for a long time before swallowed hard. "And you don't mean emotionally."

"No, I don't. She has a bruise on her face, and I saw her holding her shoulder as she was in pain. Last night, she called me, Luke, and I could hear it in her voice. She was crying, trying to control herself. Begged me not to let Lucky pick up Cameron. To have Lucas take him to Audrey's. Because she would be there."

Luke rubbed a hand over his face. "Damn it, Barbara Jean. That's not—Lucky *loves* that girl. He's always loved her. Don't you remember how careful he was with her? He used to—" His voice thickened. "He used to..."

"He *used* to," Bobbie repeated softly. "He used to worship her. He used to think about how to make her happy. He used to watch her. Watched the world around her. Tried to anticipate anything that might hurt her. *All* of that is past tense."

"It's—it's been a tough year—" But Luke couldn't even finish it.

"Worse than the year she was raped, and he found out about..." Bobbie gestured at him. "Worse than that? Because that rocked his world. Yes, he's been sick. He's been hurt. But I'm worried—"

"Did she actually tell you he's hurt her?" Luke asked, desperate to find a way out of this. "Elizabeth's a strong girl, she wouldn't stand for it—"

"Oh, like she wouldn't sit around for a year dealing with brainwashing while Lucky treated her like crap? How many times did we all tell her just to have patience? That if we loved Lucky enough, he'd come back to us—"

“This isn’t our fault—”

“No. It’s not. But if we don’t do something now, whatever happens next *will* be our fault. Have you seen Lucky today?” Bobbie repeated.

“No. I—I haven’t.” Luke reached for his cell phone. “But I’ll call him—”

“I’ve left voice mails. He’s not picking up.” Bobbie reached over, touched his hand. “Luke, she’s not ready to face it. I know that. I’ve been there. We’ve both been there.” She cleared her throat. “We watched Mama go through it—”

“I’m not talking about it, Barbara Jean—”

“There’s something rotten in the Spencer blood. Daddy used to beat Mama like it was nothing. And she died. You—”

“You don’t have to tell me what I did,” Luke muttered. “I know what’s in me. What I did to my angel. What I can never take back. But Lucky was different. He was going —” He looked back at his sister. “He was going to be *better* than all of us.”

“And maybe he still can be. But only if we stop it now. Before he really does something he can’t take back. I love that girl, Luke. Laura loved her, too. What would she want us to do?”

“She’d want us to look out for Elizabeth.” Luke sighed. “Yeah, okay, we’ll track him down. We’ll make this right.”

General Hospital: Hallway

“I’m gonna ask her,” Patrick declared with a firm nod of his head. He shook his finger at Robin Scorpio. “*Don’t* talk me out of it—”

“Couldn’t be done if I wanted to—” Robin grimaced as she watched Elizabeth working at the hub. The nurse winced as she lifted a pile of charts. “Can’t we just tie her up and force her to let one of us look at her shoulder?”

“I like the way you think. Clearly, I have great taste.” Patrick slung an arm around her shoulders. “But it’ll look weird if I do it, so I’ll distract her, and you get the rope —”

“The two of you are dumb as *hell*.”

The doctors jumped at the bark behind them and spun around to find Epiphany scowling at both of them. “You want to ask her? Just ask her. She ain’t gonna tell you fools nothing.”

“But we can’t just...” Patrick gestured in Elizabeth’s direction. “We can’t let it go. Can we?” He looked at Robin, and she knew he was thinking about the conversation they’d had the month before. His worry over something in Lucky’s medical history that would spill over to Elizabeth.

It looked like his worst fears had come true.

Robin forced a smile on her face and turned to the nurse. “He’s learning empathy,” she told Epiphany, trying to lighten the moment. “It’s cute. Really.”

Patrick scowled. “Great. The two of you have jokes, but I’m over here—”

“Just follow me,” Epiphany said with a roll of her eyes. “Now.” She stalked across the hallway and meekly, the doctors followed.

Elizabeth looked up to find the trio standing in front of her, their expressions resolute. “Uh...can I help you?”

“Here’s what is going to happen,” Epiphany told her. “You’re going to let one of these idiots take a look at that shoulder. You’re *going* to let the other one take pictures of your injuries. We’re not going to ask you any questions. But you will have them if you need them.”

Elizabeth stared at her supervisor for a long moment before shaking her head. “I’m fine—”

“Girl,” Epiphany began, but Robin, taking her life in her hands, interrupted.

“Just me, then, Liz. You and me. We’ll go do a quick exam, and I promise. I’m not going to ask *any* questions.”

“There aren’t questions to ask—”

“You have a son you need to be able to carry,” Robin told her, stepping to the front of the trio. “Don’t risk making it worse.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “Fine. But *just* you.” She eyed Patrick and Epiphany suspiciously as Robin took her by the elbow. “And no questions.”

“Not even one.”

When they were in the room, Elizabeth sighed, realizing Robin had clearly prepared for this. “You went to see the S.A.N.E nurse,” she murmured.

“I did,” Robin said as she unpacked the kit. “I wanted to take pictures, and this has a disposable camera and measuring stick. We...” She looked at Elizabeth. “We don’t need any of the other stuff, do we?”

“No.” Elizabeth hesitated, then slowly peeled off her scrub top, wincing.

She moved on to the long-sleeved knit top she wore underneath. Robin helped Elizabeth ease it over her head, revealing the purple bruise on her shoulder blade, the fingerprints on her arm, and to Elizabeth’s surprise, another bruise wrapping around her abdomen. She frowned at it as Robin stood her in front of the wall and handed her the measuring tape.

“I didn’t see that,” she murmured. Oh, God, she was *covered* in bruises. She’d tried so hard not to look at herself in the shower in this morning, but—

Robin thankfully remained silent and merely handed Elizabeth a hairband. She tied her hair back to reveal the sickening bruise at her hairline.

“I know I said no questions,” Robin said, “and I mean that, but um, the shoulder injury...I just need to know what you...” She sighed, looked at Elizabeth. “No questions,” she repeated.

Elizabeth met her gaze for a long time, then nodded. She gestured at her face. “The first bruise is three days old. That’s from hitting the wall. And these...” She gestured at the first set of fingerprints on her right arm. “That’s two days ago. The, uh, cut on my face...and the rest of them...” She closed her eyes. “I fell backward over a table and into a lamp. Then I hit the floor.”

“Okay.”

Robin gently rotated Elizabeth’s shoulder for a minute, then nodded. “I think it’s just a bad contusion. Are you taking anything for it? Motrin?”

“Motrin and ice.”

“That’ll probably be good.” Robin handed Elizabeth her shirt. “I’ll take the camera to a one hour place. It’ll be dated today. And if...you ever need anyone to certify when they were taken, I’ll do it.”

Elizabeth held her clothes to her chest, her eyes burning. “You’re *really* not asking questions.”

“If you want me to ask them, I will. But I don’t think I need to.” Robin bit her lip. “Are you safe?”

“Right now? Yes.”

“I don’t know you that well, Elizabeth. But I like you. And I remember Lucky from growing up here.”

“You said—”

“I’m just stating facts. I know that there will be some people who will either never believe you or assume you did something to deserve it.” Robin met her eyes. “You *never* deserved it. And I will believe you. When you’re ready to answer those questions.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Let me know if that shoulder feels worse, okay? We might want an MRI, but it doesn’t look that serious.”

When Elizabeth had gotten changed, she followed Robin back out to the nurse’s station, where she found Patrick and Epiphany still waiting. She arched a brow. “Don’t you people have jobs?”

“Yes, I’m going to go do it in a minute.” Patrick scowled. “I don’t like people.”

“This is not news to me—”

“And I think your husband is a giant asshole—”

“Patrick,” Robin hissed, whacking him in the shoulder as Elizabeth blanched.

“But since I’m *not* allowed to say that,” Patrick continued, “so I’ll just say that you are one of the few people that I like. And it pisses me off I can’t do more to help.” He paused. “It *really* pisses me off.”

“You...” Elizabeth hesitated. “You *are* helping. Thank you for your concern. I’ve got this under control.” She looked at Epiphany. “Can I clock out early? I only have fifteen more minutes—”

“Yeah, but grab your guard,” Epiphany told her. They watched as Elizabeth got on the elevator with Cody.

“Well, what did she say?” Patrick demanded as soon as the doors had shut. “How bad is it?”

“I can’t tell you that,” Robin said with a roll of her eyes. She muttered under her breath and stalked away.

“I’m worried,” Patrick told Epiphany. “If she doesn’t say what he did to her, she might talk herself into going back—”

“All we can do is be there for her. You forget — he’s not just her husband. He’s a cop,” Epiphany said with a shrug. “And they’ll stick by him.”

Patrick wanted to argue, but simply couldn’t. So he just went back to his shift.

General Hospital: Parking Garage

Elizabeth hung back slightly as they approached the dark black sedan Cody had driven her to work in. She waited as Cody walked around the car, looking for evidence that it had been broken into or tampered with.

He stooped on the ground to look under the car, completing the bomb check. Then she heard him hiss. Her pulse kicked up as she took another step back. “What is it?” she demanded.

“A flat tire.” Cody scowled as he got back to his feet and dusted some grit and dirt from his suit jacket. “Damn it.” He pulled his phone from his coat. “I’ll call for another car.”

Elizabeth exhaled, relieved. She just wanted all of this to be over. “Okay—but—” She frowned. “Don’t you think it’s weird that we have a flat? Don’t Jason and Sonny do, like, routine maintenance?”

Cody glanced up, frowned at her, then looked back at the car. “*Shit*. Let’s go back inside—”

A shadow darted around them, and Elizabeth screamed as Manny Ruiz lurched out from behind a car and ran at Cody, who didn’t even have a chance to pull his gun before the tire iron smacked the side of his skull.

“Run,” Cody choked out as he fell against the car. Elizabeth took off, the pads of her sneakers slapping against the concrete floor as she dashed back towards the emergency stairs, knowing she’d never get to the elevator.

Just as she reached the door and started to twist the handle, a hand slid over her mouth, and Manny’s voice panted in her ear. “Not so fast, Pretty Girl. You’re all mine.”

Elizabeth bit his hand, then screamed. Manny swore, spun her around, then backhanded her. Elizabeth flew into a car, then falling onto the ground.

With a moan, Elizabeth tried to crawl away. She could see Cody in the distance, laying sprawled out by his car.

“Help...”

She cried out as Manny yanked her head back—then dimly saw the car bumper in front of her before pain exploded in her head, and her vision went black.

Chapter Sixteen

*Being me can only mean
Feeling scared to breathe
If you leave me then I'll be afraid of everything
That makes me anxious, gives me patience, calms me down
Lets me face this, let me sleep, and when I wake up
Let me breathe
- Afraid, Neighborhood*

Friday, April 7, 2006

General Hospital: Emergency Room

Jason stalked into the emergency room, Sonny and Max hot on his heels. He stopped to scan the cubicles and swore when he saw Cody lying on one of the gurneys, his face pale, blood staining his shirt. At his side, Patrick and Robin were working.

Alan and Monica were both just outside the curtain, talking to Emily. Alan turned and gestured for Jason to join them, even as he scowled upon sighting Sonny.

"We called you as soon as we got the warning from the security room," Alan told him. "The PCPD has already been through."

"What did they say? Did they tell you anything?"

"No, they were told the guard can't help since he hasn't woken up. We gave them the description of the car Manny was driving and a copy of the security tape. I think Mac said he was going to find Lucky and put an APB out to the airports and the train station." Monica shook her head. "*How* did he get into the parking garage?"

"Stan said he'd try to find out," Sonny said to Jason. "But I told him it's not the priority."

"No, but it might tell us where he's hiding." Jason exhaled slowly. "What about Cody? What did you find in the parking garage?"

"Flat tire. I guess Manny used it as a distraction." Alan hesitated and exchanged a look with Monica. "Cody was on the ground by the car, but we found blood nearer the

stairwell. Blood and....hair on a bumper.”

“Elizabeth’s hair,” Emily managed, her voice hoarse. Her eyes were puffy. “It looks like she ran for the stairs and almost made it. He must have slammed her head into the car—” She couldn’t. She looked back at the guard. “She should have stayed home.”

Jason followed her gaze, troubled by the pallor of his guard’s face. Somewhere, Manny Ruiz had Elizabeth. She was hurt, terrified—

“Cameron’s still at Carly’s,” Jason said, swallowing hard. “You don’t have to worry about him, Em. I put more men there—”

“A lot of good it did us here,” Emily snapped, and Jason flinched.

“Emily,” Alan murmured. “Short of locking Elizabeth in a room until Manny was dealt with, I don’t know what your brother could have done. And to be honest, I have a feeling the fault is in the hospital security.” He looked at Jason. “I’m sorry. You were right. I should have pushed harder to get Manny Ruiz out of this hospital.”

Emily sighed. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m just—” She folded her arms. “I’m just scared. I know you did your best to protect her.”

You’re not Superman.

Elizabeth’s voice echoed in his brain as Jason tried to think of the next step. No one had seen Manny Ruiz since Wednesday afternoon when he’d clocked out of his shift. Forty-eight hours, and his men still hadn’t found the psycho. They didn’t even have a lead.

“Jason?”

He looked to find Robin trying to get his attention. “Yeah?”

“Cody has a fractured skull. We’re taking him up for surgery. You’re his medical power of attorney, so...” Robin held out a clipboard. “He was conscious when they found him. He was drifting in and out, but he kept saying Elizabeth’s name over and over again. Telling her to run.”

“I should have done more,” Jason said. He scribbled his name.

“You’re not Superman,” Robin said, and he looked at her with a start. “What? What did I say?”

And I don't expect you to be.

"Nothing," he swallowed. "Em—"

"Yeah?"

"Call her grandmother in Memphis." Jason scratched his temple. "Sonny—" He turned to his partner. "Go to Carly's—" Sonny grimaced. "Stay with Cameron. If Manny's trying to get Elizabeth out of town...I don't know, he might be crazy enough to go for her son. To take him along. I just—I know we have guys there, but—"

"No, I got it. Call me if you find anything."

When Sonny had left, Emily touched his arm. "What are you going to do? Do you have any ideas?"

"No, I don't," Jason admitted. "But I'm going down to security. I don't—I don't know, Emily. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry," she echoed with a sigh. "Because I think I'm going to give you something else to worry about. I've been trying to call Lucky since Elizabeth went missing, but he's not picking up his phone. His dad said he'd been trying to find him all day, but it's like he's disappeared."

Jason frowned at her. "Why—"

"I don't know if it's related," Emily said, "but it's weird, right?" She bit her lip. "Isn't it?"

Jason did think it was troubling that Lucky was missing at the same time Elizabeth had been kidnapped, but he couldn't think of how it was related. "I don't know. I'll see if anyone knows anything, but—"

"Right." Emily nodded. "It's not a priority. I know. I just wanted to let you know." She took a deep breath. "Just—just find her, Jason."

"I will."

Warehouse: Room

Elizabeth moaned slightly, shook her head, and opened her eyes. She winced from the light. “What—” She couldn’t finish the words.

“I’m sorry.” The bright light flashed, then dimmed. She opened her eyes again to find the room much darker. She was sitting in a chair, her hands tied behind her.

In another chair, a few feet in front of her sat Manny Ruiz.

“W-What—” Elizabeth’s body just froze, and she couldn’t speak. “Oh, God. What are you—”

“You can scream if you like,” Manny said with a smile. “No one will hear you. We’re too close to the docks. Too far away from everything else.” He tipped his head to the side. “I’m sorry I had to hurt you, Elizabeth. You were always so nice to me. But you ran, and, well, plans change.”

“I—” She swallowed the bile that rose in her throat. “What are you going to do?”

“I know you’ve talked about me to Jason Morgan. He must have told you all the rumors.” Manny’s grin widened, and he got to his feet. He picked up a long knife from a table, then pointed it at her, the blade a dull glint in the dim lights. She flinched. “I have...high expectations, and sometimes it’s hard to make me happy.”

A tear slid down her cheek as she tried to find the words. She had to be able to make this stop. “Please—”

“But you’re strong, you know. I’ve been watching you. I think *you* might be the one I’ve been looking for.” He knelt in front of her, touching her chin with the tip of the knife. She hissed as it bit into her skin slightly.

“But if you disappoint me, well...you’ll go with the others. Pretty women with big blue eyes and skin as pale as yours...” He got to his feet. “They turn a nice profit in many places.”

She moaned slightly as her vision blurred. *Oh, God.* He was going to rape and torture her until he was bored, and then...

“Please...”

“But I don’t want you to think I don’t care about you.” Manny shook his head. “No, no. It’s just the opposite. You’re such a bright light. Such a sweet, sweet girl. I want to

give you something. I want you to see how *much* I want to please you. I got you a present.”

Oh, no. Oh, God. What if he’d gone to Carly’s—what if her little boy—

“Come with me. No, no, don’t fight—” Manny cut the bonds on her wrist, but held the knife to her. “Come on.”

Very aware of the warm blood trickling from the cut on her chin, the ache in her head from whatever he’d hit with her at the parking garage, and the cool press of the knife against her scrub top—she gulped down a breath and forced herself to stay quiet as he dragged her along.

Elizabeth followed him out of the room into the warehouse’s vast, empty center room. She stumbled in the dark, but Manny hauled her back to her feet and kept dragging her.

“Please. Just let me go—”

“I’ve waited so long for this moment. I had a plan that was better than this, but then, well, you forced my hand, Elizabeth. I had to save you.”

“Save me?” she repeated. “What—”

“I saw those bruises.” Manny shook his head. “When we talked on Wednesday. I *saw* what he did to you.” He looked at her, somehow his teeth bright white in the dark as he flashed her another smile. “You’ll thank me when this is done.”

A chill danced down her spine as he shoved her through another doorway. She bit back a cry as she saw who Manny had tied to a chair, bleeding and bruised...

Lucky.

General Hospital: Security Room

Learning that Jason was going to talk to her son, Epiphany had followed him down to the security room. Jason didn’t have the time to argue, particularly with someone he knew that was so loyal to Elizabeth.

“I would have given her the time off,” Epiphany said as they neared the room. “I would have made it work. That girl *never* asks for help when she *really* needs it. She

—”

“Epiphany—” He turned and just shook his head. “No, she doesn’t. But let’s not—we can’t think about any of that right now.”

“Right. I’m sorry.”

Jason went into the room to find it emptier than he’d thought. He frowned and looked at Stan and the other guard. “No cops?”

“They thought they got everything they needed with the tape of her abduction.” Stan spun on the chair and looked at him with a bit trepidation. “You don’t need to see it. We’re scanning the rest of the footage to see how he got in—”

“I want to see it,” Jason said firmly.

Stan sighed, turned back to a monitor, and pressed play. Jason watched as ten minutes before Elizabeth had clocked out, Manny crept out of the shadows, knelt by the car, then disappeared again.

“He dug an icepick into the tire. We found it near Cody,” Stan said as the video continued to run. From the elevators, Jason watched as Cody and Elizabeth walked towards the car.

She’d done everything right. She’d waited to leave the elevator until Cody had swept the area. Then she stayed directly next to him, on the side next to the roadway, not somewhere where she could be grabbed in the shadows.

She’d paused by the car so that he could do a bomb sweep. She knew the routine better than Jason had remembered. And then Cody pulled out his phone—

“We don’t know who he was gonna call. Maybe Vic,” Stan said, continuing to narrate. They both flinched as Manny jumped out of the shadows and whacked Cody hard with the tire iron.

Elizabeth hadn’t hesitated. Just like he’d always told her. Don’t worry about the guard. Just run. She’d screamed, then darted away towards safety—

“She almost got away,” Epiphany murmured. “Just a second more—”

Jason watched, stone-faced, as Manny caught up to Elizabeth at the door, threw her

against the car, then grabbed her by the hair and bashed her head against the bumper. Elizabeth slumped down to the floor. Her body was limp as Manny carried her out of camera range.

“She did everything I told her to do,” Jason said. He exhaled slowly. “And it wasn’t enough. How many cars left the garage after this?”

“Twelve. We’ve been tracking all of them, trying to find the one that might have been —”

“I think I’ve got it,” the other security guard said. “This one—registered to a Doctor Leo Ramsey.” He grimaced. “Look at the footage of the car entering the garage around 1 PM—”

And there it was, Manny behind the wheel, just driving like he had a right to be there. The guard switched to another view, and they saw Manny parking the car. Then moving it—

“He waited in the garage until a car near Elizabeth’s moved so he could be closer. He planned this. And he must have been planning this for a long time—do we know where the doctor is?”

“No, but if we find the car—” Stan waited as Jason called Alan and told him the make and model to pass on to the cops. “Does this get us closer to Manny?”

“No,” Jason admitted. “Because I don’t think he’s at the doctor’s house.” He scrubbed his hands over his face. “I don’t know where to look,” he admitted.

“She’s tough, Jason,” Epiphany told him. “And she’s got that little boy to keep her going. Nothing is gonna stop Elizabeth coming home to him.” She nodded to the screen. “Keep looking, Stanford. We’ll go up and wait for word from the guard. He might know something. C’mon.”

Outside the security room, Jason slumped against the wall for a minute, trying to collect his thoughts. “I told her I wouldn’t let anything happen to her. And I couldn’t keep that promise—”

“Jason.”

He frowned, looked up at the frowning nurse. “What?”

“Manny knew what car Elizabeth drove to work today.”

Jason straightened, hissed. “She didn’t drive her car. She drove with Cody. He was following her from Audrey’s.” Which meant he’d been following her all along. Damn it. How had they missed it—he thought of the rookie guard who had done a shit job of following him.

“They keep saying they can’t find Lucky Spencer. And I can’t help but think—he went missing after an argument with Elizabeth that sent her running to her grandmother’s.” Epiphany hesitated. “You tell me Manny was targeting Elizabeth because he’s obsessed with her.”

“Maybe...”

“Maybe Manny wants to punish Lucky for hurting Elizabeth.” Epiphany shook her head. “It’s almost a shame you didn’t hurt her, Jason. Maybe he’d come find you.”

Warehouse: Room

Lucky blearily opened his eyes, looked at both of them, and coughed. “What the hell, Elizabeth—”

“Lucky—” Elizabeth looked at Manny with wide eyes. “What did you do?”

“Nothing much. I found him in an alley on Courtland Street.” Manny grabbed Lucky by his hair, dragged his head back. Brought the tip of his knife to her husband’s throat. “I saw the bruises, Elizabeth.”

“Elizabeth,” Lucky choked, trying to look at her, but Manny wouldn’t release his head, wouldn’t let him move.

“Do you have any other bruises?” Manny asked idly. “Or just the one on your face?”

“I—”

“She has such a *lovely* face,” Manny told Lucky, his voice almost sing-song. “You messed it up. Such pretty skin. Soft. You know that.”

“How can you...how can you be so angry at *him* for hurting me?” Elizabeth managed, desperate to get that knife away from her husband. “You—you’re planning to *rape* me.”

“No, no...” Manny released Lucky’s hair. “No, I’ll wait until you’re ready. You’ll want it, too.” He licked his lips, his tongue sweeping out with lasciviousness. “I’m *good* at making women want me.”

“I’ll never—”

“I know you got a taste for the bad boys.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened as she took a step back. “What does—what do you mean?”

“It means I saw you, my sweet, pretty Elizabeth. All the times you met with Jason Morgan.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. Oh, God. It just got worse. He’d been following her, he knew—he knew—all of her worst fears—

“I just wanted to get your attention with Skye. That was just a game to see what you’d do. How would you try to save her? I knew you would. I *knew* you couldn’t help yourself. I thought you’d go to the chief of staff, the police, your husband. But no—” He wagged a finger at her, then turned back to Lucky, who was glaring at Elizabeth now, his lips curled in a sneer, his eyes burning.

Manny laughed again. “Oh, see, Lucky knows what I’m trying to say. He gets it. *He* knows who you ran to.” He ripped Lucky’s head back again, yanking on his hair, his voice dropping the sing-song quality. “That’s why you hurt her, isn’t it? You knew she was a faithless whore, didn’t you?”

General Hospital: ICU

Jason scowled as he peered at Cody through one of the transparent walls of the ICU. “I was hoping he might wake up tonight,” he told Robin.

“I know. But we can’t do anything about that.” Robin bit her lip. “You really don’t have any leads—”

“No, but—” Jason grimaced. “I can’t just sit here. I need to do something. Look somewhere—” He broke off.

“What?” Robin touched his arm. “I know that look—”

“The waterfront,” Jason said. He met her worried gaze. “There’s a lot of abandoned buildings with cargo docks. It’s a way to escape, to get out of Port Charles under the radar.”

He could go look. He could do something instead of *waiting* here at the hospital for something to break. “I’ll go take a look. Maybe find some activity or just—something.”

Robin tipped her head towards the elevator. “Go. I’ll call you if anything changes with Cody.”

Warehouse

“What is he talking about?” Lucky demanded. Elizabeth just shook her head. No, not now. Not this. She couldn’t process this, couldn’t make herself accept that her husband was worrying about an *affair* while they were being held at knifepoint—

“You know, I wondered why a cop’s wife ran to Jason Morgan *every* time I so much as said boo to her.” Manny shook his head. “Never ran to you,” he said to Lucky, who growled.

“Just—just stop—let him go, okay?” Elizabeth knew if she tried to run, Manny would just kill Lucky and come after her. She was tired, her leg hurt from something—her shoulder was on fire—

She’d never be able to outrun Manny, and she knew she was alone. No one would know where she was, and Lucky clearly wasn’t going to be able to do anything.

She had to find a way out.

“Let him go, and I’ll—” She swallowed hard. “I’ll go with you.”

Lucky stared at her in shock. “No! No! Elizabeth, you *can’t*—”

“Well...” Manny lifted his brows, lowering his knife slightly. “If I had known the way to your heart was threatening to carve up the man who hurt you, I wouldn’t have planned the second part of this game.”

“S-Second part?” Elizabeth sputtered. “What—”

Manny reached into his pocket with his free hand and showed her a cell phone. Her

phone. “Funny. Did you know she has Jason Morgan on speed dial?” Lucky’s eyes flashed with murderous rage, and Manny laughed. “Yes, it’s very upsetting. *You’re* not on the list. But he’s number two and since one is for emergency—”

“What?” Lucky bit out. He turned his glare back on her. “What the fucking hell?”

“I can explain—” Her world spun for a moment. “I just—with all this Manny stuff, I needed to—”

How could she explain she’d done it the night before when Jason had asked her to make sure she could call him if she needed him. She didn’t need Lucky on speed dial, and having Jason at the top—it just made sense—

But Lucky was looking at her with such hatred that she couldn’t force the words out. This couldn’t be happening.

“Why don’t we call him? We can ask Jason Morgan—” Manny grinned at Elizabeth’s stricken face. “Let’s invite him to the party—”

“Are you absolutely *insane*?” Elizabeth bit out. Why the hell would Manny want to invite one of the most feared enforcers on the East coast?

“It’s sweet; she’s worried about me,” he told Lucky. To Elizabeth, he continued, “I’ve got something he wants, pretty girl. And it might be nice for you to say goodbye to your lover before I whisk you away somewhere nice. I might not even hurt him much if you ask as nicely as you did for your husband here.”

He pressed the speed dial and put the phone against his ear.

Roscoe Trucking: Parking Lot

He’d parked his bike a block away, not wanting the sound of it to alert anyone who might be in the area. Mickey Roscoe had run a trucking company for Sorel as a front, and Faith had maintained it after his death. It had been abandoned since her death the year before.

It was a medium-sized building on the edge of the docks. The chain-link fence that surrounded it had fallen into disrepair due to negligence and vandalism. Just as Jason ducked under a broken section, his cell phone rang.

His heart began to race when he saw Elizabeth’s name on his identification screen. “Elizabeth?” he demanded when he answered the phone.

“Oh, you sound so hopeful. No, sorry to disappoint you, but it’s just me.”

Manny’s smooth voice sounded so normal that it startled Jason. Did he even have her? Or just her phone? “Where is she?”

“She’s safer with me than she is out in the world. Oh, look, she doesn’t agree, does she? She’s shaking her head—”

“Jason, don’t listen to him—”

He closed his eyes at the sound of Elizabeth’s voice. She was panicked but alive. And that was more information than he’d had thirty seconds ago. He could cling to that.

“What do you want? I can get you out of the country if you let her go—”

“Oh, no, no, it’s nothing that simple. You see, I’m taking my sweet Elizabeth with me, but I have to clear up old business before she can go. She worries, you know, and I’m just...” Manny sighed. “I’m afraid she won’t be able to concentrate on me.”

“What do you want?” Jason repeated.

“I want you to join our party. I have something special before we leave. A present that I want you to give it to her. I’m at Roscoe Trucking. You know the place. You took care of its owner.”

Jason closed his eyes in relief. Thank God. He was here, and he’d arrived nearly ten minutes before Manny could expect him to show up. He’d be able to surprise them.

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

“Make it quick,” Manny said, then hung up.

Before he went inside, Jason called Robin. When she picked up, he said, “I need you to call Sonny and the PCPD. Tell them to go to Roscoe Trucking, but to be careful. He has Elizabeth, and I’m pretty sure I heard Lucky in the background.”

“Lucky!” Robin repeated, but Jason had already hung up. He needed to stop Manny Ruiz and get Elizabeth to safety. He wouldn’t break another promise to her.

Warehouse: Room

“He sounded so concerned,” Manny said with a sigh. “He must *really* love you,” he said to Elizabeth. “All the times he was at your apartment, all those close moments on the docks, at the warehouse—did he ever tell you?”

Elizabeth’s hands were shaking as she dragged her hands through her hair. “*Why* are you doing this to me?” she choked out. “Why are you—” She looked at Lucky, and something inside her shriveled up and died.

Because why—in the middle of being kidnapped and mentally tortured—should she have to explain herself to the abusive husband she’d just fled—

Why?

Why was this happening?

“Because I think it might be hard for you to enjoy yourself if *I’m* the one that kills this piece of shit.” Manny backhanded Lucky, who moaned in pain. “But maybe if I tell Jason Morgan where you got that bruise, he’ll take care of it for me—”

“*That’s* your plan?” Elizabeth demanded. “He’d never do that to me. He’ll kill you first.”

“She has a lot of faith in him,” Manny said, his tone apologetic as he looked at Lucky. “I was angry with her at first when I realized she was unfaithful. Just like you are now. No, don’t deny it,” Manny murmured when Lucky shook his head. “I thought she deserved to be punished. But then, Lucky, you know what changed?”

“What?” Lucky muttered. He winced as Manny pinched his cheek. “What?”

“I saw her face. And I realized she was just lonely. Desperate for someone to treat her right. So I’ll leave Jason Morgan to take care of you, and I’ll take her somewhere where you can’t hurt her again.”

A sob broke, escaped her lips as Elizabeth shook her head. How could she make this stop? How could she save herself? How could she get back to her son?

“I never hit her,” Lucky hissed. “Tell him, Elizabeth—I *never* hit you—”

“We don’t have time for lies.” Manny cut Lucky’s bonds, then shoved her husband to the floor. Lucky screamed as Manny ground his heel into his back—right at the part

of the spine where Lucky had been injured.

“Stop! Stop! I told you I’ll go with you!” Elizabeth rushed forward to grab Manny’s arm to stop him from kicking Lucky again.

“He shouldn’t lie to me,” Manny panted. He stomped one more time, then grabbed Elizabeth by her wrists. “Come on. We need to be on the docks before Morgan gets here—”

“What? Why—” But Elizabeth could barely catch her breath as he dragged her. “I thought you wanted him here—”

“Not until I’m ready for him.

Elizabeth opened her mouth to argue with him again, but then—

Then she saw him. Just the corner of his leather jacket outside the large loading dock door. A cry of relief nearly bubbled out of her throat, because she knew—God, she knew she’d be okay.

Jason was already here. He’d found her. Somehow, he’d been close when Manny called, and he was here before Manny would expect him.

“I told you,” Manny was saying, “I have a plan.”

“And so do I.” Elizabeth spit in his face.

When Manny reared back, she kicked at the back of his knees until Manny went sprawling. Not even waiting to see if he’d hit the ground, Elizabeth took off, finding a burst of adrenaline somehow—

She exploded out onto the docks, hearing Manny’s angry shouts behind her—Jason was there, shoving her behind him, his arm outstretched, the gun pointed at Manny who skidded to a stop with a growl and look of loathing at Elizabeth.

“You fucking *bitch*!”

Elizabeth expected Jason to open fire—to shoot Manny where he stood until he was dead. But he didn’t. Because she was standing there. Watching him. “Jason—”

“That’s so sweet,” Manny said with a shake of his head. He looked around, his hands

up. “Can’t bear to make her see you as a killer. Must be true love. I guess I’ll just find a way to meet you again—”

“Jason, no, you *can’t* let him go—”

Manny’s grin only widened—until Jason pulled the trigger. Twice in rapid succession, two shots to the chest that sent Manny flying backward, skidding across the docks. Elizabeth sank to her knees, dizzy with relief.

“I needed a heart shot,” Jason said flatly. He tucked his gun away, then sighed as he heard the whirl of police sirens. He took Elizabeth’s hand and pulled her back to her feet, crushing her into a tight hug. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?” He pulled away, framed her face in his hands, searching her eyes.

“Just a hit on the head when he grabbed me.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I was so scared. He called you, and I thought—I was so scared—” Elizabeth threw herself back into his arms. “But you came—”

“And you got yourself away from him.” He turned his face, pressed his lips to her hair. “You saved yourself. I just finished the job.”

“I—” Elizabeth drew back on a shaky breath. She met his eyes. “How did you find me? How did you *know* we were back here—”

“I just—” He swallowed. “I just did.” Their eyes held for a long moment. Elizabeth’s head was spinning, and then— “Oh, God. Lucky. He was hurt—”

She drew back, blanching as she saw several police officers standing in the doorway, including Mac Scorpio, who was just raising his brows.

“Your husband is being loaded into an ambulance—if you care,” Mac said with a coldness in his tone she’d never heard before. He nodded to Manny. “He dead?”

“Yeah.” Jason lifted his chin as if daring Mac to do something about it.

“About time.” Mac shrugged and walked away, back inside the warehouse. Elizabeth sagged against Jason.

“Asshole,” Jason muttered as he put an arm around her shoulder and helped her limp back inside. “He could have asked you if you were okay—”

"I can't worry about that," Elizabeth sighed as they neared the front of the building. But then she could hear Lucky's voice. She rushed towards him. "Lucky, are you okay?"

She tried to touch his arm, but he slapped her hand away. "What do you care?" Lucky bit out. "I heard what Manny said. Go be with your lover, you bitch!"

"W-What—" Elizabeth stepped back, stung. She looked around at the paramedics, at the other officers who avoided making eye contact before looking at Jason, still standing by the warehouse door. She looked back at Lucky. "Manny—he was *lying*, Lucky. It wasn't like that—"

"He was right about one thing. Faithless whore. That's what you are. What you've *always* been—"

"Elizabeth, he's in a lot of pain right now," Mac finally said, putting a hand on her arm, drawing her away. "Let's give him a minute."

"I—" She looked at Mac. "I—"

"And what did you expect, hanging out with Jason Morgan?" Lucky's partner, Jesse Beaudry, snapped. "What did you think people would say?"

Her knees buckled as she took in all of the people who had listened to Lucky—who believed him—

She'd been kidnapped, held at knifepoint, threatened with unimaginable rape and torture—had managed to survive it—had just about rescued herself—

And it didn't matter. It didn't matter.

She didn't matter.

Tears burned in her throat as she slowly took a step back. She stumbled over a rock and fell to the ground. No one moved to help her. She sat on the gravel for a long minute, just staring at her hands, now scraped from the rocks.

"Come on," Jason murmured. He knelt next to her and got her to her feet. "Let's go to the hospital. Robin's waiting. And Emily. Everyone's worried."

"Are they?" Elizabeth asked dully. She closed her eyes to shut out all the stares, the

accusations and let Jason steer her towards a car, only belatedly realizing that Sonny and Max had arrived.

“Yeah, they are. Come on,” he repeated. “Let’s go.”

“Okay.” With a shaky sigh, she slid into the backseat of the car and looked one more time towards the ambulance whose back doors had also closed.

She should feel relief. Manny was dead. The nightmare was over.

Except it felt like it was just beginning.

Chapter Seventeen

*Will we burn in heaven
Like we do down here?
Will the change come while we're waiting?
Everyone is waiting*
- Witness, Sarah McLachlan

Friday, April 7, 2006

General Hospital: Emergency Room Trauma Room

Emily rushed into the trauma room, snapping on gloves as paramedics rolled Lucky in. Her best friend was bloody and bruised, his face nearly unrecognizable with cuts and a swollen right eye, and he was writhing on the stretcher, screaming at the top of his lungs—

“We tried to calm him down in the ambulance,” one of the paramedics said with a sigh to Patrick as he handed him a chart. “But he saw his wife get in a car with the guy she’s been having an affair with. It set him off all *over* again—”

“What?” Emily demanded, her eyes wide. “What the *hell*—”

And then she heard Lucky’s screams. She heard the words

“Fucking whore! This is her fault! She did this to me! *She did this!*”

Emily’s head spun as she looked across the stretcher to find Patrick’s blank face, stark-white. He swallowed hard, met Emily’s eyes, then looked at the other attending in the room. He slapped the chart into his chest.

“No way in hell am I treating him.”

Then he stalked out—shoving past Alan, who stumbled back in surprise. When he saw that Monica had arrived, he took off after the neurosurgeon as her mother took the chart from the other attending.

“Emily—” Monica closed her eyes, maybe to block out the word *whore* as it echoed in the room. “Can you deal with this?”

She took a deep breath. “Yeah. Yeah, I can.”

“Where is she? Where is that cheating bitch? Is her asshole boyfriend with her?”

“Good. Get some goddamn meds and shut him up,” Monica barked to the attending. “I don’t want to hear his voice anymore—”

General Hospital: Emergency Room

The world felt like it was spinning around her. People kept talking to her, walking past her, but Elizabeth just sat on a gurney in the emergency room, holding a bleeding arm in her lap, staring straight ahead at the curtain. Jason paced next to her, glaring out at the emergency room through the cubicle’s drawn curtains again.

“Where the hell are all the doctors?” he muttered.

“With Lucky, I think,” Elizabeth said. She closed her eyes. Her voice didn’t even feel attached to her. Was she floating? What did shock feel like? Her body swayed slightly. “I’m fine—”

“Where the hell *is* everybody?” Epiphany demanded as she jerked the curtain back. She jabbed her finger at someone. “You! Go drag Junior Drake from wherever he is—I don’t give a flying fuck if a cop is bleeding on the table. One of our own is hurt. She comes first—”

“Epiphany,” Elizabeth said, then shook her head as her supervisor came in. She winced as Epiphany touched her chin, turned it. “He didn’t—”

“You gonna tell me he *didn’t* hurt you? I watched the tape. I know he hit you, obviously cut you with that knife—” Epiphany glared at Jason. “Why you still standing there? Go *find* Drake and get him here—”

“I’m here, I’m here,” Patrick muttered as he and Robin arrived, pushing the curtain back. “I’m sorry. I was having a difference of opinion with the Chief of Staff.”

“You’re going to get suspended,” Robin said idly as the neurosurgeon pulled on some gloves.

“Yeah? Won’t even be the first time this year.” Patrick tipped Elizabeth’s head back and shined a light in her eyes. “She’s shocky. Pupils dilated. Pulse is rapid—”

“Jason,” Robin said softly as she eyed the cluster of cops standing on the other side of the emergency room. “Maybe...you should be somewhere else.”

Elizabeth blinked at him. Tried to focus on his face, but it was blurry, and she couldn’t quite manage it. She took a deep breath, realized Robin and Jason had continued speaking while she was...

Trying to float back to reality.

Jason turned and scowled at them. “Why? Because *they* couldn’t be bothered to help her?”

He shook his head, took Robin’s arm, and walked a few feet from the cubicle. “None of the paramedics even asked her if she was okay. I had to bring her to the hospital.” His blood boiled, remembering the confusion and hurt in her eyes when she’d fallen to the ground and just stayed there. Waiting for the first responders to help her. Men and women who were supposed to be better than him.

“What?” Robin’s scowl matched his as she shot a dark look at them. “Why? Because of the bullshit Lucky is spewing?”

“He’s still—” Jason swore under his breath. “What’s he saying *now*?”

“That’s why Patrick is in trouble. He got into the room and heard Lucky demanding to know where the cheating bitch and if her asshole boyfriend was with her—” Robin grimaced. “Pretty sure he means you. Patrick listened to exactly one sentence of that and walked out.”

Jason liked Patrick Drake more and more. “So?”

“So, he can’t just *refuse* to treat a patient,” Robin said with a roll of her eyes. “Even if *I* kind of want to set him on fire, too. I mean, Jesus...” She looked back at the cops, saw her uncle had joined them. “But I guess they believe him.”

“I don’t know what happened. I never saw Lucky until it was over.”

“I don’t know either. But...” Robin hesitated. “It’s not that...I’m not judging, but if there’s *any* truth—”

Jason hesitated, and Robin raised her brows. “It’s...complicated,” he muttered.

“Okay—” Robin closed her mouth as her uncle approached them. “Uncle Mac, if you’re here to talk to Liz—”

“Jesse’s going to take her statement. She looked like she was okay at the docks, so we just want to know how Lucky ended up down there—” Mac began.

“Why—” Robin narrowed her eyes. “Why does that matter now? Manny’s dead.”

“Yeah, and that’s what we want to talk to Jason about. Care to answer some questions about what the hell happened?” Mac demanded, turning his attention to Jason.

Jason hesitated. If he’d thought this was about Elizabeth’s kidnapping and cleaning up loose ends, he might have agreed. But clearly, they were focusing on *Lucky* and the attempted murder of a cop. “Yeah, just let me call Justus—”

“Do you really need your lawyer for this?”

“You know, I hear the first responders didn’t bother to check on Elizabeth or offer medical assistance,” Robin said flatly. “She’s in shock, you know that, right? And she has a head injury. I’d hate the PCPD to get slapped with a civil rights suit.”

“Robin—” Mac sighed, looked back at Jason. “Get your damn lawyer down here. I’ll wait.”

“You’ll wait over *there*,” Robin snapped, pointing back to the main desk. “And I notice you didn’t deny it. I expected better from you, Uncle Mac.”

“Yeah, well, I expected better from Elizabeth Spencer, so I guess we’re even.”

Mac stalked away as Jason exhaled slowly. “They’re never going to believe this had nothing to do with me,” he murmured.

Robin folded her arms. “No, they probably won’t. I’m sorry. This is probably going to get a lot worse for Elizabeth. Which brings me back to my original point—”

“I should stay away from her,” Jason said. He scrubbed his hands over his face.

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. She doesn’t need any of this. I don’t want to make it worse.” He looked back at the curtain. “Robin—”

“I’m not going to leave her alone. Emily is in with Lucky, her grandmother is flying in from Memphis as soon as she can get a flight. I have to go in there and talk Patrick

into doing his job, but I promise you—” She touched Jason’s arm. “She won’t be alone. And I’m not going to let anyone push her around.”

“Thanks. I’ll go call Justus.”

Robin stepped back behind the curtain to find Patrick carefully placing a butterfly bandage on the cut on her chin. “Jason had to go call his lawyer,” she told Elizabeth. “Mac wants to question him.”

“Great,” Elizabeth murmured. “I’m sure he’s looking forward to that.”

Patrick turned to Epiphany. “I want her overnight for the head wound. We’re going to run an MRI on the head, wrist, and shoulder just to be sure. Get her a room.”

“Patrick—” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “You should go take care of Lucky.”

“What? I never said—”

“I know what he said back at the warehouse.” Her head swayed, and she pressed a hand to her forehead. “Is he still calling me a faithless whore?”

“Uh—”

“Manny called me that, too.” Elizabeth managed a sour smile. “Funny, isn’t it?”

“Not even a little bit,” Patrick muttered. “Elizabeth—”

“He’s hurt. And you’re a doctor. You should go help him. Don’t get into trouble because of me.”

“All right,” Patrick said carefully. He looked at Robin. “You gonna scrub in with me?”

“No, I’m waiting for Emily to get here. I promised Jason someone would stay with you,” Robin told Elizabeth, who just sighed.

“And that’s why he went somewhere else to call Justus. Because the last place he should be is with me. That’s going to make everything worse.”

Epiphany huffed. “Don’t you worry about *any* of that right now. Robin, go scrub in with Patrick. I’ll stay—”

“Elizabeth?” Jesse Beaudry appeared in the opening of the curtain. “I need your statement—”

“No,” Patrick said with a glare. “Number one, you don’t come near my patient without a goddamn handwritten *engraved* invitation. I’m talking *calligraphy*—”

Robin put a hand on her boyfriend’s arm. “Jesse,” she said to the other man, “we’re admitting Elizabeth to the hospital. Let’s wait until she’s settled and has some time. She’s been through a lot tonight.” She arched one slim brow. “You do remember *she’s* the victim, right? Not just Lucky?”

Jesse swept his eyes over Elizabeth, then snorted. “Doesn’t look much like a victim to me, but fine, have it your way.”

“What the *actual* fuck is going on right now?” Patrick demanded as Maxie’s boyfriend sauntered off. “What happened to protect and serve?”

“It’s simple.” Elizabeth laid back against the gurney. “They think I’m having an affair with Jason, and that’s why I got kidnapped. And Lucky—a brother in blue—got hurt because of it. So not only do they *not* care about what happened to me—I bet some of them think I deserved it.”

Robin pressed her lips together as her eyes burned. The flat affect in Elizabeth’s voice, coupled with the brutal statement, broke her heart. Elizabeth didn’t expect much from anyone at this point. The odds that she’d ever go public with what that brother in blue had done to her slipped from unlikely to not a chance in hell.

“Come on,” she told Patrick. “Let’s go. Epiphany will take care of her.”

“And I will slap the silly shit out of anyone else who comes in this room tonight,” Epiphany said with a firm nod. She shoved up the long-sleeved shirt she wore under her scrubs to her elbows. “Just try me.”

Outside the cubicle, Patrick scowled. “I do not want to spend one more minute of my life trying to help that abusive little piece of shit—did you hear her in there—I knew it! I *knew* I should have told her about the drugs—that’s what he’s on, you know that, right?”

When Robin just shook her head and sighed, Patrick continued. “He’s in withdrawal because Manny probably grabbed him before he could get his next fix, and he’s ready to set everything on fire—”

“Patrick—”

“I’m *telling* her—”

“You *can’t*. She’s a nurse, Patrick. She’ll understand when she does know. And she will find out—these things never stay hidden for long. You shouldn’t have even said that to me right now.”

“Yeah, but—”

Robin leaned up and pressed her lips against his. “I love you that you want to do something to help her. But I also heard her tell you not to get in trouble over this. And she’s had enough of people not respecting her tonight.”

“Damn it. Damn it. That’s a good point.” Patrick was still scowling as they made their way over towards the trauma room. “You’re a pain in the ass sometimes.”

“Part of my charm.”

General Hospital: Hospital Room

It was another thirty minutes before Elizabeth was admitted to one of the general wards. Bobbie had stopped by for a few minutes to let her know that Carly was keeping Cameron overnight and that Elizabeth shouldn’t worry. Cameron was ridiculously excited to have a sleepover with his new best friend, who happened to have a playroom bigger than Elizabeth’s entire apartment.

Then Emily had finally been able to leave Lucky when he went into surgery and come up to sit with Elizabeth. She’d stayed by Elizabeth’s side as Epiphany wheeled her upstairs into her own room, sending glares to anyone who even attempted to talk to Elizabeth.

While she and Emily hadn’t really spoken the last days, Elizabeth was grateful for her presence. They hadn’t even spoken a word about the fight they’d been having—Emily just planted herself at Elizabeth’s bedside and refused to leave.

Then Jesse Beaudry showed up to take Elizabeth’s statement.

Emily let Lucky’s partner in and just glared when Jesse suggested she leave the room. “Not a chance in hell.”

“Okay,” Jesse drawled. He set himself at the end of Elizabeth’s hospital bed, standing with his feet slightly apart. He nodded at the brace around her wrist. “I didn’t think you were hurt.”

Elizabeth blinked, then looked down at her wrist. “Oh. I strained it. I—” She grimaced. “I’m not sure when. I think when Manny dragged me...” She exhaled slowly. “But yeah, it’s a strain.”

“Why did Manny kidnap Lucky, too?” Jesse asked. “Did you know Manny was targeting him?”

Elizabeth turned her face away from him. “Not until he dragged me into the room. Manny said...” She swallowed hard. She didn’t think they’d believe her about the bruises. Not now, when she was covered in them thanks to Manny Ruiz. “Manny said he’d seen me fight with Lucky.”

“Uh-huh. You weren’t at your apartment last night? Manny knew you were in a different car, so he followed you to work, didn’t he?”

“I stayed at my grandmother’s house—”

“How is *any* of this relevant?” Emily demanded. “Manny kidnapped her, then took Lucky. He’s dead now. You can thank my brother any time—”

“Em—”

“It’s important we understand the details. You don’t want Jason to be arrested for murder, do you?” Jesse sneered.

At that, Elizabeth turned back abruptly at the smug cop. “What? Why?”

“Manny was unarmed when we found him. Jason shot him in cold blood.” Jesse shrugged. “You’d already escaped from him—How can he argue defense of others?”

“This is bullshit—” Emily scowled.

Elizabeth struggled to breathe as her heart began to race. “Manny came after me. He followed me. He kidnapped *me*. He tried to kill my guard—”

“Yeah, how *do* you explain a cop’s wife being followed around by one of Jason’s goons? Manny came after you. Why?”

She closed her eyes. “I told you. He kidnapped me last fall. I filed a report. He...he told me he was obsessed with me.”

“Really? Because he also stalked Sam McCall. Jason Morgan’s fiancée Are you sure it was *you* that caught his attraction and not...” Jesse sneered. “Your *connection* to the local mob element?”

“Okay, that is absolutely it. You are *done* here.” Emily strode forward and yanked open the hospital door. “Get out—”

“It wasn’t about them,” Elizabeth tried to explain even though she knew he wouldn’t listen to her. “It was me. Manny got a job here because of me.”

“Sure. You and Jason Morgan used to date, didn’t you?” Jesse glanced down at his notebook. “I asked around, and you’ve been off and on for the last seven years, going back to when you were eighteen—how long have you been on again?”

Elizabeth felt a sob bubble up in her throat. “We’re not—”

“Get out,” Emily repeated. “Get out, or I’ll have hospital security remove you.” She stepped up to Jesse, who rolled his eyes. “How *dare* you come into this room and use this moment to go after my brother—Elizabeth was kidnapped! She has a concussion, a strained wrist, and shoulder—she was threatened with rape and torture at knifepoint, watched her husband be beaten in front of her and you’re in here—”

“Her *husband* was beaten in front of her because *she* got herself mixed up with criminals,” Jesse retorted, but Emily had already stopped listening. She stalked out into the hallway. Jesse turned back to Elizabeth.

“I don’t care if Lucky’s been in a bad mood lately,” Jesse snapped. “He deserved more loyalty from you. Even if you weren’t screwing Jason Morgan, you were clearly up to something with him. Why else would Manny Ruiz give a damn about you?”

“Get out of this room right now,” Alan Quartermaine thundered as he stormed into the room, Emily hot on his heels. “And don’t come near this patient again!”

“She’s a witness—”

“She’s the *victim*, you son of a bitch!” Emily tried to push past her father, but Alan held her back. “What the hell is this?”

“Get out,” the chief of staff ordered again. “You’ll be hearing from the hospital’s attorney. Don’t come in here again.”

“I’ll be in touch—”

“You’ll be in touch with her *lawyer*!” Emily retorted. “Justus Ward, the family attorney—”

“Yeah, I know him. He’s downstairs defending Morgan from another murder charge.” Jesse shook his head as if he were disappointed in them all. “Man. This town has its priorities screwed up.”

He left, and Alan went after him to make sure he got on the elevator. Emily turned back to Elizabeth, who was silently crying in the bed.

“Don’t listen to him—none of this is your fault—”

“Manny kidnapped Lucky because of me—”

“Because he was *insane*—” Emily shook her head, took Elizabeth’s hand. “None of this is your fault. And I’m not going to let *anyone* tell you it was. Lucky will understand that when he wakes up.” She hesitated. “When he calms down. He’s just hurt right now. And Jason isn’t going to jail. Justus won’t let that happen.”

“I just want this to be over. I just want it to be done.” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “Why can’t it just stop?”

“It will. I’ll go get your doctor. I’ll find Robin. You need to sleep. You need to rest.” Emily rushed out to find someone. Within ten minutes, she’d located her mother, who prescribed sedation for Elizabeth without argument.

As Monica and Emily watched Elizabeth slip into sleep, Emily squared her shoulders and looked at her mother. “I’m gonna go check on Jason. He should know what the cops are doing to Elizabeth. I also want to make sure Justus will represent her.”

“I’ll wait here with her until someone else comes to sit with her,” Monica promised.

General Hospital: Conference Room

Jason had been interrogated maybe a hundred times in the last ten years and was

generally pretty good at keeping himself under control. He let Justus deal with most of the questions initially, ferreting out what Justus thought was okay to answer.

No, he had no evidence that Manny was actually targeting Elizabeth. That's why he didn't go to the cops. No, Jason didn't know why Manny had kidnapped and beaten a cop. No, Jason didn't know Manny was unarmed when he shot him.

Jason thought the conversation was nearing the end when Mac introduced a new topic — one he'd never thought Robin's uncle would actually bring up.

"And how long have you and Elizabeth Spencer been sleeping together?"

Justus put up a hand to ward off Jason's immediate response. "We're not commenting on gossip."

"It's not gossip," Mac said blandly. He looked at Jason. "Before Lucky Spencer went into surgery, he claimed that Manny Ruiz told him he'd followed Elizabeth to see you several times. Apparently, Elizabeth didn't deny it when Manny confronted her. Then Manny also told Lucky that he'd been kidnapped and beaten to get him out of the way." He paused.

Jason squinted and looked at Justus. "What—" Jason broke off. "I don't understand."

"I do," Justus said, grimly. "You're suggesting that Jason was *working* with Manny somehow to get Spencer out of the way so he could have his wife, and what, Manny Ruiz went rogue?"

"That's the story Spencer is telling—"

Jason pressed his lips together, shook his head. Justus sighed, looked at Jason, then looked back at Mac. "Give us the room for a minute. I want to talk to my client."

Jason scowled as Mac left. "There's *nothing* to talk about. It's crap—"

"Of course it is. But you shot an unarmed man, and if Lucky Spencer sticks to this story, it's going to create some serious shit for you. And for Elizabeth." Justus hesitated. "Is that what you want?"

"No. I don't care about me. But Elizabeth—" Jason sighed. "What do you want me to do?"

“You *need* to talk to this man about your relationship. You also need to give him something he can work with. You know Mac. He’s not a bad guy. But he’s a guy that has a cop who’s hurt and blaming the local mob. A lot of his guys are not making this easy on him. They stick together, and you don’t want them thinking Elizabeth is the enemy.”

“Fine.” Jason scowled. “Bring him back in.”

When Mac sat back down, Jason told him, “I’m only going to say this once. Elizabeth and I have been friends for years. We are not sleeping together.” That much, at least he could say without lying. “We’ve never slept together—”

Mac hesitated, looked at Justus. “Is—But everyone knows—”

“Everyone knows what they *think* they know. I asked her for a favor a few weeks ago, and then my sister...” He sighed. “Emily and Sonny were in the tabloids—it got complicated. We talked a few times about that. And then Elizabeth noticed that Skye was being followed by Manny.”

“Skye,” Mac repeated.

“She told Lucky who said the PCPD couldn’t do anything. And she was worried. So...” Jason rubbed the back of his neck. “She asked me to look out for Skye. Elizabeth cares about other people. She didn’t want Skye to get hurt. Eventually, I told Alcazar, and Skye went to Miami. That’s it. *That’s* what Manny thinks he saw.”

“Lucky seemed pretty convinced,” Mac said, but he was hesitating. “Why do you think he’d believe—”

“You’ll have to ask him that. Manny called me tonight because I’m on Elizabeth’s speed dial. She put me on there last night when Manny went missing. I was worried. I put guards on her because I wanted her to be safe. We’re *friends*,” Jason stressed.

“And the PCPD wouldn’t have had any reason to suspect Manny at that time,” Justus reminded Mac. “You couldn’t have spared the resources. As to the reason Detective Spencer was kidnapped, you might want to wait for Elizabeth’s statement as she was in the room—”

“Oh, Elizabeth isn’t giving any more damn statements,” Emily said as she stood in the open doorway of the conference room. “And *you* keep your asshole cops away from her from now on.”

“Emily—” Mac said, getting to his feet. “What are you—”

“My best friend has been terrorized and traumatized enough by *one* psycho. The next time the PCPD wants to talk to her, they can ask Justus. Or any other lawyer I find for her. Because this—”

“Emily, what happened?” Jason asked, worried. “Is Elizabeth okay?”

“Oh you mean, is she *okay* after Jesse accused her of having an affair and told her this was her fault—if she’d stayed away from my brother, she might not have been kidnapped? Blaming everything on her?”

Mac muttered under his breath as Justus scowled, and Jason’s jaw clenched. “You know, it’s *one* thing for you to come after Jason with a bullshit charge,” Justus began as he clipped his briefcase closed. “But a terrorized victim barely an hour after she escaped a man who kidnapped her and threatened to rape and torture her? That’s *low*. Even for the PCPD—”

“That was not what was—” Mac closed his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said finally. “He shouldn’t have asked it that way—”

“What does *that* mean?” Emily demanded, incensed beyond practicality now.

“Look, I like Elizabeth. I always have. But let’s not pretend that she doesn’t share at least a portion of the blame here—”

Jason growled and took a step forward. Justus shoved him back. “Don’t make this worse, Jason,” he hissed.

“Worse?” Jason repeated. “How can I make this worse? Are you *listening* to this? No one gives a *damn* about what happened to Elizabeth—”

“I can’t even find out what happened to her,” Mac said, throwing up his hands.

“All you had to do was ask her,” Justus said. “But don’t worry. You can ask her when hell freezes over. My clients are finished speaking with you. You want to talk to them again, you bring an arrest warrant.” He glared at the commissioner. “You have daughters. Would you want them treated this way? Would you want Robin to be treated this way?”

Mac exhaled slowly. “I’ll talk to my men,” he said after a long moment. He looked at

Emily. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not the one you should apologize to.” She stepped aside. “Get out of this hospital, or I’ll have my father escort you out the way he did Jesse.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Mac told Justus, then left.

Emily collapsed into a chair, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Why are they doing this? They’re supposed to be the good guys!”

Jason just shook his head. “I’m sorry, Emily—”

“And Elizabeth—God, she was *expecting* it. She *knew* it was coming, but it didn’t make it any less—” Emily scrubbed her hands over her face. “I never thought I’d say this, but I miss Taggert.”

Justus snorted. “Taggert hated Jason—”

“But he didn’t hate Elizabeth,” Jason said quietly. “He never would have treated her this way. And he would have kicked anyone else’s ass who tried it.” He scrubbed his hands over his face. He’d tried to be open, tried to avoid it, but this was a disaster spiraling out of control.

“Jason, you need to stay away from Elizabeth until this blows over,” Justus told him. “Let me handle any communication—”

Jason scowled, letting his hands fall back to his sides. “That’s not fair—”

“It’s what *she* needs right now,” Emily told him. “She’s exhausted. And she just wants this to be over. We *need* to make it over. Whatever it takes.”

“I’ll make some phone calls, but you should brace yourself for the morning papers.” Justus offered Emily a grim smile. “Because what’s about to happen will be much worse than your little scandal.”

General Hospital: Elizabeth’s Room

Elizabeth blinked, blearily, trying to adjust her vision to the darkened hospital room. As she turned her head, the events of the last day came back to her—from her mad dash to her grandmother’s, to taking photos of her injuries...

To the kidnapping. To the aftermath.

To the questioning.

“Elizabeth?”

She blinked again as a light switched on near her bed. “Patrick—” she licked her dry lips. “What are you doing here?”

“We’re taking shifts,” Patrick said as he stifled a yawn. “Emily didn’t want you left alone in case the PCPD came back. Justus left his card. Don’t talk to them without him. They’ve got some bullshit story about Jason going after Lucky and using Manny—” He shook his head. “Never mind. We can talk about that tomorrow—”

“What—” Elizabeth winced as she tried to sit back. Patrick reached for the bed remote and gently raised the bed. “That’s crazy. Manny kidnapped Lucky because of me. Because he thought Lucky had...” She trailed off. Looked at Patrick, then swallowed. “Because he thought Lucky left the bruise on my face.”

“But you didn’t tell them that,” Patrick said after a long moment.

“I didn’t think they’d believe me, and after all of this...” She closed her eyes. “I know they wouldn’t. They blame me.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think it’s going to get better once they find out...” Patrick hesitated. “Whatever Manny did to Lucky’s back—”

“He stomped on him. Repeatedly. Ground his heel into his spine.” Her stomach rolled just at the memory of it. “Oh, God, if you’re here, then his surgery is done.”

“It is. Lucky has an incomplete injury of the lumbar—” He sighed. “The technical stuff doesn’t matter. Basically, Manny aggravated the injury from the car accident—the same discs that were originally injured in November. I’m sorry. It’s bad.”

“Is he...paralyzed?”

“No. He’ll need another surgery, and he’ll be able to walk okay. But there’s no way I’ll ever be able to clear him for active duty again. He’s finished as a cop, Elizabeth.”

“Oh.” She leaned back and looked at the shadows on the ceiling. “Does he know?”

“No. He’s still out from the surgery. Elizabeth, this isn’t your fault—”

“Yes, it is,” she insisted. “I shouldn’t have made Lucky so angry. He asked me to stay from Jason, and I didn’t—I thought I had a good reason—”

“You *did*. Manny was stalking people, and a danger to everyone—” Patrick leaned forward. “And that’s bullshit that you made him angry. Lucky took a swing at me at one of our appointments. He’s an angry, violent man.” He pressed his lips together and shook his head. “You are *not* responsible for what he does—”

“Yes, I am. If I just—” She turned her face away. “If I could just love him better, if I were a better wife—”

“Elizabeth.” Patrick sighed, dipped his head. “I am so not equipped for this bullshit,” he muttered to himself. “Look at me.”

She turned back to him, her eyes damp with tears. “It’s *my* fault.”

“Because you made Lucky angry,” Patrick said. When she nodded, he shook his head. “No. A man doesn’t hit a woman. Full stop. End of story. I don’t care if he walked into the apartment and found you in the middle of a gang bang with the Five Families, he doesn’t get to put his hands on you.”

His scowl deepened. “I don’t care *what* bullshit excuse he gives you. I don’t care how much pain he’s in or how he’s managing it. You don’t take it out on the person you promised to love. End of story,” he repeated.

“I—” Elizabeth bit her lip. “I know you’re right. You are right,” she repeated. “I think —” She sighed. “I feel guilty.”

“Why?”

“Because I did...I didn’t sleep with Jason. We’re not—that’s not what happened.” She met his eyes. “But it still felt wrong. I think...I don’t know. I *feel* like I cheated on Lucky. Jason and I—we just talked about—about before. When we were together. And it just—we never told—”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “I never knew he loved me then. And it shouldn’t matter. But it does. And I hate myself. *I* blame myself.”

“Why is it always me?” he asked the ceiling. Patrick rubbed the side of his face.

“Promise me you’ll get some rest tonight. I’ll give you something to sleep, okay? Just—this is all really fresh for you. And it’s going to get worse before it gets better. But you just—I don’t care what the hell is going on with you and Jason, Lucky Spencer does not get to use that as an excuse to hurt you.”

Elizabeth released a shaky sigh. “No, I know that. I just...I can’t explain it.”

“Then don’t. We’ll talk tomorrow. Everything can wait that long. And I’ll find you someone who does not suck at this.” Patrick leaned over to do something with her IV.

“You’re not so terrible,” she murmured even as the world fell away again.

Chapter Seventeen

*When the world is falling down
And another breaks then another falls
For losers always make the winner's day
Stand climb and fall
Carry the weight
Can't carry it all
- Stanley Climbfall, Lifehouse*

Saturday, April 8, 2006

Kelly's: Dining Room

From the moment Sam had stepped into the diner, people had been looking at her whispering. She'd arrived in Port Charles around five that morning and gone straight to the Towers to sleep. She hadn't thought much of Jason not being home—he'd probably had something to do at the warehouse.

Then she'd come here for coffee—and people just would *not* stop whispering about her.

With a scowl, Sam stepped up to the counter. She leaned in towards Maxie Jones, who didn't look all that happy about her morning shift. "What the hell is going on?" she demanded. "Do I have something on my face?"

"Oh." Maxie shrugged. "They probably saw the papers. It's worse than Sonny and Emily. I mean...I'm sorry for *you*, but it's just the kind of stuff this town eats up—"

Sam stopped her before Maxie could walk away. "What do you mean they saw the papers? I've been out of town since Tuesday—"

Maxie's eyes widened. In an instant, her boredom vanished, and her eyes lit up. "Wait. So you don't *know*? Oh my God, I get to *tell* you! This is, like, what I was born for. Wait right here—"

She dashed into the back kitchen as Sam continued to seethe. If the news about her mother had gotten out, she'd be so goddamn *pissed*—

Maxie shoved the *Port Charles Sun* at her. “It’s the full cover—”

Sam stared down at the front page, trying to understand what she was looking at. A photograph of Lucky and Elizabeth from their wedding next to one of Jason’s many mug shots — COP’S WIFE & GANGSTER IN SHOCKING AFFAIR with REVEALED DURING ATTEMPTED MURDER PLOT GONE WRONG in smaller letters.

“What. Is. This?” Sam demanded in a low, angry voice. “What the *hell* is this?”

“Manny kidnapped Lucky yesterday.” She blinked, a bit taken aback at Sam’s hostile reaction. “He kidnapped Liz later, but the papers are saying that Jason was trying to get rid of Lucky because Liz wouldn’t leave her husband for him, so he used Manny. Only Manny went rogue—”

Sam exhaled slowly. That was insane. And ridiculous. The pressure on her chest began to ease. “Oh. Well, that’s stupid—”

“Probably,” Maxie agreed. She studied the headlines. “But *everyone* heard Lucky accuse Liz to her face, and Jason *was* the one that rescued her. I overheard Mac telling my mom about it—when the police got there, Lucky was gravely injured in a room, Manny was dead, and Liz and Jason were, like, *totally* making out on the docks —”

“They were—” Sam held up a hand. “I’m sorry. I need you to explain.”

“Hugging, fine. Whatever.” Maxie sighed. “I’m sorry. I really shouldn’t be so mean, right? I mean, you guys were totally engaged—”

“We’re *still* engaged,” Sam retorted. She shook her head. “This...this is all just a misunderstanding.”

“I don’t know. I mean, I know Jason didn’t try to have Lucky killed, but this affair stuff can’t be totally wrong, right? I mean, why else would Manny call *Jason*?”

“Manny called—” Sam ran her hands through her hair. “Maxie, I need you to stop enjoying this so damn much and tell me what *happened*.”

“Jesse told me that Manny kidnapped Lucky first, then grabbed Liz. Then he called Jason. And if Liz was really so scared and terrified and traumatized or whatever, why would Lucky accuse her of having an affair? I mean, he’d *know*, right? Maybe Lucky caught Jason and Liz together—”

“Maxie, you just—”

“And then Jason drove Liz to the hospital and, like, refused to leave her alone until Mac had to question him. Plus, Liz is totally refusing to talk to the cops without a lawyer. And she hired Justus. Who is Jason’s lawyer.” Maxie shook her head sadly. “I’m sorry, Sam, but I mean, everyone knows they’re like obsessed with each other.” She leaned in and whispered, “It’s not even the *first* time Liz has screwed Lucky over for Jason. Some people just never learn.”

“Okay. I’m going to go.” Sam slid off the stool. “You’re just—you’re *wrong*. Jason and I are engaged. Liz is married. It looks like she’s married an asshole, but none of that other stuff is true.”

“Maybe not the way the papers have written it,” Maxie told her, “but where there’s smoke, there’s fire. It can’t *all* be rumors.”

“Yeah, it can. So, *stop* enjoying this so damn much.” Sam stormed out of the diner, letting the diner door slam shut behind her.

General Hospital: Elizabeth’s Room

When Elizabeth woke the next morning, she saw her grandmother sitting next to her, grimacing at a copy of the *Sun*. Elizabeth saw her picture on the front page and sighed. “How bad is it?” she murmured.

Audrey looked up and managed a grim smile. “Hello, darling. How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been hit by a truck.” Elizabeth sighed because her grandmother hadn’t answered the question. That wasn’t a good sign. “When did you get here?”

“About an hour ago. Steven nearly came with me, but I told him to stay. That we’d call him if we needed him.” Audrey closed the *Sun* and leaned over to kiss Elizabeth’s forehead. “I checked in on Lucky before I came in.” She paused. “If you care.”

“Of course—” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “It’s not true, Gram.”

“Oh, well, *this* particular story, maybe not. But the fact of the matter is that you wouldn’t be in this bed if you’d stayed away from Jason Morgan.”

“No, I’d still be with Manny Ruiz, being raped and tortured,” Elizabeth snapped.

Audrey scowled.

“I don’t understand how you got tangled up with Jason again. Haven’t we talked about this at length? Look at you. Your husband’s career is over thanks to this, your son spent the night with Carly Corinthos, and you’re in this bed, bruised from head to toe. Was it worth it?”

“You know,” Elizabeth said softly, “it wasn’t fun when the police accused me of being a whore, but this is even *less* amusing.”

“Elizabeth—”

“I’ve learned something very valuable from all of this,” she continued. “That literally everyone thinks I’m a garbage person.”

“No one thinks that—” Audrey took a deep breath. “I’m sorry—”

“You are always are.” Elizabeth turned her face away. “For what it’s worth, this had nothing to do with Jason. Manny was obsessed with *me*. He tried to kill Lucky because of *me*. And I am here alive because *Jason* killed him.”

“Elizabeth, there is no reason for Manny Ruiz to have targeted you—”

“Gram, can you just...” Elizabeth shook her head. “Can you go to Carly’s house and get Cameron? Take him back to your place. I don’t want to argue with you anymore. Nothing I say matters anyway.”

Audrey hesitated. “Elizabeth—”

“Please.”

“All right. I’ll go get Cameron.” Audrey got to her feet, with another shake of her head. “I’m only trying to protect you. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know that, Gram.”

“I just...I love you.”

“I know.”

Elizabeth kept her eyes closed until Audrey had left, then opened them and reached

for the paper she'd left behind. The headline was about as terrible as she'd thought it'd be. She thumbed through to skim the article.

Naturally, the paper had decided to go through all of their old gossip columns and brought up the stupid Christmas party from a lifetime ago, and her kidnapping from four years earlier—and someone had told the *Sun*'s reporters that Jason Morgan had had guards in the hospital protecting his mistress for weeks—

“Great.” Elizabeth flung the paper across the room and grimaced. Now the entire town thought she was a cheating bitch. There was little mention of the fact that she'd been chased down, thrown against a car, and abducted by a psychopath.

Lucky hadn't cared. The police hadn't cared. Neither had her own grandmother.

Manny being gone was supposed to solve her problems—instead, his death had just made everything so much worse.

Morgan Penthouse: Master Bedroom

Jason stepped out of the bathroom, towel drying his hair. He went to his dresser to drag out some clothes so that he could get to the warehouse and start doing damage control.

He'd spent the night at the there, working off his frustration by loading and unloading coffee shipments. When he'd finally returned home, he'd seen Sam's luggage at the bottom of the stairs and winced. He was *not* looking forward to whatever conversation his fiancée wanted to have. Not after she saw the papers.

Which was, of course, a whole other problem he wasn't interested in dealing with. He was doing a lot of avoiding these days.

He heard the door slam shut downstairs and footsteps on the stairs. Jason pulled on his jeans and was just tugging on his shirt when Sam shoved open the door.

“What was the *one* thing I asked you for when I left?” Sam demanded. She shoved the *Sun* at him, as well as the more sedate *Herald*.

“Sam—”

“I *asked* you not to make me a laughingstock. To humiliate me in front of everyone. Do you know what happened when I went to Kelly's for coffee?”

Jason sighed as he reached for the *Herald*. He hadn't seen *their* headline yet — COP INJURED IN BOTCHED KIDNAPPING; RUIZ SHOT DEAD. He shook his head. Like the PCPD, everyone seemed to forget that it had been *Elizabeth* who'd been the target.

"I'm sorry about the gossip," Jason told her. When Sam snorted, he scowled. "I didn't plan it. Manny grabbed Elizabeth, and while we were looking for her, he called me from her phone. By the time I got to the warehouse, she had managed to get away from him long enough that I could take a shot."

Sam hesitated. "You...then what the hell does *Lucky* have to do with this? And what about Mac Scorpio seeing the two of you on the docks?" But some of the flush had left her cheeks.

"I'm not sure. Elizabeth wasn't in any condition to get into it last night, but it looks like Manny was stalking her. She had a fight with Lucky and went to her grandmother's. We thought maybe Lucky was grabbed because of that."

"Because Manny was obsessed with her?" Sam bit her lip. "How come the papers don't say that? Why is it all about *you*?"

"Because when Lucky was being loaded into the ambulance, he made a big scene and called Elizabeth—" Jason swallowed hard. "Some names I'm not gonna repeat. The cops didn't even bother to talk to her. They didn't even examine her. I had to drive her to the hospital."

Sam pursed her lips and looked down at the papers now on the floor. "No," she said finally. "I don't buy it." She met his eyes. "What happened between you two while I was gone? I told you to figure out what you were feeling. Do you think that I'm the only one who knew? That Lucky didn't know what was going on?"

"Nothing was going on," Jason snapped, then immediately regretted it. Because that was a lie. "Damn it, Sam—"

"Are you gonna tell me you didn't have another one of your *conversations* with her while I was gone? That you weren't alone with her?"

Jason hesitated. "I was, Sam, but—"

"And that *Lucky* didn't know it?"

He remembered going to her place on Wednesday night, Lucky walking in on them.
“I—yeah, but—”

“But *nothing*. Lucky saw something was going on, *I* saw it. And now the whole fucking *world* knows it. And then he gets kidnapped—” Sam pressed her lips together. “He blames her, doesn’t he? Manny never would have gone near her if it wasn’t for whatever the hell is going on here with you.”

“I don’t know that. He might have—he took the job at the hospital to be closer to her
—”

“How the hell would—” Sam bit off her protest, then took another deep breath.
“Jason, I get it. She was in trouble. You had to help her. I’m not—it’s not that—it’s—”
She picked up the Sun. “The whole world is talking about it. They’re pointing at me. Laughing, snickering behind my back.”

“Sam...” Jason rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m sorry.”

“Do you love her?” Sam asked softly.

Jason blinked at the change in topic. “What?”

“You heard me.” Sam met his eyes. “Do you love her?”

Jason looked away, out the window, towards the hospital. Sam followed his gaze and scowled. He didn’t know how to answer that question. He didn’t know if the answer yes. He just...

He knew it wasn’t *no*.

“I don’t know,” Jason finally said. “I’m sorry.”

“Does she love you?” Sam pressed.

“I don’t—I don’t know the answer to that.” When Sam didn’t say anything else, he sighed. “Sam, I’m sorry—”

“Why? You were honest with me. And now...” She set the paper on his dresser and looked at him again. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No,” Jason said. But he waited a moment too long, and even he could hear the

uncertainty in his tone. Sam sighed. “No, “ he repeated, careful to be more firm this time. “I—I asked you to marry me. I meant that—”

“Then you need to stay away from her,” Sam told him. “Manny’s dead. It’s over. You need to delete her number. Forget her name. You need to put her in your past. Because there’s no point in us doing this if you can’t do that.”

He knew she was right. He opened his mouth to agree but then closed it and just looked at her. “It’s not over,” he finally said. “The cops are still trying to pin Manny’s murder on me—”

She just sighed again and shook her head. “I think that I’ve been understanding,” Sam said, “to the point of *insanity*. But you’re standing here telling me with one breath that you might be in love with another woman but that you still want to marry me—what am I supposed to think?”

“I—”

“Are the papers lying? Was there actually an affair?” Sam demanded, the flush in her cheeks rising again. “Why can’t you just stop this? How do you think this makes me feel?”

“We weren’t having an affair,” Jason said, but the words felt automatic. Robotic. And not entirely true. He didn’t know how to explain any of it to himself, much less to her. Should he tell her about the kiss he and Elizabeth had shared in her apartment? Would that make it worse?

And it was obvious Sam didn’t believe him any more than he believed himself. “I wish...God, I *wish* I believed you.”

She turned and left.

General Hospital: Elizabeth’s Room

“I’m surprised there’s no guard on your door.”

Elizabeth had moved from the bed to the loveseat underneath one of the windows. She looked over to find Mac Scorpio in the doorway. She turned her attention back to the window. “I don’t need a guard anymore. Manny’s dead.”

“Uh-huh. Did you want me to call your lawyer?” Mac asked. “Emily told me you wanted Justus present.”

Elizabeth knew that she should send Mac away and call for Justus, but she was tired. And she just wanted it *over*. “Are you planning to call me a whore?”

Mac flinched, then shook his head. “No. I’m sorry if Jesse offended you. I’ll remind him that we don’t make the judgments. We just investigate and take the evidence where it leads us.” Mac approached her, stopping at the foot of the bed. “How are you feeling today?”

“Tired. Sore.”

“You haven’t been to see Lucky yet,” Mac said. “I looked at his visitor’s list.”

How could she go near the man that had started this roller coaster? If she’d gone to the PCPD the first time he’d pushed her, would they have believed her? Lucky had shoved her, screamed at her during her own kidnapping, then proclaimed her a whore when they were rescued—

And of course, no one thought Elizabeth *might* have a good reason for being cold to her husband. *She* was clearly in the wrong.

“No, I haven’t. I saw the papers. I don’t really want to see anyone.”

“Yeah, they did take some liberties,” Mac admitted. “I’m sure it’ll calm down. Lucky’s not awake yet, so I guess he doesn’t know he won’t be back on active duty.” He tipped his head. “How do you think he’ll take that?”

“Badly.” She looked at Mac. “Do you blame me, too?”

“Blame is a strong word,” Mac said. “I think you’ve been through a lot, and I’m sorry for it. I wish we could have done more to keep Manny off the streets.” He paused. “I also think that maybe if you chose your friends better, this might have been avoided.”

Elizabeth looked at him, saw the kind, well-meaning man that she’d known for years, who had always tried his best.

She looked at him and saw the face of everyone who would make this her fault. “And if I hadn’t walked through the park one night, I wouldn’t have been raped.”

Mac shook his head. “It’s not the same thing—”

“I wasn’t supposed to be in the park. I lied to my grandmother. I always did that, you know. And I lied to everyone. I sat in the park, and I wore a short dress. That’s what Tom Baker told me when he confessed to me—that he couldn’t help it. So it was my fault then, too.”

“No.” Mac sighed. “That’s not—”

“Is that what you’d tell *your* daughters? Didn’t Georgie get kidnapped by Diego Alcazar last fall?” Elizabeth looked back out the window. “Did you tell her it was her fault for being too nice? For being kind to the wrong people?”

“Elizabeth—”

“Manny kidnapped me last fall because he needed a nurse to take care of him. Women are known to disappear around him. He took a job at the hospital before the quarantine. He followed me around. And all of that happened before Jason and I ever spoke. Jason and I hadn’t been friends for more than two years—had barely even been in the same room for almost a year. Manny targeted me because he’s sick and likes to play games—”

“All of that might have been true,” Mac said. “But he only kidnapped you *after* he found out you were...friends with Jason Morgan.”

Tears burned at the back of her eyes, but she refused to let this man see her cry. To see how it broke her to know she wasn’t going to be believed. No matter how rational she was. How calm.

“Okay. Well, let me make this clear for you. Manny kidnapped me. He kidnapped Lucky and told me it was because he saw me fighting with Lucky and thought it would make me happy. He called Jason because he thought Jason might be tricked into killing Lucky for him. I think. I don’t know. That part of his plan was never clear —”

“Elizabeth—”

“He threatened me with a knife, hit me with a rock, ground his heel into Lucky’s spine, and when I managed to get free of him for a minute, Jason shot him to protect me and to save Lucky’s life. That’s it. That’s your statement. I’m not saying another word without a lawyer.”

“I figured we’d get to that sooner or later. Are you planning to use Jason’s lawyer?”

“No, I’m planning to ask *Emily*’s cousin to represent me. It’s not my fault they’re the same person.” Elizabeth met Mac’s eyes. “I didn’t deserve any of this—”

“I never said you did—”

“And I don’t deserve to be treated this way. You can go. Don’t come back. If you question me again without Justus present, I’ll file a harassment suit. *No* one gave a damn about me back at that warehouse. You decided it was my fault that a fellow cop had been hurt, and I’ve been treated like garbage ever since.”

She got to her feet. “It wasn’t my fault that Tom Baker raped me. And it wasn’t my fault that Manny Ruiz kidnapped me.”

“No one is saying what happened to you as a kid was your fault, Elizabeth. But you’re an adult now. You should take responsibility for your actions. You decided to get involved with a man like Jason Morgan. And now Lucky is paying for it—”

“Get out.”

Mac shook his head, but then he left. Elizabeth slowly sat back down as the pressure built in her chest and her shoulders started to shake. She’d managed to keep it together until the commissioner had left, but oh, God, he was right, wasn’t he? Maybe Manny wouldn’t have gone after her if he didn’t think it would get Jason’s attention—*was* this somehow her fault?

Could she have prevented this? And how was she supposed to live in this town now? If she left Lucky—how could she ever show her face? No one would understand, and she knew now that *no one* would believe her about the abuse.

Lucky was the heroic cop who’d been grievously injured, and she was the whore who had ruined his career.

And no one would ever be convinced otherwise.

General Hospital: Fourth Floor Stairwell

Jason took a deep breath and approached Epiphany, who was waiting at the door like a guard—her arm braced against it so that it could not be opened until she moved.

“Thanks for doing this,” he told her. “I figured it’d be easier to see her this way—”

“Have you seen the papers?” Epiphany demanded. “The filth they’re writing?”

Jason sighed, nodded. “Yeah, I saw them. Did she—”

“She did. Her grandmother was kind enough to leave them for her.” Epiphany raised her brows. “So that Elizabeth could consider the *consequences* of her actions with all the pertinent information.” She said the last part of it in a tone that indicated she was directly quoting Audrey Hardy.

Jason flinched and looked away. Audrey had never been his biggest fan. “Is she okay?”

“Well, I don’t know, because, after that visit, Mac Scorpio showed up, and she decided to give him a statement without a lawyer.” She pursed her lips. “She ended up throwing him out of her room, so I don’t think she’ll be making that mistake again.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Epiphany—”

“So, the only way you’re getting through this door is if you tell me what you got to say to her is important enough that you need to bother her.” Epiphany lifted her chin. “Because her husband is two flights up in ICU. He’s an asshole, but he’s a man. And you know what happens when a man starts screaming about how terrible a woman is?”

“Epiphany—”

“Everyone believes him. It doesn’t matter how hard Elizabeth works in this hospital, how long she’s lived in this town. No one cares how many people she’s helped or how many lives she saved during the quarantine—none of that matters. Because he’s a cop. So her word means nothing.”

He dipped his head, exhaled slowly. “Okay—” Jason shook his head. “Okay, I’ll go. I don’t want to make it worse.”

Epiphany sighed. “Wait—”

“You’re right. It’s not worth the risk. She’s been through enough.” He hesitated. “And I’m being selfish. I just—I haven’t seen her. I don’t know if she’s okay. Is she?”

“No.” But she lowered her arm and stepped back. “But it might do her some good to

see someone who doesn't believe the worst." She huffed. "Don't get caught."

General Hospital: Elizabeth's Room

Patrick had tried to talk Elizabeth into staying another night at the hospital, but she wanted to be alone. She wanted to get her son, go home to her apartment, and sort herself out.

And she knew she probably should be in the room when Lucky found he'd never be a cop again. Not the way he wanted to be. If she wasn't there—well, it would just give people one more reason to talk.

And Elizabeth just didn't want anyone to look at her anymore.

In an hour, Patrick had promised, he'd come back and sign her discharge papers. He'd even drive her home personally. She knew that no one would bother her with Patrick around—the surgeon was pretty good at the fuck off face.

"Elizabeth?"

She turned at the sound of Jason's voice. She knew she shouldn't feel happy to see him—that his being there was literally the *worst* thing right now, but she hadn't seen him since the night before, and she didn't really remember a lot from the emergency room.

At least he wasn't going to call her a whore or blame her for her own kidnapping.

Jason glanced down the hall, then closed the door behind him. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't be here."

"Probably not." Elizabeth sat back on the love seat. "Did anyone see you?"

"No, I called Epiphany, and she let me up the service stairs." He sat next to her, turned slightly toward to face her. "I...I'm sorry about the papers—"

"None of this is your fault, Jason. It's...." She sighed and looked down at her hands. "I don't know. It's the newspapers for not caring about the truth. It's mine. It's Lucky's ___"

"And it's mine," Jason pressed. She glanced up, met his eyes briefly, saw the worry. "You told me to stay away. And I didn't. I don't know what got into Lucky to make

him think—”

“Manny did.” Elizabeth’s voice trembled, and goosebumps made her skin feel cold. “Manny told him that we’d been meeting. A-And Lucky didn’t even—” She closed her eyes. “Anyway. You know, Lucky doesn’t need a reason. He hates you. He has for years.”

“Elizabeth—”

“I just—I wasn’t prepared for *everyone* else. I always knew no one would believe me—” She bit her lip, horrified to realize she’d very nearly told Jason the truth. It was one thing to tell Patrick who didn’t really know her or Lucky—that somehow seemed safe.

But if she told Jason, if she said it out loud to someone who knew them—

It would be true. It would *always* be her reality. And she couldn’t take that back.

“Elizabeth—”

“Emily told me that a few weeks ago—no one believed us back then. After the Christmas Party.” With a smile she didn’t really feel, Elizabeth sighed. “I don’t just mean the world, I mean—”

“Emily didn’t believe us.”

“Neither did Nikolas. And they *both* told Lucky. Apparently, he’s believed I was lying all these years.” She swiped at her eyes. “So, yeah, Lucky didn’t really need much more than a push—”

“Elizabeth—” Jason stretched his arm across the back of the sofa. “I wish I could make this go away.”

“Yeah, well, until we figure out time travel, that’s never going to happen.” She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, though. I—I forgot about Sam. And she wasn’t really happy with us either before all this. I never...” She pressed a hand to her chest. “I never told you that she saw us on the docks—”

“No, but she did.” Jason squinted. “How did *you* know?”

“She and I...” Elizabeth shrugged. “We talked. Don’t worry,” she continued when he sat up, looking alarmed. “It wasn’t—” She sighed. “It wasn’t angry. And I think we

walked away understanding each other. But Jason, I keep telling you—”

“That we can’t be friends—”

“You know we keep saying that word like...” She hesitated. “Like that’s what this *is*. Like, I’m saying we can’t hang out anymore. And that’s just...” Elizabeth turned slightly, angling her body towards him. And somehow found the courage to meet his eyes. “That’s not what we’re doing. And that’s not what we’ve *ever* done. Not since the morning I found you in the snow.”

“Yeah.” His voice was just above a rasp. “I know.”

“And maybe not even since that night at Jake’s. I used to think you were my safe place. Someone I could trust with...” She bit her lip. “Everything.”

“You can—”

“But that’s not something I should share with anyone who isn’t the man I married. And to be honest—” Her chest tightened as a tear slid down her cheek. “That’s not something you ever gave me.”

“What?” Jason blinked, pulled back slightly, looking stunned. “What—”

“You never opened your life to me. You always kept me at arm’s length—”

“That’s not—”

“So when I say that you and I need to stop this, I mean *I* need to stop this. I need to walk away and stop giving away pieces of myself to people who won’t take care of them—” She broke off, then shook her head. Because she should be saying to this to Lucky, not Jason.

Shaken, Jason just stared at her. “That’s not how it was—”

“I’m sorry—” Elizabeth sighed. “That’s not fair—I don’t—I didn’t mean—”

“Well, I see *some* people never learn.”

The cold, bitter voice snapped them both out of their bubble, and Jason and Elizabeth turned to find her grandmother glaring at them from the doorway.

“Mrs. Hardy.” Jason climbed to his feet and instinctively steadied Elizabeth’s elbow as she also stood. “I was just—”

“Making everything worse,” Audrey snapped. “Or do you *enjoy* the notoriety that comes with your job?” She let the hospital door swing shut behind her, her hands at her hips. “What in the world are you thinking, Elizabeth, to carry on with him *here*? Of *all* places—”

Elizabeth just closed her eyes, then looked at Jason. He looked irritated but said nothing waiting for her to handle it. “Thank you for checking on me, Jason. I’m doing fine, as you can see. So, you should go now.”

“Are you sure—”

“Yes. And when Cody wakes up, can you tell him how much I appreciate him? I’ll try to stop by—”

“Oh, sure, keep making it *worse*—” Audrey snarled.

“Cody nearly died trying to save my life,” Elizabeth snapped at her grandmother, her cheeks flushing. “Don’t you *dare* suggest I don’t owe my life to Cody and Jason. If it weren’t for them, I’d be somewhere being raped and tortured by a raging psychopath until he got tired of me and killed me. Or sold me. You know what that’s what he threatened to do, don’t you? Pretty women like me make a lot of money.”

“Elizabeth—” Audrey swallowed. Her face was ghastly white. “I didn’t realize—”

“No, you didn’t. Because you didn’t *ask*. Jason came to check on the guard who saved my life. And, yes, he wanted to make sure I was okay. Because thanks to the PCPD, I haven’t been able to thank him since I was admitted.”

“I’ll go,” Jason said when the room was quiet for a beat. “I’ll—” He looked at Elizabeth, then shook his head. “I’ll go.”

“You do that.” Audrey stepped aside to let Jason leave. “And *don’t* come back.”

When the door had shut, Audrey turned back to Elizabeth with that omnipresent disappointment in her eyes. “I cannot *believe* you. I cannot believe this is the girl I raised. What if Luke or Bobbie had come by? What if the cops had come back? How would it look to find the two of you cuddled up on a sofa while your husband was unconscious two floors away—”

And Elizabeth couldn't take it anymore. She reached for the pitcher of water on the table and threw it across the room, sending a stream of water in its wake. The plastic clattered to the floor, skidding with the momentum. "Just *stop*!"

Audrey's tirade broke off abruptly as her eyes widened. "Elizabeth!"

"Can't you just—stop—for one minute!" Elizabeth pressed her hands to her hair, digging her fingers into the scalp. "Just *stop*."

"I just—" Audrey hesitated. "I'm sorry. I just worry about you so much, Elizabeth. You're so impulsive, and it gets you into so much trouble. If you would just *think* before you did things, how much trouble could you have saved yourself over the years?"

"And you still—you don't *stop*. You don't take a breath. It's always how *I'm* doing it wrong. How can people tell me in one breath they love me and then just—" Her eyes ached from the tears, but they kept streaming. How did she have any tears left? "How can you tell me you love me and do this to me?"

"Elizabeth—"

"I was *kidnapped* last night. Manny Ruiz chased me down in the parking garage, grabbed me from behind, knocked me out—he nearly *killed* the man whose only job it was to keep me alive. Then he dragged me to a warehouse, threatened to rape me—and then my own husband—" Her throat closed. "My own husband, who promised to love me, to cherish me—how could he do this to me?"

Her knees buckled, and Elizabeth sank to the floor, the linoleum chilled beneath the sweat pants she wore. "How could he do this to me?" she gasped, her chest tight as she struggled to force out a full breath. "How can he tell me he loves me and *hurt* me?"

"I'm—Darling—"

"I can't do this anymore."

"Elizabeth, Lucky isn't the one that hurt you—that was *Manny*—because of Jason—"

"Audrey."

Elizabeth looked up at the new voice, frowning as she saw Bobbie gently taking Audrey's elbow and leading her out of the room. After a moment, Bobbie came back

and knelt down. She pulled Elizabeth to her feet.

“How are you, sweetheart?” Bobbie asked, smoothing Elizabeth’s hair out of her eyes, tucking it behind her ears before taking Elizabeth’s face in her hands. “What can I do?”

“I think...” Elizabeth just closed her eyes. Her face felt heavy and swollen from the barrage of tears. “There’s nothing. There’s nothing to do.”

“Okay.”

“I just—I can’t keep doing this. I can’t *keep* apologizing—”

“You have nothing to apologize for. I’ll talk to your grandmother.” Bobbie kissed her forehead. “I came to tell you that Patrick had an opening to take Lucky went back into surgery a little while ago. He wanted you to go on home. I came to take care of your discharge and drive you.”

Elizabeth felt her entire body shudder. “You don’t blame me?”

“Blame you?” Bobbie sighed. “I blame myself. I blame Lucky. I blame his father. The only person in this entire mess that I *don’t* blame is you.”

And that just made Elizabeth sob harder. So Bobbie just put her arms around Elizabeth and let her cry.

Chapter Nineteen

*All alone, I came into the world
All alone, I will someday die
Solid stone is just sand and water, baby
Sand and water, and a million years gone by*
- Sand and Water, Beth Neilsen Chapman

Saturday, April 8, 2006

Lucky & Elizabeth's Apartment: Living Room

It was just past midnight when a knock came at her door. Elizabeth, who hadn't been able to sleep after putting Cameron down for the night, went to the door and looked through the peephole. Then she pressed her forehead against the door for a long moment before unlocking it.

"Why?" she asked as Jason looked at her at the other side of the threshold. "What's left to say?"

"I—" He swallowed hard. "I don't know. I just didn't want to leave it that way."

She stepped back to let him in, feeling secure at least that her grandmother wouldn't be stopping by in the middle of the night, and that Lucky was still unconscious at General Hospital.

"This has to stop," she told Jason. "I *mean* it."

"I know. And it will. I just—I was worried when I left. And then I ran into Bobbie when I was checking on Cody—"

Elizabeth looked at him sharply as she switched on a lamp behind the sofa, casting the room into uneven shadows. "What did Bobbie say?"

"She wouldn't say anything, just that I shouldn't try to talk to you again until you'd left the hospital." Jason hesitated. "I'm sorry. I never should have gone there. I shouldn't be *here*—"

"But you were worried." Elizabeth bit her lip, folded her arms. "And that matters

more than what I need? What *I* want?" She laughed, the sound harsh and low. "Story of my life."

"No. You're right. This is me being selfish. And—" Jason just looked at her. "I wanted to tell you that you were right."

"About what?" Elizabeth asked, exhausted from it all. Wishing that she had just left the door locked.

"About what you said earlier. About not ever letting you in." He swallowed hard. "Except in the beginning. You were the only person I let get close. After losing Robin and Michael. But I didn't know how to do it again. Or maybe I just didn't want to."

"I'm sorry—" Elizabeth looked away. "I shouldn't have said that. I didn't even really mean it. I know that it's not true. I'm just—" She exhaled slowly. "Maybe we were closer back then. Before it got complicated. That last summer—" She hesitated, rubbed the side of her head. "I don't know. I think we just kept getting in our own way. Or maybe we missed our chance a long time ago."

Jason shook his head. "No—"

"No?" She arched her brows. "Then explain Brenda and Courtney to me, Jason. Explain Sam. You've been married, Jason. Twice. Even if Brenda didn't count, at least she got—" Her voice trembled. "She got more than I did. And you asked Sam to marry you. You never even *told* me you loved me. So why are you here right now? Why aren't you at home with her?"
"I—"

"If you're here because you feel guilty, then don't. Because I don't have room in my life right now to deal with any of this anymore. I just—" Her eyes felt swollen from all the crying she'd done, and she just wanted it to be over. "My entire life is destroyed. This *can't* matter anymore. So can you just—" She exhaled on a shaky breath. "What do you *want* from me?"

"I don't know," he admitted painfully. "I—I just—for *years*, I thought I knew why I'd lost you. I thought I'd accepted it. But I didn't have any idea how much I hurt you. And it kills me that you didn't know how I felt."

"How you *felt*. Past tense. It was four years ago, Jason."

"It's not—" He pressed his lips together. "Okay."

Elizabeth blinked, then tipped her head to the side as something *insane* began to whisper in the back of her head. She stepped towards him. “No. Finish what you were going to say. Because until you get this out of your head, you’re going to keep coming up with reasons to see me, and I would just rather we get this done—”

“It’s *not* past tense,” Jason bit out. “I know it is for you, but it’s not for me—”

She put her hands up in front of her as if to protect herself. “Wait. What? *What* are you saying?”

“You don’t need this now. This is just selfish,” he muttered as he turned to go.

“No, don’t you dare—” Elizabeth dashed around him and flattened herself against the door as he tried to reach for the doorknob. “You’re never selfish.” Elizabeth tried to look into his eyes, tried to read them, but the room was still too dark for that. “The entire time I’ve known you—you’ve *never* been selfish. So what’s going on?”

“Sam asked me today if I still loved you.”

Elizabeth drew in a sharp breath, her hands falling to her sides uselessly. “And what did you say to her?”

“I told her I didn’t know.” Jason scowled. “But that was a lie. I knew it when I said it.”

She swallowed hard. Her brain was buzzing as if it had exploded into a million pieces inside her skull. She couldn’t find a single thing to say in response to that.

“And then she asked me if—” Jason shook his head. “If you still loved me. I told her I didn’t know. I never asked you.”

Their eyes met again, and Elizabeth felt it down to the tips of her toes. This was *insane*. This was the absolute *last* conversation she should be having right now while the entire world was on fire outside.

This was the moment. This was the chance she’d never believed could come again. All she had to do was tell him yes. Because, of course, the answer was yes. It had *always* been yes.

But Elizabeth couldn’t force the words past her lips. Her eyes burned. “If you ask me, I’ll answer.”

“I know.” He reached up to cup her cheek, gently wiping away her tears. “But I can’t ask you. Not tonight. Because this isn’t fair to you.”

“I decide what’s fair to me,” she told him, putting her hand over his, leaning into his touch. Just for a moment. She just wanted to have this fantasy for a little while.

But reality set in as a police siren wailed somewhere outside of the apartment. She pulled her hand away, and Jason stepped back.

“I won’t come back,” Jason told her in a low, raspy voice. “Because I don’t think I trust either one of us if I did.”

“Me either.” Elizabeth stepped back, folding her arms again. “And we still made promises to other people.”

“But if you need me...” He pulled open the door, then turned to look at her, his face all but impossible to make out in the dark hall. “For anything...”

“I know where to call.” And even though she knew it was wrong, that it was a mistake, Elizabeth leaned up on her toes and pressed her lips to his. For just a moment.

Because a moment was all they were ever allowed. Their lips brushed, and she felt his hand gently on her shoulder, at first curling around as if it to draw her in closer... then gently pushing her away.

“I need to go.”

“I know.”

But they stood there another moment, in the shadows of her doorway, and Elizabeth just wanted desperately to be brave. To answer the question he’d left unasked. She closed her eyes as his lips touched her forehead.

“I’ll see you later,” he murmured against her hair.

“See you later,” she said softly as Jason finally pulled away and left.

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

When Jason walked through the door around two that morning, he went straight for the stairs. The light next to the sofa switched on just as he stepped onto the bottom

step. He spun around, surprised to find Sam on the sofa.

Waiting for him.

He blinked, then stepped towards her. “What—What are you doing up? I thought you’d gone to bed—”

“Yeah. I did. And then I heard your door close. So I decided to wait up. Your phone didn’t ring, and you don’t normally leave in the middle of the night unless it’s planned.” Sam unfolded her legs and got to her feet. She didn’t turn on any other lights—most of the room was still plunged in shadows.

He didn’t know what to say to her. Didn’t know how to stop any of this. He knew that what he’d done tonight—the conversations, the words he’d said to Elizabeth—the kiss they’d shared as he left—all of it was wrong.

They both knew it. And they knew it had to stop.

“Did you go to the warehouse?” Sam asked.

“No,” he answered. But he didn’t volunteer anything else. He didn’t want to hurt her. If she didn’t ask—maybe they could both push this conversation away—

And that thought—the idea that he was leaving it up to Sam to make this choice—it suddenly struck him as wrong, and he didn’t feel comfortable with it. He didn’t know how to navigate this situation—he was sure Emily would tell him this was like Carly and Robin, but it didn’t feel that way.

He’d always loved Robin more than Carly, had always preferred a future with Robin. But Carly had had Michael, and he’d been swept away by the idea of a family with her. To keep Michael, he thought he’d have to take on Carly. And he knew that he’d bungled things badly with Robin, that he’d hurt her by not being what she needed him to be. By pretending long past their expiration date that there was a future for them.

That wasn’t happening here. Was it?

“I went to Elizabeth’s.”

Sam closed her eyes, nodded. “Yeah. I figured.” She took a deep breath as if bracing herself for whatever came next. She opened her eyes and looked at him. “Are you

having an affair with her? Are you sleeping with her?"

Jason hesitated. He couldn't answer the first question. He thought anything he might say would be a lie. The answer wasn't yes, but it definitely wasn't no. "No, we're not sleeping together."

She waited, but he said nothing more. "Okay." Sam curled her fingers into a fist, pressed into her abdomen. "I asked you a question earlier. But I think you lied to me. Or maybe you're lying to yourself. I don't really don't care which. It has to stop. I don't deserve this."

"I know—"

"I haven't done anything wrong. I'm still the *same* woman I was when you asked me to marry you. Two months ago, I found out my entire life was a lie. And the only family that isn't you—it doesn't belong to me. I don't understand how you can just stop..." Sam shook her head. "How can you tell me you love me and hurt me like this?"

"I—" Jason swallowed hard. "I don't know. I don't know what's changed, Sam. I know it's not you—"

"Is it because I couldn't let go of what happened with Alexis? Or because I wanted to go back to my old work?" Sam stepped closer to him, her dark eyes wet with tears, darting back and forth, searching his expression. "Or is it what your sister said? About how we started? Because I know I said I coned you at the beginning, but it wasn't all about that."

"Sam—" He curled his fingers around her forearms, just below the elbow. "I know that ___"

"But you don't look at me the way you used to, and I don't know *why*. It can't just be Elizabeth. It *can't*. Because we were happy."

"I know we were—"

"If you just—" She sniffled, sucking in a choking sob. "If you just promise to stay away from her, I'll turn down the job with Paulie, okay? We can—we can go to the island. Or to Hawaii—"

Her fingers clung to his black T-shirt, and he dipped his forehead down to rest against hers. Part of him wanted to say yes. To do what he could to get back the life

she talked about. They *had* been happy. He had been satisfied with their life—and he didn't know if Elizabeth was planning to leave Lucky. Even after all Lucky had put her through. He'd done worse, and she'd stayed. Hadn't Jason learned his lesson a thousand times where they were concerned?

"Just *tell* me you don't love her. That you still love me. And we can just pretend this never happened."

Jason exhaled slowly, then gently lifted his head, pressing a kiss to her forehead as he did so. Then he took a step back. "I can't tell you any of that, Sam. I'm sorry. I don't want to lie to you. Or to myself. Not anymore."

Her shoulders jerked as if she'd been slapped, and she also took a step back. "So, what? After *everything* we've been through? You're leaving me? For Elizabeth Spencer?"

"No." Jason rubbed his chest. "That's not an option for me. I don't—" And oh, man, it hurt to admit, but — "I don't think that's ever going to happen."

"Fine." With a careful nod, Sam drew in a breath. "So, where does that leave us?"

"I don't know."

"I guess I have to decide if I want to keep sharing space in your head with another woman." She dragged her hands through her hair and heaved a heavy sigh. "I'm going to bed."

"Sam—" Jason caught her elbow as she walked past him. "This isn't what I want—"

"Yeah, well—" She turned slightly to face him, then arched his brow. "Tell me this, Jason. If Elizabeth showed up at your door tonight and asked you to run away with her, would you even hesitate?"

"I—Sam—" Jason shook his head.

"The truth. I can take it."

"I don't know," he admitted. "I..." He might take some time to think about it, but—

"Yeah. That's what I thought. I'm going to bed," Sam repeated. And this time, Jason didn't stop her.

Sunday, April 9, 2006

Brownstone: Kitchen

Bobbie poured coffee into her brother's mug and just sighed. "I'm not looking forward to seeing Lucky today," she admitted. "Elizabeth asked me not to be there when Patrick was going to tell him."

Luke frowned as he sipped his coffee, black. "She asked me to stay away, too. Why?"

"I think..." Bobbie sat on the stool at the island and sipped her own coffee. "I think she's afraid his reaction is going to be humiliating for her. I told her that she shouldn't go. She's only there because of what everyone is saying."

"Yeah." Luke looked away. "What happens to my boy when she leaves him, Barbara Jean? What's he gonna have to fight for when he loses his career *and* family all at once?"

"Luke." Bobbie set her coffee down with a thud of the porcelain against the granite counter. "Don't you *dare* ask that girl to stay—"

"I know they hit a rough patch—"

"A rough patch—" Bobbie scowled. "Lucas Lorenzo Spencer, is that you're going to call it? You and I both know he hit Elizabeth—"

"We don't know anything—"

"Don't we?" Bobbie asked, pointedly.

Luke dipped his head, looked away. "Barbara—"

"Why should Elizabeth stay with a man who has been verbally and physically abusive?" Bobbie challenged. "Because he needs her? That's what Mama used to say —"

"Now, don't start any of that—" Luke got off the stool and started to pace. "That's not fair. This isn't about us—"

"No, because you never wanted Mama to stay, and you're asking Elizabeth to do the

one thing we both know got our mother killed.” Bobbie scowled. “Why is it her job to save him, Luke? Why did we *ever* put that on her?”

“What? When? What are you talking about? All I’m saying is maybe asking her to give him a chance to turn it around—”

“And I’m asking you why the hell she should have to. Should I have waited for D.L. to turn it around?” Bobbie snapped. “Maybe he could have been a better man with a better wife, right?”

“You *know* that’s not the same thing. Barbara Jean! Lucky isn’t Pop, and he sure as hell isn’t the asshole who went after you. How can you even compare them?”

“Do you think I want to admit that this is what’s happened to him? That I wanted his marriage to Elizabeth to fall apart like this?” Bobbie’s lip trembled. “I *love* that boy, Luke. Like he was my own. When we lost him, it was like losing BJ all over again. And Elizabeth grieved. She broke apart. That’s what I saw yesterday when Audrey was berating her about Jason. Elizabeth has been betrayed by the man who promised to love her, and you think she should *stay*?”

Luke dipped his head. “No. I don’t think she should,” he admitted, the words forced out from small deep, dark, place inside. “I think maybe she should take her boy and run. But I can’t—I can’t put her first. Because *Lucky’s* my son. And I have to fight dirty if we’re gonna fix this—”

“You can ask Elizabeth to do whatever you want, but I won’t be apart of it.” Bobbie lifted her chin. “I called Nikolas. I tried to get him to come home. But he refused. He’s not ready. He’s still too much in pain, but Lulu agreed to come. Do you want *Lulu* to be alone with Lucky? Knowing that he put bruises on Elizabeth?”

Luke hesitated. “Barbara—” He just shook his head. “Elizabeth can’t be my priority. I’m sorry. I wish I were a better man—”

“So do I. Laura would be...” Bobbie pressed her lips together. “You know what? I’d like to think Laura would be on my side, but I already know what the two of you have done to Elizabeth. You’re still looking for the boy we lost in the fire, Luke. He’s dead. He’s never coming home.”

“I know that—”

“Then *stop* pretending this can be fixed—”

"I am never going to give up on my son, and there's no way I'm going to let his family walk away from him without at least trying to fight for them." Luke scowled at her. "You handle this your way, Barbara Jean. And I'll do it mine."

General Hospital: Hallway

Patrick stopped Elizabeth before she reached for the handle of Lucky's door. "I'm telling you. You probably shouldn't go in here."

Elizabeth sighed and nodded. "I *know* it's going to be terrible. I know that he's going to be angry. He's going to say terrible things." She folded her arms tightly, wishing she could disappear into herself. "But I need to do this."

"Why?" her friend demanded. "After *everything* he's put you through—"

"Don't—" Elizabeth looked around, put a hand on his arm. "Can we just—look, right now the PCPD thinks I'm a garbage whore and that this—" She gestured to the door. "*This* is my fault. And they believe that so much that Justus told me they're thinking of filing charges against Jason for murder."

"I—" Patrick pressed his lips together. "So, what, you're going to perform the part of the devoted wife to...get rid of suspicions?"

"If I stick to my story, if I can get past this and get Lucky to calm down, I might be able to get him to back down on the rest of it. I can explain everything to Lucky. I know I—" She chewed on her bottom lip. "I think I can convince him Jason and I weren't having an affair. *That's* why he's so mad—"

"That might be why he's mad. It's *not* why he's an abusive dick hole," Patrick muttered. "*Stop* blaming yourself—"

"I'm not—" She was, and she wasn't sure how to stop it. "I'm just—I'm just trying to find a way out of this mess that doesn't mean I have to keep listening to people point and stare. Whispering behind my back—" She grimaced. "It's—I don't like it."

"Ignore it—"

"I can't. It's like—" Elizabeth shook her head. "I...was raped when I was a teenager, and for months, I felt like everyone knew. Everyone was staring. I couldn't stand for anyone to even look at me. Make eye contact. It made my skin crawl—"

"Elizabeth." Patrick dragged a hand through his hair. "Shit. I'm sorry. Okay. Okay."

He squared his shoulders. “So, your plan is to do whatever you can to make the gossip stop.”

“It won’t ever stop,” Elizabeth admitted. “But if I can just...make it less obvious. If I can make it less interesting—if I don’t give them anything to talk about...they’ll move on. And then you and Robin will have a fight or Epiphany will slap the crap out of the orderly that keeps pinching the nurses—”

“Who?” Patrick demanded, distracted.

A smile touched her lips. “Never mind. She’s got a plan. I’m just—I just *need* to get through this right now. That means doing what people expect from a wife who doesn’t know what the hell her idiot husband is talking about.”

“Uh-huh.” Patrick shook his head. “Okay. It’s your life. I’m just here to keep him from throwing things.”

She shot him a dark look as he opened the door for her, but didn’t say anything else. They went inside the room where Lucky had woken up about an hour before and was finally fully conscious.

She hadn’t really been able to see the extent of Lucky’s injuries before, but his face was cut and bruised badly from whatever beating Manny had given him. Her stomach pitched — she never wanted him to be in the middle of any of this. No matter how she felt about what had happened between them.

“Lucky.” Patrick picked up his chart and looked over the notes. “How you feeling?”

“Like everything is on fire.” Lucky licked his dry lips, looked at Elizabeth with a bit of confusion. “Why are *you* here?” he demanded flatly.

“Lucky, I know things were confusing at the warehouse. And we’ll talk about all of it —” Elizabeth looked at Patrick, who just shrugged as if to say, *I told you so*. “It wasn’t true. None of it.”

“*Sure*,” Lucky snarled. “Jason’s number wasn’t in your phone, and you weren’t cuddling up to him five seconds after he shot a man—whatever helps you sleep at night.” He turned to Patrick. “When can I get out of here? When can I go back to work?”

Patrick looked at Elizabeth again, giving her another opportunity to leave, but Elizabeth just lifted her chin. She knew the only way to get through any of this was

to forge ahead with her plan to make it like nothing had changed.

“Lucky,” Patrick said after a long moment, “while you’ll be able to walk again with some therapy—”

“Walk again?” Lucky sputtered. He tried to sit up, crying out in pain. “What the *hell* —”

“You injured the spinal cord. I can get technical if you want, but I thought you might want the bottom line. You’re not going back on active duty.”

Patrick’s blunt words hung in the room like a thunder cloud as Lucky just stared at the surgeon, his eyes bulging, his face cherry red. “What does that mean?”

“It means unless you decide to go on desk duty permanently, you’re finished as a cop. No doctor will ever clear you to go back on the job,” Patrick told him. “I’m sorry. We did everything we could, but with the injury from February still not fully healed, the existing damage from November—”

“You did this,” Lucky hissed to Elizabeth, his fists clenched at his sides, the knuckles so white they nearly matched the sheets. “You fucking *whore*.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No—No, I never meant for any of this to happen—”

“No? You got yourself kidnapped by one of Jason’s enemies, Elizabeth. What the fuck did you think would happen?” Lucky demanded. “How long have you been fucking him? Did you ever even *stop*? Has it been all this time?”

“No, we never—”

“*Stop lying to me!*” Lucky screamed, his voice bouncing off the walls and surely carrying out to the hallway. “You’re *always* lying to me!”

“I—”

“Elizabeth, go,” Patrick muttered to her, obviously alarmed by the quick rise in fury in his patient. Elizabeth was suddenly convinced if Lucky could have stood—

“Why are you protecting her? What do you think I’ll do?” Lucky’s rage continued to boil over. “Do you think I’ll hurt her? She can’t be hurt. There’s *nothing* inside her. Nothing but lies! You’ve always been a liar!”

“I—” Her voice faltered. She’d known it would be bad—that it would hurt—but she realized now what a terrible decision this had been. This wasn’t worth it. Nothing was worth this. “I never—”

“What happened to you?” Lucky continued, his words slashing at her like knives. “To the girl who crawled out of the snow? Where did she go?”

“Out of the snow...” Bile rose in her throat. “You mean...after the rape...” *Oh, God.* “What are you—” Tears stung her eyes, and her hands slid to her sides as she tried to fight what his words meant. He couldn’t—no—

“That’s my Elizabeth. You’ve killed her. She’s gone. *Get out of here! Whore!*”

“Go,” Patrick ordered, but Elizabeth had already turned, fumbling with the latch on the door before fleeing.

“Whore,” Lucky muttered, laying back against his bed. “The nerve of that *bitch* coming in here—”

Patrick quietly hung Lucky’s chart on the bed again. “*You* can go to hell,” he told his patient. “They can suspend me. They can fire me. But I am *done*.”

Then he left, deciding he needed to hunt down Emily or Robin—a woman who would know how to convince Elizabeth to get out. Because he was pretty close to just locking her in a room until she came to her damn senses.

General Hospital: Nurse’s Station

Sam had just stepped off the elevator when Elizabeth came barreling down one of the hallways, almost slamming right into her.

“Whoa, are you okay?” Sam put out her hands to steady Elizabeth’s trembling shoulders. She winced at the bruises on Elizabeth’s face. Even though she wasn’t overly fond of the other woman, she could take a step back and understand that Elizabeth wasn’t even really the enemy.

“Sam—” Elizabeth’s face paled. “Oh, God. Why are you here? Why can’t this just stop —” She put her hands against her face, pressing them to her cheeks. “I just want it to *stop*.”

“What? What are you even running from?” Sam demanded. “And why shouldn’t I be here?”

“What?” Elizabeth blinked at her, trying to focus on her. “No, I just mean—” She sighed. “I’m sorry. I can’t seem to get my thoughts straight. I just—” She swallowed hard. “Lucky just found out he won’t be able to go back to active duty.”

“Uh-huh, that sucks.” Sam tipped her head. “And...I’m guessing he blames you. I’ve heard the gossip. I know he’s where most of it got started.”

“I just— I don’t understand how any of this—I was just minding my own business, and now I can’t get anyone to leave me alone—Why won’t they just *leave me alone*?” Elizabeth delivered the last part at the top of her lungs to a pair of nurses who were giggling behind the nurse’s desk.

Sam narrowed her eyes. “You can’t get anyone to leave you alone? What does that mean? Are you talking about Jason? Because I know—” She bit off her words, realizing she’d nearly confronted Elizabeth about the midnight visit in the middle of the hospital.

Because that wouldn’t make any of this go away.

“Oh, God, that’s why you’re here? He told you?” A startled flush was the only color on Elizabeth’s chalk-white face. “Why would he do that?”

Later, Sam would decide *this* was the moment she should have walked away. She could see Elizabeth was in distress, and she knew that the other woman had been terrorized by Manny. She could see the evidence of it on her face, in the bruises and cuts, in the brace on her wrist.

But she couldn’t. Because Jason kept everything close to his chest. Talked around the problem—absolutely *refused* to just tell her what was going on—

And Sam knew how to push someone’s buttons. If she wanted to know what Jason was telling Elizabeth—

Well, there was one way to find out.

“I guess because he feels guilty,” Sam said slowly. “You both do, don’t you? You should.”

With a low moan, Elizabeth started to walk away, to jab at the elevator buttons. Sam's stomach sank. She hadn't denied it. They felt guilty. It was just about the words. That's all.

Because it was one thing for them to talk about emotions—but if—if there was more—if there was more—

Sam didn't even know *why* it was worse, somehow. If Jason had put his hands on this woman and still come home to her—she didn't know how to deal with that. *She'd* always been the other woman.

Is this how those women had felt when Sam had slipped into their lives, stolen their husbands, convinced them to leave? This stinging sense of betrayal? Maybe she could accept she didn't own Jason's heart, but the least the bastard could do was keep his *body* to himself—

"It's—I can't do this. I can't do this right now—"

"Can't do *what*? I'm so sick of you and Jason pretending you're some epic romance," Sam hissed. "You're nothing. You *know* you're nothing. He came home to *me* last night—"

"I—" Elizabeth nodded. "I know. *I know*. I told him we had to stop. That we promised people things, and I don't break promises. I can't be that person. I'm not a liar—" her voice climbed unsteadily. "I don't care what anyone says. I can't be a *liar*—"

"Then stop *lying* to me," Sam snapped. "Stop lying to Lucky. Stop letting Jason lie to me. You two aren't just damn friends, are you? Something happened while I was gone —"

And the guilt in Elizabeth's face, the wince, the helpless flutter of her hands as she tried to stop crying—Sam's world stopped spinning. "I didn't—It's not like that. I won't let it be like that. I'm not that person. I don't want to *be* that person."

"What happened?" Sam pushed, and Elizabeth shook her head, obviously forgetting that Sam had said she already knew. "Damn it. You tell me you're not a liar. Well, stop lying to *me*!"

"It was just—" Her voice faltered. "Just a kiss. That's it. I never—it never would have—I'm sorry. I stopped it. And then he stopped it—"

"Twice? He kissed you twice?" Once, maybe, Sam could deal with that—but *twice*—

Christ. “What, three times, and you’ll just jump into bed? How the hell am I supposed to trust you? Trust him? How do I know you’re not lying to me now? What’s wrong with you? Why can’t you just *stay* away!”

Elizabeth sucked in a nasty sob that sounded like her entire body was curling up and dying. “I *tried*,” she managed.

“What the hell is going on here?” Epiphany demanded as she stalked over and put herself between the two women.

“Stay out of this,” Sam ordered. “This is between me and this lying bitch! You kept coming to him! I *saw* you! *You* called *him*!”

“Epiphany, get her out of here!” Patrick all but skidded to a stop as he slid between the two women. “Now! Elizabeth, go home!”

“I—” Elizabeth looked around, and now Sam did, too. As if just realizing that it wasn’t just the two nurses from earlier. Several people were staring at them. Almost a dozen had stopped. “I did stay away,” she managed faintly. “It didn’t work.”

And Sam knew then. *Knew* that Elizabeth was telling the truth. That, at some point, it hadn’t been Elizabeth doing the seeking. After all, hadn’t *Jason* made the midnight visit? Her face felt hot and itchy as she really saw Elizabeth for the first time, the fragility in the other woman’s posture, the bloodshot eyes, the trembling body—

Elizabeth had been on the edge of a breakdown, and Sam had just shoved her right over. She stepped back. “I’m sorry,” she said faintly. “I didn’t mean—”

“Let’s go,” Epiphany said as she put an arm around Elizabeth’s shoulders and hustled her away. “Don’t come near her again.”

Feeling sick, Sam nodded as Epiphany took the devastated woman away. She looked at Patrick, who looked as if he might cheerfully murder her. “I shouldn’t have—”

“She’s not your friend. Or your sister. She owes you nothing. Get out,” Patrick said flatly. “Before I have security remove you.”

Numb, Sam nodded and pressed the elevator button. Mercifully, this time, the doors opened, and she stepped inside.

What the hell had she just done?

Chapter Twenty

*Don't you plead me your case, don't bother to explain
Don't even show me your face, cause it's a crying shame
Just go back to the rock from under which you came
Take the sorrow you gave and all the stakes you claim
And don't forget the blame*
- Sleep to Dream, Fiona Apple

Sunday, April 9, 2006

Corinthos & Morgan Warehouse: Loading Dock

“Uh, Jase?”

Wiping sweat from his brow, Jason heaved another bag of coffee from one pallet to another before turning to find his tech guy, Stan Johnson, with a worried look on his face. “Stan? What’s going on?”

“This is gonna sound weird, but my mom is in your office. She called me, trying to find you. She says she needs to talk to you.”

The only thing Jason and Epiphany Johnson had in common was Stan...and Elizabeth. Jason gestured for Stan to follow him as he weaved in and out of clusters of men switching between second and third shift, picking up pace as he neared the hallway of the offices.

Epiphany Johnson was standing in the middle of his office, a jacket pulled over a pair of scrubs. She lifted her brows. “You *need* to get your woman under control.”

“What?” Jason blinked and shook his head. “I don’t know what you mean—”

“Stan, this doesn’t concern you.” Epiphany pointed a finger at her son, who didn’t even bother to argue. He pulled the door shut as he left. “I told you. Elizabeth has been through more in the last forty-eight hours than some people deal with in a lifetime—”

“What happened? I just saw her last night—” Jason stepped towards Epiphany, furrowing his brow. “What happened?” he repeated.

“It was a mistake to let you anywhere near her yesterday. You keep away from her, and you tell your girlfriend to do the same. Elizabeth doesn’t owe *either* of you a *damn* thing—”

“What happened?” Jason cut in sharply, the slash in his voice rendering Epiphany speechless for a moment. “What is going on?”

“Elizabeth went to tell Lucky he’ll never be a cop again, and the little shit handled that about as well as you’d think.” Epiphany pursed her lips. “I don’t know what exactly he said to her, but she ran out of that room like the hounds of hell were chasing her—and then she ran into your fiancée.”

“Sam,” Jason said, dread creeping up his spine. “Why would she—”

“I just know that by the time Patrick and I got there, Elizabeth was crying, Sam was calling her a lying bitch, and the whole damn hospital was there.”

Jason closed his eyes, shook his head. He’d never—he’d never thought Sam would take this problem to Elizabeth but then again...he remembered now that Elizabeth told him the day on the docks, Sam had confronted her.

She hadn’t told him what Sam had said, but now...Jason worried. “Is she okay?”

“Patrick got a hold of Emily, who drove her home. I gave her the week off. And I got the board to agree to paid leave.” Epiphany smirked. “I suggested she’d be able to sue us for negligence since we hired the psycho.”

Then she narrowed her eyes, squinting at Jason like he was a bug on the sidewalk she’d like to stomp. “You keep yourself and that woman away from my nurse. She does not need your bullshit.”

“I know. I’ll deal with it.”

“Do that.”

And with that, Epiphany stalked out. Jason let his head fall back to look at the ceiling, frustrated with every single thing on the planet. He should have known after the conversation the night before that Sam wouldn’t let sleeping dogs lie.

He’d just thought she’d take it out on him.

“Uh, Jase...I just saw my mom walking out of her like she was about to do murder. Everything cool?”

“Yeah, yeah. Your mom—she’s just...she’s looking out for Elizabeth.”

“Yeah, she really likes her,” Stan offered. “You need anything from me? This Manny thing wrapped up yet?”

“I don’t know. The PCPD is probably still trying to figure out how to pin a murder charge on me, but I’m letting Justus worry about that.” Jason cleared his throat. “I gotta head out. I have some things to deal with.”

Lucky & Elizabeth’s Apartment: Living Room

Elizabeth rubbed her eyes and stepped back to let her father-in-law in. “Hey, Luke.”

“Hey, kid. Where’s the munchkin? He in his room?”

“No, Carly offered to watch him for me,” Elizabeth admitted. “She came to pick him up and take him to Thunder Island with Morgan.”

“Carly?” Luke frowned. “When did you two become friends?”

“Never.” Elizabeth closed the door and went back into Cameron’s room, where she was sorting his toys into boxes. “But Morgan and Cameron get along great, and I know Carly has a tough time finding parents who will let their kid hang out with Morgan.”

“Yeah, Caroline’s not a big hit with other moms, and that’s before you even throw Sonny into the mix.” Luke scratched his brow. “Uh...what are you doing?”

“Going through Cameron’s toys so I can pack them,” Elizabeth said flatly.

“I was afraid of that. Listen, Elizabeth, I know things seem bad right now—”

“Luke—”

“I’m just asking you to hear me out, Darlin’. I know my boy isn’t at his best right now
—”

Elizabeth shook her head but realized she wouldn't be able to concentrate on packing her things until she got Luke out of the apartment. It would be better just to let him do what he was gonna do and get over it. "His *best*, Luke? Really?"

"I—"

"Do you know what he said to me earlier?" Elizabeth asked. "When I went to the hospital, ready to overlook all the things he'd said and done, just to—just to try to put it behind us—" She looked at him. "He said he wanted to know where the girl in the snow went."

"The girl in the..." She saw the moment Luke understood the reference. His Adam's Apple bobbed. "Hell."

"Your *boy* apparently liked me best when I was a weeping, fragile mess that needed him to breathe. He wants *that* girl back—"

"You know that's not true—Liz, come on—"

"I don't know any damn thing—" Elizabeth huffed, then stalked out of Cameron's bedroom. She went to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of water. "Luke, I don't know what the hell you expect from me."

"I came here to beg you to give Lucky another chance."

No. The word nearly burst from her lips like a bullet, but she bit it back. Luke didn't know. He didn't get it. "Luke—"

"I want you to remember the Lucky we knew once. The Lucky you and I knew before it all went to hell." Luke pulled out a worn picture and shoved it at her. Elizabeth took it from him and sighed. Lucky's smiling face holding his little sister. His parents with him.

God, she'd *loved* that boy. "When was this taken? I don't remember his hair being that long."

"About a year before you moved here." Luke took the photo from her and smiled down at it himself. "He was a great kid. The kind of kid I knew *I* didn't deserve. I don't even know where he came from. It was like...this mix of everything good and pure about me and Laura—you know what I mean."

"I do. That was a long time ago." Elizabeth sat at their cramped table. "I have a little boy of my own—"

"I know. I know. But you just—you gotta understand then. There's nothing I wouldn't do for my boy. You feel that way about Cameron." Luke sat at the other seat, his blue eyes intent on hers. Focused. "If your little guy was hurting, if you knew a way to help him, wouldn't you do *anything*?"

"I—" Elizabeth felt her breath catch. "Yes. But—"

"I know Lucky has...he's done terrible things. Shameful. Barbara Jean told me everything—"

"What? No—"

"It's just you and me here, kid." Luke's eyes, always so kind and understanding, were soft. "You know I'll believe you. I can see the bruise Barbara told me about."

Elizabeth touched her face. "It—he pushed me. I fell into the wall..."

"I'm sorry. There's never a reason—" Luke swallowed hard. "I know that sounds like crap coming from me considering what I did to Laura, but I never, ever put my hands on her in anger after that night. I terrified myself that night, and I made a promise that I would never hurt her again. That doesn't make it right, but it's just—it's a promise I kept."

Elizabeth pressed her lips together. "Luke—"

"The boy you and I knew—the one who found you that night, who brought you home, and took care of you? That boy *never* would have done this to you. It kills me to know this happened. That my blood did this." Luke's voice rasped as he continued. "But you know that's not who Lucky is. Not deep inside."

"I think..." Elizabeth said, after a long moment, "that it's not the Lucky I knew then. But—"

"He's in there. I *know* my Cowboy is in there. You know it, too. You married him. You gave him another chance last year. I'm just—I'm begging you not to give up on him."

"Luke—"

“If he loses you, if he loses his career and his family all at once—” Luke shook his head. “That’s it. That’s the last chance we’ll ever get. He’ll never recover from it. And maybe the man he is right now—he doesn’t deserve it. I don’t know. You were there. You’re the one that got hurt. But, God, Elizabeth, doesn’t that boy deserve another chance?”

Elizabeth sat back, her chest tight. “Luke, I don’t know if I can keep fighting for him. I don’t think I’ll survive it.”

“You won’t be alone this time. This time, I know. And Barbara—she’s mad as hell I’m asking you to even consider it—but I just—he and Lulu are all I got left of my angel. I have to ask the impossible. Because if anyone deserved it, it’s the kid that you fell in love with all those years ago. Lucky deserves it.”

“I—” Elizabeth bit her lip. “I don’t know if I can trust him again, Luke. If I can even—I don’t know if I even *love* him. After everything—I mean, you don’t know it all. And even if I could—what makes you think Lucky is going to—he thinks these terrible things. And no matter what you think—”

“I’ll talk to him. I’m not asking you to promise him forever. That’s not something anyone can promise. And I get it—you can damage love. Kill it with abuse and anger. I did it to Laura. I know I did. I know I’m most of the reason she’s locked up in herself.”

“If he puts his hands on me again,” Elizabeth said slowly. Her body shuddered. Oh, God, was she really going to try this? Hadn’t she been through enough? Didn’t she deserve a break?

But if she left Lucky tonight, if she left him while he was still in the hospital—that would be *all* anyone would think about. All they’d talk about. And the whispers and the snickers—she didn’t want it. She just wanted to get away from them all.

She could leave Port Charles. She could take her son and run. Steven might even let her stay with him in Memphis. Maybe Sarah out in California. Leaving Port Charles was the only way to leave Lucky right now.

Luke reached over to cover her hand. “Thank you for even thinking about it,” he told her. “You should tell me to go to hell. I almost want you to. Because I know I’m asking you to do something that no woman should.”

“It’s so easy...” She sucked in a breath, struggled to keep herself together. “It’s so easy to say — one hit, and I’m gone. You ask yourself why women stay. Weak women

stay. Cycle of abuse. God, we're all so fucking arrogant—" Elizabeth scrubbed her hands over her face. "But it's not easy. It's...you're right. It's that hope that he's still in there. That we can save him."

"Elizabeth—"

"And I want to save him, Luke. I want to be the one that brings back the best of the boy we loved. I loved Lucky. And we were so happy. I've never been as happy with anyone as I was those few months before the fire—" She swallowed hard. "I want to save him. Because he saved me. If there's a chance, maybe I owe that to him—"

Luke hesitated. "I don't know about *owe*—"

"I'll stay. For now." Elizabeth said, finally. And gently, in her mind, closed the door on whatever might have happened if Jason ever asked her that question. He would always be a wish. A fantasy that could never happen.

Lucky was her reality. Her right now. And Luke was right. If there was a chance that boy could ever be found again, Elizabeth had to try. He would do it for her.

"If he hits me again," Elizabeth said slowly. "That's it, Luke. I can't—I can promise to try. But I can't keep living like this. So I'll try. But he has to try, too. *He* has to want to make this better."

"I know. I know. We'll make it happen." Luke squeezed her hands. "We're going to make it right. You and me. We're going to fight for him. He'd do it for us."

"Yeah," Elizabeth said with a half-smile. "He would." Once upon a time. But she was terrified that the boy they were trying to find had died in a fire a lifetime ago and would never come home again.

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

When Jason walked through the door that afternoon, he saw Sam sitting quietly on the sofa, her eyes bloodshot, tearstains on her cheeks.

"Epiphany came to tell me you went to the hospital. What did you do?" he asked.

"Nothing I'm proud of," she murmured. She got to her feet and held out her hand. "I've been waiting for you. I knew someone would tell you."

Jason opened his palm and watched as her engagement ring dropped into his grasp. And felt relief. "I should have ended it weeks ago," he said after a long moment.

Stung, Sam met his eyes for the first time, and her nostrils flared. "Are you serious right now? I asked you if you wanted me to leave—just last night—"

"And I should have said yes." He took a deep breath. "Because if I had, you never would have gone to the hospital today."

Her face flushed. "Excuse me? Are you—we're breaking up—I am giving you back your engagement ring after everything you did to me—and all you can think about is her—" Sam laughed, a bitter, twisted sound. "Of course. Of course. Who cares that *my* life has fallen apart, too, right? I've not only lost my past—my entire identity—but now my future is gone. I've lost my home. But—hey—" She put her hands up. "My real crime here is asking your *whore* how many times you've slept together in our bed —"

Jason flinched, then scowled. "We never—"

"Slept together, I know. You keep telling yourself *that* makes any difference."

She stalked past him toward the stairs, then whirled back to face him. "I can't believe you have the nerve to act like I did something wrong. So you didn't actually have sex. Big deal. You kissed her, didn't you?"

Jason exhaled slowly. "Yes."

Sam pressed her lips together. "And if she'd given you the slightest opportunity, you would have slept with her, right?"

He clenched his hands into fists at his side. "Sam—"

"Don't lie to me. Because if you wanted to say no, you would have said yes. Have the guts to at least be honest with me for once. Would you have slept with Elizabeth if she gave you the chance?"

Jason sighed, looked down at his feet for a long moment before raising his gaze to hers. It was time to stop lying. "Yeah. Yeah, I would have. Sam—"

She held out a hand to stop him, and he closed his mouth. Sam took a moment, her lips trembling as she fought to get herself under control. When she looked at him, her

eyes were burning. “Do you think I’m proud that I pushed her into losing it? Into making that scene at the hospital? God, Jason, I’m not cruel. I know she’s been through hell—”

“Then why?” Jason shook his head. “You already knew how I felt. Come at *me*, Sam. *I* deserve it—she doesn’t. You know that. Why did you do it?”

“I—” Sam sighed, some of the flush fading from her cheeks. “I don’t know. I think maybe I told myself I just wanted to see her. I know you don’t believe this, but I actually don’t hate Elizabeth. I even like her sometimes. What I *hate* is how you let her get between us—”

“That wasn’t her fault.”

“No. It wasn’t. And she made that very clear. She told you to stay away, and you didn’t. You kept showing up—” Sam curled her fingers into fists as her scowl deepened. “You couldn’t just admit the truth. I asked you if you wanted me to leave, but that was the wrong fucking question. I should have asked myself if I wanted to stay.”

“I screwed this up. I know that—”

“You’d think you’d know how to handle this with all your damn experience,” Sam shot back, the fury rising again. “I’m hardly the first woman you’ve cheated on.”

“I didn’t—”

“You don’t know *what* the hell you want. You keep Robin dangling on a string while Carly’s in the wings. You let Elizabeth drive herself crazy while you were out with Courtney—and God knows, you’ve made me look like a damn fool—” Sam stabbed a finger at him. “You’re never happy with what you have. You *always* want something else.”

“That’s not true—”

“Even if you begged me to stay, I wouldn’t. I stood in that the hospital, screaming at a woman I knew was on the brink of a nervous breakdown, and I just—I thought, why the hell am I taking this out on her? She and I weren’t friends. We’re not sisters. She didn’t owe me anything. You did. *You* owed me the truth. And if you couldn’t manage that, you owed me a little fucking respect.”

“I—” Jason swallowed hard. “I’m sorry. You’re right.”

“Well, it’s too late damn late for any of that.” Sam stared at him. “She’s not going to leave her husband for you. Not after all of this. Maybe before everything went to hell, before he lost his career—but she’s not brave enough to throw away her life for you. And I don’t blame her. Because you’re fickle, Jason. And even as much as I hate her right now, she deserves better.”

Jason stepped back, took a deep breath. “We’re done talking about this—”

“I hope you rot in hell and die alone, you son of a bitch.” With that, Sam turned and stalked up the stairs.

Shaken, Jason sat on the arm of the sofa and listened to the sounds of Sam packing—throwing things around—stomping—

And couldn’t find a single reason to argue with anything she’d said. He’d hurt every single woman he’d ever been with. Robin. Carly. Elizabeth. Courtney. Sam. Why would Elizabeth put herself through the crap she’d have to put up with to be with him after all he’d done to hurt her?

He’d never once been able to tell her how he’d felt. Had never once told her loved her. He’d told Carly when it wasn’t even really true. But not Elizabeth. He’d never once had the courage to say the words.

And now, she’d never give him the chance.

He deserved nothing less after the damage he had caused her by simply refusing to stay away when she’d asked.

A few minutes later, Sam came down the stairs, dragging the duffel she’d packed before she’d left for Florida. “Have someone pack the rest of my things,” she said. She jerked open the door and left.

She never looked back, and after ten minutes, he went downstairs to the garage to take out his bike.

He needed to be nowhere. Fast.

Lucky & Elizabeth’s Apartment: Living Room

Elizabeth sighed when she opened the door, expecting to see Milo Giambetti

dropping off Cameron that evening. Instead of Max's boyishly charming younger brother, she found Bobbie holding Cameron's hand, a hopeful smile on her face.

She'd been looking forward to a quiet evening with her little boy, closing out the world and trying to figure out how to deal with the decision she'd made.

It had been a terrible day, beginning with the scene that morning with Lucky, the run-in with Sam, and the conversation with Luke. She'd gone from being positive her marriage was definitely over to agreeing to one last try. Or at least, she'd agreed not to leave for a little while.

And she was sure that Bobbie was here to talk about the situation. This was the last thing she wanted, but she knew Lucky's aunt was someone she could trust.

"Hey, come on in. Did you have a good time at Thunder Island?" Elizabeth asked as she knelt down to hug Cameron, still not quite able to lift her son with her injured shoulder and strained wrist.

"Yeah. Best time ever. Carly is nice, Mommy. Is she my aunt?" Cameron asked as he kissed her cheek, then wandered towards the sofa, clutching a stuffed rabbit by the ear as it dragged on the floor. "I wonned this bunny."

"Cool." Elizabeth looked at Bobbie, confused. "Why does he want to know—"

"Because Carly is my daughter, and I'm his Aunt Bobbie. He asked Carly, too," Bobbie said with a half-smile.

"Oh, man, I bet she *loved* that," Elizabeth murmured, thinking of her nemesis. "What did she say?"

"She said it was up to you." Bobbie went into the kitchen to get Cameron a juice while Elizabeth just watched the competent and experienced grandmother get Cameron settled in the living room with his toys, a snack, and the ever-present Spiderman movie DVD she'd given him for Christmas. "Let's talk in the kitchen."

"I'm glad Cam has a friend his age," Elizabeth said slowly as they sat at the little table. She sipped a bottle of water. "But...Carly and I really don't like each other. I don't know how I feel about my kid getting attached to her that way—"

"Particularly after Lucky's reaction to Cameron spending time with Sonny's son," Bobbie said. When Elizabeth didn't answer, the older woman sighed. "I'll admit I had hoped you'd be asking me to take you to Audrey's or just...somewhere else. I didn't

expect you to still be here.”

“Luke came by.”

Bobbie closed her eyes, looked as though maybe she were counting to ten silently, before opening them again and meeting Elizabeth’s gaze. “And my brother convinced you to stay.”

“He asked me not to leave right now. To give Lucky some time to sort things out.” Elizabeth sighed. “I know you’re against it—”

“I’m not for or against anything, sweetheart.” Bobbie squeezed Elizabeth’s hand. “It’s not my job to do that. I’m just here to tell you that whatever you need, I’ll be here.”

Her breath caught. “Bobbie—”

“That being said, I just want to point out a few things to make sure you’ve thought this through. And if after I’m done speaking, you’re still committed to this...choice, I’ll stop arguing.”

“Okay.”

“I think we can stop pretending that all of the bruises and injuries are just from Manny Ruiz,” Bobbie told her. “My nephew has been physically and emotionally abusive. You’re an adult, so if you’re choosing to believe Luke and that there’s a chance Lucky can turn this around—I can’t stop you.”

“But?”

“But you have a child. A little boy who deserves to be your number one priority.” Bobbie raised her brows. “Are you planning to continue raising him in this home, with a man who has not treated you well?”

Elizabeth hadn’t quite let herself think about what would happen if she stayed—she really hadn’t gotten past the initial decision. She licked her lips. “I’ll be honest that up until now, the relationship I had hoped would develop between Cameron and Lucky hasn’t...really happened. Lucky’s...I mean, you know. You did us a favor by helping out. He wouldn’t.”

“That disappoints me,” Bobbie admits, “but, no, it doesn’t surprise me. Has he been...rough or angry with Cameron?”

“No—no, except maybe earlier this week when he was sick.” God, had that only been a few days ago? “Lucky brought him to the hospital, but I don’t think he was mean or rough about it. He was just...It was the wrong decision.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “But no. He mostly ignores Cameron.”

“I see.”

Her chest burned. “Oh, God, he *ignores* him. Like my parents did. Cameron’s going to know one day, isn’t he? How can I—” Elizabeth pressed her hands to her face. “How can I do this?”

“Which brings me to my second point, Elizabeth.” Bobbie gently pulled Elizabeth’s hands from her face. “Do you still love my nephew? Are you *in* love with him? Do you see a future with him? Because no matter what you and Luke think, we’re never going to have the boy he once was. Maybe we can give him some peace, maybe we can work on the anger. But Lucky is *never* coming home.”

“I—” Elizabeth cleared her throat. “Of course I’m in love with him. I married him—”

“Did you marry the man? Or did you marry the memory?” Bobbie tilted her head. “It’s just you and me here.”

Her throat felt tight, but Elizabeth finally forced the words out. “I don’t know. I think—I think part of me blames myself for all of this. Not-not the original injury. I mean, we were doing okay for a while. He was unhappy, but I wasn’t...I wasn’t miserable, Bobbie. If he’d never gotten hurt—”

“But he did.”

“Yeah, but...I don’t know what changed everything. I don’t know if his worry about never going back to work just...spilled over. And I know—I know this...Manny and Jason stuff—it *is* my fault. I never should have gotten involved. I should have kept myself out of it. I should have stayed away from Jason.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Bobbie—”

“You can spend the rest of your life wondering what if things had been different—what if you’d zigged instead of zagged. But you didn’t. Marriage isn’t supposed to be a penance. It isn’t supposed to be an obligation.”

Bobbie managed a sad smile. "Take it from someone who has tried it all. I married for love, I married for friendship, I married for revenge—and none of it quite worked for me. You deserve happiness, Elizabeth. Not the memory of it, but the actual feeling."

"I'm..." She shook her head. "I know."

"Do you?"

"I think I know," Elizabeth admitted. "Bobbie—" She sighed. "Maybe I don't love Lucky as he is today. And maybe I can't ever love or trust him again. I know you're right. I know that Luke is living in a fantasy. Whatever happens to Lucky going forward, this last month will always be part of our story. We're not those teenagers making promises anymore. And maybe I don't owe the man who's hurt me anything."

She waited a moment, trying to figure out how to articulate her choice, which felt more solid now that she'd thought through all the angles. "And I told Luke I'm not promising forever. I don't think I can. I don't think I can stay forever, Bobbie. But he's right that if I leave now, when Lucky's at rock bottom, I'll always wonder if I could have done more. I'll always wonder if I could have fixed it. Even if I just stay a month, even if I just...stay another day. I need to know."

"Okay." Bobbie nodded. "I can understand that." She hesitated. "And what about Jason?"

"What about him?" Elizabeth dully. "There's nothing—we never slept together—"

"You and I both know that love isn't about sex. Are you in love with Jason?"

"I—" She pressed her lips together. "Probably. And he might even be in love with me. You're right. We never slept together, but I don't think—I think if Manny hadn't happened or maybe there had been the opportunity—I don't know."

"Where does he fit into all of this? Does he know you're going to stay with Lucky?"

"He doesn't. He doesn't know, and he doesn't fit." She sighed. "Which is something I should tell him. We should...clear the air, and I need to make him understand that whatever has been going on—whatever label we put on it—it can't keep going." She looked at Bobbie. "Am I making a terrible mistake?"

"It's not my job to tell you that. I think you have far too many people who judge you, Elizabeth. All you can do is your best. And I think you are." Bobbie leaned over,

kissed her forehead. “Whatever you do, wherever you end up, you are my family. And that will never change.”

Elizabeth swiped at her eyes, sniffled, and then smiled. “Then if Carly doesn’t mind it, I want Cameron to feel like he’s part of your family. You’re his Aunt Bobbie. Carly and her boys can be whatever they want to be to him. He deserves all the love I can give him.”

“Then, Aunt Carly it is.”

Elizabeth laughed then, a small hysterical burst of sound that surprised her. But she kept laughing because it felt good, and then she went with Bobbie to go watch Spiderman with her son.

Chapter Twenty-One

*If we both were born
In another place and time
This moment might be ending in a kiss
But there you are with yours
And here I am with mine
So I guess we'll just be leaving it at this
I honestly love you.*
- I Honestly Love You, Olivia Newton-John

Monday, April 10, 2006

General Hospital: Lucky's Hospital Room

Luke Spencer was not a good man. He'd never lied to himself on that account. He'd never pretended to be anything except a son of a bitch who'd managed to strike gold for a bit.

For a brief moment, for a handful of years, he'd played patriarch to a perfect family. He'd been married to the best woman God had ever created, and she'd seen fit to give him two children who had been perfect in every sense of the word.

No piece of that life had survived to this moment. His angel, his beloved Laura, was locked inside her own brain, unlikely to ever come back to him, and his children were strangers to him. He'd never been much of a father to Lulu—she'd always belonged to her mother—but oh, his boy—*his son*—had been someone Luke had been proud to know.

That pride was hard to remember now as Luke walked through the door to find his sullen son lying on his back, his eyes staring at the ceiling. This man was a pale shadow of the boy he'd been, and Luke wondered if maybe this was all just a fool's errand.

But he'd already done the hardest part and convinced the second-best woman who had ever been put on the Earth to give his son another chance. Luke took the seat next to Lucky and cleared his throat.

"Well, this is a real mess you got yourself in, Cowboy."

"I don't want to talk to anyone," Lucky muttered. He turned his head to the other side, to stare at the blank wall.

"That's too damn bad because I got things to say. It's a shame that you can't have the life you thought you would. I never...I never really understood the cop thing, but you wanted it, and I decided to just try my best to support you. I'm sorry it can't happen."

Lucky remained silent, so Luke trudged on. "I decided to do a little damage control for you, Cowboy, because you'd made a mess of things with the pieces you still have left. I went to your place and found Elizabeth packing her things, ready to go."

"Probably going to Jason," Lucky muttered.

"Well, I don't know where she was planning to go, but judging by the bruise on her face, she had her reasons."

Lucky twisted his head then, his bloodshot eyes narrowed on his father. "Did she tell you?"

"She didn't have to tell me. Your aunt did. She told me about your fight on Friday. And I saw the bruise today."

"I didn't—" Lucky's voice faltered. "It was an accident."

"And her shoulder?"

A flush rose on Lucky's cheeks as he looked away. "That, too."

"Any *other* accidents you want to tell me about?" Luke asked sharply. "I didn't raise you to put your hands on women—"

"*You're* gonna lecture *me* about violence against women?" Lucky snorted. "Don't bother, Dad. I guess I'm not much better than you."

"You were supposed to be. But maybe there's no point." Luke's shoulders slumped. "Maybe there is something rotten in us. I tell myself I never raised my hand to your mother in anger, but it's a lie, isn't it?"

Lucky said nothing, so Luke continued.

“That night—that night, I didn’t care about her. I only took what I wanted. It was a moment of insanity, of desperation, and yes, violence. I struck out at the woman I said I loved, and I hurt her. I can tell myself it wasn’t anger towards her, but maybe it was. Maybe I thought she should have given me some attention.” He paused. “I never forgave myself for that.”

“Didn’t bother you when you married her. Had kids with her—”

“I was raised in a world where men took charge, and women listened. I was raised by a man who claimed to love my mother, too. But when he was angry, she saw the back of his hand more than anyone else.” Luke’s chest tightened as he thought of his beloved mother, gone more than forty years. “Eventually, he killed her. He shoved her so hard that her head hit the table.”

Luke closed his eyes. Even after all these years, he could still see it. “She died instantly, Cowboy. From one angry shove.”

Lucky swallowed hard. “I—”

“In a lot of ways, I think my mother was already gone. He stole years of happiness from her every time he smacked her across the face. Every time he took his bad day or bad luck out on her body.”

Lucky hesitated, flicked his eyes to meet his father’s. “I didn’t know that.”

Luke shook his head. “My father beat my mother every day, and I hated him for it.” His voice trembled as he finally admitted the dark truth. “And I hated her sometimes for not leaving. How could a woman stay after that? And how can a man say he loves a woman and do that to her? It wasn’t until I was older, until after...that terrible night, when I looked at your mother, saw the damage and the terror—” He stared down at his hands. “It scared me.”

“I didn’t mean to do it.” Lucky closed his eyes. “I was just... I was *so* angry. Jason—Fucking *Jason Morgan* bought Cameron medicine that I knew we couldn’t afford, and I just—I couldn’t stand it. I started to get rid of it, and Elizabeth tried to stop me—” His voice wavered. “I told her I was sorry. She stayed, Dad. She forgave me.”

“And then?”

“And then...I grabbed her. I pushed her.” The muscles in Lucky’s throat worked hard as he struggled to speak. “I kept telling myself to stop, but I couldn’t. And then she went to Jason. She’s been having an affair with him, Dad. She’s lying to me—”

“Even if that is true,” Luke said gently, “what gives you the right to put your hands on her? To bruise her? Leave a mark?”

“N-Nothing. I know that. I always know it *after* it happens, I just get so mad—and then she’s just standing there, and I *know* she wishes I were him—”

“If she wanted Jason Morgan, I guarantee you, Cowboy, Elizabeth could have him. She’s always stayed with you.”

“But Manny—she went to him about Manny—” He stopped, took a deep breath. “That’s not right. She came to me first. And I pushed her away. I told her we couldn’t do anything.”

“And Elizabeth Webber never takes no for an answer. She wanted to protect Skye. And she needed to protect herself. Do you blame her for doing whatever she had to do? I would have gone to Corinthos and Morgan myself if I needed protection for my family.”

“It doesn’t matter. I lost control. I said things—did things—I can’t take them back.” Lucky shook his head. “It’s over. I can’t fix it—”

“I talked to Elizabeth, and God love her, she’s not ready to give up on you yet.”

“She...” Lucky’s eyes were damp. “She didn’t—but you said she was packing—”

“I reminded her of what the two of you have, and that it’s worth fighting for. I know you, Cowboy. And so does she. She knows this isn’t you. She’s always loved you, and she’s willing to give you another chance.” He hesitated. “She has some conditions, I’m sure, and she’ll talk to you soon enough. But I got my own terms if you want my support.”

“What conditions—”

“You *stop* throwing tantrums about Cameron playing with Morgan. That’s Bobbie’s grandson, and apparently, our Cam has taken a shine to him. Elizabeth is not giving up something that makes her boy happy, and *you* don’t get to hurt *my* sister over this Jason crap.”

“Fine. I-I can do that—”

“If you lay one more hand on her, I’ll help her pack. You get me, boy? If you touch her again, I’ll lay you out flat.” Luke shook his head. “That’s it. Those are the only things I wanted to make clear to you. You give her whatever she wants, Lucky. Because if Elizabeth walks this time, you’re not getting another chance.”

“Okay.” Lucky took a deep breath. “I can do this, Dad. I can—I can do this. If Elizabeth...if she’ll forgive me, and stay away from Jason, I can be better.”

Luke searched his son’s face, had hoped to see more resolution, more determination. And maybe a bit more shame. But whatever he’d wanted to see, it wasn’t there.

Luke nodded, then got to his feet. “We’ll see what we see then.”

Kelly’s: Courtyard

Elizabeth gingerly stepped into the small courtyard, Cameron’s hand clutched in hers. She avoided the curious stares from two of the tables seated, enjoying the unseasonably warm early spring weather.

“Aunt Em!” Cameron let his fingers slide from hers as he toddled over to her best friend, seated at the third table. Emily stood up and swept the little boy into her arms, pressing kisses to his face. Cameron giggled and blew raspberries at her.

“It’s good to see you out.” Emily flashed a hesitant smile and embraced Elizabeth lightly before helping Cameron into his booster seat. “How...how are you? Since, um...”

“Since you dropped me off yesterday,” Elizabeth said. She unwrapped the bundle of utensils from its napkin so that her hands would have something to do. “I’m okay. Um, better than I thought I’d be, to be honest.”

“Good. Good. I’m glad to hear that. I, uh...” Emily picked up her iced tea, sipped it. “I haven’t known what to say to you. I mean, I feel like I knew on Friday. I had my head together, and I had one goal—to protect you. Keep the idiots away.”

“I know. And I appreciate that.” Elizabeth squeezed Emily’s hand. “I don’t know if I could have gotten through it without you.”

“I think I thought people were just...upset. I mean, it was fresh. With some time and space everyone would just...stop being stupid. They would just stop saying things, and Lucky would wake up yesterday and realize how insane he sounded...” Emily shook her head, her dark eyes worried. “But that didn’t happen. And I don’t know how

to fix any of this.”

“There’s nothing for you to fix,” Elizabeth said gently. She handed Cameron a toy to occupy them as they waited for a waitress. “This is my problem—”

“Yeah, but I should be able to do something—”

“Emily—”

“And I think some of this has to be my fault. Like, is it because I said all that terrible stuff about Jason and you? Is that why Lucky is like this? Why was he saying all of those things—”

“I think,” Elizabeth said slowly, “there are a few reasons why Lucky...why he said those things. You told me that no one ever believed Jason and I hadn’t been together that Christmas. That Lucky thought I was lying.”

“Yeah, I mean—” Emily squinted. “Wait. Wait.” She shook her head. “You...you *really* weren’t together? I mean, I just—I know what you guys said, but I saw the way you looked at each other, and talked about each other—”

“Emily, I would have told you.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Oh, God, is *that* why you and Nikolas were so annoying that spring Jason was in town? Because you thought —” She shook her head. “It explains why Lucky was so...angry then. He thought I was lying about my first—” She chewed her on her bottom lip. “Emily, Jason and I—it’s *never* been like that. We’ve never—I mean—God, this is so stupid—”

“You don’t have to explain yourself—”

“No, I don’t, but when I don’t, people just make up their own versions,” Elizabeth muttered. She shredded the napkin into pieces. “Look, yes, maybe what happened with you and Jason—I don’t know—it was part of it. Because I felt bad for you and for him, so I decided to talk to him about it, and he was...” She sighed. “Obsessed with making sure I knew he hadn’t been with Courtney back then.”

“I’m sorry—”

“But it’s not your fault, because that should have taken exactly one conversation. It’s just—Jason and I were already talking about things we shouldn’t be. I had already asked him for help with Manny. Lucky and I were having other issues—” Elizabeth hesitated. “I’m not having an affair with your brother, Emily. Not...like that.”

Emily looked away for a long moment, then looked back at her. “There are a lot of ways to have an affair, Elizabeth. And sleeping together is just one of them.”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together, then reluctantly nodded. Because pretending had created this problem in the first place. “Yeah. Yeah, I know. Jason and I crossed a line. One we never would have if we’d—if other things were okay. Sam’s dealing with some stuff—clearly. And I told you—Lucky and I are not...we’re—Jason and I just...got...distracted talking about what happened. A-and...” Nervous, she tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “We said things we shouldn’t have.”

It’s not past tense for me.

“You know, Lucky and I have been friends almost since the day I moved here,” Emily said softly. “But I love you, and you *can* trust me.”

“There’s...nothing to say. I’m married. And I made vows. I have—need—to make sure I do right by them. Lucky’s been through a lot. Luke said—and I agreed—that me leaving him right now would only make things worse.”

Emily’s brow furrowed. “I don’t understand. Do you...*want* to stay with Lucky? Because if you don’t, I’d understand. The people who matter would understand—” She shook her head. “You’re feeling guilty about whatever happened with Jason. Don’t let that push you into doing things you don’t want to—”

“I—” Elizabeth blinked. She hadn’t expected that. “Emily—”

“You blame yourself for Lucky’s injuries, but Manny’s the one to blame. And I know Lucky has been a jerk to you lately. I wasn’t that distracted by Sonny that I didn’t see it, you know? Don’t let Luke talk you into saving Lucky. Not again—”

“It’s not—”

“I think my brother is in love with you,” Emily said bluntly. “I watched him while you were missing, after you were safe—I’ve seen him a few times since—and I’m pretty sure that you’d just have to crook your finger—”

“Emily—” She really didn’t need this.

“If you’re staying with Lucky because you feel sorry for what happened to him, because you pity him, or maybe you still think you owe him for what happened after you were...hurt, then you’re not doing *anyone* any favors. Stay with Lucky because you love him. Because you still see a future together—”

"I can't be the reason he falls apart. He's lost his career, Emily. For months, he's had one goal—get back to active duty. And now he can't have that. How do I walk away from him when he's this low?" Elizabeth shook her head. "Even after everything—"

She took a deep breath. "For better or for worse. This is worse. Marriage means something to me. Marriage to Lucky was all I ever wanted—" She closed her eyes. "I can't stop. Why can't I stop *lying*—"

Emily frowned. "Elizabeth—"

"Even now, I can hear myself saying all the same things I've always said. Marriage is what I wanted. A future with Lucky is what I wanted." She met her friend's eyes. "I don't want them anymore."

"Then what do you want? *Why* are you staying?"

"I just want—" Elizabeth sighed. "I don't know. I wish I did. I just know—I know that leaving *now* would be a mistake. Luke is right. Lucky has lost everything. What happens if I leave—"

"Why is that *your* problem?" Emily demanded.

"Because of what we meant to each other. Because he never would have given up on me—"

"Yeah, he would have. The boy might not have, Elizabeth, but this man? He's *already* given up on you. And your life together." Emily pressed her lips together. "Are you afraid of what would happen if you left?"

Elizabeth frowned. "What—what do you mean?"

"I mean, the way everyone would look at you. The way the papers talk about you—or maybe it's not that complicated. You'd rather stay with a man who makes you miserable than make the slightest attempt to be happy with someone else."

"Emily—" Her voice broke. "It's—" She looked away. She busied herself wiping up Cameron's face as he dissected the burger they'd ordered for him. He was covered in ketchup. He grinned at her, and she managed a laugh at the smears on his face.

"Sonny was a mistake," Emily said softly. Elizabeth looked over at her. "You were

right, *of course*. And so was Jason. I handled it badly. I was so sure you would support me, so sure that Jason would stand with me—but I never gave either of you a chance. I think I knew it was doomed. I think I saw it from the start. But I had to make the mistake. *I* had to find out for sure.”

“Em—”

“So you need to make this mistake. You need to see that what you’re fighting so hard for isn’t worth winning. I just—I don’t know why you can’t fight as hard for Jason.”

It wasn’t a terrible question. She knew Jason cared about her—he might even think he was in love with her but—

“Right now, he feels guilty. He feels guilty about hurting me four years ago. About hurting Sam. About what happened to Manny.” Elizabeth exhaled slowly. “When the smoke settles, we’ll just have the same fights over again. He won’t trust me to take the risks I need to take to be in his life. And I’ll just get angry all over again and leave. Because...”

She hesitated. “Because I don’t trust that he loves me. And he’s never given me a reason to believe he does. He never gave me the words, but I should have been able to feel it. And I didn’t.”

“Elizabeth—”

“It’s simple to say we failed because of what happened with Sonny. Or because of what happened with Zander. Those things are easy to blame. But the truth is, he didn’t love me enough to take the risk. Or trust me enough to know that I understood the risk.” She looked down, started to cut her salad into small pieces, avoiding Emily’s gaze. “So no, Emily. I don’t fight as hard for Jason. Because he never loved me. And I don’t believe he does now.”

“And you think Lucky does?”

“I think...” Elizabeth pursed her lips. “I think he needs me.”

“Well, what I think is this—all of that crap you just said about Jason is just that—*bullshit*. I think you are very good at rationalizing and explaining the simple fact that you’re afraid.” Emily shook her head. “Look at me, Elizabeth. Look me in the eyes and tell me again that you don’t think my brother is in love with you.”

“I—” Elizabeth drew in a sharp breath. She made eye contact. “Emily—”

“You’re afraid to reach out because my brother hasn’t always been the best at reaching back. But *don’t* tell me he doesn’t love you. You know what the problem is, Elizabeth?”

“Emily—”

“You think love is measured by the people who stay.”

Elizabeth’s chest suddenly tightened, and she gulped down a sob. “Emily—”

“And, sure, Lucky needs you right now. He’s always needed you. He needed you to get him through what happened with his family back in the beginning. He needed you to get through the brainwashing. To get through the injuries. He needed you, Elizabeth. And some of the time, he loved you.”

Elizabeth looked down at her plate. Closed her eyes. “But not now.”

“No. Not now. He needs you, Elizabeth. But he’s not staying because he wants to.”

“He’s staying because he has nowhere to go,” Elizabeth murmured. She looked at Emily. “Yeah, I know—”

“I thought Zander needed me. I thought that was why I should stay with him even when I didn’t love him anymore. I thought what he needed was more important. I just made myself—and him—miserable.” Emily sat back in her chair. “Don’t you think you deserve better?”

“I think...” Elizabeth sighed.

“Mommy? You crying?” Cameron furrowed his brow. “I hug you?”

“I’m okay, sweetie,” Elizabeth told him. “Finish your food, and we’ll go play in the park, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I don’t want to upset you, Elizabeth. I’m sorry—”

“You’re not wrong, Emily. About any of it. Maybe—” Elizabeth sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I want. I know that I’m not being fair to anyone. To me, to

Lucky..."

"To Jason?" Emily continued. Elizabeth just sighed again. "Does he know you're staying?"

If you ask me, I'll tell you.

I won't ask you tonight...

Elizabeth sighed. "No."

"Are you still staying?"

Elizabeth waited a long moment, tried to gather her thoughts. Her confidence had been shaken by Bobbie, by Emily—by all of it. But at the end of the day—

"Yes. For now."

"You should talk to him—" Emily bit her lip. "I love you. And I want you to be happy. But I also love my brother, and I don't want him hurt either."

"I know. I don't want to hurt him either. I'm going to talk to him." Elizabeth bit her lip. "I'm staying to give Lucky a chance to get himself together—and maybe—I don't know. If he goes to counseling, if he gets himself under control—I don't know, maybe we have a chance. I know you think it's not worth the trouble. You're not wrong, Emily."

"Then why—"

"Because if there's the smallest chance that me staying right now means a part of that boy can come back to us, Emily—" Elizabeth sighed. "I have to take that chance. For everything we were to one another—I owe this to him."

"I don't agree, but I guess I can understand why you'd think that."

"But that still means that I need to—I need things to go back to the way they were. Jason and I can't be friends."

Emily pursed her lips and sighed. "No, I guess not, but—"

"We'll just drift right back towards one another. Just like we always do. And I *can't* do

this anymore. I don't want to hurt him, Emily. And I don't even know if he's still engaged to Sam. All of this might not mean anything—he might even agree with me that it's better if nothing changes.”

“Well, then you're both stupid,” Emily said. “This isn't love. What you're describing, what you're going back to—that's not love.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes, pained. “Well, it's the only kind I know.”

“If it hurts this much,” Emily said, pausing until Elizabeth looked at her, “then why do you want it so badly?”

“I—” Elizabeth pressed her lips together. “I don't know.”

“Your parents left you. Sarah and Steven left you. God, even Nikolas and I have left you. Lucky's left you.” Emily reached across the table to squeeze Elizabeth's hand. “Jason's left. I get it, you know. You deserve better from all of us. Love *shouldn't* be measured by the people who stay.”

“That's not what I'm doing—” Elizabeth protested, but the words died on her lips because, of course, it was.

“No one stays forever, Elizabeth. That's just life. Lucky has nowhere else to go. If he had options, would he be staying?” Emily asked her pointedly. When Elizabeth remained silently, she shrugged. “You have options. You don't have to do this.”

“I do,” Elizabeth said with a quick shake of her head. “I do, but I—I get it. And thank you.” She wiped her eyes again. “Can we just talk about something else? Anything else?”

Warehouse: Jason's Office

“You know, I swore the day the ink was dry on my divorce papers that I would never set foot in this building again.”

Jason looked up from his paperwork and scowled at the sight of Carly in his doorway. “Uh. Hey. Did—Did I miss something?”

“Like ten calls, so yeah.” Carly shrugged and sat down. She wrinkled her nose as she took in the rickety desk, uncomfortable chair, and lumpy sofa. “Jase, do you know how much money you have?”

“Yes.”

“Then why—”

“You redecorated Sonny’s office, and people always go in there. I don’t like people.”

Carly considered this, then nodded. “Fair enough. Listen, I think I’ve been a very nice human being for the last seventy-two hours. By my measures, I’m eligible for sainthood.”

Jason set his pencil down and frowned at her. “Since when?”

“Since I watched Elizabeth Webber’s kid almost every day since Thursday. I even took the kid to the amusement park yesterday. I didn’t ask any questions about why Cameron couldn’t go to daycare or why I had to cancel my day at work on Friday to take care of him. I did a nice thing, Jason.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure it’ll pass.”

“Hey.” Carly leaned forward, slapped her hand on the papers Jason was pretending to read. “Buddy. I’m not saying you have to *answer* my questions. I just think I’ve earned the right to ask them.”

Jason nearly said no, but then looked up at his friend. “Thank you for helping Elizabeth out. It made her feel better knowing her son was safe, and more than that, he was happy. I appreciated it, but you did *her* the favor. I know that hurts—” Carly grimaced, but he continued, “but sometimes you’re not terrible.” He picked up the pencil again and return to his work.

“I already knew all of that, Ace. I’m *still* asking the questions.” Carly leaned back against the back of the wooden chair. “Are you having an affair with Elizabeth Webber?”

“Pass.”

She pursed her lips. “Did Sam really go after her in the hospital?”

“Pass.”

“Did they mud wrestle—”

“What?” Jason scowled, slapping the pencil down. “What the hell—”

“Hey, I do not control the gossip. I just enjoy it.” Carly held up her hands in mock surrender. “Are you still engaged to Sam?”

Jason hesitated at that—because *that* was information that shouldn’t be public yet. “Why are you asking me that?”

“Well, generally, once people start gossiping about an affair, the status of the existing relationships are fair game, too—but honestly? Max told Milo, who told me that Sam checked into Jake’s. He saw her last night with her stuff when he was getting a drink.”

Jason sighed. “No, we are not still engaged.” He eyed her. “And okay, yeah, it’s a little bit because of what happened in the hospital. But there are other issues that are none of your business.”

“Hey, if you’re finally drop kicking Sonny’s mattress buddy—” Carly shook her head. “Best news I’ve had all day. I’m actually almost happy enough that I might not mind that Elizabeth Webber is hanging around again—”

He was going to get a headache if she kept this up. “Carly, was there anything else?”

“Yeah, do you think Sonny and Emily are still a thing? Because we were all pissed about that for a hot minute, and, like...” Carly shrugged. “I guess we’re all good now?”

“You’d have to ask Sonny—”

“I’d rather set myself on fire.” Carly got to her feet. “So if you’re not going to give me any details about why Port Charles is obsessed with your sex life, then I guess I’ll go —”

“Oh, no. Please. Don’t.” Sonny stood in the doorway. “Don’t go on *my* account,” he continued in a wry, sarcastic tone.

“Haha. You deflowering any other children, or are you still busy with the last infant?” Carly demanded darkly.

“Carly,” Jason said flatly.

“Not that it’s any of your business,” Sonny said, then he looked at Jason, “Or yours, but no, Emily and I are not seeing each other anymore. It turns out we don’t have a lot in common.”

“Ha!” Carly barked, her eyes positively lit with glee. “This is literally the *best* day of my life! Skanky McCall has been booted to the curb, you’ve stopped shopping in the children’s aisle, and you look *miserable* about it which just—” She kissed her fingertips. “Just puts the cherry on the top.”

“How did I stay married to you for so long?” Sonny demanded.

“No prenup,” Carly offered as she picked up her bag. “And I’m gonna go enjoy the fruits of my labor.” She jabbed a finger at Jason. “Don’t go making any other mistakes, Jason. I like the kid, but I am not about having the mother be a part of my life.”

And with that, Carly left as quickly as she’d arrived, her perfume lingering in her wake. Sonny scowled, looking at Jason. “What’s that last part about?”

“She’s been baby-sitting Cameron these last few days.” Jason sighed and looked back at the paperwork.

“And probably wanted to know if all the gossip was true.” Sonny nodded. “It’s almost comforting sometimes. She’ll never change, and it makes her predictable.” He paused. “Uh, so about Elizabeth—”

“Damn it,” Jason muttered as his pencil tip snapped. He glared at Sonny. “You’re not seriously in here to ask me about my love life, are you?”

“Well,” Sonny said as he sat in the chair Carly had vacated. “I did offer some information about mine.” He hesitated. “But I’m asking because...well, she’s married to a cop. You can imagine it’s...not just idiots at the hospital gossiping. This is the kind of crap that travels in *our* circles as well.”

Jason grimaced. “I’m not talking to you about it, either.”

“Carly said something about Sam—”

“Sonny—” Jason closed his eyes in frustration. “I’m really not interested in having this conversation—” His phone rang, and man, he was hoping someone needed to be punched.

Jason would like to beat the shit out of someone right now.

But the caller identification screen told him it was Elizabeth, and he stared at her name for a long moment, unsure if he believed what he was seeing. He'd wanted to go to her after that scene with Sam—but he'd remembered how much worse he'd made things by not listening to Elizabeth. So he'd stayed away.

But *she* was calling *him*.

"Jase?" Sonny prompted.

Jason finally flipped open the phone and pressed it to his ear. "Hey."

"Hey. Um, I'm sorry if I called at a bad time—" Just the sound of her voice soothed some of the rough edges of his mood.

"No, no, it's fine. What's up?"

"Can—can we talk? Can you come over? I mean, whenever is good for you—"

"Yeah. I'll be right over."

"Oh. Oh, really? Okay. Thanks. I'll—I'll see you."

Jason closed the phone and stared at it for a long moment. What could she want to talk about? Did she want to talk about what had happened with Sam? Or the night before? Was she staying with Lucky—

"Is Elizabeth okay?"

Jason blinked, then looked at his partner, who he realized he'd forgotten was in the room at all. "How did—"

"Your voice changes when you talk to her. I always know when you're talking to her. Or about her." Sonny tilted his head to the side. "Jase, she's been through a lot."

"I know—"

"So whatever she needs, just make sure she gets it. But take care of yourself for a change." Sonny stood. He slid his hands in his pockets. "I never should have asked

you to go to the church.”

Jason shook his head, confused. “Sonny?”

“The wedding,” Sonny clarified. “To Brenda. I should have taken that on myself. It wasn’t fair to you. I’m not going to ask you to clean up any of my messes anymore. I mean, I’m going to try not to. Habits are hard to break.”

“If you’d gone to the church and told her in person, you never would have gone,” Jason said, his voice a bit rough. “You knew that.”

“Yeah. Or maybe I was just a coward. I broke her into little pieces, Jason, by sending you. I humiliated her.” Sonny’s eyes were dark when they met Jason’s. “I have a lot of regrets about Brenda. I should have found a way to stay with her. She was the one, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I’m just—I don’t know what I’m saying. I guess—I don’t know what’s going on with Elizabeth and you. I never do. You keep all of that pretty close to the chest. But just...don’t walk away today without saying whatever needs to be said. Because the words you don’t say, they’re the ones that haunt you.”

Lucky & Elizabeth’s Apartment: Living Room

Elizabeth must have paced the length of her small living room a thousand times before Jason knocked on her door. Her heart pounding, her pulse racing, Elizabeth stared at the door before swallowing hard and reaching for the doorknob.

This was fair. This was right. And they both needed to clear the air.

But just the sight of Jason and his kind, concerned eyes made her hesitate. Was she really—really—closing the door on even a *friendship* with him so that she could stay in a marriage with a man that had abused her?

Oh, God, what the *hell* was she doing? This was a mistake. She should have avoided Jason like the plague. She could have written him a letter.

“Hey, are you okay?” Jason stepped forward, lifted his hand as if to touch her face. But he stopped just short, his hand falling away. Pressure built behind her eyes because God, she wanted to feel his hands on her—

Oh, damn Luke Spencer to hell. If he'd never walked through her door, reminding her of that boy—that perfect boy—who deserved so much better the man he'd grown up to be.

“Elizabeth?”

“Come in,” Elizabeth said, finally stepping back from the door so he could cross over the threshold. “Sorry, my mind—I’m going in a thousand directions right now.”

“It’s okay.” He waited until she closed the door. “Are you—is this about what happened with Sam yesterday?”

“You—” Her mouth was dry. “You know about that? I didn’t think anyone would actually tell you—Did Sam—”

“She didn’t have to.” Jason sighed. “I’m sorry. Epiphany came to tell me. She was worried about you. I would have called or checked on you, but—but I didn’t...” He looked at her, and she felt his next words down to the tips of her toes. “I didn’t want to be selfish. I haven’t listened to you when you told me what you needed.”

If only she *knew* what she needed.

“It’s okay. I’m okay. I mean, it was an ugly scene, but it’s over. And—we deserved it. I mean, I deserved it—I just—I didn’t expect it.”

“Elizabeth—”

“I told you this was a mess...” She turned away from him, starting to pace again. “I *told* you we were going to hurt people—”

“How? We didn’t do anything—”

Elizabeth turned to look at him as the first tear slid down her cheek. “Didn’t we? God, Jason, are you really going to stand there and tell me you didn’t *know* what we were doing was wrong? And we kissed. Twice—”

“The first time—that’s my fault—”

“It was not. I kissed you. Both times.” Elizabeth glared at him. “Don’t you dare try to protect me from this. I did that. I just—you always stopped it before. And this time I

didn't—" She dragged her hands through her hair. "This isn't what I wanted to do."

"Sam and I broke up."

He delivered that news in a matter of a fact tone that had Elizabeth dropping her hands to her side and just staring at him. Oh man, she'd been counting on *him* stepping back. Wanting to go back to the status quo. Why didn't anyone *ever* do what they were supposed to? "W-What?"

"We weren't happy even before all this happened. We were fighting over things that had nothing to do with you—but I—" Jason hesitated. "You're right. We hurt people. And Sam didn't deserve it. So we broke up."

"Oh, man." She bit her lip. "Jason—"

"And no, I didn't know what we were doing was wrong. Not then." Jason stepped towards her, and she knew she should step away, but she didn't want to. Because he was looking at her with *that look* and she just wanted to hold on to it forever. She loved the way his eyes were soft like this— "Because it felt right. Didn't it?"

She should say no. She should deny it. But she'd spent too many years pretending. "Yes. Except when it hurt."

He frowned at that, shook his head. "Elizabeth—"

"Because it's so silly now. It feels so silly and terrible to talk about what we felt back then—" She forced out the words. "Because if I had just...said something back then, or if you'd just said something—it would be different now. And it hurts that we both walked away knowing—"

"Elizabeth—"

"But we did. And we can't keep standing here like the last four years didn't happen—" She took a deep breath. "I'm married."

His body stilled, the muscle in his jaw clenched, and Elizabeth knew he'd taken her meaning. "You're staying."

"I am."

"After—" He swallowed hard. "After *everything* that happened."

“Yes.” Her hands fluttered in front of her—she didn’t know what to do with them. “Um, I know it looks—it looked bad. And it was bad. We had awful fights. And he said terrible things.” Did terrible things. “B-but if I leave him now when he’s already lost his job, how do I live with myself?”

Jason frowned, shook his head slightly as if he didn’t understand her. “Elizabeth—”

“Things are bad enough, you know? But it gets worse if I leave. I just—I promised, Jason. I meant my vows. For better or for worse.”

He exhaled slowly, took a small step back. “Okay.”

“Okay.” Her lip trembled, so she bit hard to stop it. “I just—I thought you should know.”

“Because—”

“Because we crossed a line a-and I just—I’m not staying on that side of the line. I’m going back to the other side. Because—because it’s right. It’s the right thing to do. A-and you know, you and Sam can still—”

“That’s not going to happen.” Jason looked at her for a long time, and she finally broke eye contact, looking away. “You forgot something.”

“I—” Elizabeth frowned. “I did?”

“You forgot to tell me that you love Lucky.”

Her heart simply stopped as she looked at him, at those dark, angry eyes she’d so rarely seen directed at her. “I—”

“Isn’t that how this usually goes?” Jason asked, and she was stunned to hear a thread of bitterness in his words. “You and I have a moment. We almost go forward, and you stop it. You tell me you love Lucky, and I go away.”

“Jason—”

He shook his head. “Never mind—”

“Jason—” Elizabeth started forward, grabbed his arm as he started to turn towards

the door. “It’s not like that—”

“No?” Jason raised his brows. “How is it different?” he bit out.

“Because—” She licked her lips. God, she should just leave it at that. She should just let him walk out the door. This was a clean break, and he’d go away angry. He’d stay away.

But she couldn’t. She couldn’t stand it. Because it wasn’t like before, and he didn’t deserve to believe a lie. “Because I didn’t say it.”

“Didn’t—” And then he got it. He turned back towards her fully. “Elizabeth.”

“I didn’t say it. And I didn’t forget. This isn’t like before, Jason. It’s not. Because back then, I was still in denial. I still told myself every day that you were just my friend, and that Lucky was my forever. I couldn’t see a future that was different. And I thought if I said it enough, it would be true.”

She lifted her chin. “But it wasn’t true. And maybe it hasn’t been true for a long time. I just—I can’t let you think that I’m not—that I don’t understand what I’m doing.”

“Then *why* are you doing it?” he demanded. “If it’s not true—”

“Because I have to. Because I have to know if—” Her voice faltered. “Because it’s the right thing to do—”

“Damn the right thing—” Jason bit out the words as he slashed his hand through the air. “Stop worrying about the *right* thing to do! What do you want—” He curled his hand into a fist. “I am *done* arguing with you about Lucky Spencer. I’ve learned my lesson—”

“Jason—don’t go like this—”

“What did you expect?” Jason growled. “That I would be *happy* about you staying with someone you don’t love because you made a promise a lifetime ago to a boy that doesn’t exist anymore?”

“I—” Elizabeth pressed her hands to her face. “I’m sorry. *I’m sorry*. I can’t seem to make anyone happy. I can’t do anything right. *I’m sorry—*”

“No—don’t—” She heard him sigh as he stepped back towards her. When he spoke

again, his voice was soft, quiet. “Don’t be sorry. I don’t want you sorry.”

She opened her eyes at those familiar words. Her resolve nearly crumbled. How did they always seem to find themselves back here? “Jason—”

“I just—” He took her face in his, covering her hands with his own, tilting her head back, so their eyes met again. “I just—”

“If you ask me, I’ll answer you,” Elizabeth said, her voice raw. “*Ask me.*”

He closed his eyes as if in pain, then slowly shook his head. He leaned down, rested her forehead against hers. “If I have to ask, then you’re not ready to offer it. And I—” He pressed his lips to hers, and she kissed him greedily, hungrily, sliding her fingers in his hair, drawing him tightly to her.

She just wanted one more memory, one more taste—

Jason gently pushed her back after a long moment, but not far. He kissed her eyelids gently, then slowly released her face, stepping away from her. “I don’t want you sorry,” Jason told her. “I just want you to be happy. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Jason—”

“Will this make you happy?”

She didn’t know what had changed in the last few minutes—she had nearly given up. Had nearly given *in*.

But now, now she knew she was making the right choice for her. It would be easy to give in to him, to offer the words that would be true for both of them. She saw that now—she didn’t know how she ever could have denied the way he felt. The way she felt.

It didn’t change anything. It didn’t change the fact that she had to stay for now. That she had to try one more time to save the boy who’d never let her give in to the demons. She needed to know for sure if he was gone. And if she left now, if she abandoned him when he might need her the most—she’d never be able to forgive herself.

She didn’t need one more regret on her conscience. And she already knew she could live with the regret of not having Jason.

She'd been doing it for years.

She opened her eyes to look at him. “I don’t know. But I have to do it.”

“Okay.” He exhaled slowly. “Okay.” He fisted his hands at his side. “And you need me to stay away. To actually do it this time.”

“Y-Yes.” She folded her arms tightly, her chest aching. “I don’t want it, but it has to be —”

“Okay,” Jason said again. “But if you need me...” He hesitated, shook his head as if it irritated with himself. “If you need me.”

“I know how to find you.”

“I’ll—” Jason looked at her for a long moment. “I’ll see you later.”

“See you later.”

Then he left, and Elizabeth locked the door behind him.

Chapter Twenty-One

*You walked away and you left me numb
Rock bottom hit the floor
But I'd rather feel the pain
Than nothing at all
So if misery likes company
Then why am I alone?
It's cold outside this double bed
Inside a single room
So never let them see you cry
- Never Let Them See You Cry, Billie Myers*

Tuesday, April 11, 2006

Kelly's: Courtyard

Jason felt a hand snag at his elbow as he pulled open the door to the diner the next morning. Already irritated and in a crappy mood, he turned but swallowed whatever he'd been about to say when he found Robin Scorpio's pretty brown eyes staring back at him.

"Oh, wow, it's been a while since that look's been aimed at me." She smirked, then folded her arms. "I was hoping I'd run into you eventually."

"Why?" Jason let the door fall shut, turning to face her fully.

"Walk with me. I want to talk to you."

Knowing it was easier to agree, Jason let his ex-girlfriend wind her arm through his and steer him away from Kelly's, towards the docks. "Robin—"

"I was hoping you might tell me why the whole world is convinced you're having an affair with Elizabeth Spencer," Robin said as they approached Elm Street Pier. "No, don't scowl at me—this isn't me asking you for gossip."

"That's what it sounds like," he said dryly. He waited for Robin to sit on the bench, then sat next to her. "Why do you care?"

“Well, because I like Elizabeth. I always did, but we weren’t close before I moved away. Since I came back to work at GH, she’s become a friend. And Patrick absolutely adores her.” At the flash in Jason’s eyes, Robin shook her head. “Not like that. He’s never had a female friend before, and I think he’s kind of adopted her like a little sister. He’s worried about her. And...” She hesitated. “I am, too. For reasons I can’t talk about. Doctor patient stuff.”

“Patient,” Jason repeated, frowning. “When—” But he knew how seriously Robin took this kind of thing, so he didn’t argue. “You know as much as I do,” he said finally. “Lucky said things, and it went from here.”

“That doesn’t explain why people seem to just...” Robin pursed her lips. “How do I explain this? They just seemed to have *expected* it. But it was, like, out of left field for me, you know? I didn’t even realize you *knew* Elizabeth. And now...” She shrugged. “I guess I just...I was worried. About you both. And yeah, a little curious.”

Jason exhaled slowly and looked out over the lake towards Spoon Island. He didn’t know why he answered her, but Robin always had a way of *looking* at him. “We became friends after you left for Paris. The last time. Lucky had...we thought he was dead in that fire. And I’d...”

“Lost Michael,” Robin finished, a pained expression crossing her features. “Yeah. Okay—”

“I...It’s complicated, Robin.”

“It usually is.”

“I mean...” Jason shook his head. “We’ve been friends for a long time.”

“I just want to help her, Jason. I don’t want to hurt her.” She put a hand on his arm. “Are you okay? You look tired.”

“I’m fine. I just need to go get my coffee and get back to work—”

“We used to be able to talk,” Robin said softly as Jason got up and started for the stairs. “I’m not sure when that stopped. Long before we broke up, I know that. We stopped talking. And then we stopped liking each other. And somewhere between those two events, we stopped loving each other.”

He turned back to look at her, at the girl who was not only his first memory but some of the *best* memories he’d made in his short life. Robin had been his touchstone, the

one person he'd trusted. Until he'd broken that trust, and then she'd broken it back.

"I did everything wrong back then," Jason said finally. "I didn't really see it. I don't know when it happened—when we stopped being good for each other. I didn't know who I was if I didn't love you."

"I know. And I didn't see a future without you. You gave mine back to me, so I didn't want to give up on us." She got to her feet. "But I hurt you, too. And I hurt myself. I *never* should have stayed as long as I did. I let myself live a lie with you and Michael, but I hated myself every day. And I started to hate you, too."

"I wasn't fair to you. I asked you for things I had no right to—"

"I could have said no. I should have," Robin added. "But you know, we do stupid things. Because the misery we know is more comfortable than something new." She tilted her head. "I was surprised you never...that you never got together with Carly. I really thought—"

"I thought I was in love with her," Jason admitted. "I wasn't. If I had been, I never—" He bit off the words abruptly, irritated with himself for falling into old habits.

"It's just you and me here, Jason. It doesn't hurt me to talk about Carly," she told him. "Not anymore." She stepped towards him. "If you had been in love with Carly, what wouldn't have happened?"

"Elizabeth," Jason said quietly. He met Robin's eyes. "People at GH have long memories. You know that. And they probably remember the Christmas party the year you left. Nikolas Cassadine and I got into a fight, and he told the entire world we were sleeping together. We weren't—but—"

"But people believe what they want." Robin's smile was a bit sad. "But I guess it didn't work out."

"No. It didn't. And it won't. She's...staying with Lucky. Even after everything..." He shook his head.

"She's staying—" Robin pressed her lips together, her nostrils flaring slightly. "I didn't—I didn't think she would. I, ah, that's..." She took a deep breath. "Well, that's a mistake."

"She's never going to walk away from him," Jason muttered.

“Don’t say never. I guess that answers my question about whether there’s any truth to the rumors.”

“No—” Jason shook his head. “Not the way they think. But—” He pressed his lips together.

“The misery we know,” Robin repeated, “is usually the choice we make. Because you know what to expect. It’s terrifying to go into the unknown, to reach for something new. If it doesn’t work out, you can’t go back to what was before. That’s why you and I stayed together long after we were any good for each other. We were comfortable. Don’t be too hard on Elizabeth, Jason. She’s doing the best she can.”

“I know.” He cleared his throat. “Check in on her, will you? She could use a friend who isn’t close to Lucky, too. Emily does her best—”

“But her loyalties might be divided. Don’t worry, Jase. Patrick and I have her back. And I...” She sighed. “I don’t think it will last. Honestly, I hope it doesn’t.” He looked at her sharply—wondering what she knew. “But maybe she needs to find out for herself.” She offered him a smile. “Thanks. For actually talking to me. I missed it. We used to be friends.”

“Yeah, we did.” He kissed her cheek. “Take care of yourself, Robin. I’ll see you around.”

Jake’s: Upstairs Hallway

Sonny rapped his fist against one of the rickety doors and waited until footsteps inside shuffled towards him. Then the door opened, and Sam McCall glowered at him. “What do *you* want?”

“I wanted to check on you.”

“Good news travels fast, I guess,” Sam muttered. She didn’t open the door a single extra inch, not having any intention of letting him inside the room. “I’m alive. What do you *want*?” she repeated.

“Jason told me the two of you broke up,” Sonny said as Sam’s eyes narrowed. “Does that surprise you?”

“No. I’m sure he ran right over to his precious Elizabeth, and they’re basking in their freedom to be together now that Lucky’s out of commission and I’ve been run off.” Sam folded her arms. “Unless you’re here to make my day and tell me Jason got

rejected again by her.”

“That’s...more hostility than I was expecting,” Sonny admitted. “But I guess it’s deserved. I’m pretty sure Elizabeth is sticking with her marriage. Some people mean their vows, I guess.”

“Yeah, well, you never have, so I guess that *would* surprise you. Good. Now Jason can go find some other damsel in distress to rescue so he can just repeat this insanity with Elizabeth in, like, two years. Isn’t that how this works? He settles for as long as he can stand it, she crooks her finger when something goes wrong for her—”

“I think you’re hurt,” Sonny said gently. “And Jason didn’t handle any of this right —”

“Oh, you’re on *his* side now? After all the crap you two said two each other five minutes ago? Good God, you’re both insane. I’m actually *relieved* to be done with you and everyone else who’s part of your sick, twisted life.”

“A lot of the things Jason and I said to each other were true, even if they were cruel and delivered in anger. Sam, I just—I know I didn’t treat you well. Even if I *was* just a mark to you—”

Sam’s eyes changed, darkened somehow as she slid her finger down his silk dress shirt. “I bet I could have you wrapped around my finger in no time. Make you remember how it was between us—”

“You probably could,” Sonny admitted, as he caught her finger in his hand. “But neither one of us wants that, do we? If you need any money—”

Sam scowled, jerked her hand back as if it were scalding hot. “Didn’t Jason tell you? We were fighting because I wanted to get back into the game. He thinks I’m trash now, just like he used to. Imagine a criminal like Jason Morgan looking down his nose at a con artist like me and thinking he’s better.”

“I didn’t realize—”

“At least now with Jason gone, I don’t have to pretend to play the small games. I can go right for the big ticket. I don’t need you or Jason. I never did.”

“Sam—”

“So stop pretending like you give a damn.” She stepped back and slammed the door.

General Hospital: Nurse’s Station

Robin was the first person Elizabeth saw when she started her shift that morning, and the bright sunny smile from the doctor gave Elizabeth the lift she needed.

She’d put off returning to work as long as she could—Epiphany had offered the rest of the week, but Elizabeth wanted to get back to work. Back to her life. She was supposed to talk to Lucky later that day, to sort out exactly how things would work now that...well, now that she’d decided to stay.

Elizabeth didn’t even realize part of her had been hoping that Lucky would refuse to stay until Luke told her how ashamed and sorry Lucky was. Not that it would have changed anything—Elizabeth had already walked away from Jason, and the last twenty-four hours since he’d left the apartment had been terrible.

“Hey.” Robin flashed her another smile. “Welcome back.”

“Glad to be back.” Elizabeth ignored the student nurses who had giggled when they saw her and pointed. Robin had leveled a glare in their direction, but the nurses had just laughed again and walked away.

It would eventually stop. There was always another scandal at the hospital, and Elizabeth was desperately counting on something happening quickly. When she noticed Robin looking at her again, Elizabeth sighed. “What?”

“Nothing, nothing. I guess—” Robin pursed her lips. “I saw Jason before I came to work this morning.”

Elizabeth’s fingers stilled, frozen in air above the keyboard of the computer. “You did.”

“Yeah, I wanted to talk to him about—well, to be honest, about the rumors and just—get his side of things. Shameless, I know, but I just—I wanted to make sure I knew what I needed to know to be a good friend. We’re not...I mean, we’re *new* friends, but —” Robin sighed. “It doesn’t matter. He told me that you’re not leaving Lucky.”

Elizabeth’s throat clenched, and she looked back at the monitor even though the words and images were little more than a blur. “Did you tell him?”

“About the bruises? No. But I have the photos.” Robin touched her shoulder. “I didn’t

ask questions. I'm not asking them now. To be honest, after what happened this weekend, I'm pretty sure I don't have to."

"You—"

"I would never tell anyone. But I just—I'm not very good at letting things go. Not when I think I can help."

Elizabeth shook her head. "You can't—"

"Jason, by the way, looked like he'd been hit by a truck." Robin hesitated. "And you don't look much better. So I guess...I don't know. It's not my business—"

"It's really not—"

"But I'm going to butt in any way because if something happened and I didn't at least say *something*—I'd never forgive myself. Which is selfish, I know, but I'm known for that."

Robin paused, but Elizabeth said nothing. "If you're staying because you think he'll change, because you think he's sorry, and it'll be different, you're wrong. You know that. You took the same training I did. They're always sorry. But it's *always* your fault because *you* made them mad."

"Robin—"

"You're going to make him mad again. That's just life. Your son is probably going to make him mad. Can you tell me you're not wondering if he'll do it again?"

"I—" Elizabeth shook her head. "No. But maybe that's why I'm staying. Because if I leave now, I'll always wonder if maybe he would have changed. If he doesn't..." Her chest tightened. "At least I'll know. And no one will be able to tell me I didn't try—"

"Why do *they* matter?" Robin asked softly. "And you already *know* you've tried. I've *seen* you try. He didn't do it once, Elizabeth. How many times?"

"I—" She cleared her throat. "Three times. But it was—it was quick. And it was this stuff with Manny—Robin—"

"I just—I guess I'm doing that selfish thing, and I'm picturing myself—" Robin looked away, then met her eyes. "A few years ago, while I was in Paris, I had a patient

like you. A sweet girl who wanted to do right by the man she'd married. But he hit her all the time. And she always thought it was her fault. I told her to leave, and she wanted to. But she was Catholic, and thought—well, what would her family say? Divorce wasn't done in her family. So she stayed."

Elizabeth's eyes blurred. "What happened to her?"

"She was making dinner one night, or so the police report said, and she used the wrong kind of pasta. So he hit her in the face with the pan she'd used to fry the meatballs. It was still hot from the stove. And he kept hitting her until—" Robin's voice broke, and she took a deep breath. "She died, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth dipped her head. "Robin—"

"I didn't tell Jason because I knew you wouldn't want me to. Because I took an oath, and I see you as kind of my patient. But I'm just—I'm—if you end up here as a patient—I'm going to tell him, and I don't care if they take my license. Because I think you and I both know if *he* knew, you wouldn't be doing this."

"He'd never understand why I'm staying if he knew," Elizabeth admitted. "But—I think—" She sucked in a deep breath. "I think everyone else would."

"Elizabeth—"

"They'd want me to give him another chance. My grandmother would just—I don't know—I think she'd tell me that maybe it *was* my fault. And Emily would just say that Lucky's not like that, and I should try therapy or something—" Even if Emily had been championing her to leave, she doubted that Emily would believe Lucky had crossed the line into physical abuse. She couldn't bring herself to believe anyone would be on her side.

"Would they—"

"My grandmother seems to think if I'm single, I'll run to Jason, and that's the worst thing she could think of. She wanted me to keep trying with Ric after everything that happened—" Elizabeth rubbed the side of her head. "I'm just—I don't want to hear it. I don't want to be blamed."

"And *that's* worth the chance you're taking?" Robin said softly. "Elizabeth, if you end up hurt, I don't want to be the one to tell Jason that I knew what you were facing and did nothing. I'd never forgive myself. So if other people's opinions matter so much, why can't Jason and I get a vote?"

She licked her lips, picked up a stack of charts. “I—” She met Robin’s eyes. “Please don’t make this harder on me—”

“Who else knows?” Robin challenged.

Elizabeth shook her head. “It doesn’t matter—”

“Why? Because you know if you told more people, they wouldn’t let you do this—” Robin scowled as Elizabeth looked away. “Who? *Who* knows and isn’t giving you the third degree?”

“Bobbie isn’t happy about it, but she’s promised to support me. And Luke—he asked me to stay. To give Lucky another chance. I know Patrick and Epiphany suspect—”

“That’s more than enough—Elizabeth, I don’t understand why you’re doing this. Why are you staying when you don’t want to?”

“I—” She hesitated. “I have to,” but even that sounded weak to her. “Robin—”

“No. *Don’t* ask me to make this easy for you. Don’t expect me to give you that crap about supporting you no matter what.” Robin huffed. “You know, I expected you to start telling me how much he loved you and how he’s not like this—you’re not even trying to make this sound like it makes sense. You don’t want to stay. Don’t.”

Her resolve weakened. “Robin—”

“Why do you matter less than Lucky?” Robin pressed. “Why does *he* get to come first? When is it your turn? Why the hell aren’t Luke and Bobbie helping you pack?” Troubled, Robin sighed. “But maybe it’s not that complicated.”

“I—”

“You think you deserve this. That you had this coming. That even though you know better, that you almost understand why Lucky did what he did. After all, he saw the truth, didn’t he?”

Elizabeth swallowed. “Robin—”

“If you’re staying with Lucky because you feel guilty about being in love with another man, if that’s why you’re going to let him get away with physical and

emotional abuse—” Robin shrugged. “I can’t stop you.”

“It’s just—he’s been hurt almost since the wedding. He *was* different before then—but he’s been out of work and hurt. And things just keep getting worse. He’s so angry, Robin. If he could stop being angry—” She pressed her lips together. “You knew him when we were younger. You know what he was like.”

“You think it’s okay to push aside what he’s done, what he’s said because he’s in pain. Because he’s having a tough time. No, that’s not how it works. He made his choice. Maybe this isn’t who he *was*, but this *is* who he is now, Elizabeth.”

She sighed. “But you’re not ready to see it. Maybe you never will be. But I swear to God, if I find out he’s laid another hand on you, I’m *going* to tell Jason. I’m going to show him those pictures, and he’ll—” Robin scowled. “I should tell him now—”

“Robin, please don’t, he’ll never understand—” Elizabeth reached out to stop Robin from reaching in her lab coat for her phone. “Please—”

“I don’t *understand*.” Robin softened as tears slid down her cheeks. “I’m sorry. I know I should be nicer. I should be more understanding. Or maybe I should butt out. Carly’s always said I don’t know how to mind my own business. She’s probably right. But I *like* you, damn it. You matter. And it kills me that you don’t think you matter enough to leave him.”

“Robin—”

“I don’t mean to threaten you with Jason. It’s only that—” Robin shrugged. “I think he might be the only person who could make you see what a mistake you’re making. And you know that. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be so scared for me to tell him.”

“If...it happens again,” Elizabeth said slowly, “then...” Her stomach rolled. “Then you should tell him. Because you’re right. I don’t think I can—I can’t see this clearly. I thought I was. But I just—I don’t know. I thought I was making the right choice. I just—I don’t know.” She should tell Robin she wasn’t planning to stay forever, but she wasn’t even sure she believed herself, and she knew Robin wouldn’t understand.

“Think about telling him,” Robin said softly. “It’s not too late.”

Remembering Jason’s face as he’d walked away the night before, Elizabeth sighed. “You’re wrong about that. I need to get back to work.”

Kelly’s: Diner

Emily picked up the paper bag with the dinner she planned to bring over to Elizabeth's that night so she could spend some time with her and Cameron. She thought her best friend could use an evening of normal.

She couldn't explain why Elizabeth's decision to stay with Lucky was bothering her so much—maybe it was the misery in Elizabeth's eyes, the shock of how the PCPD had treated her after the kidnapping—and the conviction that whatever had happened between her brother and Elizabeth wasn't going to go away simply because Elizabeth planned to ignore it.

Whatever was going to happen, Emily knew she'd have to choose a side. And maybe she already had—

“Emily?”

Emily blinked and turned to find Sonny standing behind her. She grimaced, unsure at how they'd drifted apart so quickly in only a few days. Two weeks ago, she'd been battling her family and friends, burning bridges with all the people in her life—and for what?

For *Sonny*?

“What? I'm on my way to pick up Cameron from daycare, so—” She shrugged.

“I just—” Sonny looked at the curious onlookers and nodded towards the back of the diner. Emily rolled her eyes but followed her former lover behind the counter, into the kitchen, and out into the alley. “I just thought we should talk—”

“What's to talk about? I blew up my life over a man who doesn't respect or trust women.” Emily shrugged. “Lesson learned—”

“That's—that's not fair. You know there are things about my life you can't know—”

“Bullshit. There are things you don't want me to know because *you* need to be in control. This wasn't business as usual, Sonny. This was my best friend, and thank God I did butt in, you know, since it's how *you* figured out that Manny was targeting Elizabeth. She's my best friend, Sonny, and you wouldn't let me help her.”

“I know that's how it seems—”

“That’s how it was. Life is just...it’s too short to waste my time on a man who doesn’t see me as his equal.” Emily shook her head. “You don’t. And I don’t think there’s a woman you’ll ever trust enough to give up some of that control.”

“Emily—”

“It was fun, but I’m done. I need to get back to my life. You know, Elizabeth has never once let me down. She’s always been in my corner, always been right there when I needed her, but I wasn’t there for her. Being with you—I was a cruel, selfish, and thoughtless person—”

“Oh, that’s my fault?” Sonny repeated, irritated now. “You fought with Jason, not me —”

“No, all of those things are in me. But being with you brings out the worst in me. And I just...I can’t do it. It’s too hard, Sonny. And it hurts too much. And...” She bit her lip. “You’re just not worth it.”

She pulled open the heavy steel door to the kitchen and disappeared inside without another look.

General Hospital: Lucky’s Room

Elizabeth gently knocked on the open door to her husband’s hospital room. At the sound, Lucky turned towards the door, his face pale, and his eyes bloodshot. “Elizabeth.”

“Did Luke tell you I’d be by today?” she asked, not moving from the threshold, not interested in taking one more step until she knew...

Until she knew it was safe.

“Yeah.” He swallowed hard. “You gonna come in?”

“That depends. Are you going to call me a whore again?”

He closed his eyes, shook his head. “No.” The word was little more than a whisper, but it gave Elizabeth the strength to walk into the room. She stopped at the foot of his bed and left the door open.

“I was packing my things on Sunday,” Elizabeth said slowly, “because I thought—

and part of me still thinks—that we can't get past this. And honestly, Lucky, I'm not —" A lump rose in her throat. She had to say it. Even if she said it only once. "I'm not sure I want to."

"Yeah." He looked at her, those eyes she'd once loved so much. "I get that."

"I promised Luke I would try."

"He said..." Lucky reached for the bed remote and pressed the button that brought him up a few more inches. Elizabeth sat in the chair next to his bed but perched on the edge.

Ready for an escape.

"He said he had to beg you."

"Are you surprised?"

"No." Lucky met her eyes. "I'd tell you I was sorry, but I don't think I'm sorry is enough."

"I'm not sure, either," she confessed. "I know you've struggled, Lucky, since November. Since the car accident in February. I know it's been hard. And I've tried to be supportive. I tried to do what you needed me to do. I told myself you'd go back to work, and it would be okay. We'd be okay."

"I'm not sure I'll ever be okay again." He winced as he shifted on the bed. "I can't ever go back to being a cop. Mac said I could do desk duty. I'd hate that. Dad says I can go to work at the club. But I just—" A tear slid down his cheek as he shook his head. "I had a plan. And I can't go back."

"It's not my fault," Elizabeth said softly. "I know you think Manny went after me because of Jason. He didn't. He was insane, Lucky. And he targeted me because of the kidnapping last year. And he went after you because of the bruises."

"Yeah. Yeah, I remember that much." Lucky exhaled slowly. "I just—I see you, and I remember being in that room—listening to Manny—"

"If you can't let this go, if you can't get past this, Lucky, then we don't even need to have this conversation." Elizabeth started to stand, but Lucky held up a hand.

"I can't lose you, too. I can't—" Lucky's voice faltered. "I can't lose everything, Elizabeth. I don't deserve you. But I won't—I won't hurt you again. I love you."

She pressed her lips together, looked down at her arm, where the fingerprints from last Wednesday were only just fading. "You said that the first time you pushed me. And then twenty-four hours later—"

"I was just—I was angry. And I knew I'd fail my test on Friday—"

"Hurting me *can't* be the answer."

"I know." Lucky closed his eyes again. "I know. I don't have any excuses, Elizabeth. I was just—I was angry. And I was jealous. Because Jason was back in our lives, and I just—"

"I have never slept with Jason," she said flatly. Because, at least on this, she could be honest. "Not seven years ago when we thought you were dead. Or five years ago. Four years ago. Last week. I don't care what people told you. And if you can't believe me on that simple fact, then we have a problem."

"He needs to be out of our lives," Lucky bit out. "And if *you* can't agree on *that*, then we really have nothing to say to each other."

"I'd already decided that, but he's still Emily's brother. And he lives in Port Charles. I can't avoid him forever. So you either trust me, or you don't."

"I—" He licked his lips. "I want to. Isn't that enough?"

Elizabeth wanted to say no, but she knew that she was on shaky ground here. She was pressing the semantics, but she knew if Lucky asked the right question, she'd have to lie. Or tell the truth about exactly how far across the line Elizabeth had strayed.

"We can start there." She took a deep breath. "If you touch me again, if you hit me, push me, or even grab me, I'm done, Lucky. This is it. This is the last chance we'll ever have to make this work. I want you to go into anger management counseling."

"I—" Lucky's face flushed. "What?"

"If you say no, I'm going to get up, go home and pack, and the only time you'll hear from me is in divorce court. I took pictures, Lucky. Dated pictures before Manny laid

a finger on me. So you go to anger management, or we have nothing else to discuss.”

Lucky wanted to argue—she could see it in his face—then he sighed, shook his head. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re probably right. I need to figure out how to deal with all of this. It kills me that I hurt you, Elizabeth. I don’t know how it happened—I never thought—I never thought I’d be that man.”

“Neither did I.” She shifted, uncomfortable, realizing now that part of her had thought he’d fight her more on the counseling. Had she still hoped he’d back out? Take the responsibility away from her? “But we made promises to each other, Lucky. And they mattered to me.”

“They mattered to me. So whatever you need me to do, whatever you want, I’ll do it. Our marriage is all I have left.”

“Good. Good, I’ll get...I’ll get some names, and when you get out of the hospital...” Elizabeth got her to feet, tucked her hair behind her ears. “I have to go. Emily’s getting Cameron for me from daycare, and she’s bringing dinner.”

“Okay. Thank you, Elizabeth. For this chance. You won’t regret it.”

“I hope not. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

*Staring at the bottom of your glass
Hoping one day you'll make a dream last
But dreams come slow and they go so fast
You see her when you close your eyes
Maybe one day you'll understand why
Everything you touch surely dies*
- Let Her Go, Jasmine Thompson

Friday, April 14, 2006

General Hospital: Lucky's Room

Lucky grimaced as he gingerly lowered himself onto the hospital bed. He leaned over slightly, took a deep breath, and tried to grit his teeth as pain ripped through his back.

He'd begun intensive physical therapy two days earlier and would be in the hospital another few days. Nearly every doctor he'd talked to thought Lucky would probably be in a measure of pain for six to eight months as the discs in his back healed.

But he'd never be fit enough to go back to his old life. He wouldn't be on the streets but chained to a desk. Lucky had reluctantly told Mac that after he was done this latest round of rehab, he'd take whatever job the PCPD found for him. Damned if he'd work with his father at the club.

He didn't want to see Luke Spencer's sad, disapproving eyes every damn day. It was bad enough dealing with his wife, but at least Elizabeth had a *reason* to look at him with such bitterness. He closed his eyes. He wasn't going to think about what had happened before. That was the agreement. He and Elizabeth were supposed to make a fresh start.

Lucky wanted that. He wanted to make up for how much he'd hurt her, wanted to show her it didn't have to be this way. But it was hard to forget she was only staying because his father had begged. She hadn't wanted to stay, and if he'd been any kind of man, he would have told her to go.

But he wasn't strong enough to throw away the dream of who he had been, the love

he'd felt for her once. If they tried harder—couldn't they be happy again? Why was it so hard to get it back?

"Spencer."

Lucky turned at the sound of his doctor's voice, watching as Patrick strolled into his room, a chart in his hand. "What? More bad news?"

"Maybe for you, but not for me." Patrick shoved the chart into its place at the foot of the bed. "The hospital finally hired a replacement for Tony Jones. I'm transferring some of my excess cases, and you were the first on the list."

Lucky scowled. "Why?"

"Because there is no way in *hell* I'm going to pretend I give a damn about what happens to you," Patrick retorted. "Elizabeth refuses to admit it, but I know how those bruises got on her face, on her arm. For some ridiculous reason, she's staying with you." He shook his head. "You touch her again, Spencer, *I* will make your life a living hell."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Lucky snarled. He forced himself to his feet. "Elizabeth was kidnapped by a psycho—"

"Not on Friday morning, she wasn't. Don't bother denying it, asshole. Any man who takes his anger out on a woman doesn't deserve the title."

Lucky fisted his hands at his side. "And who the hell are *you* to tell me how to deal with my wife?" Jesus Christ, how many fucking men did Elizabeth have trailing around her like a puppy dog? The doctor, the psycho, the gangster...what the hell was she doing that these men all thought they had the right to talk to him like this? He was a fucking cop—

"There's a special place in hell for men like you," Patrick told him. "Men who say 'my wife' like they're talking about property they own. Elizabeth is my friend."

"Sure. Friend. I've heard your reputation. You sure that's *all* you are?"

Patrick narrowed his eyes. "You really are a dumb bastard. I'm not going to waste my time with you. I hope she figures out she deserves better. Rot in hell."

He stormed out the door while Lucky glared at his back. What the hell had Elizabeth

done or said? She'd promised no one other than his father and aunt knew—and why the hell did Patrick Drake give a damn? He'd only been in Port Charles a few months

Lucky exhaled slowly, then shook his head. No. *No*. This was how it had started with Jason. Assuming there was something going on, and hadn't he driven Elizabeth right into Jason's arms? Every time he'd hurt her, that asshole had been there, waiting. Elizabeth made friends easily. People *liked* her.

When he felt the edge of his temper subside, he sat back on the hospital bed, and let out another slow breath. He had to stop doing that. *Had* to stop seeing Elizabeth at the center of everything that was wrong. She was all that he had left that was good, and if he messed up again, she'd never come back.

He had to get this right. He just wished people would give him some fucking space and understanding. He'd been through a lot, and he'd handled it badly. But he was trying, wasn't he? What the hell did people expect?

He'd tell Elizabeth to get her new guard dog to back off, and maybe if Jason Morgan stayed the hell away, they might have a chance to get it right.

Hardy Home: Living Room

"Mommy, Mommy, guess what?" Cameron said, toddling towards Elizabeth as fast as his little legs would carry him. She still couldn't quite lift him without a twinge in her shoulder, but she was able to keel down and hug him at the door.

"What?" She pressed kisses to his face as he giggled.

"Gram got me another Biderman!" He wagged the action figure in her face. "And I got a movie for here, so I don't gotta bring mine."

"That's great, baby." She kissed him again, then got to her feet. "Thanks for picking him up today, Gram. Carly had to take Morgan to the doctor's—"

"I don't understand why we can't simply go back to our old routine," Audrey complained as Elizabeth took Cameron's hand and led him to the sofa where he started to put his things into a bag. "I enjoyed having him every day, but instead, you insist on maintaining connections to dangerous criminals—"

"Carly was actually found not guilty of shooting Tony due to temporary insanity, so I don't think she counts as a criminal, Gram." Elizabeth looked at her grandmother.

“It’s not personal. Morgan and Cameron are getting along right now, and having Michael around is good for him, too. He needs the socialization to start nursery school in the fall—”

“He’s too young—”

“A little,” Elizabeth admitted. “But Carly told me the two-year-old program has been great for Morgan at St. Andrew’s, and since Morgan can’t start preschool for another year because of his birthday being in November, they can go to school together—”

“St. Andrew’s?” Audrey repeated. She pressed a hand to her chest. “That’s a private school—”

“Yeah, Port Charles doesn’t have a preschool program in the public school, so I have to pay—no, leave those here, Cam. For next time,” she told him as he tried to shove all of his Legos into the bag.

“But that’s very expensive. Oh, Elizabeth, don’t tell me you’re letting that man pay for Cameron’s education—”

“What?” Elizabeth stared at her, wrinkling her nose in confusion. Then she sighed. “You mean Jason.”

“Yes! You know what people will say if they find out Cameron is in the same school as Morgan Corinthos. You should look into Port Charles Day. It’s less expensive—”

“People can say whatever they want. Cameron Lewis left his entire estate to Cam.” Feeling exhausted by a conversation she never saw coming, Elizabeth shook her head. “I told you that. He put aside almost all of it for Cam’s education. I’m only using a little for preschool.”

“Oh.” Audrey cleared her throat. “I’m sorry. I had—I hadn’t thought of that—”

“No, I guess you wouldn’t. You’d have to *ask* me without jumping to conclusions. I can provide for my son, Gram. Thanks to his grandfather. But if you must know, I did ask Carly to call in some favors to get Cam in for next year. I wanted him to be with Morgan.”

“I like Morgan,” Cameron told his great-grandmother with shiny baby teeth flashing. “He’s my cousin. Cuz Aunt Bobbie is his gram, and she’s Daddy’s aunt.”

“I—”

“Carly and I do not like each other. But we both love our kids.”

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea for Cameron to spend so much time around criminals—”

“Criminals are bad guys,” Cameron announced with a dark look. “I don’t like bad guys. Who’s a bad guy, Mommy?”

“No one—”

“You’re telling me that you’ve never seen Jason Morgan at Carly’s house?” Audrey asked Cameron.

“Don’t get him involved in this—”

“Morgan’s Uncle Jason? He’s nice. He’s Aunt Em’s brother, and he’s nice, Mommy. He listens to all my Biderman stories. Then he let Morgan walk on his back.”

“Cameron, sweetheart, can you go upstairs and make sure you have everything you need?” Elizabeth said. The toddler sighed, then started to trudge up the stairs, climbing slowly. When he was out of earshot, Elizabeth looked at her grandmother with irritation. “Do *not* interrogate my child about Carly’s house—”

“You’ve just heard it from his own lips that he’s seen Jason there—is that where you met him?” Audrey demanded. “Did you use your own son as a cover for your affair?”

Elizabeth stared at the older woman for a long moment before exhaling slowly. “Thank you for watching Cameron today, but I’ll make other arrangements in the future.”

“Elizabeth, I’m just trying to help! You’ve so impulsive—you never *think*—You have a perfectly good marriage—”

“Is that what people said to you about Tom Baldwin?” Elizabeth demanded as she turned back to face her grandmother. Audrey’s face lost its color, and Elizabeth immediately regretted the cheap shot. “I’m sorry, Gram. I just—you never *stop*. You never give me a moment to breathe before you criticize me. You don’t live with Lucky. You don’t know anything about my marriage.”

“I—” Audrey swallowed. “Why would you compare...” Something flickered in her eyes. “Elizabeth.”

“Cameron, let’s go!” Elizabeth called up the stairs. “Gram—”

“Tom Baldwin abused me. He raped me. And he forced me to stay in a marriage that nearly destroyed my soul.” Audrey’s voice quivered slightly. “And you know that.”

“I’m sorry—”

“You would never throw that out at me to hurt me. Just as I would never remind you of your own attack as a weapon. So I ask you, Elizabeth...” Audrey took a deep breath. “*Is there something you need to tell me?*”

“I—” The truth nearly spilled out then as she saw that maybe, just maybe, her grandmother *wouldn’t* take Lucky’s side. Elizabeth sighed, bit her lip, and then Cameron started to climb gingerly down the steps. One step at a time, nearly crawling backward—Cameron was suspicious of steps.

The moment was lost. “No. I’m sorry. I’m just—I’m doing the best I can, Gram. And I’m trying to give Cam all the love I can. I don’t have a lot of family. It’s just you and me. So if Bobbie wants to loan Cam some of hers, I’m not going to argue.”

“No, of course not, dear. And I do remember how good Jason was with Michael as a baby. I’m sure he’s very nice to Cameron.” Audrey clasped her hands in front of her. “I’m sorry. I know I push too hard, and I judge too harshly. I love you. And I will try harder not to leap to conclusions.”

“Thank you, Gram. I love you. Even with all the...fighting...you’ve never given up on me.” She pressed her lips to Audrey’s cheek. “Thank you,” she repeated.

“I love you,” Audrey reminded her again. “And I will always be here if you need me.”

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

Emily sheepishly stepped over the threshold of the penthouse, shoving her hands into the pockets of her jacket as she walked past Jason. “I didn’t think I’d be let back in here after the crap I started.”

“I let Wally know a few days ago you had clearance again. After Manny, then Sam moved out—” Jason shrugged, closing the door. “You told me you and Sonny were done...”

“All of that seems so far away now, doesn’t it?” Emily asked. She tossed the jacket on the arm of the sofa.

“Yeah.” Jason exhaled with a quick shake of his head. “Well, I guess it doesn’t matter —”

“It *does* matter, Jason. Because maybe the reasons are over, but it doesn’t change what I did. What I said.” She folded her arms across her chest, dipping her head down a bit. “I was cruel. To you, to Elizabeth, and to Sam.”

“You were upset—”

“Yeah, but—look, it doesn’t mean I get to *say* whatever I want. I just...wish there something I could do. I mean, I started all that crap, now you and Sam are broken up, and Lucky is making Elizabeth miserable—”

“That—” Jason held up a hand. “That has nothing to do with it—”

“Nothing?” Emily lifted her brows. “You and Sam didn’t have arguments about what I said? How you reacted? You and Elizabeth would have...” She shook her head. “Never mind—”

“I’m—” Jason hesitated. “Maybe some conversations happened that might not have, but that doesn’t mean—” He paused. “How I reacted is on me. I pushed Elizabeth into talking about all of it. And kept pushing, even when she asked me to stop. And *I’m* the one that hurt Sam with all of that—”

Emily tipped her head. “You know, I’ve talked to Elizabeth. I know...I know things are...complicated. Did...she tell you she was staying with Lucky?”

Jason grimaced, remembering the conversation four days earlier at her apartment. Elizabeth’s tear-stained cheeks, the pain in her voice as she begged him to ask the question.

He should have asked her. So what if the answer would have made everything harder? How simple was it — Do you love me? And she would have said yes.

But he didn’t ask it. And she hadn’t volunteered.

“She did,” Jason said shortly.

“I think it’s a terrible decision. I mean, Lucky’s my friend, too, but what kind of friend would I be if I told her to stay with someone who treated her that way?” Emily asked. She shrugged. “But Luke knew exactly how to convince her.”

“Luke?” Jason repeated. “What does *he* have to do with it?”

“Elizabeth didn’t say a lot about it to me because she knew I’d be angry. Bobbie and I were talking, and she was pissed as hell at Luke. Apparently, she was packing on Sunday, after all that crap at the hospital. He came over, and he convinced her to give Lucky one last chance. She was so close to walking away.” Emily sighed.

Jason scowled. He knew it—he *knew* it wasn’t as simple as Elizabeth making the choice on her own. “She was packing? She was going to leave?”

“Oh, yeah. She’d even asked Justus about Cameron—did Lucky have any rights or was she good there—she was making the choice, Jason. And then Luke Spencer came to make Lucky her problem again. He and Laura—they *always* knew exactly how to twist the knife. I mean, look, I’m no saint. I was always pushing her back when he came home—but they never let up. Always telling her if she just kept trying, Lucky would come back to them. She just had to hold on to the memory.”

Emily started to wander around the penthouse, restlessly. “It made sense to me then. I was just a kid. We were *all* just kids. And then I came home and...I thought I was still supposed to love Zander. And I made everything worse clinging to that. I hurt him. I hurt Nikolas. I hurt myself. Because I was trying to hold on to promises I made when I was just a kid. The fact that Luke can look at Elizabeth, what she’s been through, and tell her she needs to keep holding on to this memory of Lucky—they were *sixteen*! Like how is any of this *fair*?”

“It’s not,” Jason said, finally. “But you’ll never convince her of that.”

“No, I guess not,” Emily said with a sigh. “I just...you get the feeling she’s not telling you something about all of this? Like...I *know* something else is going on. Not about you,” she added. “I think we’ve covered that—”

Jason frowned. “What did she tell—” He sighed. “Never mind.” Was that the kind of desperate he felt? Wanting to know what Elizabeth had said about him to his sister? How pathetic—

“No, about Lucky. I just—I feel like this isn’t the end of it. Like, she thinks he’ll go to go to anger management, and it’ll be okay. I just—I don’t think so. He was *so* angry

about losing his job—how is that going to go away? I mean, I know Lucky. Even before the fire, he knew how to hold a grudge better than anyone. He hated Nikolas for years for no good reason other than he was a Cassadine. He declared war on Luke and his mother because of something that happened before he was born—”

Emily bit her lip. “I’m worried about her, Jason. It’s like...she’s got herself twisted up in who she was supposed to be and what her life was supposed to look like. Now, she’s too scared to step away from it. I thought she was past this—past this idea of saving Lucky the way she says he saved her. I don’t remember Lucky having to destroy himself to help her get through the rape, so why does she have to sacrifice her own happiness?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said finally, troubled. “But that’s a question that Elizabeth has to answer for herself.”

“Yeah. I know.” Emily offered a determined smile. “But I’ll be a better friend this time. I’m going to keep an eye on her. And you—” She tipped her head.

“Have to stay away,” Jason told her. “I promised her.”

“Okay. Well, then it’s up to me—” Emily reached for her jacket. Jason put a hand on her elbow.

“But if she needs any help—”

“I know how to find you.”

Emily left her brother in the penthouse, then smiled to herself as she walked towards the elevator. She *knew* Elizabeth wouldn’t have told Jason that she’d been on her way out the door when Luke pressured her for the same reason she hadn’t told Emily.

But telling Jason that Elizabeth had been ready to do it—to make sure he knew she hadn’t chosen this on her own—well, just maybe Jason would wait around to let the smoke settle and when Elizabeth finally got herself together—

Well, she’d done what she could to make up for her mistakes. The rest would have to be up to them.

Tuesday, April 18, 2006

Lucky & Elizabeth’s Apartment: Living Room

Elizabeth managed a smile as Lucky gingerly made his way into the apartment, his arm braced by his father. Behind him, Lucky's former partner, Jesse, hovered, shooting Elizabeth irritated looks every few minutes.

She really didn't have the energy to deal with Jesse and others in Lucky's life who didn't seem to be able to let the events after the kidnapping go. She'd run into several cops in and out of the hospital, and they all seemed to share Jesse's general dislike of her.

Elizabeth didn't much care what the PCPD thought as long as they stayed out of her business. According to Justus and Emily, they'd quietly closed Manny's shooting as self-defense, so Jason wasn't facing any charges.

She hadn't seen him since he'd left her apartment the week before, and that was good. He was doing what Elizabeth had asked—staying away. That was what she needed to make her marriage work—

Even if she missed him.

"Thanks, Dad," Lucky said as Luke helped him sit on the couch. "I can do it by myself ___"

"That new doctor of yours told you to take it easy a few more days before you start trying to get back into the swing of things," Luke reminded Lucky. "Let Elizabeth pamper you here—"

"She's got work," Lucky said, then winced. "I mean, that's not what I—" He looked at Elizabeth. "I didn't mean it that way."

"I know you didn't. Bobbie and Emily are both coming by to check on you while I'm at work," Elizabeth reminded him. To Luke, she said, "And Dr. Cook made it clear—Lucky could follow his instincts. If he feels up to moving around, then he can."

"I have to get back to my life." Lucky looked at Jesse, who had shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "And maybe I'll like working the desk—"

Jesse snorted but didn't say anything about that. Instead, he just shrugged. "Whatever. Glad to see you out of the hospital. Maybe me and Maxie can come over for dinner or something. We'll grab some ribs from Eli's."

"That'd be good, right?" Lucky said to Elizabeth. "We love their ribs. Remember? We had it on our first real date. Your birthday—"

"I remember," Elizabeth said softly, but she did smile. "You got your dad to give us the club for the night." He'd been doing that a lot since their conversation at the hospital—bringing up memories from those halcyon days before the fire.

The trouble was the more Elizabeth remembered how happy they'd been back then, she'd realized how unhappy she was *now*, and that probably wasn't a good thing. But he was trying, and she'd promised to try, too.

"Well, speaking of the club, I should get going. Someone has to run the place, or Claude will burn it to the ground." Luke looked at Elizabeth. "Call me if you need anything, okay, kid?" He kissed her cheek. "Glad to see you out of the hospital, Cowboy. And back to your old self."

But his smile looked forced, and Elizabeth knew Luke was overcompensating. He felt guilty for convincing her to stay, but it wasn't his fault. She'd made the choice. She'd had days to reconsider and people who'd wanted her to, but she'd stayed.

She'd stayed for the boy he'd once been and for the girl who had loved him. And she'd stayed because the promises she'd made in November had meant something to her.

"I'll head out with you," Jesse said to Luke. "Lucky, I'll see you around."

"Yeah."

When they were gone, it was just the two of them. Elizabeth rubbed her arms restlessly as she stood behind the sofa, watching as Lucky rearranged himself into the corner, wincing at the pain in his face. "Do you want something for dinner?"

"No, not right now," Lucky said. He grimaced. "Where's Cameron? Why isn't he here?"

"I thought it might be easier if he wasn't here tonight," Elizabeth admitted. "You're not really that fast on your feet, and I wanted you to be settled and see how you felt out of the hospital without a two-year-old running around. So he's spending the night with Morgan."

"And Carly," Lucky said flatly. "That's still a thing."

"It is. Carly's taking over for my grandmother. It's great, actually. Cameron gets to have play dates with his best friend. Carly's usually with them this time of day, but if she can't be, she's got a nanny. And Leticia's great. So I don't have to worry about

last-minute cancellations.” Elizabeth shrugged. “And it forces Carly to be nice to me, which I kind of enjoy.”

“I really...I’m not comfortable with Cameron playing with Sonny’s kid,” Lucky said. He looked at her, uneasy. “And doesn’t Jason go over there a lot?”

Forcing herself to be casual, Elizabeth answered, “I imagine he does. Morgan is also Bobbie’s grandson. He’s your cousin. Carly’s your cousin. We’re not arguing about this, Lucky. Cameron is my son.”

He pressed his lips together with a flare of his nostrils. “I thought we were supposed to be a family—”

She clenched her fists. Now he was going to play that card? “We were. But *you* made it clear that watching Cameron on your own is a burden—and that was before you got hurt again.” Elizabeth cleared her throat. “So I made arrangements. You can go to therapy and counseling without having to worry about Cameron.”

“Counseling?” Lucky repeated. “Oh, the anger management thing.” He hesitated. “I was hoping we could—put that off for a while. Just until I get through the first few weeks of my rehab. I know what the doctors said about my back, but if I try hard—if I can work through the pain—”

“You want to postpone anger management counseling,” Elizabeth repeated, her stomach dropping. Of course. “Lucky, you *promised*—”

“I know. And I’ll go. But I can go in a few weeks. I’m trying to do better. Aren’t I doing better?” Lucky demanded. “I’m not even demanding you keep Cameron away from Jason—”

“You don’t get any credit for not shoving or pushing me in the ten minutes we’ve been alone,” Elizabeth said coolly. “So I don’t *know* if you’re doing better. You’re not calling me a whore anymore, so okay there’s that—”

“Are you ever going to let that go?” Lucky demanded, suddenly shoving himself off the sofa and turning to face her. His face flushed. “I was in pain, and I was hurt—”

“You don’t even *remember* all the times you called me a whore, do you? Because—” Elizabeth bit off whatever she’d been about to add. “Never mind. We’re not having this argument. I don’t want you to postpone anger management. I’m not comfortable with you breaking your promise—”

“I’m not breaking my promise, I’m just asking for more time—”

“And I’m saying no.”

Lucky stared at her for a long time, but Elizabeth didn’t back down. Not this time. She wasn’t a weak, silly girl who was staying with her man because she believed he’d change. She knew he wouldn’t unless he dealt with his problems. And until he did, his anger could turn on her again.

She didn’t want to be like the woman Robin had warned her about. She wasn’t stupid—she wasn’t blind—and if Lucky refused—

She’d go to her grandmother’s house and never look back. She was keeping her promises. She was staying away from Jason. Lucky had to keep his, too, or there was no point in even trying.

Lucky scowled. “Fine. Be that way. I’ll go to counseling. I’ll make an appointment.”

“Good. I’m going to go make dinner,” Elizabeth said and went into the kitchen.

Jake’s: Bar

Sam rolled her eyes as she took a swig of her beer, then turned away from the door towards the back of the bar. “Slummin’ again?” she demanded as Sonny Corinthos slid onto the stool next to her. He ordered a drink from Coleman behind the bar.

“No, just checking in.” Sonny sipped the bourbon the bartender gave him. “One of my warehouse guys said you’ve been here every night—”

“It’s a free country—” Sam grimaced, then closed her eyes with a shake of her head. “I’m in a bad mood, Sonny. And it’s not getting any better the longer I stick around here. You’re getting in the way of my mood, so I’m taking it out on you. I don’t know why you’re bothering—”

“Jason said something to me in the middle of all that crap with Emily—about cleaning up my messes and not wanting Emily to be the next woman I damaged. I can’t—” Sonny hesitated. “I can’t do anything about Lily. Or Brenda. Carly is...” He flicked his fingers. “Whatever Carly is. But I just...I feel like you’re in a bad place. And I guess I wish I could help. Balance the scales a bit.”

“There’s no balancing the scales, Sonny. You didn’t hurt me. I didn’t hurt you. We didn’t matter enough to each other.” Sam pursed her lips. “And you don’t have to

worry about me. I'm heading to Florida in the morning on a job. I'll be gone a few weeks." And might not even come back except to pack her things. She didn't like who she was turning into in Port Charles.

"So you're really getting back into the game—"

"I let you and Jason and pretty much everyone make me feel guilty about my past. I made excuses about what I did, tried to pretend I did it for moral reasons—I did it to support my brother. And I did, you know. I wanted to make sure Danny was cared for." Sam shrugged. "But you know why else I did it?"

"Because you liked it."

"Because I *liked* it," she repeated. "You know what I mean, Sonny. It's gotta be the same kind of power you feel being in charge here. There was probably a moment when someone listened to you carried out an order—or maybe someone you intimidated—a moment when you just *knew* it had been worth it because *damn* it felt good."

"I do like power." Sonny swirled the bourbon in his tumbler. "I never had much of it as a kid. Couldn't keep Mike from leaving, couldn't keep my mother from looking for a father figure to replace him. Deke locked me in closets—" He sipped the alcohol. "But being Sonny Corinthos with men at my beck and call, who'd take a bullet for me—" He nodded. "Yeah, that feels good."

"Exactly. That's what I feel when I run the games. When I know I have that person right where I want them—I can say anything, do anything, and they'll believe me. I just—" Sam laughed a bit. "I *love* it. And maybe that makes me a terrible person. Jason hates what I do. I don't get it—I don't understand—"

"Jason *Quartermaine* was a pain in the ass," Sonny said. "He had a moral code that was based on the usual crap—right and wrong, law versus crime. He thought I was trash, and that everyone around me deserved what they got. Except Stone. He loved Stone. But Jason *Morgan* still has that sense of right and wrong. He still follows a code. I just helped him rewrite it after the accident."

"So he doesn't believe in preying on the weak and innocent," Sam said, with a roll of her eyes. "And people in your business know what they're getting into. What about the collateral damage? I mean, come on—"

"He regrets collateral damage. Minimizes it. You and me—" Sonny arched a brow as Sam met his eyes. "We *thrive* on it. Because it means we matter. It gives us power."

Jason will never get that about you, Sam. He can barely tolerate it with me.”

“I wish I could blame the break up on Elizabeth, but I guess we were doomed the second I decided to take that job with Paulie.” Sam finished his beer. “Well, then, better we figured that out before we got married or had kids. Because I’m done pretending to be someone I’m not.”

She slid off the stool. “To be honest, Sonny, I’m not sure if I’ll be sticking around Port Charles much longer. I still have some...unfinished business, but when that’s done —” She held out her hand. “Have a nice life.”

“You, too, Sam. Let me know before you decide to split for good.” Sonny offered her a dazzling smile. “I want to make sure I keep your contact info. You never know when a good con artist will come in handy.”

Thursday, April 20, 2006

Courtland Street: Alley

Lucky grimaced as he found Santiago Escobar waiting in their usual meeting place. He’d tried—he’d *really* tried—not to call the dealer because he’d been determined to get by on the painkillers his new doctor had given him. This guy hadn’t fed Lucky any the bullshit Patrick Drake had fed him about limiting his prescriptions. No referrals to a pain management clinic either.

But Lucky had taken the pills too fast—he’d gone through the entire bottle in only three days. He just knew that if he went back to Dr. Cook asking for a refill already, the doctor *would* probably start pulling the same crap. All these doctors, just covering their asses. They didn’t actually give a shit about him or what he needed.

“Didn’t think I’d see you back here,” Santiago said with a sneer. He shoved his hands into his jean pockets. “Heard you got the shit kicked out of you.”

“Yeah, well, that’s why I’m here. Manny Ruiz screwed up my back, and they won’t change the dosage on my pills.” Lucky grimaced as a tearing pain sliced through his lower back. He should probably still be resting at home, but he was sick and tired of not living his life, of letting it just happen to him.

“You got what I need?” Lucky demanded.

“Yeah, yeah.” Santiago reached inside the jacket and withdrew the plastic bag with pills—and the chaser of heroin Lucky had asked for. Just enough for one use. He

wasn't a drug addict, but nothing relieved the pain like the heroin. He could handle it. Santiago held out his hand. "Pay up—"

"I'm good for it," Lucky snarled. "I get my disability check in two weeks. I can make it good then."

"This ain't no fucking Kmart, asshole—"

But Lucky had already taken the bag and shoved it in his jacket. "I'll pay up. I need this now. I can't get through rehab without it."

"You don't pay me in two weeks, Spencer, you'll regret it."

"Yeah, yeah."

Santiago sneered one last time at him before disappearing down the alley. Lucky took the bag out once he was gone and dry swallowed two of the pills. He'd have to wait until he got home and made sure he was alone before he could get the real relief.

He just needed to get through the physical therapy, get his strength back—then he wouldn't need this crap anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Four

*They say everything is temporary
Who the hell are they anyways
I wanna know where does love go to die
Is it some sad empty castle in the skies?
Did we just shoot too high and spoil like wine?
- But We Lost It, P!nk*

Thursday, April 27, 2006

Mercy Hospital: Meeting Room

Lucky grimaced as he sat down in the folding chair, trying to adjust the way he was sitting until his back wasn't screaming in pain. He took a deep breath and finally found a bearable position.

The chairs had been arranged in a semi-circle, just like he'd seen on television, and the people that filled them mostly looked normal. There were even a few women, sipping the terrible coffee he'd passed on.

Maybe this wouldn't be so bad. If Lucky could find a way to get control of his anger, to stop himself from lashing out at Elizabeth—

Maybe she'd stop flinching every time he came near. She'd done that before—years ago—after her rape. It had taken months before he could touch her on the shoulder or the elbow without her reacting in disgust—

He swallowed hard. He didn't like reminding himself that Elizabeth had good reason to flinch from him now.

"The way this works," the guy in charge said as he sat down a few chairs down from Lucky, "is that we introduce ourselves. First names only. And tell us why you're here. What kind of problems you're having."

His smile was relaxed as he continued, "My name is Greg. I'm facilitating this meeting, but I've had my own anger management problems in the past. I didn't know how to let the little stuff slide off my back, and I made everyone else hate being

around me. One day, I got cut off on the highway. Instead of just letting it go, I followed the car until it parked in a residential neighborhood. I was about to get out and—" Greg shook his head with a rueful laugh. "I'd like to think I was just going to yell at him, but I'm sure I would have thrown a punch. I didn't because a little girl ran up to him and hugged him."

Lucky grimaced. He'd expected something worse than that, but maybe one of the others would have a story that would feel...more like his. He couldn't be the only person who'd actually take his anger out on someone else.

Greg was quiet for a moment. "I sat in my car and stared at them for a long moment, and I realized that I had a problem. I had to get it under control. So I went to therapy." He looked at the next guy, two seats away from Lucky. "What about you?"

Lucky listened as one man talked about how he'd lost it in a meeting at work and cursed out his supervisor—then the woman next to him admitted that she'd done something similar. None of these people had acted out violently.

But Elizabeth had asked him to do this—to give this a real try—and he wanted to prove to her that she was right to trust him. That he was still the guy who had slept on the floor and protected her.

"Uh, I'm Lucky." He grimaced. "It's a nickname my parents gave me when I was a kid—short for Lucas. I don't—" He exhaled slowly. "I don't feel lucky right now. I—I got married last fall. We've been together off and on since we were teenagers. Right after the wedding, I hurt my back. And then...I recently hurt it again."

With a sour taste in his stomach, Lucky continued, "I couldn't work, and I was always in pain. She stuck with me. She supported me when my paycheck was cut in half because I wasn't on active duty anymore—" His throat tightened. "I just—I started to feel angry all the time. Just pissed off because this wasn't the way my life was supposed to be. She was taking care of me, and it was supposed to be the other way around. That's how it used to be—I used to protect her, keep her safe—"

He stopped, took a deep breath. "We've been arguing for months. I mean, I think I was arguing more. I was always angry, and she was always tired from work. And then one night, I accidentally pushed her."

Lucky stared down at the gray, dirty carpet. "I didn't mean it. She was behind me, and I just—I flung out my hand—" He stopped because, oh, God, *that* was a *lie*. He knew it. He'd always known it. He hadn't meant to hurt her, hadn't meant to shove her into the wall—

But he *had* known she was behind him, that she was trying to stop him from pouring out the medicine that Cameron needed—medicine that Jason Morgan could afford to buy but Lucky couldn't—and he'd just wanted her to shut the hell up and get away from him—

He looked up, looked at Greg. "I was angry at her. And I took it out on her. I promised her it would stop. It has stopped. But I don't know how to stop being angry."

"Okay," Greg managed a smile. "Thanks for sharing. Next?"

They continued introducing themselves, but Lucky realized that no one else shared a story similar to his—there were no other husbands, wives, boyfriends, or girlfriends—no other cases of domestic abuse.

He was the only person in the room that had taken their anger out on another person violently— or, Lucky told himself, the only one who dared to admit it. That was something, wasn't it?

After the meeting, as Lucky struggled to get his feet, Greg came over to him. "Lucky, can you stay for a few minutes? I wanted to talk to you."

"Uh, yeah, okay—" Using his cane, he followed Greg over to a corner of the room.

"Listen," Greg began as he folded his arms. "I think it's good that you're here, that you're ready to make a change. I can't tell you how many guys I've seen come through this program who claim they have an anger problem but don't want to admit the real reason they're looking for help—"

Lucky frowned at him. "Real reason?"

"Domestic abuse," Greg said. "Lucky, you have an anger problem, that's true, but you're here because you've hurt your wife, aren't you?"

His stomach pitched and rolled, but Lucky nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, that's why I'm here. I never—I never punched or slapped her. But I pushed her. I shoved her. And she got hurt—" He saw Greg grimace. "What? I can't be fixed?"

"I didn't say that," Greg told him. "But I think this isn't the right place for you. What you need is a different kind of counseling. You and your wife need to be intensive therapy to deal with this—"

“But it never happened before,” Lucky told him. “Let me—look, I didn’t get into it during the meeting, but let me just—let me *explain*. I’ve known my wife since we were teenagers. She—she got hurt by someone else, and I found her that night—she was too scared, but she let me help her. That’s how we fell in love—this isn’t who I am—” His throat tightened. “This isn’t *me*.”

“I’m glad that you see that,” Greg said. “And it’s true, a lot of anger problems start with a traumatic incident like an injury, but if what you want to do is save your marriage, this isn’t going to do it. You’re more than welcome to work on your anger, but—” He hesitated. “*This* isn’t the place to resolve domestic abuse problems.”

Lucky swallowed hard. “We can’t go to counseling,” he said finally. “I can’t go to a therapist with her.”

Greg tipped his head to the side, squinting slightly. “Why? If she’s willing to work with you, try to resolve it—”

Lucky looked away, looked around the room that was now empty. “I don’t think it’ll work,” he admitted, finally. “She—while this was happening, she reconnected with an old boyfriend.”

Greg was quiet for a long moment, then nodded. “Which did not help your anger problems, I’m guessing.”

“I—” Lucky fisted his free hand at his side. “I know why she did it. I was terrible to her. I wasn’t being fair, and she was working hard to support us, to support her son—”

“You didn’t mention a son,” Greg said.

Lucky stared at him for a long moment. “I—I didn’t—” Of course, he hadn’t, he thought. He didn’t think about Cameron much at all. He didn’t need to these days since he was no longer expected to pick him up after daycare. Even Audrey wasn’t looking after the kid anymore. Cameron spent all his time with Bobbie or Carly.

“He’s two. Almost two,” Lucky corrected. “He’s not mine, though. He’s from another relationship—”

“The old boyfriend?”

“No—” Lucky drew his brows together. “No. From someone else. He’s dead. He doesn’t matter. The kid’s father, I mean.”

“Right,” Greg said. “Lucky, what you’re looking for—the answers you’re trying to find, the problem you’re trying to fix—it’s not going to happen in this group.”

“But—”

“Have you taken your anger out on anyone else?” Greg pushed. “Have you pushed around any friends? A family member?”

Lucky hesitated. “No.”

“You aren’t going to fix what you need to fix without your wife in the room.” Greg walked over to a table and scribbled something down on a piece of paper. He held it out. “This is the name of a good therapist, right here at Mercy. You should give him a call, set up something with your wife.”

“But you can’t help me.”

“We might be able to help you manage some of the anger, Lucky, but it’s not going to change the fact that you committed an act of violence against your wife.” Greg looked at him. “And if you’re telling me she was a victim of violence once before, I think your problem might be worse than you’re willing to admit to yourself. You need to ask yourself why you think this can’t be fixed in counseling.”

Lucky left then, crumpling up the paper and tossing it in the trash can near the elevator. He didn’t need to ask himself why they couldn’t go to counseling. If they went to counseling, a therapist might ask Elizabeth about her affair with Jason.

The last thing Lucky or Elizabeth needed to think about was Jason Morgan. He’d get angry again, and she might—

She might decide she’d made a mistake.

Saturday, April 29, 2006

Luke’s: Bar

Emily leaned against the bar and looked back over at the table where she and her friends were sitting. “It’s nice to see Lucky with a smile on his face,” she said to Elizabeth.

“Yeah.” Elizabeth waited for Claude, the bartender, to look at them. “Hey, can we get a pitcher of Rolling Rock and two strawberry margaritas?” she asked.

“Sure thing, sweetheart. You want me to send them over, or do you want to wait?” Claude offered as he tossed a towel over his shoulder.

“We’ll wait,” Elizabeth said. She looked at Emily with a sheepish smile. “I need a break from Jesse.”

“Yeah, he really is a dickhead, isn’t he?” Emily rolled her eyes. “Why did you invite him? He hates you and doesn’t mind showing it.”

“Because Jesse is Lucky’s partner, and Lulu is Maxie’s friend.” Elizabeth nodded at her younger sister-in-law, who was telling an enthusiastic story to the rest of the table. Lulu poked her brother in the shoulder, and Lucky rolled his eyes, laughing. “Lulu has been good for Lucky.”

“It’s hard to be miserable around someone who doesn’t take anything seriously,” Emily agreed. “I’m glad Lu could come back, and I guess Jesse will come around. It’s not like you’ll get Patrick and Robin out for drinks with Lucky any time soon. Patrick hates him.” She hesitated. “But things are better, right? Lucky started anger management, right?”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth popped a pretzel in her mouth. “He did. Thursday was his first session. He didn’t really want to talk about it much.” She hesitated. Lucky had been quiet when he’d returned home. She’d thought the sessions might be a lot for him, but she’d hoped he’d want to talk about them. “Emily—”

“Drinks up, ladies.” Claude set the pitcher and margaritas down. “Tossed it on the tab.”

“Thanks,” Elizabeth said. She picked up the pitcher. “Come on.”

“I still think I should get to drink,” Lulu was saying as Elizabeth and Emily set down the drinks. She wrinkled her nose. “I’m the only one who can’t—”

“You’re the only one who’s underage,” Lucky reminded her. “And you will be until...” He frowned. “Wait, when is your birthday again?”

Lulu punched him in the shoulder, but she laughed. “August 8, as you damn well know, and I’m gonna expect a big party to make up for that!”

“Here’s your drink, Maxie,” Emily said, sliding the margarita to her. Elizabeth set the pitcher down. “So, what did we miss?”

“Just Lulu telling Jesse about some stupid high school party,” Maxie arched her brows at Lulu, who offered an innocent smile. “Some things shouldn’t be spoken of.”

“Hey, what’s the point of high school if you don’t have a few regrets?” Elizabeth said, forcing a smile. “I mean, how many English classes did we ditch, Lucky?”

“Uh, not as many as you wish we had,” Lucky replied. He grinned at her, his eyes sparkling at the memory. “You thought running away from home meant no homework.”

“Well, *excuse* me if I thought something good would come from sleeping under the docks,” she retorted. She looked at Jesse. “What about you? Any crazy stories from high school?”

“We talked about me,” Jesse said shortly. “You weren’t here.” He poured himself another beer, then set the pitcher down. The table fell into an awkward silence. He looked past Elizabeth to Lucky. “You lived in Canada as a kid, didn’t you? What was that like?”

Lucky cleared his throat. “Uh, nothing special. Things didn’t get interesting for me until I moved to Port Charles.”

“Yeah, that’s when you started running away from home,” Lulu said. “Didn’t you and Em run away, too?”

Emily laughed, but the sound was a little forced. “Yeah, when I first came to live with the Quartermaines. Oh, my God, Elizabeth, do you remember the day we met?”

Elizabeth forced a smile, trying to cover how irritated she was that Jesse had, again, spoken rudely to her, and Lucky had said nothing. But Lucky was really trying, and it *was* fun to talk about the old times, the good memories. He was happy when they talked about those times.

But he didn’t want to talk about anything after the fire. It was as if they’d never made another good memory after Helena had kidnapped him. She enjoyed reminiscing, but it felt sad and a bit empty to spend hours talking about things that had happened nearly a decade ago and not feel comfortable enough to talk about anything that had happened to her lately.

She was going to start observing surgeries in a few weeks, Patrick had told her. Elizabeth had been so excited to be leaving behind paperwork and post-op in the ICU. She'd come home to tell Lucky, but he'd just smiled thinly and told her that was great and left for physical therapy.

"Elizabeth?" Lu prompted. She kicked her under the table. "Where'd you go? Emily asked you a question."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. Yeah, Em, I remember. We were at the cafeteria, and it was your first day back." Elizabeth took a deep breath and smiled at Lucky, but he was frowning at her now as if irritated that she'd drifted away during their conversation. "You were there, Lucky. Some girls were making fun of Emily, and I knew you were going to jump in, so I did it first." Her smile felt thin as she stretched her lips even more. "I thought it would impress you."

Jesse snorted. "So, the first nice thing you did for Emily was a lie? Shocking." He sipped his beer.

"Well, yeah, but you were different back then, Elizabeth," Lucky said, hurrying to cover for his friend. Lulu was glaring at Jesse, and even Maxie looked like she was starting to lose patience.

Elizabeth frowned at Lucky. "Different? What do you mean?"

"You were..." Lucky hesitated, sat back with a grimace. "Well, it was before," he said lamely. "You were Lizzie. Remember?"

"No," Elizabeth said softly. "I don't." Because she was *still* Lizzie. She would always be that brash, impulsive teenager who'd swept into town with a chip on her shoulder the size of Colorado. She'd often laughed with Emily or Lucky about her Lizzie side—

She'd just never thought Lucky agreed with her. Or thought of them as separate people.

"I don't remember anyone ever calling you Lizzie," Maxie said, with an air of desperation. "No one even calls you Liz. What's that about?"

"My family used to call me that. It drove me crazy." Elizabeth tucked her hair behind her ears. "Because it usually came at the end of a sentence that was about my behavior or grades."

"Oh, so, like it's a response thing. You hear Lizzie, and you think your mom or dad is

right there, ready to snark at you.” Maxie nodded. “Yeah, I got that. If my mother calls me Maximiliana, I know that I am in *serious* trouble—”

“Or when I hear Lesley Lu—” Lulu said brightly.

“But you *were* different before,” Lucky insisted, and they all looked at him. “When you were younger. You’re—you’re nicer now. Better.” And now he didn’t look as happy. He looked irritated, his brows furrowed together with a twitch in his cheek. “Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean—”

“Lucky, shut up,” Lulu told her brother, widening her eyes to make her point.

“Stay out of this, Lulu,” Lucky shot back. He looked back at Elizabeth, who just met his eyes, her lips pressed together. “I mean, think of the crap you pulled with Nikolas and Sarah—”

“I remember, Lucky,” she said flatly. She picked up her margarita and sipped it. “But that was always me. I’m older now, but I’m still Lizzie Webber.” She arched a brow. “I’ll *always* be Lizzie Webber.”

Lucky scowled and sat back in his chair, grimacing as his back must have shifted in the wrong way. “This is stupid.”

“Yeah, it is,” Maxie said, brightly. “It’s just a nickname.” She tossed back the last of her margarita. “I need another drink.” She got to her feet, grabbed Lulu by her arm. “Let’s go. You can go practice ordering.”

“What—ow! Hey!”

Jesse poured himself another beer—the only person at the table who’d finished his first round from the pitcher. “Just seems like Elizabeth is admitting she’s still a bitch.”

“You know what—” Emily began hotly, but Elizabeth put a hand on her arm and looked at her husband. When he said nothing to Jesse, she pursed her lips and nodded. He was *never* going to say anything.

She arched a brow. “Jesse?”

When the younger man met her eyes, a smug smirk on her lips, she leaned forward. “You know what I like about you?”

“What?”

“Absolutely nothing.” She paused. “Go fuck yourself.” Jesse scowled, and Elizabeth picked up her margarita. She sipped it, feeling a sense of triumph. Asshole.

“I just don’t know why you can’t admit that you’re not Lizzie anymore,” Lucky said, completely ignoring the byplay—and Elizabeth had had it.

“That’s what you meant that day back in the hospital,” she said. He frowned at her. “When you asked where that girl went—you really *did* hate Lizzie Webber, and all this time—*all* this time, you’ve been acting like that girl died the night Tom Baker pulled me into the bushes—”

“Elizabeth—”

“No, that’s not—” Lucky exhaled slowly. “No. That’s *not* what I meant, Elizabeth. I’m —” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. “I’m sorry if that’s how it sounds. But you know I’m not imagining things. You *were* different after.”

“Lucky,” Emily murmured. “This really isn’t—”

“I was different after that night.” Elizabeth twisted her wedding ring on her hand, wishing she hadn’t picked this fight. Lucky wasn’t wrong, but he also didn’t get it. And maybe she was making a big deal out of nothing. But it felt like it *mattered*. “I guess I didn’t realize how important that was to you.”

Lucky frowned. “Of course it was. *That’s* who I fell in love with—”

Emily closed her eyes. “Oh, you *idiot*—”

“Got it.” Elizabeth got to her feet, tossed back the last of her margarita, and picked up her purse. “I’m going to call a cab home. Good night.”

Luke’s: Parking Lot

Jason strode towards the entrance of the bar, frowning as he thought about seeing Luke Spencer. He hadn’t seen the older man since the kidnapping—since Luke had convinced Elizabeth to stay with Lucky. He and Sonny didn’t have a lot to do with Luke’s club these days, not since Sonny had sold Luke his interest in the club after the garage fire years ago—

But Luke's still operated in the Escobar territory, and Jason still had an obligation to check in with the old man to make sure they were sticking to the deal.

Just as he reached the door, it swung open and Elizabeth nearly barreled into him. Not realizing who it was at first, he put his hands out to stop her from knocking him over— "Whoa—"

"Watch where—" She bit off as his hands brushed her shoulders, left bare by the filmy tank top she was wearing over a pair of tight jeans, a jacket slung over her arm. "Oh. Sorry."

"Sorry." Like he'd touched a live wire, Jason drew his hands back. He looked at her, trying to focus on any detail he could in the dim lighting outside the club. It had been so long since he'd seen her—

She was clearly dressed for a night out—she'd done something to her eyes so that they looked darker, her lips were a ruby red. He looked past her, grimacing. "Are you —"

"I should go," Elizabeth said. "I'm sorry. I just—" She took a deep breath because her voice faltered for just a moment. "I just had a fight with Lucky, and while I doubt he's going to storm after me, he might. So I'm going to go call a cab—"

Jason exhaled slowly, irritated with himself as she started past him. He reached out, his fingers brushing her elbow. "Wait, I don't—" He shook his head. "I don't want you calling a cab and waiting out here alone—"

"I—" She looked back at him, their eyes meeting for a moment as her voice faltered. "That's not a good idea," she said, finally.

"Elizabeth, wait, I'll drive—" Emily stopped short when she saw the two of them outside the entrance. The door swung shut behind her. "Oh. Hey. Jase."

"Hey, Emily." He slid his hands into his pockets. Stepped back. "Ah, I have to meet with Luke. I should—I'll use the back entrance."

Without another look at either of them, he walked around the corner of the building and disappeared.

Emily arched a brow at Elizabeth. "Thank God it was me that came out just then. You have terrible timing—"

“I didn’t plan for him to be out here—the universe just hates me—” Elizabeth shook her head. “Never mind. I just want to go home—”

“Elizabeth—” Emily pressed her lips together. “You know that’s not what Lucky meant, right? I mean—I know it sounded like he only fell in love with you because of the rape, but—”

“It—I know he doesn’t mean it that way. But I also know he’s not wrong. The person I was after the rape? He fell in love with *her*. I was quiet, I was withdrawn. And I didn’t have the energy to go after anyone, except Nikolas. Which didn’t bother him then. Lucky fell in love with that girl.”

Elizabeth looked away. “I always knew that. I guess I thought we fell in love again with the people we grew up to be.”

“You did—”

“I just want to go home, Em.”

“Elizabeth—”

“No, don’t—” Elizabeth nearly swatted Emily’s hand on her shoulder, obviously meant to comfort her. She curled her hand into a fist instead, jerking away. “Don’t. Don’t pretend I’m not right. He couldn’t stand Lizzie Webber. No one could.”

Emily pressed her lips together, then sighed. She said nothing.

“I just—I had to be that girl again after the fire,” Elizabeth told her. “I had to find Lizzie again or I wasn’t going to make it. And that’s—” She inhaled sharply. “Oh my God.” She pressed her fingers to her forehead. “I always thought—”

“Elizabeth—”

“I thought Lucky put me back together after the rape—I thought it was him—but I did it.” Elizabeth looked at her best friend, as tears slid down her face. “I finished it. Because after Lucky died I was alone, and I had to figure out how to survive. So I did it. I survived. And I only did that because I remembered who I was. That I was strong.” She pressed a fist to her mouth as she choked back a sob.

“You’re one of the strongest women I know—”

"I've been killing myself to be that girl again, to be the girl he fell in love with but—" Her breath was shaky as she tried to put it into words. "But he's not even trying to love who I am today. Why? What's so wrong with her?"

"You know the answer to that—" Emily tucked a piece of hair back behind Elizabeth's ear. "You know there's nothing wrong. I told you, it's not too late—"

"Yeah." Elizabeth looked back towards the corner where Jason had disappeared. "Yeah, it is—"

"Elizabeth—"

"I wanted to save the boy so much—the boy who never, in a million years, would love me today—" Her voice broke. "I wanted to save him so much that I threw away a man who already did." Elizabeth pressed her hands to her eyes. "Oh, God, Em, what did I do—"

Her shoulders continued to shake as Emily drew her into a fierce hug.

"It's not too late," Emily repeated. "We can fix this—"

"No—" Elizabeth took a deep breath, then dragged her hands through her hair. "No. Jason doesn't deserve this. I need—I need to finish what I started and then I need to go. I need to stop living in the past. I just need to *stop*." She sighed. "I also need a ride home."

"Elizabeth—"

"Please, Emily. I can't—Not right now."

Luke's: Office

Luke scowled when Jason came through the door. "Hell, I forgot you were coming tonight." He got to his feet and shut the door behind him. "My boy didn't see you, did he?"

"No. I ran into Elizabeth on the way out of the bar, and she told me he was in here. I came through the back." Jason held up a hand as Luke opened his mouth. "I didn't know she'd be here. It was just bad timing. She had a fight with Lucky and left."

“A fight—” Luke sighed, his shoulders slumping. “Damn it. It was going better. He was laughing the last time I went out there.” He went back to his desk, scowled at Jason again. “You’re *not* helping, Morgan—”

“I’m not doing anything,” Jason said flatly. “We had a business meeting. It’s not my fault you didn’t remember.” He fisted his hands at his side.

Luke narrowed his eyes. “You’re pissed at me, so I guess you know that I’m the one that convinced Liz to stay.” He nodded. “Didn’t think she’d tell you that—”

“She didn’t. And—” Forcing himself to take a breath. “It’s none of my business. She doesn’t want it to be, so it’s not—”

“Uh-huh.” Luke nodded slowly. “Never knew you to lie to anyone, even yourself. Guess things change—” He cleared his throat when Jason just glared at him. “Anyway, let’s just talk about the Escobars.”

Saturday, May 6, 2006

Brownstone: Backyard

“Cameron, careful!” Elizabeth laughed at her son as he charged at Morgan, sending them both into the ball pit set up in the backyard. “Don’t hurt him—”

“I think it might be impossible to bruise that kid,” Carly said dryly as she stepped up next to Elizabeth. “Everything going okay? With the party, I mean?”

Elizabeth nodded, looking around at the tables and games Bobbie and Lucas had helped her set up for Cameron in Bobbie’s backyard. Luke had offered the Spencer house, but the Brownstone was more familiar to Cameron these days. Elizabeth was just happy to see so many people here, enjoying Cameron on his special day.

Leticia had brought Michael and Morgan earlier while Carly was at work, Emily had picked up Kristina and Molly from Alexis’s house so that there would be more kids. Lulu had convinced Maxie, Dillon, and Georgie to help run some of the games. Dillon had decided to be the official photographer and was walking around with his digital camera to take candids.

Bobbie had arranged a birthday cake in the shape of Spiderman. Luke had driven to Rochester to get, he’d informed her with a roll of his eyes. But her baby had the perfect birthday party—

Even if Lucky and Jesse had spent nearly the entire time in the kitchen, drinking. She forced a smile back on her face and looked back at Carly. “Imagine, Little John will be here running with them next year.”

“Yeah, God, he’s growing so fast,” Carly murmured. “Jax said he would bring him by maybe later, but he was napping when I left the hotel. And you know—”

“Never disturb a sleeping baby,” Elizabeth finished. “Literally, the first lesson any parent learns.”

“Can you—can you come over to my car for a minute?” Carly asked. “Mama!” She raised her voice, causing Bobbie to turn away from where she’d been speaking to Felicia and Mac. “I’m going to take Elizabeth for a minute. Don’t let the kids die!”

“*Real* nice,” Bobbie called back.

Carly cackled as she and Elizabeth walked around the corner of the house and headed for the street where Carly’s SUV was parked. “I figured you wouldn’t want me to bring this out just yet or do this in front of people.”

Elizabeth frowned as Carly pressed the remote to lift the back of the car. Then her face brightened. “Chuggin’ Charlie! Where did you—” She exhaled slowly, looked at Carly who just stared back at her blandly. “How did he know?”

“It’s not like Jason comes over my house all the time,” Carly said slowly. “But he visits the boys, and he’s been over a few times when Cameron has—”

“I know. Cam always tells me. He really—” Elizabeth sighed. “He really likes Jason.”

“I know. He invited Jason today, but Jason told him he had to work. So instead, he stayed for dinner on Thursday—when I had him overnight for the night shift?” Carly reminded her. “I got him a cake because it was his actual birthday—”

“I know. He was excited because he got two cakes for his second birthday—”

“Joke’s on me,” Carly said with a roll of her eyes. “Morgan thinks he’ll get *three* cakes in November, and this is just the kind of thing he’ll remember.” She sighed. “Anyway, Cam told Jason over dinner this was the only toy he really wanted. So I guess Jason made a few phone calls.”

Elizabeth stared at the blue train that had been at the top of Cameron’s birthday list.

She'd looked for weeks—so had her grandmother and Bobbie—even Carly and Lulu had made a few calls. But Jason had listened to Cameron and located one for him within two days.

"I thought maybe we could keep it at my house for Cameron for a while," Carly said when Elizabeth said nothing. "Cameron doesn't tell Lucky about seeing Jason, does he?"

"No," Elizabeth said softly.

"So it can be a secret, for now. Because Cameron deserves this gift, and he deserves it from someone who loved him enough to do whatever Jason had to do to get this stupid thing—" Carly looked at her. "And you deserve someone who loves your kid enough to do that."

"Carly—"

"I'm *not* saying that because I like you. Actually, I've decided to hate you again." Carly tossed her hair over her shoulder. "Jason looks miserable. I was hoping for more happiness when Skanky McCall left us, but apparently, *I* don't get to have nice things." She sighed. "I'm saying it because I think any single mother deserves someone who loves their kid."

Elizabeth should argue with her, tell her to mind her own business, that she was wrong—but Lucky had only come to the party because he knew it was expected. And he'd stuck by her side long enough for Cameron to blow out the candles, then gone inside to drink with a man he knew hated Elizabeth.

More and more, she knew she was making the right decision. She would honor her promise to Luke to stay and support Lucky until he returned to work—but after that

She was done.

"I fought for *years* for Sonny," Carly continued. "I drove myself and everyone around me *crazy* trying to be enough for him—trying to match his expectations—trying to be worthy of his love." She pursed her lips. "I thought that meant our love was epic, that it was destiny, fated mates bullshit, you know?"

Elizabeth let out a shuddering sigh as she saw where Carly was going with all of this. "I know what you mean."

"I was devastated when it fell apart. I thought there was something wrong with me. I was damaged—I was broken—there had to be a *reason* Sonny always cheated. Why he treated me like a child, why he never respected me." Carly met her eyes. "The best day of my life was the day I let go and stopped pretending what I was fighting for was worth having."

"I—"

"You're not there yet, and I guess I can respect that. Just because *I* think you're an idiot who's fighting for someone who doesn't put even pretend to put in even half the work when there is someone out there who will love and respect you—" Carly shrugged. "That's *your* mistake to make."

Elizabeth laughed even as tears slid down her cheek. "Thanks, I think—"

"Don't wait too long to get your shit together, Elizabeth." Carly pressed the remote to close her car door. "Your *son* deserves better." She met Elizabeth's eyes. "And you do, too. Tell me you know that."

"I—" Her voice shook. "I do."

Carly arched her brow. "Then act like it."

Chapter Twenty-Five

*Oh we have stained these walls
With our mistakes and flaws
But even if we won't admit it to ourselves
We'll walk upon these streets and think of little else
I won't show my face here anymore
I won't show my face here anymore
- These Streets, Bastille*

Wednesday, May 10, 2006

Kelly's: Courtyard

Elizabeth propped her hand on her chin and smiled as Luke slid the Dr. Octopus figure across the table, pretending to let her son chase him with his Spiderman figurine. Luke Spencer might not be a good man, but he knew how to put on a great show.

This was the third lunch he'd met her for, the third time he'd insisted she bring Cameron with her because the kid was his family, too. He had promised her that if she took a chance on Lucky, he'd stand by her. And he was trying.

"Grampy," Cameron said with a shake of his head, "That's not how he runs!"

"Sorry, sorry, I'll have to watch the movie the next time Aunt Bobbie is watching you and Morgan," Luke promised. He handed the Doc Octopus back to Cameron and flashed a smile at his daughter-in-law. "He doesn't mess around."

"No, he takes Spiderman seriously," Elizabeth told him. "Morgan's having a great time teaching him about Star Wars. It's been great having Morgan around him. I'm so glad Bobbie introduced them."

"It does make Caroline crazy having to be nice to you because you're the only parent who lets her kid go over her house." Luke shrugged. "Anyone that drives my niece crazy is my favorite person."

"I likes Aunt Carly," Cameron said, furrowing his brow. "She gave me Doc Octopus for my birfday." He set down his toys, then reached for the slider burger she'd ordered

for his lunch. It still took a minute to watch her baby eating food that was so clearly grown up.

“It was a nice party,” Luke said. “Good for the Spencers to have new blood.” He hesitated, then slid his chair away from Cameron, angling his head as if asking Elizabeth to push down slightly so they could lower their voices. “How are you doing, kid?”

“We’re okay. Nothing’s happened,” Elizabeth said. She picked at her salad with a heavy sigh. “Lucky’s been sick a lot, actually. Throwing up. Upset to his stomach. I tried to get him to go to a doctor, but he refused. He goes to therapy, and he’s gone to anger management a few times. I...suggested marital counseling.”

“And from the look on your face, Cowboy wasn’t interested?”

“No, he’s tired of counseling. Between rehab and anger management...” Elizabeth bit her lip. “He’s trying, Luke. And it’s been good for him to have you around so much. Thank you. And Lulu’s trying. It’s helped take some of the pressure off.”

“I’m glad.” Luke hesitated. “But I asked how *you* were, darlin’. I didn’t ask about Lucky.” He tilted his head. “You wanted marital counseling.”

“It’s...I tried to tell myself it was like the brainwashing. I convinced myself then that it wasn’t Lucky doing those things. Saying those things. But maybe...” She shook her head. “Maybe we let him off the hook. Maybe we’re always letting him off the hook. I —”

“It’s only been two weeks. How’s anger management?”

“He won’t talk about it. He tried to get out of going, tried to put it off. I insisted. I told him it was the promise he made me.” Elizabeth swallowed hard. “I almost backed down. He—he looked angry when I asked, but—I didn’t. I told him no. He had to go. And...he’s going. But he won’t talk about it.”

Luke sighed, leaned back in his chair. “Well, kid, we’re doing all we can. I can’t ask you for more. When is he supposed to start the desk at the PCPD?”

“Another week or so. He’s able to get around better. Dr. Cook says he’ll always have some pain, but his mobility is better.”

“How long do you think you’ll manage to stay?” Luke asked, looking down at his bowl of chili. When she blinked at him, he shrugged. “Things aren’t getting better, are

they? He won't go to counseling, and I know you're still fighting."

"We're not—"

"I know y'all argued the last time you were at my club. Bad enough that it sent you running."

"You..." Elizabeth pursed her lips. "You do?"

"Jason was meeting me that night," Luke offered apologetically. "He'd said he'd stop by, and your thing was a bit spur of the moment, so I'd forgotten. But Jason said he'd run into you outside. That there was a fight."

Elizabeth looked down at her plate. "Not a fight so much as—" She sighed. "I don't know."

"I think you do know, Elizabeth. It's okay. You didn't promise me forever, and I didn't ask for it. I wanted him to have space to adjust. You're giving him that. But if he won't work on the problems, Elizabeth, then nothing has really changed. It can't."

Tears burned in her eyes. "I didn't think you'd understand—"

"Laura asked me once after the Cassadines hit Port Charles—when we started having all the problems—" Luke sighed heavily. "She wanted to deal with the crap. When I found out—when we thought Stefan was Nikolas's father—she wanted to work it out. And I—I'm not as strong as she was. As you are. Even though she'd always looked past my flaws, forgiven me for things that no man deserves forgiveness, I couldn't find it for her. I couldn't bring myself to do what she needed."

"Why?" Elizabeth asked softly. "I never understood it. I never really saw you guys in action, but the way Lucky always talked about the two of you, especially on the run—how could you deny her the chance to fix things?"

"I wish I had some eloquent explanation," Luke admitted. "It took me a long time to understand why I just walked away. But I couldn't make sense of it. If we went to counseling, Elizabeth, and we talked about her time on Cassadine Island, we'd have to talk about all the other stuff. The darkness." He was quiet for a long time. "Laura never saw that night the way I did."

She knew he was talking about the Campus Disco. They'd never really talked about it—the two of them. And Elizabeth wasn't sure she wanted to bring that back. But...

“Lucky said that when he confronted her...she refused to say what it was.”

“That’s how she was able to live with me all those years,” Luke said gently. “How we were able to have that big, beautiful wedding, all those adventures, raise our kids—because she *never* admitted it to herself. And God help me, I knew it. Cowboy forced us to look at that night. To take it out and examine it. I still—I knew what I’d done. Laura eventually admitted it. But neither of us ever really figured out how to live with it.”

“And going to marriage counseling—”

“We might have. And I think I was better off pretending that we broke up because I’m a selfish asshole rather than the love of my life realized what a monster I am.” Luke swiped a hand over his mouth, cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how we got on that topic—”

“Thank you.” Elizabeth reached out, touched his arm. “I know this is hard for you. It was hard for all of you. But you *still* don’t give Laura enough credit. Maybe she didn’t admit to herself for all those years, but you know that she did finally. And she forgave you. And if you had even an ounce of her courage...”

“A lot of things might have been different. Well, you’re not wrong about that, kid. I’ve survived a lot of things, Elizabeth, but no one ever said survivors were always brave. I’m mostly a coward when it matters. Look at how I ran out on my family.”

“You came back, Luke. That’s not nothing. My family can’t even manage that half the time. And I hope, one day, when Lucky and I have sorted all this out, whatever happens to my marriage, I can still count on you.”

“Always,” Luke promised. “You know, the reason I even got my boy back in the first place—why we could be in the same room—you kept him from running away all those years ago. You gave him a place to stay. A person to hold close. And you helped lead him to Nikolas. And back to me and his mom. I—” He looked at Cameron, who had knocked over the ketchup bottle trying to reach it. He picked it up and dumped some onto his plate for some fries.

“Luke—”

“You kids were magic back then. The way you loved each other, the honesty—the sincerity. Grown adults don’t know the kind of love the two of you had. You saved him, Elizabeth. And I’m selfish. I’ve been asking you to do the same miracle over and over again.”

"I didn't save him," Elizabeth said with a shake of her head. "But I'm trying—"

"*You* saved him," Luke repeated, gently. "The man he is today—that's not your fault. You've done what I've asked. Thank you."

"I didn't do it just for you." Elizabeth bit her lip. "People tried to talk me out of it. And they almost—" She thought of Jason's face, the look in his eyes when she'd begged him to ask her.

The bitterness when he'd reminded her of all the times she'd left him.

You forgot to tell me you loved Lucky.

"Elizabeth—"

"I stayed because of the magic. You're not the only one who remembers it, Luke. Lucky and I remember it. And we almost destroyed each other the last time we tried to find it. I thought it was different this time." She twisted her wedding ring, looking at the small stone. "It *was* different this time. For a little while," she said softly. "But Lucky and I aren't those kids anymore. He didn't handle the injuries—and—he doesn't love me, Luke."

She looked at Cameron. Luke followed his gaze. "I have my son to worry about. He needs a family who loves him. And unfortunately, the only Spencer who doesn't—"

"Is the one who matters most," Luke said quietly. "I get it, Elizabeth."

"I don't know how long I'm staying," she continued. "I just know it's not much longer. Something has to change. I'm not happy, Luke."

"I can see that—"

"And I think—I *know* I deserve to be."

"Of course—"

"So, we'll just..." Elizabeth exhaled slowly. "See how things go once Lucky goes back to the PCPD. Maybe he'll agree to more counseling. But as things are—I'm not sure I can make it more than a few more weeks. If that."

“Then that’s all you can do. Thanks, Elizabeth. For everything you have done.”

Lucky & Elizabeth’s Apartment: Living Room

It had been more than a week since Lucky had run out of his second prescription of oxycontin and two weeks since he’d visited Courtland Street. He’d tried—he’d told himself that he was better. That he didn’t need the pills, the sweet relief of the heroin—he knew he didn’t.

He didn’t *want* them. He didn’t *want* to be a drug addict, and in his more lucid moments, he knew that’s exactly what he was.

Sometimes he made it ten minutes without thinking about the pills. But then he’d move slightly, his back would explode in pain, and there was no escape—all he could think about was the bliss, the emptiness in his head when he smoked the heroin—he’d only done the hard drug twice. Never shot it up, never used a needle—but God... he just wanted the pain to go away.

He wanted it all to go away. Every night he came back from sitting in a bar, nursing a beer, and lied to Elizabeth about anger management—he wanted an escape. He was failing her, failing his family—

Failing everyone still looking for the boy he’d been.

He’d tried anger management—tried to do what Elizabeth needed—but he’d failed at that, too. He’d know if they went to marital counseling like she wanted, like that asshole Greg had wanted, she’d leave him.

She was going to leave him anyway. It just a matter of time.

So when Elizabeth had taken Cameron out for lunch, Lucky had finally made the call and begged Santiago to come to him.

He got to the door and pulled the other man in fast, almost before the knock had finished echoing in their dingy hallway. “You got the stuff?”

“Yeah, I got it.” Santiago raised his brows. “You got the cash?”

“Next week,” Lucky promised. “Disability isn’t kicking in as fast as I thought—” and wouldn’t be kicking in at all since Lucky was going back to work, but what the hell was Santiago Escobar going to do to him?

And once he got back to work, he wouldn't need the escape. He'd have a purpose. He might even actually try counseling again—

But right now, he needed the high.

"You don't pay next week, Spencer, my cousin ain't gonna like it. He's on me about it —" Santiago shoved him in the chest, setting Lucky back a step. "And he's not gonna fuck around. You *better* pay."

"Yeah, yeah. I will." Lucky almost drooled as he saw what he'd asked for—the bottle of pills and enough of the heroin to hold him over until he went back to work. "Nice—"

"That's five grand you owe me, Spencer." Santiago grabbed Lucky's shirt and dragged him towards him. "Where the fuck you gonna get that kind of money? Disability pays that much? Fuck that—"

"I'm a cop injured in the line of duty," Lucky said desperately. Wasn't he gonna give him the stuff? Why bother coming over here? "They're gonna hold a benefit for me at the carnival. A raffle to help with expenses—"

"You'd better hope they come through. Don't you got a rich brother?"

Lucky scowled, shoved Santiago back hard. "I don't ask my brother for shit." And Nikolas was still in Greece, still in deep mourning over the death of Courtney Matthews and the loss of the child he'd wanted to be his.

"You'd better make good. You got a week, Spencer. One week. And you'll remember this once you're back at work. I take care of you now, you take care of me then."

"Sure, sure."

Santiago scowled, but eventually left. Lucky sighed in relief as he clutched the bag to him. He had maybe an hour before Elizabeth got back. He hurried through Cameron's bedroom into the bathroom ensuite. He closed the door and ran the shower at the hottest setting, knowing that the steam would help dissipate the smell.

And then he lit a match, waiting for the emptiness he was beginning to crave with a fury that would have terrified him—if he could think clearly enough to realize it.

Thursday, May 11, 2006

Kelly's: Dining Room

Jason breathed a sigh of relief when he realized that Elizabeth wasn't on the premises. After their run in at Luke's a few weeks earlier, he'd realized he'd need to be more proactive about not seeing her. He'd had Emily find out her work schedule, then avoided any of the places they might run into each other when she was off.

But Mike had asked to see both of them today, and Jason had taken a chance, knowing that Elizabeth wasn't working the day shift this week. She'd switched to nights, Emily had said, for a few days, and Cameron was excited because he'd been spending the nights with Morgan.

Jason had managed to drop by Carly's a few times when he'd known Cameron might be there. He'd promised to stay away from Elizabeth, but he hadn't promised to stay away from Cameron. He'd seen the little boy the night before after his mother had dropped him off. Cameron had thanked him shyly for his birthday present, the Chuggin Charlie train that his mommy had told him was from Jason.

"But shhhh," Cameron said in a whisper with gleaming eyes. "It's a secret. Mommy said just you, me, Aunt Car, and her. Like Biderman."

So Elizabeth knew and had told Cameron where the present came from. Had wanted Cameron to know it. Jason didn't want that to matter, but it did.

Other than that brief moment at Luke's, he hadn't seen her in nearly a month. It wasn't even the first time a month had passed without seeing her, but it hurt now in a way he hadn't expected. He'd thought the pain would be less sharp after all these weeks—that he'd be able to stop thinking about her.

"She's not here," Sonny said simply, as Jason's eyes swept the diner again. Jason looked at his partner with a frown. "I called before we came. Mike let me know she'd just left."

Jason exhaled slowly. "I wasn't—"

"I know. But he said it was important and I know you promised her. So let's go see what he wants." Sonny sighed as they headed for the kitchen. "Man, I hope this isn't about another bookie."

Mike grinned at them, wiping his hands on his apron as he came out of the pantry. "Thanks for coming, guys. Come into the alley. Let's talk."

Jason grimaced as he followed Sonny and his father behind the diner, letting the heavy steel door fall closed. “What’s up, Mike?” he asked.

“I caught a little weasel working my parking lot yesterday,” Mike told them, the grin fading from his face. “The Escobars.”

Sonny scowled. “Bullshit—they know they’re not supposed to leave Courtland Street —” He looked at Jason. “Did *you* know about this?”

“They’ve been getting bold,” Jason admitted. He fought back the urge to remind Sonny he’d warned him about the Escobars months earlier. Sonny had brushed him off then. “I heard some rumors, and I checked with Luke. His club is on the edge of the territory, and he said they’d been tried a few times. He’s always run them off, but they’ve been getting braver. I told you they didn’t want to be limited to that part of town,” Jason told him. “But Kelly’s is *your* territory, and your father runs it.”

“A couple of Mateo’s nephews are coming up,” Mike said. “They’re young.”

“And stupid,” Jason said. “Just Kelly’s? Anywhere else?” If they were only pushing at Kelly’s, it might be a dig at Sonny personally.

Mike hesitated. “Georgie Jones. She’s a senior at PCH this year and said that a couple of Escobar kids got arrested for dealing at the school. Felipe and Iker. Mateo’s sister’s kids. I asked,” he added. “And the little asshole in my parking lot was Santiago Escobar, their oldest brother. They’re dumb, Sonny, but not afraid. They think the deal you made with Mateo shows their uncle’s weakness. They’re out looking for respect.”

“God *damn* it,” Sonny muttered. “I’m not in the mood for this penny-ante shit.” He looked at Jason. “Get Mateo in the room with me. He needs to get his house in order. He gets his sliver of territory because I don’t have the energy to stomp him out. Make him understand I will *find* the time.”

“I’ll head over to the warehouse now and set it up.” Jason nodded to the two of them, and walked down the alley, out towards the parking lot.

Mike hesitated, then looked at Sonny. “You called me before you came over. Asking me about Elizabeth. If she was around.”

“Yeah, you told me she’d grabbed something to drink and left.”

“She did. She told me she was gonna sit on the pier and watch the ships come in a bit since her grandmother had the kid, and she had some free time to herself.” Mike grimaced, looking back where Jason had disappeared. “Does that matter?”

Sonny pursed his lips. “He’s supposed to stay away from her,” he murmured. “But you know what? What he doesn’t know, what she doesn’t know? Not their fault.”

“Uh-huh,” Mike said. “Just so you know, if this becomes a thing—”

“You had nothing to do with it,” Sonny promised, and hoped he wasn’t making a mistake.

General Hospital: Nurse’s Station

Sam stepped off the elevator and grimaced when she saw Epiphany Johnson standing like a guard behind the counter.

She’d just flown back to Port Charles the day before intending to pack up her meager belongings and go back to Miami, where she was closer to the action and the jobs. Since leaving Port Charles, she’d run a few real estate cons with Paulie and had started to put the moves on a new mark for the trophy wife. Her trip here was part of it—disappear for a few days early in the relationship, make him desperate for her.

She had a few things she’d left in storage here—and she felt like she had to make peace with Elizabeth before she could leave Port Charles behind.

Whatever Elizabeth and Jason had been up to, whatever their twisted relationship looked like now, Sam knew that the other woman had stayed with Lucky. And was probably *still* dealing with the vicious rumor mill that went along with this hospital.

So Sam just wanted to make good with the nurse because she shouldn’t have gone after Elizabeth that way. She *should* have just sliced off Jason’s balls since he was the one that had done the wrong.

Epiphany narrowed her eyes when she saw Sam. “No.”

“I just want to talk to her for a minute, Epiphany. Can you just tell me when she’s working—”

“No—”

“I need to apologize—”

“I can say no in a couple of languages. Maybe you’d understand one of *them*,” Epiphany snapped.

“Okay, okay—” Sam held up her hands. “I just—I just felt bad, and I didn’t want to leave Port Charles without making good—”

“That girl don’t owe you anything, Sam. She never did. So, take your guilt and try someone else. You come near my nurse, I’ll have your ass removed by security.” Epiphany picked up the phone. “In fact, you don’t leave right now—”

“I’m going, I’m going,” Sam muttered. She’d track Elizabeth down somewhere else. She didn’t want to leave any unfinished business behind in Port Charles.

Except Alexis Davis because that shit was *staying* buried.

Elm Street Pier

Elizabeth had thought she’d be safe on the pier from running into Jason.

She’d been at Kelly’s, picking up an iced coffee to enjoy on the docks, the first truly warm day in an otherwise chilly spring. She had an entire hour free before she was supposed to meet her grandmother to go shopping and have dinner with Cameron before her night shift.

Mike had been on the phone while she sat at the counter. He’d looked at her meaningfully, then asked a question, clearly repeating the person on the other end. “Is Elizabeth Webber here?” She’d frowned at her name, then he’d continued. “Sonny, why does that matter? I just need to see you and Jason.”

She exhaled slowly, understanding. Sonny didn’t want her to run into Jason. She raised her coffee. “I’m going to sit on the docks for a bit,” she said to him softly, dropping money on the counter. “See ya, Mike.”

And then she’d left, feeling like she’d be okay. Jason and Sonny would meet with Mike, she’d be on the docks, enjoying her coffee, and keeping her promise to herself and Lucky. Jason was obviously keeping his promise to her to stay away.

Everyone doing what they said they would. Like mature adults.

Except when she heard the boots, her heartbeat picked up, and her stomach started fluttering. Not in dread. Not in annoyance.

In relief.

Which was insane because Elizabeth had already promised herself she was done running to Jason, done using him. She'd made a mistake staying with Lucky, but it was her mistake to fix.

And just because she knew she was leaving Lucky in a few weeks, it didn't mean Jason was going to be waiting for her. She'd already rejected him one too many times to hope for that.

He stopped at the top of the stairs as she got to her feet and looked at him. Jason met her eyes, then slowly walked down towards her. He stopped at the bottom and didn't move.

Elizabeth licked her lips and offered a smile. "Hey. I—I'm just...drinking coffee."

"I didn't—" Jason looked around, but the dock was empty, and the only people they could see or hear were the workers just off on the pier and in the distance on the wharf. "I didn't know you'd be here. I was just going to the warehouse."

They stared at each other for another minute, and Elizabeth knew—she knew she should just let him go. But she couldn't.

She didn't *want* to.

"Thank you for the train," she said softly. "Cameron wanted it so much, but it was sold out everywhere. Bobbie, Gram, I—We all looked."

"How did you know—" Jason broke off, swallowed.

"Carly brought it. And even if she hadn't told me, I'd know you would be the only person who could find something like that." Elizabeth smiled, hoping it looked as casual as she wanted it to. "Cameron loves it. And he won't say anything—"

"I—I saw him yesterday. At Carly's. He said it was a secret. Like Spiderman." A smile flitted on his lips as he took a step towards her. "I didn't know if you'd let him keep it."

"There's nothing I wouldn't do for my son." She stepped towards him. "Thank you."

“He talked about it when I saw him at Carly’s.” Unsure, Jason looked out over the lake. “He asked me to come to his party. But I told him I couldn’t. I said I’d send something.”

“He—I’m glad he gets to see you at Carly’s. He loves it there so much. Morgan has a lot of toys, but he’s just surrounded by a lot of people who love him. It’s all I’ve ever wanted for him.”

“He’s a great kid.” He looked back at her, and Elizabeth looked down, a bit unnerved by how much she wished his eyes weren’t guarded. How much she missed the way he looked at her. She shouldn’t.

She was married. She’d decided to stay with her husband. Even if she knew she was leaving, Jason deserved better than this.

“Are you...” Jason shook his head. “Never mind. It’s none of my business. I should go —” He started past her, towards the dock stairs—then stopped. He turned back to face her, only a few inches away. “You were going to leave. Emily told me.”

“I was,” Elizabeth said softly. “I didn’t.” She should have. She wished like hell she hadn’t listened to anyone but her gut that day. Or that she’d listened to everyone except Luke Spencer.

He nodded, almost with a grimace as if he’d regretted saying anything. He exhaled a short sharp breath. “Okay, then.”

Jason started to walk away then, but she couldn’t let it go. Not like this. And she should have. This was just like before—only he’d been the one pushing for more than she wanted to give, and now—

Now she just *couldn’t* let him walk away. She couldn’t stand that he’d think—

“It’s not okay.”

He stopped but kept his back to her. “No, it’s not.” His words drifted back towards her. Then Jason slowly turned around. “I’m doing what you wanted. I’m staying away from you. But I—” He hesitated, his face pained. “I need to know something.”

“What?”

Oh, God, was he going to ask? What if he did—what would she say?

If I have to ask, you're not ready to offer it.

"You always choose him," Jason said, his voice so soft, so quiet, it was almost lost in the air between them. "But you're not really choosing him, are you?"

"I—"

"Because it's not about him or me."

"No," Elizabeth said. She squeezed her eyes shut. "Because that's not a contest. It's —" Her voice caught on the words because, God, they felt like a betrayal. They felt wrong.

They *should* feel wrong.

And maybe the fact that it didn't feel wrong was the real crime. "It's always you."

Jason took that in, and some of the tension in his face eased. "Then, why?"

"I—" Her throat closed, and she shook her head. "I don't know."

"Yeah, you do." Jason touched her face—for just a second—so quickly his fingers felt like a ghost against her cheek. "I just want you to be happy."

"I'm trying."

He nodded, then stepped back. "If you need me," Jason said after a long moment, "you know how to find me."

She sighed as he walked away, and this time, she let him.

Chapter Twenty-Six

*Oh what are we doing
We are turning into dust
Playing house in the ruins of us
Running back through the fire
When there's nothing left to save
It's like chasing the very last train when it's too late*
- Broken Strings, James Morrison and Nelly Furtado

Thursday, May 11, 2006

Lucky & Elizabeth's Apartment: Kitchen

Elizabeth washed Cameron's breakfast dishes and set the last one in the drying rack just as the front door open. She looked over to find Lucky, then immediately looked away as she remembered standing on the docks with Jason less than an hour ago.

It's always you.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to erase the conversation, trying to forget the way he'd looked at her. He'd been guarded at first, but by the end—he'd let her in again.

And she'd been so pathetically happy to see it, to know it was still there—that maybe she hadn't ruined everything—

"Elizabeth?"

"Hey." Elizabeth's voice faltered, and she cleared her throat, tried again. "Hey. I didn't expect to see you."

"Yeah, I went to the station to sign some paperwork." Lucky grimaced as he pulled out a bottle of beer from the fridge. "I have a rehab session in a little bit."

Elizabeth looked at the beer bottle with some distaste—he was drinking more and more, she thought. Maybe because Dr. Cook hadn't wanted to renew his pain prescription the last time they'd been at the hospital. But she said nothing.

It wasn't a fight she wanted to have right now.

“And then you have group, right?” Elizabeth added when Lucky didn’t go on. “You could...” She took a deep breath. She had promised herself and Lucky that she would try to make things easier for him. “I can try to arrange my break if you wanted to stop by GH. We could get dinner at the cafeteria. I know the food is terrible—”

“No, that’s fine. I’d rather come home and sleep.” Lucky left the kitchen and let himself fall heavily on the couch, his wince not nearly as bad as it might have been a week ago. He was starting—finally—to heal.

“Yeah, okay.” Tucking her hair behind her ears, Elizabeth smiled nervously and sat on the other side of the sofa. “Um, this is my last night shift. I thought that maybe we could take Cameron to the spring carnival on Saturday. Morgan is going to spend the night—”

Lucky smirked, a bitter expression as he set the bottle down and reached for the TV Guide. “Really? You think I should be walking around, chasing a pair of two-year-olds?”

“No, I—” Elizabeth shook her head. “I guess not. Sorry. I didn’t think. I could bring something home. Maybe some ribs—”

“Jesse and Maxie brought ribs last night.” Lucky flipped through the magazine. “You were at work. Again.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth pressed her lips together, tried to count to ten. “I thought they were going to come over with—I just thought that was something we were going to do *together*—”

“Jesse doesn’t like you much right now,” Lucky said without any inflection. “And after that last time at my dad’s club, I figured you’d want a break from him.” He frowned at her. “Or was I wrong?”

She took a deep breath. “You’re not. I wish you’d have talked to him, but fine. I just—I don’t know what you want from me, Lucky. I keep trying to plan things for us to do together—and you just don’t—you don’t want to do anything—”

“Oh, don’t be like that. I’ve been tired. Between therapy and learning the computer software for my new desk job,” Lucky retorted, “when do I have time?” He huffed. “And we tried doing something together. You stormed out.”

Elizabeth sighed. Two weeks of anger management probably weren’t going to

perform miracles, but she'd hoped something would change. "Did you talk to your group leader about a meeting that I could go to? I know they have ones for couples—"

"No, and I told you, I don't *want* you there." Lucky shoved himself to his feet, grabbed his beer bottle, and started for the kitchen. "What do you even need to go for?"

"To—" Elizabeth frowned, following him. "To just...talk. You don't think it might help —"

"Oh, for fuck's sake—" Lucky whirled, then grimaced as he turned too quickly for his back. "Christ, Elizabeth, can't I have a minute's of peace with you banging me over the head? I'm *working* on it. I'm going to the stupid anger management. I haven't pushed you. I haven't called you names."

She swallowed the snarky response that had sprung to her lips and tried again. "No, you haven't. But we're still not really talking. It feels like you blame me—"

"Of course, I *blame* you. Who the hell else am I supposed to blame?" Lucky demanded. He tossed the empty beer bottle into the trash can and pushed past her back to the kitchen. She stumbled back slightly into the fridge.

"Lucky—"

"You didn't shove your heel in my spine, no, but you're the fucking *reason* Manny Ruiz kidnapped me, aren't you?" Lucky shook his head, reaching for his keys. "And he only kidnapped you because of Jason—"

"We've been through this—" Elizabeth threw up her hands in frustration. "He was *already* targeting me—"

"But he didn't make a move until you got messed up with Jason Morgan," Lucky cut in. "He probably saw a good chance to irritate Jason. I was just collateral fucking damage. Stop trying to pretend this isn't your fault."

"You—" She hugged herself, feeling a bitter chill crawl up her back. "You told me in the hospital you understood it *wasn't*—"

"Yeah, well, I was—" Lucky scowled. "I was screwed up on pain meds, and I was ashamed of how I'd treated you. You...had an affair. Okay? And I'm still angry about it. I get to be fucking angry, Elizabeth. I shouldn't put my hands on you, fine. But *don't* pretend you don't know what the hell I'm talking about."

The denial was on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't make the words leave her throat. Because of course, Lucky was right. Hadn't she and Jason kissed right here in this room a month earlier? Hadn't she all but begged Jason to take the decision out of her hands?

"At least you're not fucking denying it anymore," Lucky muttered, turning away to go through the mail on the side table. "Neither one of us is innocent, Elizabeth. We both messed things up."

"Okay," Elizabeth said slowly to his back. "So I'm asking you if you want to make it better. Because storming around, not talking to each other—that's not going to solve anything. I think we need to talk to someone—"

"You talk to someone," Lucky interrupted. "I'm already talked out—"

"But—"

"Jesus Christ leave me alone!" he finally exploded, turning around to face her, his arms raising as if to grab her shoulders.

He stopped, his hands freezing in mid-air. Then his fingers curled into fists. He stared at them as her stomach iced over.

Slowly, Lucky let his hands fall to his side. "You *need* to leave me alone when I'm like this," he said flatly. "*This* is always how it starts. You never know when to stop."

Shaken, Elizabeth nodded, stepped back. "I have to go to work. I'll—I'll see you tomorrow." She edged around him, took her bag off the hook by the door, and left.

Greystone Manor: Living Room

Jason strode into the room as Sonny poured himself a bourbon. "Mateo is open to a meeting. Says he's having issues with some younger cousins and isn't opposed to us making an example of some of them."

"Good, good. Set it up." Sonny hesitated, then offered Jason a drink. "Mike, ah, told me after you left that Elizabeth had gone to the docks. You didn't, ah, run into her, did you?"

Jason shook his head at the offer of liquor, then frowned. "What? Why?" He furrowed his brow. "And why didn't you call me?"

If Sonny or Mike had warned him—he wouldn't have taken those stairs. Or maybe he would have. He'd been able to stay away from Elizabeth for the last month, but if he'd known she was that close, sure to be alone—

He shook his head, shoving it out of his head. It didn't matter what Elizabeth had said on the docks.

It's always you.

It was never him. It didn't matter *why* she chose Lucky Spencer time after time. She did. And this was the last time he was going to let himself wonder or worry about it. He couldn't do it anymore.

"So you did see her," Sonny said. He sat in the armchair. "I thought about warning you, but I also..." he sighed, swirling the deep, dark brown liquor in the tumbler and staring down at it. "I remember staying away from a woman I cared about and running into her when we didn't plan it. It made it easier."

"Did it?" Jason asked flatly. "Which woman was that? Brenda? Carly? Sam?"

Sonny looked up at him sourly. "All of the above, to be honest. But I was thinking about Brenda. Jason—"

"I saw her. She thanked me for Cameron's birthday gift. That was it. It's nothing, Sonny. I'll call Mateo and get the meeting set up—"

"Jase, I know you're upset she stayed with Lucky after everything that happened—"

"I'm not upset—" Jason scowled, turning to find Sonny climbing back to his feet. "She always stays. I'm not even that surprised."

"My mother always stayed with Deke," Sonny murmured. Jason blinked, looked at him oddly. "It's not the same, I know you'd say, but it's not *that* different. Deke was verbally abusive first, but my mother didn't leave him when he'd scream at her. She'd just tell me he had a stressful job, that he took care of us—that when he wasn't angry, he was good to her."

Jason exhaled slowly. "Sonny—"

"I didn't really understand it," Sonny continued. "I mean, I know I never treated any

of the women I was with right, but I don't think I ever set out to hurt someone." He shook his head, took another sip of his drink. "Until Carly. She and I never used our fists, but we tore each other to shreds in other ways, Jase. And we both turned away from people who were probably better for us."

At Jason's raised eyebrow, Sonny shook his head. "Not Sam. Alexis. Alexis expected too much of me. It was easier with Carly. Even when I was miserable."

"Why?" Jason demanded. "Why *choose* to stay miserable than be happy?"

"Because misery is familiar. You get comfortable in it, understand how to breathe in it," Sonny said. "Alexis was my best friend. We never got that back after all of that, you know? I ruined it by taking a chance and not being able to hold to it. We can barely stand in the same room together because of it."

He was quiet for a long moment, pondering. "I didn't know how to be the man that could make Alexis happy, but I knew how to be the man Carly hated."

Sonny sighed again. "But going out into the unknown with someone who really matters—it's terrifying, Jase. Some people can never take the leap." He shrugged and went over to the minibar to refill his drink. "She stayed with Lucky because he's the devil she knows. And maybe, if she's like my mother, the devil she thinks she deserves."

"That still doesn't change the fact that she stayed." But now Jason felt uncomfortable with that statement. Because there was truth to what Sonny was saying. The idea that Elizabeth had *already* tried to take a chance with him and Jason had let her down—

"No. But he's *still* the devil," Sonny said. "She's scared, Jason. I don't know what happened when you saw her on the docks, and I know you won't tell me. But I'm asking you to think about how she looked and what she said."

"What about it?"

"I'm worried about her," Sonny admitted. "I saw the way Lucky exploded at the warehouse after the kidnapping, and I've heard the rumors about what happened at the hospital. That kind of rage—I never would have expected it of the boy I knew, but —" He grimaced, looking down at his drink. "But little boys grow up, and I don't know or like the man nearly as much."

Jason hesitated. He remembered now the way Lucky had looked when he'd first come

home—when he'd attacked Jason with a knife. He knew how that Lucky had been under the effect of the Cassadine's brainwashing, but Jason had worried about Elizabeth's safety then.

Should he worry now?

"She'd tell me if—" Jason closed his mouth. Would she? "What am I supposed to do?"

"Be there if and when she calls. And pay attention—because she might not be able to dial the phone." Sonny held out a second tumbler again. "You sure you don't want that drink?"

General Hospital: Break Room

Elizabeth winced at the taste of the bitter, too strong coffee as she brought the styrofoam cup to her lips. "Seriously, Patrick. You're supposed to be one of the best surgeons in the state. Can't you pull rank and get us a coffee maker from this century?"

"I tried," Patrick muttered darkly. "Alan has this thing about the struggle." He set his vending machine sandwich down at the table and sat across from her. "I hate the night shift. Robin is out, having a good time at the bar while I'm here, toiling away in the darkness—"

"I couldn't have gone even if I weren't working," Elizabeth said, with a shrug, "but I do miss tucking in Cam. He likes to sing the Spiderman song. And he's not old enough to know I'm pretty tone-deaf."

"Enjoy it while you can. My mother—" Patrick sighed, a wistful smile crossing his face. "She sounded like a cat screeching mostly. My dad can *really* sing, and he'd be out in the yard, belting one out, and she'd join in—" He laughed at the memory. "Man, it used to piss him off. She did it on purpose."

"That sounds like a sweet memory. How long has she been gone?"

"About ten years," Patrick said. He picked at the sandwich. "Dad was always an alcoholic, but functional, you know? Someone who knew how to play the game. He stopped pretending anything else mattered when she died." He shook his head. "I never understood how you could give up your entire life because you lost someone. I knew he loved her, but..."

"It shakes you to lose someone you'd planned forever with," Elizabeth murmured.

“Your world shatters into a million little pieces. You can’t ever put it back together the right away. The pieces don’t fit together. There’s always something missing.”

Patrick nodded. “Robin said something about a fire when you were a teenager. Lucky being gone for a year. Something with the Cassadines. That must have been rough.”

“It was, but we got a miracle. He’d been kidnapped, and he came home to us.” But her smile felt false.

“Yeah, a real miracle.” Patrick wiped his hands, shoved aside his makeshift dinner. “Listen, Elizabeth, I know I said I wouldn’t get involved—”

“Did you?” Elizabeth pursed her lips. “I don’t remember that.”

“And it’s not like Robin, and I are talking behind your back. We’re just—” He focused his dark brown eyes on her. “We’re worried. We saw the bruises. Before the kidnapping. And I saw the way he treated you. I know Robin took photos. She won’t tell me anything else—”

“She...” Elizabeth licked her lips. “She didn’t tell you about the conversation we had before Lucky came home?”

You think you deserve this. That you had this coming. That even though you know better, that you almost understand why Lucky did what he did. After all, he saw the truth, didn’t he?

“She said she’d talked to you. She hoped you’d tell someone else who might be able to convince you to leave, but she didn’t think you would. And we both agreed we wouldn’t tell each other anything you said to us. Because you needed to trust us.”

Her throat thickened, and Elizabeth looked down into her mud-brown coffee, blinking away tears. “I—I do.”

“Okay. Then answer me honestly—are you okay?”

Elizabeth closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and looked at him. “No. But I’m trying to be.”

“Okay,” Patrick repeated. “He hasn’t...it hasn’t happened again?”

“N-No. He’s going to anger management.” She smiled faintly. “You and Robin should do more talking because she asked the same question. I guess she’s worried. He goes

Tuesday and Thursdays. He's been going for two weeks."

"Well, I guess that's something," Patrick sighed. "I just—"

"I broke our deal," Elizabeth said in a rush of words—words she hadn't even known she was going to say. "I did it. He promised me he'd go to counseling, and I promised him Jason was gone."

Patrick grimaced. "I *had* to ask," he muttered to himself. "Elizabeth—"

"I didn't—nothing happened," Elizabeth added quickly. "But I saw him on the docks, and I stopped him. He didn't come to me. I saw him, and I just—" She pressed her fingers to her lips. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You don't need any of this."

"No," Patrick said, "but you obviously need to say it, and who the hell am I going to tell?" He reached forward, took her hands in his, drawing them away from her face. "Elizabeth."

"I did it. I have an affair with Jason. Not physically—except, yes, I did. We kissed. A few times—" She cleared her throat. "And if he'd asked me to leave Lucky, I think—I think I might have."

"But he didn't."

"I asked him to," Elizabeth confessed in a soft voice. "Sort of. We have this—I don't know. It's this thing we kept saying to each other. Sam asked him if he was still in love with me. He told her he didn't know. And she asked if I was in love with him, and he said he'd never asked me. I told him—I said if you ask, I'll tell you."

"And he didn't ask," Patrick added when Elizabeth said nothing. "So, you didn't tell him."

"Every time I see him, I think this time he'll do it, this time he'll ask—"

"Why does he have to?" her friend asked with more gentleness than she'd expected from him. "Why can't you just *tell* him?"

"Because—" She squeezed her eyes shut. "Because I can't. If I say it, you can't take it back."

Patrick just stared at her. "Okay, I don't get it. Why would you take it back?"

“I—” Elizabeth drew away abruptly, shoving herself to her feet. “It doesn’t matter. I’m married. And I’m breaking the deal. I’m wrong here. Lucky—it’s not perfect, but he’s doing what I asked him to. It’s just—” She sighed. “We’re broken. No matter what we do, it can’t be fixed.”

“Elizabeth—”

“Tonight, I was trying to think of things we could do together, and he kept shooting me down.” She bit her lip. “It’s like he can tell I’m just going through the motions, and he gets angry—”

“Does he?” Patrick asked flatly.

“N-Not like that. I wouldn’t be there if it was, but—” She sighed. “I said from the beginning, I couldn’t stay forever, and I just told Luke that I can’t stay. But I don’t know what I’m waiting for. I don’t know what’s going to change—”

She paused, pressed her lips together. “I think I thought he’d go to counseling, and it would be a switch. Like—” She looked at him. “He’d come home, and he’d look at me, and he’d be the boy I loved again. Or he’d be, at least, the man that proposed to me. The one I promised to love forever. Because I could live with that. I could make that work—”

“And that is bullshit,” Patrick told her. “Because *you* still wouldn’t love him.”

She sighed, looking at him but said nothing.

“Something *is* broken,” he said, echoing her earlier. “The boy he was, the man you married, he’s never coming home again, Elizabeth. He’s gone. Because no matter how much he changes or works, he will *always* be the man who abused you.”

She closed her eyes. “I know. I know that—”

“I’ve never been in love before,” he told her. He stood. “Never even tried it before Robin. But I swear to God, the second it makes me as miserable as you look right now, I’d walk. You’re not doing either of you any good. *No* one is happy in this situation. You think *Lucky* is happy?”

“I—” Elizabeth furrowed her brow. “No, but—”

“You think you’re doing *him* a favor by making yourself miserable and staying? You think he doesn’t see that you’re not in love with him? And that part *is* your fault, Elizabeth. Because you stayed with a man you don’t love, threw away the one you do, and now you’re torturing yourself trying to make sense of it. You can’t. You know that.”

“I—” Her voice trembled. “Patrick—”

“I’m just—I don’t get it, Elizabeth. Is this is love? Because if it is, then why the hell do you want it? Why would *anyone*?”

“For better or worse,” she breathed after a long moment. “I made a promise. It matters. I had to try—”

“Did it work?” Patrick asked her.

She sighed. “No. No, it didn’t.”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

“I—” Elizabeth paused. “He’ll be back at the PCPD full-time next week on desk duty. I promised Luke I’d stick until at least then.”

Patrick muttered, but she put a hand over his clenched fist. “You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know, Patrick. I already know it’s over. I think I’m just scared to take the final step, you know? Because I’m afraid—”

She bit her lip. “He did everything I asked him, too. He went to counseling. He’s trying, and I guess—I feel guilty. Because I’m not sure if I tried. I think I meant to. I know I tried to do things together, but the last few times, he refused — and I was relieved.”

“Elizabeth—”

“My marriage is over,” Elizabeth said. “But I think I’m afraid of what happens next.”

“If you want me in the room when you tell him—if you just want someone—” Patrick arched his brows. “All you need to do is ask.”

“Thank you.” She offered him a smile. “For everything. I know you’re new at this friend thing, but you’re doing a pretty good job.”

Kelly's: Kitchen

Maxie Jones grimaced as she untied her apron and tossed it on the counter. "How did I get talked into working at this pit?" she demanded, spinning to face her boyfriend with her hands on her hips.

"Well, you wracked up like fifteen grand in credit card debt your first semester at PCU," Jesse reminded her with a shrug. He tossed her the jacket she'd hung on the rung. "Can we get out of here?"

"Yeah, sure." Maxie frowned as she followed him back into the diner. "Just let me finish dealing with my receipts—"

"Maxie—"

"Chill out. It'll take like five seconds. Sit right there," she said, nodding at the counter, "and tell me what crawled up your ass." She arched a finely plucked brow. "Or that ass is going home *alone*."

"I just—" He shook his head. "Seeing Lucky last night at the apartment, struggling to deal with the rehab. He came into train on the office software today. He's doing everything right, you know? And that—" He scowled. "That bitch isn't even *bothering* to appreciate it."

Maxie frowned, set the pile of receipts down. "What? What are you talking about? Liz wasn't even home last night—she was working—" And she was really not into this side of him. He'd been bitchy about Elizabeth for weeks. Sure — she'd screwed around on her husband, but that was Lucky and Elizabeth's business.

"Yeah. Again. She's never around when I go to see Lucky. And today?" He shook his head with disgust. "I saw her on the docks with Jason Morgan *again*."

His voice was a bit too loud on that last one, and Maxie saw a few heads at another table glance in their direction. "Jesse—"

"I didn't hear what they said," Jesse continued, "but I saw the way they were looking at each other. You know?"

"I do, but—"

“And he touched her face—you don’t touch a married woman—anyone touches *your* face like that, I’ll rip their fucking arm off—”

“Jesse—” Maxie liked gossip as much as anyone, but there was a difference between gossip and making a scene. Bobbie had told her if she caused one more scene in Kelly’s, she’d have to let her go. Maxie hated this job, but she needed the money. “Calm down—”

“It’s just—isn’t Lucky dealing with enough? This is her fault, isn’t it?”

“I guess—”

Jesse frowned at her. “What do you mean, *you guess*? If she’d stayed away from Morgan, this never would have happened.”

“I mean, I guess, maybe that’s technically true.” Uncomfortable, Maxie shifted. “In one of my classes, though, we talked about victim-blaming, and like Mac said Manny had a long list of missing women around him—like maybe he really did target Elizabeth—”

“Please. Who is going to target Elizabeth Spencer out of all the other women in this town?” Jesse rolled his eyes. “I mean, do you really think that?”

Maxie bit her lip. “I don’t know. It makes it more Jason’s fault. Elizabeth—” When Jesse’s eyes flashed, she shook her head. “No, no, I agree with you, Jesse. I’m just saying. It’s not *just* her fault, okay?”

“No, it’s not. But it’s not Lucky’s, and he’s the only one suffering.”

“No, I know. It sucks.” And this Maxie did agree about. She didn’t feel one way or another about Elizabeth Webber, but Jesse did. And he seemed to be irritated that she didn’t. So she forced herself to scowl. “I mean, it’s kind of trashy of her to, like, still be sleeping with the guy that nearly got her husband killed.”

“Right!” Jesse slapped his hand on the counter, and a patron at the end jumped. “Do you think Lucky knows?”

“Um, I don’t know—”

“I should tell him.” Jesse fished out his phone. “He’s at a stupid counseling session, did you know that? That bitch had the nerve to demand he go to marital counseling.”

“Really?” Maxie furrowed her brow. “They’re in marriage counseling? Tonight? Because I thought Robin told me she was going to Jake’s with Emily. She invited me, but I had to work, and I asked about Elizabeth, and Robin said she had to work the night shift—”

“Probably a lie. He’s going to counseling alone then. *He’s* the one trying to save their marriage, and she’s probably off rolling in the sheets—” He scrolled down to Lucky’s number.

This was a side of Jesse that Maxie didn’t entirely like. He was just so angry. And he’d been mad at Elizabeth since the night of the kidnapping. She’d enjoyed the gossip around it at first, but it had been *weeks* ago. Wasn’t it time to move on? Jesse was taking this so personally—like *he* was married to Elizabeth.

“Jesse, why does this bother you so much?”

“He’s a brother in blue, Maxie. Come on! He deserves better than some whore who ruined his life and cheated on him with a hitman.” Jesse rolled his eyes.

“Enforcer,” Maxie corrected without thinking, the way she had grown up listening to Robin do the same when Mac had made the same mistake. Jesse glared at her.

“Sorry, sorry. But there’s a difference, and—” When Jesse did not look amused, she sighed. “That’s not important.”

“Damn right, it’s not.” Jesse got off the stool and started for the alley as he got Lucky’s voice mail. “Hey, man, it’s Jesse. Look, I saw something on the docks you should know about...”

“Do you think it’s true?” the lady at the end of the counter asked as Maxie turned back to her receipts.

“Huh, what?” Maxie blinked. “What?”

“Elizabeth Spencer. Still having that affair.” The woman sighed, propping her head on her chin. “I know she shouldn’t, but there’s something about a bad boy.”

Maxie narrowed her eyes. Her mother had had a taste for the bad boy. Had destroyed a perfectly good marriage to chase after Luke Spencer. “There’s something about the marriage vows, too,” she snapped. “It’d be nice if Elizabeth remembered that.”

“Of course.” The woman smiled uneasily. “Of course. It’s all so terrible.” Her phone

rang. “Oh, Gracie—oh, you’ll never believe what I just heard...”

Damn it, Maxie thought as the woman proceeded to tell her friend everything she and Jesse had said to each other. She looked out the diner uneasily as she realized a lot of the patrons were looking at her, then whispering. Oh, man—

Well. Maxie squared her shoulders. If Elizabeth didn’t want people talking about her, she should stop having her affairs in public.

Jake’s: Bar

Robin laughed as she and Emily stumbled through the door of their second bar that evening. “How come you didn’t tell me that Club 101 is owned by Carly?”

“In my defense,” Emily said as she leaned over to prop up the third member of their group, Nadine Crowell, who had enjoyed herself too much at the first bar, “I didn’t know she’d bought back into the club.”

“I did,” Lainey Winters, a psychiatrist at the hospital, volunteered from the back of their group. “But I forgot that it mattered.”

“Well, at least we got to drink,” Kelly Lee declared as she pushed forward and scanned the bar for a table. “We’ll get the table,” she told Robin. “You and Em are the only ones not slurring your words. Go get the drinks.”

“Pretty sure that’s not how that works,” Robin complained, but the two of them peeled off from the pack and headed for the bar. She stopped short as she and Emily came closer to the men slouched over drinks. “Em—”

“What?” Emily waved the smoke away from her face. She always forgot how dirty this place was—

“Isn’t that Lucky—”

“What, no, of course—” Emily closed her mouth as she followed Robin’s arm and saw the familiar silhouette of her childhood best friend. “It can’t be.” She looked down at her watch. “It’s nine. He’s supposed to be at anger management.”

“Where did Elizabeth say he was going?”

“He found a group meeting at Mercy,” Emily murmured. “It was for people worked

late—” She sighed. “Give me a second, I want to see if I can—” Emily held up her hand and was relieved to see the bartender serving that night was Coleman. He’d remember her from her previous visits. She caught his eye and gave him a nod—

Coleman extricated himself from his customers, grinning as he joined them. “Well, if it’s not my favorite bar fighter,” he said with a laugh. “You here to wreck my place again, kiddo?”

“No, we’re just out for some drinks. But, um...” Emily gestured at Lucky. “Is this his first time here?”

Coleman followed her gaze. “Spencer? Nah. He’s a regular. Since he got out of the hospital. Every Tuesday and Thursday. You need anything? I’ll send over some drinks for you, girls.” He touched her shoulder, then left them.

Emily and Robin exchanged a troubled look, but Emily frowned, realizing that Robin didn’t just look annoyed—she looked upset. “Robin, is there something I should know?”

“I—” Robin shook her head. “Not from me. But Elizabeth needs—she needs to know Lucky isn’t going to counseling. He promised her.”

“I—I know that.” Emily hesitated. “I’ll catch her tomorrow before the end of her shift. And before my begins.” She managed a weak smile. “I don’t feel much like drinking anymore.”

“Me either, but I’m sure the others will take our share,” Robin said dryly as they returned to their table. Emily put away Lucky’s presence but kept an eye on him for the next few hours. He left around midnight without even once realizing she was there.

There was definitely something going on that she didn’t understand, and Emily was determined to get to the bottom of it.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

*I want to hide the truth
I want to shelter you
But with the beast inside
There's nowhere we can hide
No matter what we breed
We still are made of greed
This is my kingdom come*
- Demons, Imagine Dragons

Friday, May 12, 2006

General Hospital: Locker Room

“Hey, I was hoping to catch you.”

Elizabeth blinked up at her best friend as Emily took a seat next to her. “Hey. I thought your shift wasn’t for another hour.” She stifled a yawn. She hated the night shift and was grateful this had been the last one.

“It’s not, but I always have paperwork.” Emily unlocked her locker and pulled open the door. “I need to talk to you.”

“Is something wrong?” Elizabeth tossed her flats on the floor and slid her feet out of the sneakers she’d worn for her shift.

Emily bit her lip. “You told me Lucky has anger management twice a week.”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth sighed. “I don’t think it’s helping, but maybe in a few more weeks ___”

“He’s not going.”

Emily’s words tumbled out over Elizabeth’s own, cutting her off in mid-statement. Elizabeth pressed her lips together and just stared at her friend. “What? What are you talking about?”

“I went to Jake’s last night with Robin and the others. And—Lucky was there.”

“So he went *after* his session—”

“Elizabeth—it was only nine. I thought you said his group therapy was from eight to ten?” Emily sighed. “I called some friends at Mercy. I know they’re not supposed to know these things, but well, Lucky’s face was in the paper. The guy who leads the meeting said Lucky went to the first one and never went back.”

“I don’t—” Elizabeth just stared at her. “This doesn’t make sense. He—he *promised*. He was going. Twice a week—are you telling me—”

“I asked Coleman. He told Lucky’s a new regular. Every Tuesday and Thursday. The same nights you told me he was at counseling.” Emily tilted her head. “You really didn’t suspect?”

“No, I—” Her throat closed as Elizabeth struggled to take a deep breath. “No, I just—I trusted him. I shouldn’t have. Obviously.” Why had she trusted him? After everything he’d done, how could she have trusted his word? Had she felt that guilty over her plans to leave?

“Elizabeth—” Emily didn’t say anything right away, but when it was clear Elizabeth wasn’t going to speak, Emily continued. “What are you going to do?”

“Do?” Elizabeth blinked at her blankly. “Oh.” She shoved her hair behind her ears. “I—I don’t know. I just—He promised,” she repeated. And did it matter? She was leaving.

So what if he hadn’t kept his promise to go to counseling? Was it more of a betrayal than hers?

“You know, Lucky’s been my friend longer than anyone else in Port Charles, but I just—” Emily shook her head. “I didn’t think you should stay before, Elizabeth. You asked Lucky for this one thing, and he couldn’t follow through.” She bit her lip. “Are things okay at home? I mean, are you guys still arguing the way you were? I know you had a bad night at Luke’s, but—”

“No.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “No,” she repeated. “Not like before. And yeah, he...he broke his promise.”

So did I.

And maybe that was why Elizabeth couldn’t quite push herself to be angry, to be

anything more than slightly stunned. She'd asked Lucky to deal with his anger so that he wouldn't abuse her.

He hadn't touched her. Maybe he'd lied about counseling, but he'd kept that part of the promise.

And Elizabeth hadn't kept her promise to keep Jason out of her life even a little bit. Both times she'd run into him had been an accident, but it didn't change the fact that she'd been happy to see him. That she hadn't wanted to walk away from him—she hadn't been able to keep Jason out of her heart or her mind.

How was she any better than Lucky? He'd lied to her, but how was she any better?

"It's not that simple, Em," Elizabeth said finally. "I'll—I'll talk to him. He wanted to put it off until after the first round of rehab—"

"He lied to you—"

"I-I know. But—" She got to her feet. "I'll talk to him," she repeated. "Thank you for telling me. I'll deal with it."

"Okay," Emily said warily. She sighed. "We still good for the carnival tomorrow?"

"Oh. Yeah, yeah, that's fine. I'll see you at the park." Elizabeth picked up her purse. "Cameron is looking forward to it. Leticia's going to bring Michael and Morgan, and I told Cam Morgan could spend the night with us for a change."

Emily wrinkled her nose. "Does Lucky have a problem with it?"

"I don't know, I didn't ask him," Elizabeth said flatly. "Cam's been begging to have Morgan overnight, and it's Sonny's weekend with the boys, so he didn't mind." She pursed her lips. "Don't mention it to Lucky? I mean, about Sonny. He's mostly okay with Cam being friends with Morgan when Carly is the only contact. If he thinks I'm talking to Sonny—"

"He'll think you're talking to Jason," Emily finished. "Yeah, got it." She raised her brows. "Have you? Talked to Jason, I mean."

"I—" She was too tired for this, her head still swirling from Emily's earlier reveal. "Not really. I have to go. I'll see you later, Em."

“Elizabeth—”

But Elizabeth had already pulled open the door to the locker room and left.

Corinthos-Morgan Warehouse: Sonny’s Office

Sonny grimaced as he stalked in from his morning meeting, tugging at his tie. He turned back to glare at Jason. “*This* is why you don’t let family in the business. Eventually, you get a fucking Fredo.”

Jason rubbed the back of his neck. “Mateo sounded like he wouldn’t mind if we took care of the problem—”

“Oh sure,” Sonny muttered. He eyed his mini bar but decided ten in the morning was too early for alcohol. “Do his dirty work, so when his sister complains about her son going missing, it’ll be on *us*, not him. Oldest trick in the book—”

“If Santiago insists on selling outside the Escobar’s boundaries,” Jason said, with a shake of his head, “then he’s got it coming. We could just send a warning, Sonny, but it might not be enough. The Escobars are pushing their luck. They’re trying to get at Kelly’s, there were those kids at the high school and Luke’s. They never stay where you put them. This is the same crap Moreno pulled.”

“And Sorel. Why don’t they ever learn?” Sonny scowled. “Start with a warning. Call Dougie. Find Santiago Escobar and make it worth his while to leave town.”

“Won’t someone else just take over for him?” Jason asked as the door opened, and Max came in with the tray of coffees he’d brought back from Kelly’s.

“Hey, Mr. C. Jase.” Max held out Jason’s coffee. Once Jason had it in his hand, Max tossed the container in the nearby trash, but didn’t leave. “Uh, Jase, not that I comment on your personal life—”

Jason frowned. “What?”

“I don’t listen to gossip either, but while I was picking up the order at Kelly’s...” Max shifted, looked at the two men, “I heard Maxie Jones talking with her boyfriend, that cop kid. They were talking about you and Miss Webber. On the docks.”

Jason winced. “When?” he asked. “I mean—what *exactly* did they say?”

“Uh,” Max hesitated, his nervous eyes darting back and forth between his bosses. “The cop saw you guys, but he didn’t know what you said. He thought that Lucky Spencer was gonna tear the roof off the place when his wife got home from work—”

“Beaudry thinks Lucky knows?” Sonny cut in. “Max—”

“Yeah, I think so. He called him this morning. Or left a voice mail last night. I don’t know. I couldn’t really tell. I just—” Max shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I don’t know, I just thought it was something *you* should know, Jase. In case Miss Webber should know.”

“Thanks,” Jason said as he pulled out his phone and contemplated his list of contacts.

“Jason—” Sonny said as Max left. “This *isn’t* your fault—”

“I know that. We ran into each other by accident,” Jason murmured. But they hadn’t walked away. She’d called after him—

And he’d answered.

His thumb hovered over her name, but he didn’t press it. Instead, he scrolled one name down. “Em? Yeah. Is Elizabeth still at work—Damn it. When did she leave? Okay.” He sighed. “Can you meet me—no? Okay. I’ll come to you. Yeah, it’s important. I don’t want to get into it on the phone.”

“You’re not even going to tell her yourself?” Sonny asked, his brows raised in surprise as Jason slid his cell phone into his pocket. “You’re wasting your time—”

“I’m not going to make it worse. Elizabeth worked the night shift. She’s already home. What if I call her now, with Lucky at home? It’s already too late to warn her. And I don’t know who’s at the hospital around Emily—”

“Jason—”

“I’ll send Dougie to take care of Santiago,” Jason promised. “But first, I need to go talk to Emily. Maybe Max misunderstood. Maybe—”

But he couldn’t stop himself from remembering Sonny’s warning the day before, and the anger he’d seen for himself the day Elizabeth had been kidnapped—

He didn’t want to make it worse, but he needed to do *something*.

Lucky & Elizabeth's Apartment: Hallway

Elizabeth stifled a yawn as she shoved her key into the lock, but the door was jerked open before she was able to turn it. Stunned, she stared at the angry, red face of her husband as he grabbed her arm and yanked her inside, his fingers latching onto her wrist like a clamp.

“What the—”

Lucky released her just as quickly as he'd grabbed her. He flung her past him into the apartment. Elizabeth stumbled, dropping her purse. It fell to the ground, upending her wallet, cosmetics, and other random things she kept in the bag.

Her mind scrambled to adjust, trying to think through her exhaustion and confusion.

“Lucky—What the *hell* is going on—”

“I should ask you that, you goddamn bitch!” Lucky slammed the door shut. “I just got a call from Jesse—”

Elizabeth blinked, took a step back. “What are you talking about—”

“He saw you, Elizabeth,” Lucky said, drawing out her name like it was a condemnation. “On the docks. With *Jason*.”

She put up her hands, still trying to clear her head. She was so tired—she just wanted to make this go away. “Okay. I should have told you. I—I ran into him yesterday before work. It wasn't planned, but I just—he gave Cameron a birthday present—” Damn it. She bit her tongue, wishing she could pull the words back. Why had she said that? His eyes went flat.

“Where?” He spun on his heel and stalked towards Cameron's room, shoving the door open. He started to fling things around.

Stunned, her heart racing, Elizabeth followed him. She wanted him *out* of her son's bedroom. “It's not here—I didn't bring it here. I left it at Carly's—” She gasped as he took Cameron's toy organizer and flipped it over, the bright yellow storage bins spilling out across the carpet.

“Lucky, stop!”

“Is *that* where you’ve been meeting him?” Lucky demanded. He turned again, so suddenly that Elizabeth stumbled backward into the door frame.

Get out, get out. He had that light in his eyes again. Damn it. *Get out.*

But she couldn’t quite make her feet move as Lucky’s blue eyes glared at her, the veins in his neck bulging. “N-No, that was the first time I’ve seen him since the hospital last month—”

“Liar! You’re always *lying*!” Lucky screamed, his voice nearly shrill. Elizabeth managed to slide just slightly to the left and through the doorway back into the living room. She hurried over to where her purse was still on the ground.

Shaking, she bent down to shove things back inside. “*Stop—*”

He grabbed her, jerking her to feet, knocking the purse out of her hand again. Lucky gripped both her shoulders and shook her hard.

“Stop! You *promised*!” Elizabeth cried. She shoved him back as hard she could, and Lucky, already off balance, fell backward to the floor. He glared to her, rolling to his side and sitting up. He shook his head as if to clear it.

Taking advantage of the moment, Elizabeth shoved her keys and wallet back into her purse, leaving the rest of her purse’s contents on the ground. Her hands shaking, she gripped her keys in her hands. “I know you’re not going to anger management!” she cried. “Emily saw *you*! You’ve been drinking at a bar the *last two weeks*!”

“So what?” Lucky snarled. “You lied to me!” He stood up and advanced on her. Elizabeth hastily moved away, trying to move around the sofa so she could circle him and get to the front door.

She never should have come back. Never should have given him a second chance.

“It’s not the same! I talked to Jason for five minutes! You’ve been lying for *two weeks*! I asked you for one thing, Lucky! *One*!” Tears streaming down her face, she shook her head. “You promised you wouldn’t hurt me—”

“I tried to go to the stupid meeting! But it wouldn’t work! It was never going to work!” Lucky’s chest was heaving as he screamed at her. “I’m tired of being the *only* one who’s wrong! It’s *never* your fault!”

Elizabeth made a dash for the door, trying to get around him —

Lucky grabbed her around the waist, wrapping one arm around her hips, and the other around her shoulders. Her mind froze for a second and then she started desperately clawing at his hands, screaming—

“Shut up, *shut up!*” Lucky shoved her away from him hard, and Elizabeth went flying toward the kitchen—

Slamming into the same doorway that had started all of this terror—

She hit it face first again, then slumped to the ground, dazed.

Again.

She closed her eyes, let her head rest back against the wooden door frame, and just waited for whatever would come next.

“Why do you make me do this?” Lucky cried. She could only dimly make out his voice from behind her as her vision wavered. “Why do you *make* me hurt you? You said you loved me! I *know* you don’t! *You* made me like this!”

She heard him sobbing behind her, but Elizabeth couldn’t quite gather herself. Couldn’t quite summon the energy to get up. She just wanted it over.

She heard the door slam.

Minutes passed before Elizabeth finally managed to get to her feet. She made her way into the bathroom where she looked at her face—and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry when she realized that she hadn’t hurt herself as badly as the first time. There was no red mark—she might not even bruise. There was no evidence

Her cheeks were tear-stained, her eyes were bloodshot. She’d known she was going to leave—

She should have never come back.

Her phone was ringing. Elizabeth blinked at the sound, then took a deep breath. She was starting to come back to herself, beginning to adjust again. She went into the living room and found her phone in her purse.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Em. I just wanted—” Emily paused. “You okay, Elizabeth?”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth pressed her other hand to her cheek, took another breath. She cleared her throat. “Just tired. What’s up?”

“Jason is here. He said he wanted to tell you that Jesse Beaudry saw you talking to him on the docks. He thinks he told Lucky—he didn’t want to warn you himself—”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “Yeah, I know. He just left.”

“Oh.” There was a long pause. “You’re sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, we—” Her voice caught as she looked around the living room, at the contents of her purse, still mostly on the floor. At the mess in Cameron’s room, the toys strewn across the floor. The pillows from the sofa on the floor. The missing lamp, shattered the month before and never replaced.

“We had a fight. He left.”

“I can get someone to cover my shift—”

“No.” Elizabeth sighed, rubbed her forehead. “No. That’s okay. I’m okay.”

As she said the words, she knew they were a lie. But it was a lie she needed right now. She’d returned to an abusive marriage with a man who she didn’t love.

Maybe she did deserve what she’d gotten.

No. *No.*

She was done with all of that. She was done blaming herself, pretending that everything that had just happened was her fault.

She was just done. It was time to stop. It was time to think about what she needed.

What she wanted.

“Elizabeth—”

“Can you—” Elizabeth paused. “Can you ask Jason if—is he still there? Can I talk to him?”

“Uh, yeah, yeah—” She heard a muffled voice, then some rustling before Jason’s voice was on the line.

“Elizabeth?”

Some of the chill left her bones as she listened to him say her name. She’d always loved the way he said it. She didn’t even think about what she said next—for once, she just acted. “Can I see you?”

“What?”

“Can I see you?” Elizabeth repeated. She closed her eyes. “I understand if you don’t want—”

“No, no—I mean, yeah. Yes. When? Where?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. Now, if you can. Just not—” She looked around the apartment, at the place she’d thought was supposed to be safe. “Just not at my place. Can I come see you? At the penthouse?”

“Yeah. I can be there in twenty minutes. Elizabeth—”

“I’ll see you then.”

She didn’t wait for him to respond, just closed the phone and shoved it in her bag. She looked around at the apartment for the third time, left everything exactly as it was, and left.

Courtland Street

Lucky was practically vibrating with rage, his hands shaking as he shoved open his car door and stalked towards the alley where Santiago could be found this time of day. His body felt like it was on fire, his heart racing.

Everything was burning—his brain, his arms, his back—he just wanted it to stop—he wanted the pain to stop—the screaming in his head that he’d ruined his life—that Elizabeth would never ever come back to him now—that he’d thrown it all way—

Fuck her! Fuck her! She was the one who cheated! She'd broken her promise before she'd even known he was lying! And he didn't need any fucking help. If she'd just keep her goddamn legs closed and stay away from fucking Jason Morgan, Lucky wouldn't be so damn angry all the time—

“Yo, Spencer, you better not be here for a refill,” Santiago offered with a smirk as he nodded to the woman—probably a hooker—who sauntered down towards the other opening in the alley. “I just gave you enough for a week! And you still owe—”

“Shut the fuck up, asshole—” Lucky grabbed the dealer by the collar and shoved him against the wall. “If I wanted to, I could shut your ass down tonight!”

“Big talk from a junkie—” But Santiago's flat eyes were a bit more nervous now, jumping back and forth. “What do you want, man?”

“The good stuff. I need more. The pills aren't enough.” Lucky flung him away. “And stop giving me that shit about owing you. I told you, you'll get paid—”

“I keep giving away the product, my uncle is gonna be bitchy.” Santiago climbed to his feet, brushing off his jacket. “You gotta pay up—”

“The fuck did I just say, asshole?” Lucky shoved him backward again. He needed this to go away. He needed it to all disappear *now*. “Give me my shit!”

“Fine, fine, fine.” Santiago dug into his pocket and pulled out a bag. He shoved it at Lucky. “But you don't pay this time, I'm not responsible for what happens. I gotta break even with my uncle—”

“Just get the fuck away from me,” Lucky muttered as he shoved the bag into his pocket and lurched unevenly away from him, back towards the street and his car.

When he was out of earshot, Santiago scowled and pulled out his phone. “Yo, Hector. It's time to send that cop a message.”

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

Jason hadn't reached the Towers yet when Elizabeth arrived, so she had expected to wait down in the lobby. Instead, one of the guards told her she'd been cleared for the top floor and went upstairs with her to let her into the penthouse alone.

She hadn't been inside the penthouse since the day after Emily's fever broke, and she'd rushed to tell Jason, sure that the night of comfort and closeness they'd shared

in the chapel was a sign...of something. Instead, she'd found a belligerent Courtney jumping down her throat. And only weeks before, Sam hadn't let her over the threshold, deciding to scream at her in the hallway.

Elizabeth had never expected to set foot in this apartment again, especially not alone. She was too nervous, too upset to sit down, so she just paced the penthouse from the balcony windows to the door, then back.

The same path she'd often tread during those long nights she'd spent in the penthouse alone nearly four years ago.

Just when Elizabeth had made up her mind to leave, convinced she'd made a terrible mistake, she heard Jason's key in the door.

Fidgeting, Elizabeth checked her sleeves to make sure they were down to her wrists, then wrapped her arms around her waist.

"Hey, I'm sorry—" Jason closed the door as he stepped inside, tossing his keys on the desk. Then he just stood there, several feet away from her. "I ran into traffic—"

"It's okay. Um, one of the guys said I should wait inside. I hope that's okay—"

"I called ahead," Jason cut in, with a shake of his head. "I didn't want you to—" He cleared his throat. "I didn't want you to sit in the lobby. In case anyone—I mean, I don't know if it matters if anyone sees you—"

He sounded flustered Unsure. She could count on one hand how often she'd heard him sound that way. But he was looking at her, and he didn't seem irritated to see her.

Elizabeth licked her lips. "Um, I don't even know why I—I wasn't going to call you, I mean. It wasn't my plan. But Emily called me, and she said you were with her, and I just—" Her voice faltered as she swallowed hard. "I don't know. I thought if I could hear your voice, it would be okay."

Her lip trembled, and she bit down. She didn't want to fall apart. It wasn't fair to Jason for her to walk away from him, then bring Lucky to his doorstep. Not again. "I'm sorry—"

"Don't be sorry—" He took a step towards her. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know," Elizabeth admitted. "I just—I'm sorry," she repeated. "I know you hate when I say that, but I just—I'm standing here, and this is all so unfair to you, you know? Because I—I know what was going on with us, and I stopped it. I said it had to stop. And I know you think I always choose Lucky—I do, but—" She pressed her hands to her face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't do this to you." Her shoulders started to tremble, but still—she fought the tears.

She just was so damn *tired* of crying.

"Hey." Then he was in front of her, touching her shoulder and gently tugging her forward, pulling her into his arms. Elizabeth didn't fight it—let herself fall against him, her face pressed into his chest, against the clean, smooth cotton of his t-shirt.

She felt his hand in her hair, his arms winding around her. She drank in his scent, in the warmth of his embrace—

Then the tears fell. It wasn't a storm—she didn't rage. Just a quiet release of sorrow—trickles of tears down her cheeks, dripping from her chin, sinking into his chest.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" Jason asked after a long while when the tears had passed.

Elizabeth sighed, then drew back, using the heels of her hands to wipe at her eyes. "No. Not really. You probably already know it. You were with Emily—" She backed up a few steps to lean against the arm of the sofa. Her breath was shaky, but she was through the worst of it. At least for now.

"Emily told me this morning that she saw Lucky at Jake's last night. He'd—he'd lied to me. I told him—I made him promise me that if I stayed, he had to go to anger management. He tried to put it off, but I told him—he knew it was a big deal to me." Elizabeth looked away. Jason didn't need to know why it was a big deal. "I mean, you know how bad it was after the kidnapping, how he blamed me. He's been angry for months—and I—I just—it had to stop. Or there was no point in pretending."

"But he didn't go last night?"

"No. Emily found out he'd gone to a meeting, but then didn't go back." Elizabeth sighed. "I don't know what I was going to say to him. I guess—I mean, Emily told me he'd been lying to me, and all I could think—" Elizabeth looked at him, saw that he understood where she was going. "I broke my promise to him, too."

Jason exhaled slowly. "Elizabeth—"

"I nearly forgave him. In my own head, before I even asked him about it," Elizabeth said. She laughed a bit, startled at her own realization. "Because I saw you yesterday, and I didn't walk away. And in my head, it felt like it was the same thing." She dragged her hands through her hair. "God, how pathetic am I? Patrick was right. I did this to myself."

She looked at Jason again, who hadn't said anything, just listened to her patiently. "I thought—I broke my promise to him, so maybe he deserves a chance to explain himself, you know? Maybe there's a reason. I thought—God, I thought—But I didn't think about it. I didn't even really want to think about why I broke it. I—" She squeezed her eyes shut. "I just—I saw you. And I missed you. And I was tired of missing you, and I hate myself for it—"

"Don't—" Jason broke off in the middle of what he was going to say. "Why?"

"Because I promised." Her voice broke. She opened her eyes again to find his. "I'm not—I can't—I married him, Jason. I meant my promises then. They have to *mean* something."

"Do they mean anything to him?" Jason asked, his voice low and a bit raspy. "Was *he* killing himself to keep them?"

"No," Elizabeth admitted. A tear slid down her cheek, and she shoved it away. "No, but I'm tired of making promises that no one else seems to give a damn about." She shoved away from the sofa and stalked across the room to stare out over the harbor. "Maybe I just wanted to make it a whole year. My second marriage and it barely hit six months. I think I always knew Ric was a mistake. But Lucky—that wasn't supposed to end up like this."

"Elizabeth—"

"And it's stupid, I know it, to kill myself over this. Because I don't love him anymore." Some of the tightness in her chest eased as she admitted it finally. "I knew that weeks ago. I knew I was going to leave. But I needed to keep my promise. I did try. I did everything. I stayed away from you. I tried to be nice to his friends, even the ones I know hate me. I tried so hard, and it just never mattered to him—and I just—he didn't love me. Not really. Not who I really am." She pressed her hands to her mouth. "Why is it so *hard* to love me?"

"It's not—"

She hadn't heard him cross the room, but Jason was behind her. He turned her to face him and, again, pulled her against him, more roughly this time as if it was painful to listen to her. It probably was. How many times had she tortured him with Lucky over the years?

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I can't keep doing this to you. You deserve better than this—"

"Don't tell me what I deserve—"

"But you do." She drew away from him again. "And I'm *done* putting you through it. You were right. I wasn't choosing him last month. I didn't even really choose him all those years ago. I chose being safe. Because I'm a coward—"

"Hey—"

"I am. When it matters. I put myself right back in a terrible marriage with a man who hates me most of the time, who doesn't love my son, instead of—" Elizabeth shook her head. "Instead of just ...once...reaching out for something I want. For something that terrifies me."

Jason's mouth tightened. "I terrify you—?"

"Not you—" Elizabeth winced. "Not *you*," she repeated, more softly. "But the last time —when we almost—I didn't know. I didn't know where I stood with you. And the not knowing, the feeling that I wasn't good enough, it drove me insane. And I did stupid things. I think I sabotaged it before we ever got started," she added, thinking of that blackout mistake with Zander.

"I've been in love with my best friend before," Elizabeth continued softly, her eyes locked on his. "And when it fell apart, I broke into a million pieces. I think maybe I knew letting it happen again—I wouldn't come back from it. Not again." A wobbly smile slid across her lips. "It was safer to be unhappy with someone else than to go through that a second time."

"You weren't the only one who messed up," Jason said roughly. "I've been in love with my best friend before, too. And when it was over, my life was empty. There was nothing. I know what that feels like."

"Because that's pretty much where you were living, too," she breathed. "Jason, it was never *you* I was running away from. Or him I was going towards. It was just—I couldn't live with myself. I still don't know if I can. I've hurt so many people. You, Cameron, myself, and Lucky, too. He didn't deserve to be my obligation, my

punishment for myself. I just—I want it to stop. I just don't know how."

He pressed his lips to her forehead, a lingering kiss that she felt to the tips of her toes. His hands were in her hair, just like they had been that long ago day they'd sat on the docks and he'd told her he'd had to go.

She'd been devastated then, so sure that she'd never see him again. She'd had to leave him first, knowing she might beg if she stayed. He'd kissed her forehead, and she'd touched his arm—briefly entertaining the insanity of lifting her head, pressing her lips to his—to just see once if what'd she'd dreamt about was real.

Elizabeth hadn't kissed him then, not the shy eighteen-year-old who was just accepting there might be men out there who weren't Lucky Spencer who'd make her heart race.

But today, Elizabeth did what she'd wanted to do seven years earlier. She leaned up and met his mouth with hers. The kiss was long, soft, and sweet—what it would have been then, she knew.

When Jason drew back, he rested his forehead against hers. "Are you going back to him?" he asked quietly. He kept his hand on her chain, his thumb brushing the soft skin under her bottom lip.

"No," Elizabeth said finally. "I can't. Not after today."

Something in her voice must have sounded wrong, because Jason stepped back, his hand falling to his side. "Elizabeth, do you want to talk about it?"

"No," she repeated. Feeling better, stronger, she shook her head. "No. It's—it's not important. I just—I have to stop lying to myself. To Lucky, to everyone. My marriage is over, and it's been over for a long time." She paused. "And it's a relief," she admitted. "To say that out loud. Carly said it would be like this."

"Carly?" Jason lifted his brows.

"She said the day she gave up on Sonny ended up being the best day of her life." Elizabeth smiled. "She was right. I don't even understand why I was fighting so hard. I just—I'm done. And I'm glad to be done."

And it was better this way. She'd leave Lucky, and everyone would think it was because of Jason and anger management—no one would even have to know he'd hurt her again. And Jason didn't need to know at all.

He tucked her hair behind her ear, a slight smile on his lips. "You can't tell Carly she was right. She'll never let you forget it."

Elizabeth laughed, some the tension breaking between. "Oh, God, I know. Right? She's insufferable enough as it is." She sighed.

"I should go, though. Cameron's been at Carly's since yesterday, and I miss him. I want to get a few things and go to my grandmother's." She grimaced. "I also worked the night shift and haven't been able to sleep yet."

"Okay. Can—" Jason hesitated. "Can I drive you? If you're that tired—I can have someone take your car back to your grandmother's."

She hesitated, then looked at her watch. Lucky was supposed to be at work, then rehab, but she didn't know if he'd keep either of those appointments. "Yeah, but if his car is outside the building, can you stay downstairs? I just—"

"I don't want to make anything harder—"

"It's fine." She smiled. "Cameron will be happy to see you. And I—" She hesitated. "I don't know what's next," she admitted. "I'm not—I'm not ready to make anyone any promises."

"I'm not asking for any," he told her. "I just want you to be okay. Whatever I need to do to make it happen."

"Okay." Her smile was even brighter this time as she followed him out of the penthouse. She was making the right decision.

Everything would be easier after this.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

*When you try your best but you don't succeed
When you get what you want but not what you need
When you feel so tired but you can't sleep
Stuck in reverse
But high up above or down below
When you are too in love to let it show
Oh but if you never try you'll never know
Just what you're worth
- Fix You, Coldplay*

Saturday, May 13, 2006

Port Charles Park: Playground

“How is Cameron handling it?” Emily asked as she took a seat next to Elizabeth and offered her a bottle of water. About a hundred feet away, Elizabeth could hear the sounds of the spring carnival—the music, the games, the rides, the crowds.

Emily eyed the guard standing off to the side, just by the hedges. “Is he here for you or for Morgan?” she asked.

Elizabeth frowned. “He’s Morgan’s guard. I don’t—I don’t need a guard. With Manny gone—that was just temporary.” She absently ran her hand from her elbow to her wrist, relieved she could wear the pink tank top without worry.

The best way to end her marriage was to put all of it out of her head. She hadn’t seen or talked to Lucky or anyone in his family since he’d left the apartment last night—and she didn’t intend to reach out until she had to. She’d been dodging calls and messages from Luke, Bobbie, and Lulu for nearly twenty-four hours. Thankfully, none from Lucky.

She wasn’t ready to talk to any of them yet.

“I guess I thought Jason might want someone with you once Lucky found out you were leaving.”

Elizabeth tensed as she shook her head. “No—he never—why would he?” Oh, God,

did Emily *know*?

"I don't know. You just sounded so upset on the phone, and Jason left the hospital so fast—" Emily pursed her lips. "Honestly, Elizabeth, when you asked me to meet you guys before the carnival, I thought you were going to tell me you and Jason were together."

"Oh." Elizabeth laughed nervously. "Oh. No. It's not—it's not like that. I mean—" She was quiet for a minute as she watched Cameron carefully climb the stairs to the slide. "I told you before that Jason and I had crossed the line."

"You did."

"I tried to step back. I did," she corrected herself. "I *did* step back. Until Thursday, on the docks." Elizabeth hesitated. "I wasn't choosing Lucky, Emily. I was running away." She bit her lip. "And then Patrick yelled at me. I found out Lucky wasn't going to anger management—"

And then Lucky had broken the only promise she'd really wanted him to keep.

"I realized what I was giving up, and I didn't want to do that anymore," Elizabeth said finally.

"I don't blame you. I've been there, Elizabeth. With Zander. You know that. I thought I was dying, so I agreed to marry him. But I didn't love him. Not the way he deserved to be. And it didn't matter how hard we both tried, that spark wasn't there anymore. I was in love with Nikolas. We tried to stop it. Looking back, I still can't believe how badly I handled everything." Emily sighed. "But it was like there was a magnet attached to us. Every time we were within a few feet each other—"

"You couldn't let him walk away," Elizabeth finished. "Yeah. I get it, Em. I always did. Because it's been that way for me. Jason made it easier before—he left the first time, and the second time—*he* got involved with someone else. With Courtney. But he's not the only reason I'm leaving Lucky."

"No, I figure the anger management was part of it, too." Emily bit her lip. "You know I'm on your side, Elizabeth. And I love my brother. I think you'd be good together. But—"

"It's not like that," Elizabeth repeated. "We're not—I'm not going to leave my husband on a Friday, and move in with another man on a Saturday. Cameron—" She looked at her son, giggling as he followed Morgan down the slide. "Cameron still

thinks of Lucky as his father. That has to be dealt with. And I need—I need to be alone for a while.”

“I’m glad. I was prepared to be supportive if you and Jason were together, but—”

“You’re not wrong. I don’t know what’s going to happen there. But I know that I need to make a change.”

“Mommy, mommy…” Cameron rushed over. “Morgan says they’s cotton candy. I like cotton candy.”

“Mommy gave me money,” Morgan said with his sweet, careful smile. “I gots money.”

“We’ll head over to the carnival in a little bit.” She brushed some leaves out of his hair. “Cam, would you mind if Morgan’s Uncle Jason came by for a while?”

“I like Uncle Jason,” Morgan told Cam. “But sometimes, he won’t give me candy. He says Mommy gives me too much candy.”

“I like Mr. Jason. He playeded Biderman with me and Morgan and brought pizza.” Cameron nodded. “He can come.”

“Play for a little while longer, and we’ll head over to the carnival, okay?” Elizabeth asked.

“Okay!” Morgan tagged Cameron. “You’re it!” Then he took off running, and Cameron ran after him squealing.

“Jason’s coming?” Emily asked with her brow raised.

“I left Lucky,” Elizabeth said simply. “I don’t have to pretend we’re not friends anymore. And he likes my son. Cameron deserves all the love I can give him.”

Greystone Manor: Study

Sonny frowned as Jason checked the time on his phone for the third time since he’d arrived. “Am I keeping you from something?”

“What? No.” Jason shook his head. “I’m just—I’m supposed to be somewhere around three. What did Mateo have to say? Is he going to rein in Santiago?”

“He said he’d try, but I got something else that might be complicating it,” Sonny told him. “I put one of our guys on Courtland Street, just to get a sense of the traffic and customers. And he said that he thinks the cops have an undercover making buys.”

Jason grimaced. The last thing they needed was to get involved in a PCPD sting operation. They were just finally coming out from underneath the Manny crap. “Which cop?”

“Rocco talked to him, and the guy just said it was a cop. Rocco didn’t think it mattered who, but I can ask. But if they’re watching the Escobars on Courtland Street—”

“They might be watching them at Kelly’s or the high school. Maybe that’s why the PCPD is on this.” Jason hesitated. “I don’t like them dealing this close to your turf, Sonny, but the last thing we need is the PCPD looking at us.”

“I get it, but I don’t like the Escobars thinking they can play around like this,” Sonny returned. He poured himself a tumbler of bourbon. “Right now, Mateo seems irritated, but if we don’t do something, *we* look weak.”

Jason waited a long moment before taking a deep breath. “Elizabeth left Lucky. Yesterday. She went to her grandmother’s yesterday. And...” He pressed his lips together. “That’s where I’m going. To the park to see her and Cameron with Morgan.”

Sonny squinted at him. “Are you two—uh—you together now?”

“No,” Jason told him. “No. Not—She needs time. And space. But we don’t have to pretend we’re not friends anymore.” It had been Elizabeth’s idea, but Jason hadn’t hesitated. Asking him to spend time together where anyone could see them meant she was serious about leaving Lucky. And he didn’t want her to wonder how much she mattered to him.

“But you hanging out in public with a cop’s wife after everything that happened last month is like waving a red flag at a bull,” Sonny stated. “You know that. That’s why you’re thinking we hang back on the Escobars. Don’t give them a reason to look at us funny.”

“Yeah.”

“Any point in asking you two to lay low until her divorce papers are filed? Or like... she’s even moved her stuff out?” Sonny scowled. “You really gotta go public *today*? Less than twenty-four hours later—”

“We’re not—” Jason broke off. Because it wasn’t an unreasonable request. But it still rankled at him to be asked to put off spending time with Elizabeth and Cameron because of business. “We’re not going public,” he repeated. “But I get it. People are going to think we are.”

“I don’t give a shit about *people*, I give a shit about keeping the *cops* from digging into our lives all over again.” Sonny wiped his mouth. “This is important to you? This...carnival?”

“No. But it’s important to Elizabeth. And she would have already told Cameron I was coming. And Morgan knows I’m going. I saw him this morning before Carly took him over to Elizabeth’s.”

Sonny groaned at those words—because he knew Jason didn’t disappoint Morgan or Michael unless he had to. And it went without saying that Elizabeth and Cameron had joined the list of people Jason would walk through fire for. He sipped his bourbon and sat in the armchair. “What made her finally leave?” he asked. “Because two days ago, you were avoiding each other. Was it the thing on the docks?”

“It was part of it, yeah. Why does it matter?”

“It matters because she’s left him before, hasn’t she?” Sonny pointed out. “In fact, didn’t she leave him just before the kidnapping? How do you know she’s sticking this time?”

“Because I do, Sonny.” Jason scowled. “I don’t have to get your approval on this kind of thing. It’s not your business—”

“Really? It’s a *little* bit my business. You start sleeping with a cop’s wife—”

“Don’t call her that,” Jason snapped. “She’s not some cop’s wife. She’s Elizabeth.”

Sonny fell silent, staring at him for a long moment. “Yeah. She’s Elizabeth. And she was in your life long before she became a cop’s wife. Fair enough. If you’re willing to take on the crap we’ll get in the papers and from the cops, then fine. I’ll find out more about the PCPD’s involvement with the Escobars.” He got to his feet. “Have a nice time at the carnival.”

Port Charles Park

Elizabeth waved at Emily as she took Cameron and Morgan to get cotton candy at a nearby stall while she sat on the park bench, hoping to avoid some of the people who

were in line — she *really* didn't want to see or hear from Jesse Beaudry right now.

He was near the top of the list of people that Elizabeth wasn't really interested in seeing at the moment, but he wasn't alone. She sighed when she saw Sam McCall heading her way and decided to just suck it up. She remained seated as the other brunette stopped in front of her.

Sam slid her hands into the pockets of her jeans and rocked back on her heels. "Uh, hey."

"Hello." Elizabeth lifted her brows and sat back against the bench. "I haven't seen you around in a while."

"Yeah, I've been working in Florida for a few weeks. I actually just came back to Port Charles to finish up a few things, grab the last of my stuff, and then I'll be gone." She nodded towards the other side of the bench. "Mind if I sit for a minute?"

"Go ahead." Elizabeth slid over as Sam sat down. "So, you're leaving."

"Yeah, there's not much here for me. I—" She bit her lip. "One of the things I wanted to do was apologize for that last day at the hospital. Because I am sorry."

"I don't know what you want me to say, Sam. It was a bad day. And—"

"I know that I didn't have a good reason to be so angry with you." Sam shifted to face Elizabeth slightly. "But I think—God, I think I was mad at you *before* then. And not just because of Jason. I was mad because you *knew*."

Elizabeth didn't have to guess what Sam meant by that. She sighed. "I didn't do anything, Sam. I just ran the test—"

"Jason told you. Those results came back, and he told you about them. I can't—I couldn't understand why he'd do that. It was *none* of your business. And he told you like it was nothing. I should have known then—I should have seen you as a threat—"

"Sam—"

"You didn't do anything. I know that. It's on Jason. It's on *me* for not pushing him. For just being okay with the idea that he was still in love with you. I was willing to settle for scraps, Elizabeth, just to be with him. And that's why the hospital happened. Why I did what I did."

"It's okay. We all just—we all handled this badly." Elizabeth waited a minute. "You *weren't* wrong. Jason and I never slept together, and I—it never really came to it. But we crossed a line. Physically and emotionally. And it wasn't fair to you. I *am* sorry for that."

"I had this out of body of experience—I could literally *see* myself screaming at you, I could see you falling apart, and I just—Jesus, when did I become that woman? How did I let a man drive me to that point? I hated who I was, Elizabeth. What you and Jason did was wrong because you made promises to other people. And, well, I can't speak for Lucky, but I think deserved better."

"You did. And Lucky did, too. I never should have stayed in a marriage where I was that unhappy. It doesn't matter how *he* treated *me*." Elizabeth sighed. "I never wanted any of this." She looked over to the cotton candy stall, where Cameron and Morgan had just received their cotton candy. Emily hadn't seen Sam yet, or she would have been glaring at Sam, Elizabeth was sure.

"But that's life, right? We never get what we want. Or what we think we want. I got married in November, and I really thought it was going to be forever. It might have been. It might have been years before Lucky's anger became an issue," Elizabeth murmured. "But he can't deal with failure. With setbacks. And that's all the last six months have been. One disaster after another. And he couldn't handle it."

Sam sighed. "I know what you mean. I think things with Jason were fine until that day he came home and told me Alexis Davis was my mother, that he'd run the test behind my back, and that he'd told you. I had a choice in that moment. I could have focused on the real problem — the fact that a woman I hate threw me away like garbage. But I chose to focus on Jason, and I punished him for it. I refused to talk to him." She smirked. "And then Emily hit us like a freight train."

Emily caught sight of Sam and scowled. Elizabeth waved as if to indicate it was okay and that she should stay over there until Jesse and Maxie had left the area.

"She came at me hard when I was already low, and she threw Jason a fastball right to the face. I don't think *he* even *knew* how he still felt about you, Elizabeth, until she told him you thought he'd cheated on you. He'd barely flinched through the rest of it—including the part where she'd called me a whore—but he was so upset that he let her keep spewing all her hate and rage while he tried to figure out exactly what he'd done to you." Sam shook her head. "It was like watching a light bulb switch on his head. He'd locked you away, and then he couldn't do it again."

“Sam—”

“Instead of stopping to talk to him about it—instead of dealing with—I ran. I hid. I turned it into anger. Because that’s how it works in a relationship. You come to a fork in the road, and you either go the same way at the same time, or you take different paths. At every point, Jason and I walked away from each other. Until that day, when I found myself screaming at a woman who—I’m guessing—had already been blamed for her own kidnapping a thousand times by that point.”

“It was a bad day,” Elizabeth repeated softly. “I get it, Sam. Because I wanted to pretend my life was happy. And the first time I realized how just unhappy I was—the first time it got really bad, I didn’t make him leave. I didn’t walk away, either.”

Sam frowned, looked at her, furrowing her brow. “Elizabeth?”

“I knew he didn’t love my son, but I didn’t go then. I thought he’d get better. And then when it was clear how little he loved Cam, how angry he could get at me—I didn’t even blink. I just lied for him.” Her throat tightened as she forced the words out. Because suddenly—she needed to say it. And it seemed safe to tell Sam. “And I told everyone that I tripped and fell.”

Sam exhaled on a sharp breath. “Elizabeth—”

“And even after it got worse—even after that day in the hospital with you and knowing that there was a chance a better man might actually love me back, I stayed.” Elizabeth rubbed her chest.

“Are you—” Sam shook her head. “Are you still—”

“No. I left yesterday. And I think I mean it this time. I do.” She swallowed hard. “But I meant it the last time. And I still went back.”

“Why?”

“Why did you stay with Jason?” Elizabeth asked softly. “Because you did, didn’t you? Until that day at the hospital. You knew before then. I know you did. But you stayed.”

“It’s—” Sam waited a long moment, trying to gather her thoughts. “It’s not the same, Elizabeth. I thought we could be okay again. If you’d go away, if he’d forget about you, it would go back to being okay. And I thought it was worth waiting for it to be okay again—”

Sam cleared her throat, shook her head. “Ultimately, none of this matters anymore. I wasn’t happy here. Jason and I were always going to come to this because it turns out I’m a con artist, and I’m not ashamed of it. He was. And that’s a deal breaker for me. He doesn’t respect what I do or care that I love it.”

“And you deserve someone who does.” Elizabeth laughed a little. “Oh, God, I am so terrible at being a cop’s wife. Lucky always said that. I mean, I guess what you do is bad. But it’s not my life, and I’m not the one that has to live it. I’m sorry Jason didn’t accept it.”

“Yeah, well—” Sam shrugged. “At least with you being a nurse, you’ll have more patience for his Superman complex.” When Elizabeth just frowned, Sam continued, “The thing he has about saving people? He was so disappointed when Sonny didn’t want to do anything about Manny.” She smirked. “I told him—it’s not your job to fix the world, you know. You’re not Superman.”

“I—” Elizabeth blinked. “That’s so weird. I told him the *same* thing—”

“Yeah, but I think you and I meant different things. You expected him to be the kind of guy who wouldn’t abandon a pregnant woman being targeted by a psycho, and me?” Sam shrugged. “I figured it wasn’t his business.” She chuckled, a bit bitterly. “To think, I thought you wanting him to deal with that meant you didn’t understand him.”

“Sam—”

“Clearly, I was wrong about that. And—” Sam nodded towards a path in the distance where Jason was walking towards them quickly, “he’s not sorry how things turned out.”

“I don’t know what he is yet. But I’m sorry that you were hurt. I’m sorry for my part in it. Maybe I didn’t owe you anything as a friend, but I did owe you something as a woman. I’m sorry,” Elizabeth repeated. “And I know...I know you’re thinking of wrapping things up without talking to Alexis.”

“That’s going to be buried,” Sam said sharply. “I’m not dealing with that,” she added as Jason drew up to them.

“Is everything okay here?” Jason asked.

“Yeah, things are fine,” Elizabeth told him. To Sam, she continued, “And that’s fair. I

don't blame you. My parents abandoned me, too. Not by adoption, but they moved to Europe ten years ago, and I haven't seen them since I moved to Port Charles. I always knew they didn't love me the way they loved my brother or sister. Sometimes I think about asking them why. They probably wouldn't have an answer. Or they'd tell me I was being silly. But it'd be nice to know."

Sam chewed on her bottom lip as she got to her feet, Elizabeth also standing. "I'm sure if I told Alexis the truth, she'd tell me all the details I wanted to know before. Why she gave me up, how I ended up with Cody—I'm just not sure it's worth the price of telling Alexis. I mean, she *could* have looked for me—"

"Maybe," Elizabeth said, "but you don't have a lot of experience with the Cassadines. Not like I do. If Alexis was sixteen, she was still under Mikkos's control. He probably arranged everything. He was evil—worse than Manny Ruiz. I also know Alexis was terrified of Helena. Alexis sent her own sister away to protect her after Helena killed their mother."

"I—" Sam glanced at Jason for a long moment as his expression remained blank. "I didn't know that. Did you?"

"I did, but I didn't think about it that way—" Jason frowned. "Elizabeth—"

"Don't tell her, tell her—whatever you choose, I'm sure it'll be the right thing for you. But you've seen the way she's fought for Kristina, for Molly. Why do you think she wouldn't fight for you in her own way?"

"I've just hated her for so long," Sam said. "But if I'm going to leave Port Charles, it might be nice to take some answers with me. I don't know. I'll think about it."

"How are things?" Emily asked as Cameron and Morgan bounded up behind her. Cameron immediately started tugged on Jason's jeans—in which look liked a system they'd already settled on, Elizabeth realized as Jason leaned down to pick Cameron up in his arms.

"Hey, Cam," Jason said. "Did you eat or wear that cotton candy?" he asked, pointing to the blue strands near Cameron's mouth.

"I ateded it all up. Aunt Em says no more."

"I told her we didn't have to tell Daddy I got two," Morgan told Elizabeth. "But no more candy."

“I should get going,” Sam murmured, looking at the way Jason held Cameron. Elizabeth folded her arms, uncomfortable. She knew what it was like to watch the man you’d loved with another woman—and to see him with another child after they’d lost Sam’s daughter—

“Good luck, Sam,” Elizabeth offered as the brunette waved and disappeared down a path.

“Uh, *what* was that?” Emily demanded. She put her hands on her hips. “You were talking to her *forever*.”

“She just wanted to apologize before she left town,” Elizabeth told her. She knelt down next to Morgan and took out a napkin to wipe his face. “It was fine, Em.”

“Can we go on the rides?” Cameron asked. “Mommy said there’s some for us.”

“We just have to go to the ticket booth,” Elizabeth said as she straightened. “You ready?” she asked Emily.

“You mean, is Jesse Beaudry somewhere far away?” Emily snorted. “Yeah, he’s over by the bumper cars.”

“Well, then let’s go on some rides.”

—

A few hours later, both boys were still going strong and begging to go on the miniature kid’s roller coaster that had been set up on the far end of the park — which they could do as long as an adult would go on.

Elizabeth watched in stunned silence as Cameron and Morgan, in unison, looked directly at Jason, who didn’t even protest. He took their hands and got into line.

“Um—” Emily pursed her lips, nodded. “Okay. So that is my brother, riding a roller coaster. Jason Morgan. Excuse me—” She fished in her purse for her digital camera. “Mom is never going to believe this.”

She snapped a few photos as Jason and the boys boarded the small car. Cameron waved at them with a big grin as Jason made sure he was strapped in.

“Seriously, this has made my *whole* life—” Emily turned to Elizabeth, who hadn’t

said anything. “You okay? You look upset.”

“I’m not. I’m just—” Elizabeth sighed. “It feels like another lifetime, but I asked Lucky to come with us earlier this week. I thought it’d be something fun we could do as a family, you know? I really *was* trying.”

“I know, but—”

“And now I’m standing here, watching my son have more fun with Jason than I think he *ever* did living with Lucky, and I—I’m so angry at myself for letting Cameron live like that. He loves Jason. And he deserved better from me. I can’t imagine Lucky here. I’m *glad* he said no. I’m glad I’m standing here with you, watching Jason with my son and his best friend.” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to —”

“I haven’t seen my brother look this relaxed or happy in years. And you two aren’t even really together.” Emily slid an arm around her shoulder, tugging her in for a half hug. “It makes me happy to see you both happy. And you know how much I love Cameron. I want him happy, too.”

They watched, laughing and taking more photos until the ride was over. After, Elizabeth bought one of the pictures snapped along the ride.

“Let’s get some dinner,” she suggested to Jason as she returned to their group. “Cameron will probably want hot dogs.”

“Hamburgers,” Morgan said. He grinned. “And cotton candy.”

Jason shook his head as they headed back towards the entrance of the park, away from the larger rides and towards more of the food and games. “No more cotton candy.”

Elizabeth met Morgan’s eyes and nodded. “Yes,” she mouthed. Morgan grinned and slid her hand in hers as they wound down one of the paths.

“Did Elizabeth tell you she’s going to scrub in on her first surgery this week,” Emily asked Jason. “After only a *month*—”

“I’m scrubbing in to *observe*,” Elizabeth corrected. “I have to do that for like three more months before Patrick will actually let me assist. He’s such a perfectionist. I can’t believe he wanted me on his team to begin with.”

“Mom wanted Elizabeth on her team, too,” Emily explained. “She, like, went to war with Patrick.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Emily—” But she flushed as they arrived in the large food area set up and started to look for a table. “Don’t start.”

“No, that’s good. I know you like your job, and I’m glad other people notice,” Jason said. He lifted Cameron onto the bench seat of a table. “What do we want? Emily and I can go get the food if you want to wait with the kids.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” Elizabeth began, then she grimaced.

“Isn’t this *cozy*,” Jesse Beaudry snarled as he stalked towards them. Behind him, Maxie Jones followed with an irritated sigh. Her sister, Georgie, and her boyfriend, Dillon, were also in the group. And, to Elizabeth’s worry, so was Lulu.

“Hey, Liz.” Lulu folded her arms and looked at Jason, who still had his hands on Cameron’s shoulders after lifting him into his seat. She looked back at her sister-in-law. Lulu flashed a tight smile. “Dad’s been trying to call you—”

“I know. I was going to call him tomorrow,” Elizabeth said. “Lulu—”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll tell him.” Lulu cast a nervous look at her group. “Why don’t we just go? I didn’t want to come over here—”

“I think it’s shitty you didn’t even wait an entire day before flaunting yourself all over Port Charles with your criminal boyfriend—”

“There are *kids* here,” Maxie said, grasping at Jesse’s elbow. “C’mon, I told you—”

“No, Lucky’s entire life has been destroyed and this bitch—”

“You’re going to want to stop *right* there,” Jason said quietly. “Maxie’s right. There are kids here. You got a problem with me, that’s fine. But you should know better.”

“Kids—” Jesse sorted. “Sure—a mobster’s kid and the bastard she tried to foist off on my partner—”

Dillon, perhaps seeing the murderous light in Jason’s eyes or the way Elizabeth’s fists clenched, grabbed Jesse’s arm, tugging. “Seriously, dude. This is *not* okay.”

Morgan, likely used to his parents' fighting, hunkered down at the table and put his head down while Cameron stood up on his tiny legs and turned to Jason, wrapping his arms around Jason's forearm. "Jason, what's a bastard?"

Elizabeth growled at the sound of that word in her little boy's mouth and stepped in front of the table. "Jesse, you don't like me, that's fine. But you have *no* right to harass me or my child in public—"

"Lucky nearly died because of you, and you didn't even have the decency to pretend you gave a damn for like ten seconds—"

"You have *no* idea what you're talking about. If you won't leave, we will." She turned to take Morgan into her arms. She nodded at Jason, who picked up Cameron. "Come on, guys. We'll go to Kelly's."

"Running away seems to be your thing—" Jesse continued, but whatever words he might have said next were lost forever with the sound of a sharp CRACK!

Gunshots broke out over the roar of the crowd. Screams echoed in the air as people started to run, started to push and shove. At the familiar sound of gunfire, as she saw Jason grab her son and drop to the ground, Elizabeth grabbed Morgan around the waist and pushed down. She winced as a sharp pinch in her shoulder, then a slicing sensation through her skin like fire.

She shoved the bench out of the way and pushed Morgan towards Jason, Emily, and Cameron, rolling under after him. Jason pulled Morgan close to him, trying to cover both kids with his own body as Elizabeth and Emily huddled next to him.

Both boys were crying; Morgan was calling for both his mother and father as he burrowed his head down. Elizabeth heard more screaming—and as the gunfire faded—the screams became more distinct—

More familiar. A woman was screaming a name. Jesse's name.

"Jesse!" Maxie screeched. Elizabeth turned and could see just beneath the plastic gingham cover that Jesse was sprawled on the ground, his face turned towards her—with blood seeping out onto the cement ground. Maxie was sobbing, her sister and Dillon were trying to drag her backward. Elizabeth couldn't see where Lulu had gone.

"Wait here," Jason ordered. "Cameron, I need to go make sure it's safe—" Gently, he managed to settle Cameron with Elizabeth, Emily, and Morgan as he crawled from beneath the picnic table—

Elizabeth's heart was racing as Emily also crawled out towards Jesse and Maxie.

But she waited. She was a nurse, and she should be helping, but Cameron and Morgan were her priority and—

And she knew how this worked. She stayed out of sight, protecting the boys. They came first.

She met Emily's eyes as the other woman frantically tried to stop the bleeding. Emily did not look confident, and Maxie's anguished cries pulled at Elizabeth.

"Liz! Liz! Where's Cam?" Lulu cried as she crawled into view. She joined them under the table. "Where's Morgan—"

"They're here. They're safe—Stay with them—"

Elizabeth crawled out to help Jesse, but by then, it seemed like the whole world exploded—people were still running—still screaming—there were paramedics and security guards who'd been tasked with running the carnival.

Emily was pushed aside as a stretcher was brought over. Her hands were stained with blood as she shakily got to her feet. "Headshot," she managed. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath. "It'd be a miracle if he makes it to the hospital," she added as she watched a sobbing Maxie following the paramedics, held by Dillon and Georgie.

"You're bleeding," Emily said just as Jason returned to them, his gun already tucked back in his jeans, out of sight from the surrounding officers. He scowled, quickened his pace to be back at their side.

Elizabeth frowned, looking at him. "No, he's not. He's fine—" But then she felt it. The burning sensation on her upper shoulder, the blood dribbling down her arm. She looked down at her arm, left bare by her tank top. "Oh."

She touched the blood and looked at it, looked at Jason. Managed a smile. "Just like before."

But she didn't faint this time. Emily helped her sit down while Lulu climbed out from under the table with the boys.

“Jesus, Liz, you got shot!” Lulu cried. “I should call Lucky—”

“Mommy!”

“I’m not—I just got grazed,” Elizabeth said with a wince. She looked at her son, still crying. “I’m okay, Cam. It’s okay. We’re okay.”

“But the angry man. He’s not okay.” Morgan sniffled, swiping his eyes. “I wanna go home.”

Emily frowned as she took off the light button-down shirt she’d been wearing over her tank top and, with the help of a pair of manicure scissors from her purse, cut the sleeve and tied it around Elizabeth’s arm. “You can wait for the paramedics to look at you,” she told her. “But—”

“But we need to get out of here,” Elizabeth said, looking at Jason, who exhaled slowly and nodded. “Morgan needs to get back to Greystone right away. That’s what’s supposed to happen.”

“Wait, what?” Lulu blinked. “What does that mean?”

“Yeah,” Jason said, ignoring the blonde. “Yeah. And—” He hesitated. “I want you and Cameron to come with us.”

Elizabeth didn’t even hesitate. She got to her feet, picked up Cameron, and handed him to Jason before taking Morgan into her arms. “Then let’s go before the PCPD gets here. Emily, you’re going to the hospital?”

“Yeah—”

“Liz, wait, why can’t you just wait for the paramedics?” Lulu began.

“I’m sure Lulu needs a ride,” Elizabeth said, turning to her sister-in-law. “To be with Maxie and the others.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Emily said. “C’mon, Lu. Let’s go to the hospital.”

“But—”

“Let’s go,” Elizabeth said to Jason. “Because I really don’t think you want the PCPD to find you at the scene of a cop shooting,” she said as they started towards the exit.

She was running on adrenaline, she knew that. And when it stopped, she knew that she would have to think about the fact that she'd been shot at, standing next to Jason, with her son only inches away.

That was the last thing Elizabeth wanted to think about at the moment. Right now, she wanted to make sure Cameron was safe, and Sonny's fortress at the edge of town was the best place to be.

Everything else would wait.

Port Charles Park: Parking Lot

Jason's black SUV was parked next to Elizabeth's car. He set Cameron on the front driver's seat, then took the keys Elizabeth handed him so that he could get the car seats from her car and take them to his. Elizabeth also put Morgan on the front passenger's seat, and, together, they efficiently fastened both seats into the SUV.

It might have made sense to someone else to take the car that had already been set up for two toddlers, but Elizabeth knew the SUV had bulletproof windows. Jason hadn't even had to ask her to switch cars—she'd just known what to do.

"Mommy," Cameron sniffled as Elizabeth fastened him into his seat. He pointed at her arm. "Mommy, you hurt."

"I'm fine, baby." She took a precious extra five seconds to brush his hair out of his face and hand him his Spiderman action figure. Next to him, Morgan had a G.I. Joe he never went anywhere without. "We're going to go see Morgan's daddy's house. He's got a *lot* of toys."

"Yeah?" Cameron swiped at his face, his nose dripping. She took a wipe and blew his nose. "He gots Biderman movies?"

"I'm sure he does. But I have an extra in my bag. I never go anywhere without it," she told her son. She caught Jason's eye — they were out of time if they wanted to be out of the parking lot before the crowd told the responding officers Jason Morgan had been at the scene. "You ready?"

"Yeah. Okay, Mommy."

She closed the door and got into the front seat. Jason had already put the car into reverse to back out of the parking spot before she'd closed her door and fastened her seatbelt.

“Your arm okay?” he asked, grimacing as the SUV got caught in a crowd of other cars fleeing the park. He could hear the sirens of police cars a few blocks away. His fingers tapped restlessly against the wheel, willing the cars in front of him to move. He looked at Elizabeth—the makeshift bandage Emily had tied around her arm was already beginning to fail, the thin cotton no match for the blood seeping through.

“It’s fine. Sonny still has a guard with some medical training, right?”

“Uh, yeah—”

“I remember from when you were shot. Sonny wanted him to come look at you, but I wouldn’t tell him where you were.” Elizabeth touched her arm, wincing. “It hurts, but it’s not much worse than the warehouse graze.”

He didn’t understand how she was so calm and collected after being caught in gunfire, after her son had been traumatized—after she’d been *shot* in front of her child.

“I know what you’re thinking, Jason. And I guess we have to have that conversation, but not right now, right?”

She looked at him as the cars in front of him finally shifted, and Jason was able to pull away from the park—just before the first group of cop cars broke through the intersection across the street from the park.

“Elizabeth—”

“Jason.” She shook her head. “You weren’t hit. Jesse was. Maybe it was a ricochet. Maybe it wasn’t. But you know better. Don’t assume until you know the facts, right?”

He frowned. “How—”

“You always thought I was reckless,” she murmured. “That I treated it like a game.”

“I—” He fell silent—because of course, he had. She’d used that busboy to lure him to Vista Point—

Because he’d been avoiding her. Not returning her calls.

“I’m sorry. I should have known better. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“Good.” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “Now, what are the chances that Carly blames me for this because I had Morgan with me?”

He laughed then, a surprising release of the tension. “About sixty-forty in favor. She’s probably not going to let you babysit again.”

“Well, then I’ll just have to remind her I took a bullet for him, and we’ll be good.” They exchanged quick, tense smiles before looking straight ahead at the highway ramp that would take them out of downtown Port Charles, towards Greystone Manor and the security of Sonny’s high walls and electrified gates.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

*The world's on fire, it's more than I can handle
Tap into the water, try to bring my share
Try to bring more, more than I can handle
Bring it to the table, bring what I am able
I watch the heavens but I find no calling
Something I can do to change what's coming
Stay close to me while the sky is falling
I don't wanna be left alone, don't wanna be alone*
- Worlds on Fire, Sarah McLachlan

Saturday, May 13, 2006

Greystone Manor: Living Room

Inside the house, Sonny and Carly were waiting. Sonny sat in his armchair, a bourbon in his hand, Michael was on the sofa playing a handheld video game while Carly was pacing from the terrace doors to the double doors, back and forth.

As soon as the gunshots had been reported by the news, Sonny had called Carly for a lockdown at the estate. She'd gone without an argument. It didn't matter how long they had been divorced—she knew the procedure. Jason was with Morgan, and if he was okay, he'd be coming there as possible. She just wanted to be with her boys.

Morgan started crying almost as soon as Jason and Elizabeth crossed the threshold. He released Elizabeth's hand and ran across the room so that his mother could sweep him up into a bear hug.

Sonny launched to his feet to join mother and son. "Hey, kiddo," he said, running his hand down Morgan's back. "You okay?"

"I 'kay, Daddy." Morgan sniffled. "Scared. Big 'splosion."

Jason exhaled slowly. "Sonny, I need you to get Richie here. Elizabeth was grazed, and we didn't wait for the paramedics—"

"Oh my God, you were hit?" Carly looked at Elizabeth over Morgan's head. "Is Cameron okay? What happened?" She looked at the other toddler, who had tucked his head into the space between Jason's shoulder and neck, his cheeks tear-stained.

“Cam, it’s Aunt Carly. You okay, baby?”

“Yeah,” he offered in a small voice as he looked suspiciously at Sonny. “Jason squished me. Morgan okay, too. Mommy squished him.”

“Mommy—” Carly’s face paled as she took in Elizabeth’s blood-stained bare arm. Jason was pushing her towards the sofa where a silent Michael just moved over. “You—got—you got shot with Morgan—” He set Cameron down next to her.

“It was just the sides of the table we were on,” Elizabeth murmured as some of the adrenaline began to wear off. Her knees felt like they were made of water, and she gratefully sat down. “We had gone to the food court to get something to eat, and—I just grabbed Morgan and went under the table.”

“Thank you,” Sonny said in a quiet voice. “I’ll go get Richie.”

Cameron tucked himself against her good side. “Mommy, does it hurt?”

Morgan perched on one hip, Carly came around to stand next to Jason. “What the hell is going on?” she demanded. “I thought Sonny said things were quiet—”

“They *are*. We don’t know what happened.” Jason rubbed the back of his neck, watching as a pale Elizabeth reassured her son. “Jesse Beaudry was hit. Headshot.”

“Beaudry,” Carly repeated. “That’s a cop, right? Was he near you?”

“He was at the table, yelling at Elizabeth,” Jason muttered.

“Well, maybe it was because of *him*,” Carly said. She pressed her lips to Morgan’s cheeks again. “Hey, baby. Talk to me. You must have been scared.”

“It was loud,” Morgan said in a small voice. “And the angry man was bleeding. Aunt Em tried to help, but I think he hurt real bad.”

“Elizabeth,” Carly said, turning back to the sofa. “Why don’t I take the boys upstairs to get settled? You can get cleaned up.” She sighed. “I brought a bag with a few changes of clothes. I didn’t know how long—but you can borrow something from me if you need it.”

“Thanks,” Elizabeth managed. To Cameron, she said, “Do you want to go see Morgan’s playroom? Maybe Aunt Carly—” the words fell a bit more naturally from

her lips than she thought they might—"can get the Spiderman DVD from my bag."

"Wanna stay wit' you." Cameron wrapped his arms around Elizabeth's forearm and pressed his forehead against her shoulder.

"Well, Sonny and Jason are going to get someone who can clean my cut, Cam. And make sure it's okay." She pressed her lips to his head. "Go upstairs. I bet the playroom here is bigger than Aunt Carly's."

"It's two rooms, Cameron," Michael told him with a reassuring smile. He got to his feet, held out his hand. "Come on. We got lots of movies to watch. And Mom always has candy in her purse." He was clearly a pro at this, and beyond the lack of color in his face, didn't seem all that fazed by what was going on.

"Thanks for ratting me out, Mr. Man," Carly muttered as Sonny returned in time for that last remark. "Sonny, I'm taking the boys upstairs."

"Yeah, yeah, Richie's on his way up from the guardhouse." Sonny scrubbed his hands over his face. He waited until Carly had disappeared up the stairs with all three boys before turning back to Jason and Elizabeth. "Justus is on his way over. He's already fielding calls from Mac. Seems like they know you were there, Jase. It's only a matter of time before you get an official request to come in for questioning."

Jason grimaced. "Any word on Beaudry? What about other injuries?"

"A few other bullet grazes," Sonny said as a guard came in and sat down to look at Elizabeth's arm. He pulled out a bag and started to unpack a few things. "But Beaudry is the worst. He's still in surgery, but the guy at the hospital didn't think it looked good."

"That's what Emily said on the scene," Elizabeth offered, wincing as Richie carefully began to clean the wound. "But he made it to the hospital."

"Can you guys tell me what happened?" Sonny asked. "Were you the target? How close were you to Beaudry?"

"It's like we said. We were at one of the picnic tables," Jason said. "Beaudry and some of the other kids he hangs out with were right there. The shots started, and Elizabeth and I just grabbed the boys and went for cover."

"I was standing closest to Jesse," Elizabeth murmured. "With Morgan. On one side of the table. Emily was next to me. Jesse was right in front of me." She met Sonny's

eyes. "Jason was at least three feet away."

"*That* is interesting," Sonny mused, "and something to think about." He eyed Jason, who pressed his lips together. "Richie, how does it look?"

"Just a superficial wound," the guard told Elizabeth as he placed a bandage over it. "It bled a lot, but that serious. You won't even need stitches. Might be some skin discoloration, but it'll probably disappear with time." He packed his things up. "You're a nurse, right? You know to clean this if you have supplies?"

"Yeah, thanks."

When Richie left, Elizabeth sighed. She knew Sonny probably wanted her out of the way, so she got to her feet. "I should call my grandmother to let her know we're okay. Can I tell her where we are?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's fine. But if it's okay, Elizabeth, I'd like you and Cameron to spend the night. To make sure we know who the target was." Sonny hesitated. "I'm...kind of concerned that Beaudry was the hardest hit, and he was next to you. I don't know what that means, but you—" He looked at the remains of the blood-stained sleeve in her hands. "That bullet came close to my son, and he's okay because you took care of him. Thank you."

"You'd do the same for mine." She looked at Jason. "I'll go and call her. I'm sure you and Sonny have things to talk about that I don't need to hear."

"Yeah." Jason looked at her for a long time as if he wanted to say more as if he wanted to do something. But he remained rooted to the ground, not moving towards her. Elizabeth just sighed, shook her head, and went upstairs.

"I called Mateo," Sonny offered once Elizabeth was out of earshot. "He doesn't know what the hell is going on. This isn't from him."

"That doesn't mean it's not from the guys he can't control," Jason muttered. "Something isn't right about this, Sonny. There were two shooters—they both got away because I couldn't—the kids were there—"

"I didn't think you should abandon Elizabeth and Emily with toddlers so you could go get shot by someone else," Sonny said dryly. "You did what needed to be done. The kids come first. Two shooters?"

"Unless the guy had a machine, definitely more than one shooter. But opening fire on

crowded carnival?” Jason shook his head. “I don’t think the shots were coming from far away. A decent shot would have taken me out—I wasn’t expecting any trouble. But I didn’t even get grazed. *Elizabeth* did. And the cop took the full brunt.”

“You think Beaudry was the undercover working Courtland Street?” Sonny asked. “Maybe we weren’t the targets?”

“I don’t know.”

His partner frowned at him. “Are you sure you’re not just hoping it wasn’t about us?” Sonny asked. “You’re out in public with Elizabeth and her kid for the first time. He ends up in danger—that’s not a good sign.”

“She’s handling it,” Jason said flatly. “Better than most. No, I don’t want this to be about us. Because it means we missed something. We knew there were issues with the Escobars, but *this* is an escalation that we didn’t see coming. Do *you* want to admit we missed it?”

“No.” Sonny frowned as the front door opened, and Max shoved open the door to the living room. “What’s up, Max?”

“Uh, Lucky Spencer is at the guardhouse, demanding to talk to his wife and son.” Max winced as he looked at Jason. “I didn’t know what to say to him. He said if I just turned him away, he’d have the PCPD here to come get Cameron. I don’t know if that’s a thing he can do, but I thought Miss Webber ought to know.”

Jason sighed, nodded. “Yeah, I’ll go get her. See how she wants to handle it.”

He went up the stairs and found Elizabeth coming out of one of the guest rooms, her blood-stained tank top exchanged for a long-sleeved shirt that covered her wound. “Hey—I didn’t think you’d be done with Sonny so quickly. I didn’t even get to call Gram yet—” She frowned. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Lucky’s at the guardhouse,” he said after a long moment. “Demanding to see you and Cameron. He threatened to bring the PCPD to get Cameron. I’m sure he threw the words kidnapping around.”

Elizabeth hesitated. “The last thing I want to do is deal with Lucky,” she admitted.

“I’ll make him go away—”

But as Jason turned to go, she caught his sleeve and stopped him. “But I think I should go down myself.”

He frowned down at her, shaking his head slightly. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do—”

“No, I—” Elizabeth pressed her lips together and looked at him. “No, I don’t. But I need to do this. Plus, if I don’t send him away myself, he’ll just make more trouble at the PCPD.”

Greystone Manor: Guard House

Lucky was pacing back and forth in the driveway that led up to the estate, his car parked haphazardly behind him, one of the wheels on the curb.

Elizabeth folded her arms as she approached the gate, Jason on her heels.

“Let me in!” Lucky yelled. He pulled at the gate again, but the iron bars didn’t move. “Damn it! I’m a fucking a cop!”

“Yeah? No warrant, no service,” Max Giambetti shot back with a smirk. “Try again—”

But Lucky had seen Elizabeth walk up behind Max and another guard. His eyes were bloodshot, and she grimaced, wondering if he’d been at Jake’s drinking again. “Elizabeth, you have to come with me!”

“I don’t have to go *anywhere* with you.” Though the gate was between them, Elizabeth stayed behind the guards. She didn’t want to get within arm’s reach of Lucky—

She didn’t trust him not to grab her through the bars.

“Elizabeth, Elizabeth, you need to be safe—you need to come out here now!” Lucky stretched his arm through the bars. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to do it—”

“I’m safe right where I am,” she said flatly. “You need to go.”

“God damn it—” His scowl deepened, his face flushed even darker as he focused on Jason behind her. “You ran straight to him, didn’t you? You fucking *whore*—”

“Let’s go back inside,” Jason told her as Elizabeth shook her head. She met his eyes.

“He can’t get through the gate without a warrant, and he can’t tell the PCPD we’re keeping you against your will.”

“No, but he can still find a way to make trouble,” she murmured. She looked back at Lucky, at the man that, until yesterday, she’d been trying to save. Her husband. “He always does.”

The boy she loved was gone, and she couldn’t even find a trace of the man she’d promised to love forever, barely six months earlier. It was the first time she could look at him and not feel the choking weight of obligation, guilt, and regret.

She felt nothing.

“Go away, Lucky. And don’t come back.”

She turned and walked back to the house.

Greystone Manor: Foyer

Elizabeth dragged her hands through her hair as she walked into the foyer. Jason closed the door behind them. “Well, that was fun.”

“You didn’t have to go,” Jason told her, cocking his head to the side. “You knew he couldn’t come on the grounds without a warrant. And if the PCPD tried to take Cam, you’re here to stop that.”

“Yeah, I know that—”

“So, why *did* you go?” Jason asked, his tone quiet, his eyes searching hers. “I would have made him go away—”

“I needed to do it,” she admitted. “And maybe I didn’t even understand that until I went out there and saw him. Yesterday—” She blew out a breath. “Yesterday, *he* was the one that left. It should have been me. I should have left him weeks ago. I shouldn’t have gone back in the first place.”

Elizabeth bit her lip. “I needed to be the one who left,” she said again, more to herself. Then she met his eyes. “And I think maybe I needed you to know that. To see that.”

“Elizabeth—”

“Because I know the conversation—” She forced a smile on her face. “The argument we’re going to have later—when this is—when things are calmer.”

Jason looked away, and she just sighed. Elizabeth wasn’t sure she had it in her for that particular argument, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t going to happen all the same.

“But I needed you to see that I’m the one walking away from him this time.” Elizabeth’s chest eased. “And I’m not going back.”

Jason nodded. “Okay—”

They both turned when the double doors to the living room opened, and Sonny peered at them. “Lucky gone?” he asked.

“I’m sure he is by now,” Elizabeth said.

“Good. Jase, we got work to do. Elizabeth—”

“Got it.” She looked at Jason as Sonny went back into the living room, the doors still open. “Come find me later when you and Sonny are done talking, okay? We’ll have that argument.”

“Yeah,” he repeated. He kissed her forehead, lingering for a moment. “I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.” She squeezed his hand, then let him go. She went up the main stairs while he closed the doors.

Greystone Manor: Living Room

“She okay?” Sonny asked. He retrieved his forgotten bourbon from the coffee table and offered Jason a drink of his own. Jason didn’t usually drink with Sonny, but this time he accepted. Sonny went to the minibar to pour him a glass.

“She’s dealing. She’s—” Jason hesitated, sipped his drink. “She’s always been good under pressure. And she’s a nurse.”

“Trained to think in a crisis,” Sonny said. “Well, that’s your issue to deal with as long as Spencer doesn’t make any more problems for us.” He was quiet for a long moment. “You think this is any kind of payback for Manny?”

“Who’s left to get payback?” Jason asked. “The only brother left alive is a priest, and Roy said he never had anything to do with the family. We can call down to Miami, but I doubt anyone is missing the Ruiz family.”

“Fair. There’s always Alcazar. He’s in Miami now—”

“He owes me a favor,” Jason said. “And he knows Skye likes Elizabeth. He’s not going after her for Manny. Not after what happened last month.”

“Then I don’t know what the hell is going on. If it’s the Escobars committing suicide by going after an undercover cop, well...” Sonny shrugged. “I’ll do what I can to turn the PCPD towards them. It’d be nice to know if you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“First time for everything.”

Greystone Manor: Guest Suite

Jason and Sonny stayed holed up in the living room for several more hours as guards came and went to check in. Just after Carly and Elizabeth had fed the boys dinner and put Morgan and Cameron down to sleep, they got the word from the hospital that Jesse Beaudry had died from his injuries.

They’d gone to a guest suite with a bedroom and sitting room attached to it to eat their own food. She’d called her grandmother shortly after Jason told her Lucky was at the entrance, and Audrey had been livid to learn she was at Greystone with no plans to leave.

And now...to learn that Jesse had died...Elizabeth didn’t know what to think. She’d hoped that the worst was behind her, but somehow she knew that his death would only make things worse.

She was tired of thinking she’d hit bottom only to learn there were several levels of hell beneath it.

Carly shook her head as the guard left, having reported the news to them. She crossed to the window that overlooked the main drive leading down to the guardhouse and gated entrance. “The PCPD will be back, probably with an arrest warrant.”

“But Jason wasn’t the shooter. There will be witnesses to that. I mean, I know Maxie is probably too upset, but the others—” Elizabeth grimaced. “But yeah, they’re not

going to let this go.”

Carly bit at her nails, staring out the window. “What do you think? Do you think this was about Jason and Sonny?” She turned back to Elizabeth, who was pouring herself a glass of wine. “I mean, this isn’t your first shooting.”

Elizabeth pursed her lips. “No, it’s not. Jason made us both stay at the penthouse when Alcazar shot at me and Zander in the hospital. It was a few days before he’d let me go back to work at Kelly’s, but even then, I had a guard and stayed with him. This isn’t like that. And I guess there was the warehouse fire that year, too. And the kidnapping.”

“Yeah, that was a busy couple of months.” Carly huffed. “This does feel different. We’re in lockdown, but it’s like—do you think it was even about Jason or Sonny?” she repeated.

“I don’t know. I can’t—” Elizabeth sighed. “If it was, they sent the wrong guys to do the job. I think Jason said something in the car about it being more than one guy. They were a terrible shot if Jason *was* the target.”

“Or you. Your back was to the shooters, yeah? Because Jesse got hit in the head.” Carly started to pace. “They could have hit you. They didn’t. You got grazed, but the cop got shot.” She wrinkled her nose. “The PCPD isn’t going to care about any of that.”

“No, they won’t.”

“Especially since you were there with Jason. Crappy ending to a date, huh?” Carly raised her brows as Elizabeth recognized she was fishing for information. Elizabeth handed her a glass of wine.

“It wasn’t a date, but no, that’s not how it was supposed to go. It was just supposed to be fun. I wanted Cameron to have a good day without me rushing off to work or him going to sleep somewhere else without me. And he loves Jason. I wanted that for them.”

Carly sipped her wine. “And now, you’re remembering why you ran away in the first place.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Good God, does *everyone* think I’m some kind of idiot? Carly, the first time I met Jason, he was leaning over Nikolas’s bleeding body because Nikolas got shot standing next to him. I’ve taken care of his bullet wounds.

Hid him from people who wanted him dead. I got kidnapped because of him. This is actually the *second* time I've been almost shot standing in the same area as him."

"Uh huh." Carly nodded. "But you didn't have a kid before. And I'm not interested in watching Jason fall in love with a kid only to have you walk away—"

"A little hypocritical coming from *you*, don't you think?" Elizabeth asked coolly.

"Starting to remember *why* I don't like you," Carly muttered as she took another sip of her drink.

"Because I have a long memory?"

"Because you are *annoying*," Carly said through clenched teeth. "I'm just—Yes. I hurt Jason a long time ago. I've been trying to make up for it, okay? So if you're going to use this as an excuse to run away again, I'd rather you did it now instead of later. Before Jason can get more attached."

"Not that it's any of your business, but I didn't run the last time. Jason shoved me out the door because of the danger. And if anyone walks away because of this, it won't be me." Elizabeth sat down. "Can I eat my dinner now, or do you have anything else irritating to say?"

Carly narrowed her eyes, then sat down across from her. "Thank you, by the way. For taking care of Morgan." With a sigh, "I'm never going to like you, Elizabeth, but you're a good mother. I know I can trust my boys with you."

"That might be the first thing we can agree about."

Blue and red lights flashed through the sheer curtains. They went to the window as Carly sighed. "Well, the PCPD are back."

"And they got through the gates." Elizabeth let the curtain fall back in place. She exchanged a troubled look with the blonde because they knew what that meant.

Port Charles Police Department: Squad Room

Jason scowled when he and Sonny walked through the double doors of the room. He didn't mind the dirty looks from the cops. He'd expected to be dragged to the station once they'd learned Beaudry hadn't survived the trip to the hospital. He'd been an asshole, but Jason knew a dead cop would only make all of this worse.

No, what he *really* wasn't in the mood for was seeing Lucky Spencer and Audrey Hardy standing with Mac Scorpio.

Sonny followed his gaze and sighed. "Well, this should be fun. You think Justus is here yet?"

"You need to send a car out," Lucky told Mac, his face flushed. He threw his hands up, gesturing at Jason and Sonny. "They're keeping her locked out there—I can't see my wife or son—I don't know if they're hurt—"

Jason scowled. They couldn't get a search warrant for the estate, but if Mac thought he had exigent circumstances, they could get onto the property.

"Damn it," Sonny muttered. He twisted around. "Where the *hell* is Justus—"

As Lucky continued to rant, Jason watched Elizabeth's grandmother because he had a bad feeling if *she* backed up Lucky's demands, Mac might be swayed. Tempers were running high, and Lucky was clearly irate. But Audrey knew Elizabeth had moved out—

"Tell them, Audrey! Tell them they wouldn't let me see my own kid!" Lucky growled. "You need to let me get them, Mac! I *need* to know they're safe!"

Mac hesitated, looked over at Jason and Sonny with an irritated look, then looked back at Lucky. "Look, I can't just search the property, Lucky. I need proof that they're hurt or in danger."

"Audrey—" Lucky looked at his wife's grandmother, pleading. "Tell them. You *know* Elizabeth needs me. She's making a mistake. She's not safe there."

Audrey hesitated, looked at Lucky again, then frowned at him. Jason wished he knew what the older woman was thinking, if she was at all disturbed by the rage shaking Lucky's shoulders, the trembling of his hands, the fury glinting in his eyes.

This was not a man that Jason wanted near *anyone*, much less Elizabeth, but Audrey Hardy had always thought any man would be safer for her granddaughter than him.

"If she says yes," Sonny muttered, "I am not in the mood for this bullshit. I told you not to fuck with a cop's wife."

Jason sent him an irritated glare but said nothing.

Finally, Audrey sighed and looked at Mac. “I talked to Elizabeth no less than an hour ago, Mac. She was shaken up, but she said she was fine. She and Jason took Morgan home to be with his parents. The little boy was upset. Elizabeth stayed there because Cameron and Morgan are close, and she wanted them to feel better.”

Jason released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. He hadn’t expected Audrey to back Elizabeth up, but they’d gotten lucky. For tonight, at least, Audrey had decided to take Elizabeth at her word.

“Finally!” Sonny said as Justus entered the room behind them. “Can you get us out of here?”

Sunday, May 14, 2006

Greystone Manor: Guest Room

It was after midnight before Elizabeth saw the gates open again. She should have gone to sleep hours ago, but she’d hoped Justus would get Jason and Sonny released quickly.

And she wasn’t going to be able to rest until she and Jason were able to talk.

Carly had left her after dinner, leaving Elizabeth to pace the confines of the room, switch the television off and on, getting annoyed every time the news mentioned the shooting and seemed to blame it on Jason.

She’d talked briefly to Emily, to Robin and Patrick, to check on them. She’d gone to check on Cameron, but he and Morgan were snuggled in Morgan’s bed and sleeping like the dead.

She’d sent Jason a text message telling him that she’d wait up to talk to him as soon as he could see her.

Not long after the gates opened, there was a light knock on her door. She pulled it open, relieved to see Jason standing there—even if he looked like he’d rather be anywhere else.

“Hey,” he said as she closed the door behind him. She wrapped her arms around his waist, and he pulled her tight against him—she just wanted to be close to him. To know he was okay. They stood in silence for a long moment. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I was just worried they would keep you overnight. Carly and I knew we had to stay upstairs, but—” Elizabeth sighed, pressing her forehead against his chest. “I hated not knowing.”

“Justus came pretty quickly,” Jason told her. He hesitated. “Your grandmother was there. I think she was waiting to talk to Mac, but—Lucky was there. He was trying to get Mac to come back here and get you.”

“I guess I’m just glad Mac didn’t try—”

“That’s because your grandmother told Mac she’d already talked to you and that you were fine.”

“Really?” Elizabeth raised her brows. “I would have thought she’d want Mac to drag me out of here kicking and screaming—”

“I think Lucky made her uncomfortable.” Jason exhaled slowly. “I also think your grandmother didn’t want you to be in the middle of that.”

He crossed the room to the sitting area, and she followed him. “I appreciate you—that you just did what I needed you to do today. I know you don’t like being told what to do —”

“I don’t, but that wasn’t an ordinary situation. When it comes to my son’s safety, I’ll do what has to be done.” She sighed. “I know you feel guilty about today, but—you never would have gone out with us in the open if you’d thought there might be violence.”

“That’s just it—I can’t ever know—” Jason scowled and sat on the sofa, putting his head in his hands. “I can’t *ever* know for sure—”

“No one can.” She paused, remembering what she and Sam had talked about earlier. “You’re not Superman, Jason. I keep telling you that.” She sat next to him, pulling his arm down so he’d look at her. “You can’t control the world. You can’t save everyone.”

“I don’t—” Jason stopped, shook his head. “That’s not what I’m trying to do—”

“No? Jason, you and I were at a carnival full of people. Someone took a shot at a cop, and he died. I get why you have to take precautions, but—” She lifted a shoulder. “I think you also have to admit there’s a decent chance this was about Jesse.” Elizabeth winced. “This sounds terrible, but it’s not that hard for me to believe he pissed

someone off to the point of violence.”

“Elizabeth—”

She took his hand between both of hers, waiting until he met her eyes. “I know all the things you want to say to me. It’s the *same* conversation we’ve been having since we met. And my answer is still the same. *You’re* the one that keeps wanting to choose for me.” Her eyes burned. “You said that you were sorry you’d made that choice for me. *You* said that. Months ago, when it was about Emily and Sonny, when it was about Sam.”

“I—” Jason just stared at her. “*How* can you want this? Forget about you. What about Cameron?”

“We’re really back to this.” Elizabeth closed her eyes. Had it only been yesterday that she’d ended her marriage? Was she doomed to repeat the same mistakes forever? She’d gone through the same cycle with Lucky as she had five years ago. Now she was having this conversation with Jason *again*.

Was Ric next? Was she really that stupid?

“I wish I could wrap my son in a bubble and protect him from the entire world. I can’t. Because there is danger *everywhere*. Yeah, some of it comes from standing next to you. But it also comes from fire, from car accidents, from illnesses, from people who are supposed to love you—” She broke off as she realized what she was really saying.

Cameron had been in danger every day she’d let him live in a home with an abusive husband. Because one day, Lucky’s anger might have turned to her son. And she’d let it happen. She’d let Cameron watch Lucky hurt her and done nothing.

“I can’t control the world, Jason. I just can’t. All I can do is surround my little boy with love. With people who want the best for him and love him.”

“I do love him,” Jason said in a low voice. “Elizabeth—” He shook his head. “Maybe this isn’t the right time.” He pushed himself to his feet. “I should let you get some sleep—”

She grabbed his arm as he started to walk past her. “I told you yesterday I wasn’t—that I wasn’t ready to go anywhere with this. Not yet. But we need to get *this* out of the way because I don’t want to push this conversation down the road five more months. I am *tired*, Jason, of standing in front of you, begging you to love me.”

“Elizabeth—” Stunned, he turned to face her. “That’s not what this is—”

“Then *what* is it? Why can you take a chance with other women but never with *me*?”

“I—” Jason swallowed. “I don’t know. I just—” He looked at her arm, where the bullet wound lay hidden beneath the shirt she’d borrowed from Carly. “I don’t want to watch you bleed. I just want you to be safe.”

“Safe,” Elizabeth repeated. She didn’t even know what that word meant anymore. She couldn’t remember that last time she’d felt truly safe. She exhaled. “Fine. *Fine*.”

“Elizabeth—”

“I can’t do this anymore. I just *can’t*. Because I’ve told you over and over again—I’m willing to take that risk. And you’re not. Maybe you never will be.” Her chest hurt as she turned away, putting her hands over her face. How many times was she going to do this to herself?

“I’d rather you be alive and hate me than stay with me and get hurt,” Jason said finally. “I can live with that. I need you to be safe. I can’t—” He just shook his head. “I can’t get this right.”

“And what does safe mean?” she asked softly. “Because Manny kidnapped me, went after me—” Elizabeth stabbed a finger at him. “And *don’t* tell me he only went after me the second time because of you—because he was *always* going to come for me. And that happened while I was with Lucky. Was I *safer* then?”

“I—” Jason exhaled slowly, looked away. “No. I guess not.”

“What about the crap I went through with Cassadines—with Helena trying to kill me for years because of the Spencers? Was I safe then? What about Ric? Was I safe then—what the hell does *safe* mean?” she demanded. “Does it mean alive? Well, great. I’ve been breathing for the past four years. You got what you wanted. I’m *safe*.”

She stalked away towards the window, dragging her hands through her hair, digging her fingers into her scalp. And he didn’t even know the worst of it.

Would he really be standing here telling her she was safer away from him if she told him about how much Lucky had really hurt her? If he knew about the bruises she’d hidden—the cuts she’d lied about—

“How long do you think I’ll have to stay here?” Elizabeth asked dully.

“We’ll hear back from Mateo Escobar tomorrow,” Jason said. She turned at the sound of his voice—realizing he’d walked up behind her. “He runs a small gang out of Courtland Street. He’s the only one who could have done this, and we don’t even think it’s likely to be him. Not directly.” He sighed. “You’re right. Beaudry was probably the target.”

“Well, he really was an asshole, but I’m sorry that he’ll never get the chance to grow up. And I’m sorry for Maxie. She’ll have a tough time ahead of her.”

Elizabeth turned to look up at him. “I get it, Jason. You don’t want me to get hurt because of you. You don’t want anything to happen to me, or to Cameron. But that’s *my* choice to make. Not yours. You either respect that, or you don’t.”

“I do.” Jason traced the line of her jaw. “I’m sorry. I keep messing this up. I don’t want you to walk away. I don’t want to lose the chance that, at some point, you’ll be ready. But I won’t apologize for not wanting you hurt. For wanting you to be safe.”

“Then you need to redefine what safe means to you,” Elizabeth told him. She fisted her hands in his shirt. “Because safe shouldn’t mean unhappy. And that’s *all* it’s ever been to me.”

He leaned his forehead against hers, their breaths mingling as their lips brushed against each other. “Elizabeth—”

“And tonight...I don’t want to be safe.” She slid her hand around the back of his neck to kiss him fully, to press her body against his. His breathing was shallow when their lips parted. “Stay with me.”

“Elizabeth—” His hands, tangled in her hair, tightened a bit, lifting her chin so he could deepen the kiss. “Are you sure—I don’t want to rush you—”

“I’m tired of not taking chances.”

Jason drew back slightly, his thumb brushing the bottom of her lip. His eyes searched hers. The air around them seemed to crackle with electricity as her breath quickened. Elizabeth’s heart pounded an erratic rhythm. He reclaimed her lips, crushing her against him.

They stumbled towards the bed as she clumsily reached for the bottom of his t-shirt. Elizabeth fell backward against the soft mattress. Jason was more careful as he

stripped the shirt from her, easing it over her shoulder. He brushed his lips against her bandage, trailing his mouth from her wrist to her shoulder, then to her collar bone.

She wrapped her arms around his neck as he lifted her with one arm, settling her back against the pillows. She couldn't help but giggle breathlessly as her jeans joined his on the floor.

Jason looked at her with a wicked grin she'd never seen before. "What's so funny?" he murmured, his breath hot against her neck.

"Just—" Elizabeth moaned slightly as that mouth drifted lower again. "Just that I wish I'd worn something more interesting if I'd—I'd known it was going to be seen by someone else—"

He brushed her hair out of her face, pausing to look at her. "You're perfect," he told her in a gravelly, rough tone that sent shivers cascading throughout her body. "Just the way you are."

She slid her hand around the nape of his neck and pulled him down to her, kissing him hungrily, the way she'd always wanted to, the way she had in all her dreams over the years.

This was what she deserved, and Elizabeth didn't want to waste a minute of it.

Chapter Thirty

*Hey, you call me up again just to break me like a promise
So casually cruel in the name of being honest
I'm a crumpled up piece of paper lying here
'Cause I remember it all, all, all too well
Time won't fly, it's like I'm paralyzed by it
I'd like to be my old self again, but I'm still trying to find it*
- All Too Well, Taylor Swift

Sunday, May 14, 2006

Greystone: Guest Room

Elizabeth stirred awake as she heard sounds in the room around her. Forgetting momentarily where she was, she rolled over and opened her eyes. She expected to see Cameron bounding out of his bedroom to climb onto her sofa bed and ask for something to eat.

Instead, she found the dimly lit, luxuriously furnished guest room at Sonny's estate, the hint of the morning sun sliding between the openings in the curtains—

And across the room, Jason Morgan was pulling on a pair of black cotton briefs.

Oh, right.

She closed her eyes and fell on her back, staring up at the cream-colored ceiling, pulling the sheet up under her shoulders.

She'd slept with Jason. She'd asked him to stay—and he had.

“Hey.”

She felt the bed dip under his weight as his voice came closer. Elizabeth opened her eyes again, turning her head again to find that Jason was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking at her.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you,” he murmured. “I was worried that Cameron might come in.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth sat up, clutching the sheet to her chest and dragging a hand through her hair. “Um, what time is it?” she asked as she looked around for a clock. “It’s... almost six?”

“Yeah, you should go back to sleep,” he told her. “We, ah—” Jason cleared his throat. “We didn’t go to bed until a few hours ago.”

Her cheeks flushed. “No, but—” She took a deep breath. “Cam wakes up at seven most of the time, so there’s no point.” Elizabeth met his eyes, but it was hard to read the expression in the dim room. “So. Hey.”

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly. “Hey.”

“So, this, um—” Elizabeth laughed, shook her head. “I’m sorry. I don’t—I feel so silly. I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.” He tipped his head to the side. “Are you okay? With...”

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth answered honestly. “I...I’m not sorry. I don’t have any regrets,” she added in a hurry when he sighed. “I just...um, I didn’t wake up yesterday and think today’s the day I’m going to—” She huffed. “I’m not explaining this right.”

“Elizabeth.”

She bit her lip and met his eyes again. “I’m *not* sorry. Yesterday was insane. And I was scared. For you, for me, for the boys, and Emily. I hate that they saw that. And I was irritated because I knew we were going to have to have that fight, you know? And I just—” She leaned back against the headboard. “I didn’t think we’d have to have that conversation for a while.”

“I’m sorry.” He took a deep breath. “I know it feels like we always have the same fight.”

“Because we *do*.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes and huffed. “And I manage to win in the moment, but it’s like—I win the battle, but I never get to stop fighting the war. I don’t want to do this *again* next year, in two years.” She met his eyes. “This is the last time, Jason. I don’t know what I want tomorrow to look like. But I know that I’m *done* convincing you that this is something I am choosing with my eyes wide open. You either accept that, or you don’t.”

“And I accept it,” he said simply. “You’re right. And I get it. This wasn’t something either of us was planning to deal with yet. So if you...” He gestured at the bed, at the sheet she was still clutching against her like a suit of armor. “If you’re not ready, you’re not ready.”

“I just—I don’t know,” Elizabeth answered. “I just know that I don’t want to hurt you. I’ve done that enough. I’m not going back to Lucky. But I just don’t know that I’m ready to choose this. Not yet. I want to be. And last night...” She reached out to touch his cheek. “Last night wasn’t a decision I made lightly. I wanted to be with you. And I’m not sorry.”

“I’m not sorry, either.”

“So what happens today?” she asked. “With all of this—I know you hate to talk about business with me—”

Jason hesitated. “It’s not that *I* hate it—that’s a rule Sonny taught me. Don’t tell anyone who needs plausible deniability. But it’s also an easy way to keep people out. Sonny does that. And I don’t want to do that. Not again.” He paused. “And you were right when you said if you choose this, if you walk over that line, you deserve to understand the risk.”

He’d remembered. “Thank you.”

“You’ve proven you can be trusted. And you’re here because I asked you to come. The way Carly just drops everything and brings Michael and Morgan if she’s asked to. That’s just something she does, no matter how terrible things are with Sonny or how much they argue. Thank you for that.”

“It’s what you needed, and it was the safest place for my son. There was no contest.”

“I told you last night we were waiting to hear from Mateo Escobar. He’s a small-time guy, runs a couple of clubs over on Courtland Street. They run the drugs in Port Charles,” Jason admitted. “Sonny used to try to keep them out, but—”

“But they just kept coming. Moreno, Sorel, Roscoe...” Elizabeth nodded. “I remember. I know some of the Escobars. They were always in the ER being stitched up when I was on my rotation there. Why would they come after you?”

“They’ve been pushing out of their territory lately,” Jason admitted. “Luke’s, the high school, Kelly’s. Sonny hadn’t decided to do anything about it yet, which is why

yesterday doesn't make sense. It's..." He shook his head. "I don't know. If it's not the Escobars—I don't know. And I hate that. It's one thing to think it's probably not us, but I'd rather know for sure."

"So....I guess Cameron and I might be here a while?" she asked, unsure how she would ever explain that to her grandmother without an argument. And she still had to deal with the end of her marriage—

But Jason was already shaking his head. "No. Jesse Beaudry is—a cop's dead. No one is going to want to keep the heat going. But..." He sighed. "I'm sorry. I don't know. Maybe one more night to be safe—"

"Okay." She flashed him a smile when he didn't look convinced. "Really, Jason. It's okay. We'll wait to see what happens after Sonny meets with this guy. I better get up and get showered. Maybe I can get something to eat before Cameron gets going."

"I should go before he gets up." He winced. "Or before Carly does. I'm not in the mood to have that argument."

"Me either," Elizabeth offered dryly, as she watched him finish dressing. She got out of bed and found the robe Carly had left for her. She tied the belt as Jason pulled on his shirt and picked up his boots.

Before he left, she went to him to lightly brush her lips over his. "I meant it. I'm not sorry," she told him softly.

"Me, either." He kissed her again, then left.

No Name Restaurant: Private Room

Sonny frowned as the door closed on Mateo Escobar and his entourage. He turned to Jason, gestured back at the door. "What do you think about that?"

"I don't like it," Jason said with a shake of his head. "He thinks we should relax because it was his nephew who ordered the shooting, and he's being dealt with." Jason shook his head. "No. He refused to give us the name of the customer or tell us what the problem was so we could check up on it.."

"And why the hell they picked that moment to shoot at a crowd of kids? With my kid and enforcer standing right in the line of fire?" Sonny shook his head and sipped the coffee as Jason paced the small room. "That idiot Santiago felt secure enough to order a hit that killed a cop—"

“You think he’s lying about the target? You *still* think it was Beaudry?” Jason went to the window to watch as Mateo’s car pulled out of the parking lot, followed by two more SUVs. “Pretty dumb to take out a cop, even if he was undercover.”

Sonny squinted. “The only thing I *am* sure of is that Carly and Elizabeth can take the kids home. We don’t have to stay on the estate—”

Jason looked at him, bewildered. “We don’t know *who* the target was—Elizabeth was still in the line of fire—”

“She was, but she was grazed. Beaudry was hit with a headshot. He picked the wrong moment to get bitchy with her—it was probably the first time he was facing the shooters—” Sonny got to his feet. “I don’t think we’re out of the woods as far as the Escobars are concerned, but I also don’t think we need to worry about Carly or Elizabeth and the kids.”

Jason shook his head. “Sonny—”

“Look—” His partner looked at him as he stood by the door, his hand on the handle. “I get it. You and Elizabeth aren’t sure what you are, and she was lucky yesterday. The boys being there, Emily being there—it’s a lot. But I’m not locking Carly up any longer than I have to. She only agrees to come to the estate if I don’t push it.”

When Jason said nothing, Sonny sighed. “If you’re really not convinced Elizabeth and Cameron are safe, then take them to your place. They’d probably be more comfortable there anyway.” Sonny tilted his head. “Or maybe you’re worried if you push it another night, Elizabeth might not want to stay—”

Jason shook his head. He wished Sonny would *stop* saying shit like that—dropping hints that whatever was happening with Elizabeth was that weak. After yesterday—after last night—he knew without a doubt that Elizabeth wouldn’t balk at spending a night at his place to keep Cameron safe.

She’d never blinked, never hesitated—not *once* in all these weeks. Stalked and kidnapped by a psychopath, shot at in front of her son, locked on an estate for nearly twenty-four hours—

And the only time she’d been ready to walk was when he hadn’t been ready to trust her to stay.

He wouldn’t make that mistake again.

“Elizabeth will do whatever’s necessary to make sure Cameron is safe,” Jason said flatly. “I already talked to her about it. I think you’re wrong. I think Mateo knows exactly what the hell is going on and isn’t telling us. You should think about why that’s a problem—”

“Jase—I *know* he’s lying to us. I’m just not sure it’s our problem to solve. He needs to get his boys under control, but if it’s an internal power struggle, it’s really not our business—”

“They’re having this fight out in the *open*, Sonny,” Jason retorted. “They’re dealing at the high school, pushing in at Kelly’s and Luke’s—and they just shot up a park in broad daylight!”

Sonny exhaled slowly as if he was trying to find the patience to deal with a tantrum, and Jason narrowed his eyes. “Okay. So we make it clear to Mateo he needs to get the boys under control. We’ll take care of Santiago ourselves if he doesn’t clean it up. But beyond that? This is the *same* fight we’ve been having for months. Do you *want* to go to war with the Escobars? Is that it?”

“No,” Jason said after a long moment. “Fine. We’ll give Mateo the chance to fix things. But they’re getting bolder. This time, it was a cop that we don’t give a damn about—next time—”

He shook his head and pushed past Sonny to head to the parking lot. Jason was done arguing with Sonny. He wasn’t going to change his mind, and Jason knew he was going to have to deal with it on his own.

Greystone Manor: Living Room

Carly and Elizabeth were waiting for them when Sonny and Jason returned to the state. Carly stood up from the sofa, crossed her arms, and arched her brows.

“I don’t need any details. I just want to know if me and the boys are safe? Can we go?”

“Uh, yeah, you can go.” Sonny grimaced. “Thanks for this, Carly. I know you hate it.”

Elizabeth looked at Jason and Sonny. “That goes for me and Cam, right? We’re okay?”

“You’re okay to leave,” Sonny said before Jason could say anything. “Why?”

She didn't answer him but looked at Carly instead. "I need to go by the apartment to pack a few things," Elizabeth told her. "And I don't want Cameron somewhere where Lucky might..." She sighed. "My grandmother might let Lucky see or even take Cameron. I hate to ask you, but could you watch him for a few hours? I can pick him up later—"

"Sure. I get it. I've been through a messy divorce or two." She eyed Sonny. "Or three." Carly shrugged and went upstairs. Sonny scowled, then followed her.

Elizabeth looked at Jason, who didn't look as relieved as she might have expected upon learning that they were safe to leave. "What's wrong? Do you not want us to go?"

"No, it's not—" Jason rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not satisfied with Mateo's explanations." He walked closer to her, dropping his voice slightly. "He said his nephew was behind it. That there was some kind of mistake about a customer. He said it had nothing to do with me or Sonny. I believe *that*. I just don't think he was telling us everything."

"Okay." Elizabeth waited a minute, but he said nothing else. "Jason, do you want me to stay here another night?"

"No, no. I just—" He shook his head, sighed. "Sonny doesn't feel the same way, and we've already had an argument about it. Carly wasn't at the park, and they're divorced, so it's simple for him."

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "You *were* shot at. I don't know why they'd be shooting at you, but I didn't realize until it was too late that Manny was after you. I just don't want to make the mistake and think things are okay if they're not—"

Elizabeth bit her lip. "Why don't Cam and I come to the penthouse? We'll stay the night, and maybe you'll feel better about everything tomorrow. I don't want you to worry about me, and I don't want to take any chances either—I want to make sure Cameron is safe."

"You can stay in the guest room," Jason said immediately. "I was going to ask you to come stay with me, but I didn't want it to feel like I was assuming anything or—I don't know—that it might make you think about the last time you were there—"

"That was four years ago. I also know how to say no, Jason." She managed a smile. "And I know *you* know how to hear it. But I meant it about needing some things from

my apartment. I really just went to my grandmother's with a few things. So, let me call Luke or Bobbie, and make sure Lucky is with one of them. Is it okay if Carly still takes Cam with her?"

"Yeah, yeah. They'll have the guards at their place just like usual."

"Okay." Elizabeth paused. "Thank you. For being honest with me about this." She pressed her hand to his chest, over his heart. He covered it with his own. "It means a lot to me that you've listened to me."

"I don't want to make the same mistakes again."

"We won't." She kissed his cheek. "I'll go get my things together and let Cameron know the plan."

Port Charles Municipal Building: DA's Office

Alexis Davis grimaced as she checked the list of voice mails she had, her head down as she walked through the entrance of her suite. "Ronnie, hold my calls," she barked to her secretary. "I have a meeting with the mayor in an hour and Mac still doesn't have any news on the shooter in the park—"

"Uh, Ms. Davis—" Her secretary cleared her throat and stepped in front of Alexis's office door, forcing the district attorney to look up and focus on her. "Um, someone says they need to meet with you and won't leave until you do."

Alexis frowned and turned away to look at the woman sitting in one of the armchairs in the waiting area. "What are you doing here?"

Sam got to her feet and folded her arms. "I have a few things I need to ask you about."

Alexis sighed, impatient, really not in the mood to be accused of whatever was going wrong in Sam's life this week. "Make it quick. I have a meeting—"

"With the mayor, yeah, I heard." Sam arched a dark brow. "You're *very* important. But I think we might want some privacy for this."

Alexis rolled her eyes and looked at her secretary. "Give me ten minutes." She turned back to Sam. "Let's go."

When Alexis's door was closed, and the two of them were alone in her office, Alexis dropped her briefcase on the desk and looked expectantly at Sam. "Well?"

"Well, *Natasha*..." Sam tilted her head to the side. "That's your real name, isn't it? Natasha?"

"Common knowledge—"

"Well, *Natasha*, I'd like to know who my father is," Sam told her. "Since the birth certificate on file with the state of Maine says unknown. Oh, and did you even bother to name me before you threw me away?"

Lucky & Elizabeth's Apartment: Living Room

Elizabeth opened the door and stepped inside, followed by Jason. She was nervous about being back here, not having been inside she'd left on Friday. According to a quick conversation with Bobbie, Lucky was at the police station and would be there most of the day.

She realized now that she'd forgotten just how the apartment looked before she'd left on Friday—or that it could look even *worse*. The table next to the sofa had been turned over, the coffee table had been flipped, and one of the legs was broken.

Cameron's toys had been strewn all over his room. She dimly remembered now that Lucky had thrown the toy organizer across the room, scattering toys everywhere. But now—she realized he had come back into the room at some point and continued the rampage.

Elizabeth stared at the destruction of her son's room, of the space she'd given her little boy to feel safe and happy, and wanted to weep all over again for the choices she'd made.

Jason drew in a sharp breath—likely remembering Cameron's careful pride in his toys. Some of the action figures had been stomped on and broken into pieces—including one of the race cars he'd shown Jason that night.

Jason knelt down to pick up pieces of the plastic. He turned them over in his hands, then looked at Elizabeth. She just closed her eyes, praying he wouldn't ask what he must be thinking.

"Let's put the broken ones aside," Jason said finally. "We can replace them. Maybe I can do that before he knows they're gone."

Elizabeth wanted to argue with him, but God, he was doing it for Cameron. And that was the most important thing. She just nodded and knelt beside him, and they started to sort the toys back into the containers. She'd planned to just bring some of his favorites and come for the rest later, but—

If she left them here again, how did she even know they'd be here the next time?

"I'll take them down to the SUV," Jason told her. "There's not that many containers. I can do it in a few trips. Or, if you want, I can get a few guys with boxes. We'll get everything cleared out today."

"I—" Her throat was so tight, she almost couldn't breathe. "I want to say no," she said finally. "But I can't. Yeah. Can you do that? I don't care about my stuff, but Cameron—these are his—" A tear slid down her cheek. "Oh, God." She pressed her hands to her face. "What have I *done*—"

"It's over now," Jason told her. He drew her to her feet. "It's *over*. You're leaving. Right? You're not coming back. So don't focus on that anymore. Let's get things packed. I'll go call Cody. They'll be here in ten minutes. They can just grab some boxes from the warehouses, and we'll store it wherever you want."

"Okay. Okay. Thank you." She managed a smile. "Thank you. For caring about his things as much as I do. I need to replace them. I might have to borrow money or—" When he just stared at her, she laughed lightly. "Right. Stupid. But thank you. Knowing that you love my little boy is just—it makes this easier."

"He's easy to love." He kissed her forehead. "Keep packing. I'll call Cody."

He stepped into the living room while Elizabeth finished packing Cameron's toys back into their plastic containers. Then she started to sort through his clothes, stacking them so they could easily be put into boxes. When Cameron's things were organized, she moved on to the dresser she kept in the bedroom.

She put her own clothes into piles on the bed, setting aside things to take to Jason's and others to leave for her grandmother's. When she was done, she started to lift her jewelry box from the top of the dresser—then stopped as her wedding ring flashed in her face.

Elizabeth stared at it, then yanked it off her finger. She nearly threw it across the room, but then thought better of it. She could always sell or pawn it later. She lifted the top of the jewelry box—then just stared.

It was nearly empty. All that was left was some of the costume jewelry that she wore on an everyday basis—anything valuable was missing. The bracelet her grandmother had given her, a pair of earrings her parents had sent one year for her birthday, a necklace—

“Elizabeth—”

“My jewelry is gone,” she said softly. She turned to look at Jason, stunned.
“Everything that was worth more than twenty bucks.”

Jason swallowed hard, then walked forward. “When was the last time you saw it?”

“Thursday, before I left for work,” Elizabeth said. She dropped her wedding ring in the box. “I wear this necklace—” She pressed her hand to her chest, picking up the thin gold strand with her thumb. “My grandmother gave it to me for my last birthday —” She closed her eyes. “*Why* would he take them?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “Maybe—maybe Luke or Bobbie could find out for you.” There was something in the tone of his voice that made her look at him with some hesitation. “Cody is on his way. He’ll be here in ten minutes with two other guys. He’s bringing a van in case you want to bring anything else that won’t fit in my SUV.”

“We should get packing.” Elizabeth set the jewelry box back on her dresser and went to her closet.

She never wanted to come back here again.

Port Charles Municipal Building: DA’s Office

Alexis swallowed hard as she stared at Sam. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Could you—” She took a deep breath. “Could you start from the beginning?”

“Never mind—this was a terrible idea,” Sam muttered. She didn’t know why she was here—why she had taken Elizabeth’s advice—

She’d been arranging her plane ticket out of Port Charles this morning and was just struck with a desperate urge to *know* why she’d been given away. She had thought Alexis would deny it, that she would even refuse to see her—that she’d do something other than look at her with a devastated expression.

She turned and started for the door, but Alexis rushed past her, flattening herself

against the office door.

“No. No.” Alexis just stared at her. “*No*. There must be a mistake. Mikkos—he took you—and I looked—I looked, but they said you’d died. I *looked*. There must be a *mistake*.”

Sam took a step back, shook her head again. “What are you *talking* about? The records were right there. I mean, we had to hack into them because Maine refused to tell me anything legally, but—”

“I—” Alexis raised a hand in the air, curled it into a first. “Just give me a second. My head is spinning. I—” She took another deep breath. “I was sixteen. I was in a girl’s school in Vermont, and I’d snuck out for the night a college bar. I didn’t know the boy very well. I don’t even—” Her cheeks flushed. “I didn’t get his last name, but his name was Julian. He was very sweet, and we were both very drunk. I never saw him again. I got caught sneaking out, and Mikkos moved me to a stricter school.”

“Okay.” Sam folded her arms, lifted her chin. “So he forced you to give up your kid for adoption. But he died like eight minutes later, so—”

“He did. But you don’t *know* what Mikkos Cassadine was like—” Alexis shook her head. “You don’t know what Helena was like. Not really. She killed my mother. I hid my sister away to protect her. That’s why I became a lawyer. I thought *I* could be in charge then. After I graduated from law school, I went to Maine. I tried to find—I find to find the clinic, the agency, but it was all gone. Mikkos had created both just to hide everything—and then had closed them as soon as the baby was—”

Alexis’s voice trembled. “But I looked, Sam. I *looked* anyway. And they told me that my little girl had been adopted into a family and had died at the age of seven in a car accident. I was devastated. I never—I don’t know if there was a mistake or if Mikkos put something in the system in case I ever tried to look—”

“Well, there’s no mistake now,” Sam muttered, looking away from the shattered look in the older woman’s eyes. “Jason had his suspicions when we were told my mother’s name on the birth certificate was Natasha Davis. So he ran a DNA test behind my back.”

“A DNA—” Alexis closed her eyes. “Oh, God, you must have been *horrified*. I know how you feel about me.”

“Well, you don’t think much of me either—”

“It’s—” Alexis shook her head. “Sam, none of that matters now. I just—” She pressed her lips together. “I didn’t know your father, but yes, you had a name. I named you for my mother. Kristin. In my head, I always called you Kristie.” Tears were sliding down her cheeks as she laughed. She pressed her hands to her cheeks. “That sounds silly now, doesn’t it? Can you imagine growing up as Kristie?”

Sam’s chest was tightened. “Yeah, maybe. I’ve seen you with Kristina and Molly, so maybe I can imagine what it might have been like to have a mother.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “This isn’t going the way I wanted it to.”

“Sam—”

“You’re not my mother. This isn’t—” She huffed, looked away. “I’m *not* looking for a family. I’m not looking for sisters or a mother. And *definitely* not a stepfather.”

“I get that—”

“I only—” Sam threw up her hands. “I only came because I’m leaving Port Charles, and I guess I just—someone told me not to leave anything unfinished. Now I think I should have told her to mind her own damn business.”

“Please—don’t—don’t go—”

But Sam reached past Alexis and tugged open the door. “Have a nice life—”

“Don’t go—”

But Sam had already left, leaving her mother in tears.

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

“Thanks for letting me use the storage space here at the Towers,” Elizabeth said as Jason closed the door behind him. “And I guess it’s a good thing that Cam wanted to sleep over with Morgan again. Do you think I’m wrong for letting him? He’s spent so much time at Carly’s this week—”

“I think it might be easier for him there,” Jason said slowly, “than having to sleep in another new place tonight. He loves Morgan’s house, and he’s comfortable there. You’re not wrong to let him.”

“I guess. Maybe I should be concerned that my two-year-old has no problems sleeping

in a house without me.” Elizabeth sighed and rubbed her cheeks, her eyes aching from crying again. She just wanted to be *done* with the tears. “I want to be with him, but you’re right. Another new place *would* be hard for him. And Morgan has a playroom that’s bigger than our apartment.”

“You’re a great mother,” Jason told her. He put his hands on her shoulders, rubbing them slightly. “You’ve raised a great, funny kid who’s comfortable around people he knows he can trust. And he’s starting nursery school in the fall, isn’t he? He’ll be socialized and ready.”

“You always know how to make me feel better,” Elizabeth said, her chest relaxing. “Thanks. You’re right, of course.” She sighed. “I’m just—” She shook her head. “I don’t know. It’s been a crazy forty-eight hours.”

“It has—”

The phone rang on the desk, and Jason answered it. “Hello? Hey, Walt. Yeah, okay. Yeah, that’s fine.” He put the phone down. “Robin’s on her way up.”

“Robin?” Elizabeth frowned. “How did she know I was here? I was going to call Emily, but—”

There was a knock on the door a few minutes later, and Robin smiled sheepishly when Jason pulled it open. “Hey, I hope it’s okay that I popped over. I ran into Bobbie at GH, and she mentioned you were staying here tonight. I managed to stop Patrick and Emily from rushing over and bombarding you.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth nodded, still a bit confused. “Yeah. I guess that makes sense. Um—”

“I wanted to check in with you. Because, you know, I talked to Emily. And I know what’s been happening.” She pressed her lips together. “And because of Jesse.”

“Oh,” Elizabeth repeated. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I’ve been thinking about Maxie. How are you all holding up?”

“I’m okay. I didn’t know Jesse well, and well, you know we didn’t get along,” Robin admitted. “But Maxie is devastated. Felicia and Georgie are with her.”

“I’m gonna let you guys talk,” Jason said. He hesitated, looking at Elizabeth. “I need to go check on a few things. Cody will be downstairs if you want to go out.”

"I wasn't planning on it since I'm off today, but thanks. I'll see you when you get back." She watched him leave before looking back at Robin. "I guess you're really here because Bobbie said I left Lucky."

"Emily told me that last night. We were talking about what happened," Robin said. "And she said Jesse was fighting with you about Lucky, about you being at the park with Jason. And I guess—I don't know—I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I am..." Elizabeth stopped, thinking about her answer. "I don't know. But I think I'm getting there."

She moved to sit on the sofa, and Robin followed her. "I went home on Friday morning after my shift, and he was already—he was already out of control. I don't have any bruises to show for it, but he grabbed my wrist, he pushed me into the wall again—" Elizabeth rubbed her face. "And I just—I knew I had to be done. Part of me had already walked away weeks ago."

"I'm sorry you went through that. I'm glad you're standing in front of me now." Robin pursed her lips. "But this is the most dangerous time, you know that, right? After leaving. Have you talked to Jason about this yet?"

"I wasn't going to," Elizabeth admitted. "I thought maybe I could hide it. Everyone would think we'd divorced over Jason or Lucky's job, or something else. I almost think I'd rather they think I'm unfaithful than the truth." She laughed bitterly. "I guess I am technically unfaithful with everything that's happened with Jason."

"Elizabeth—"

"I wasn't going to," she repeated. "And then Jason and I had this stupid argument we've been having since the second we became more than friends. He wanted to talk to me about safety. He wants me to be safe. And I just—safe, Robin. Was I *safe* with Lucky? I mean, if I'm not safe being married to a cop—" She threw up her hands. "When am I supposed to be safe? What does that even *mean*?"

"Not much, I guess, from your perspective. Elizabeth—"

"I'm not ready to jump into anything with Jason. Not—not officially. But we both know it's something we want. And I just—I guess I think I might need to him understand why this is a risk I'm willing to take. Because every time he decides I should be safe with someone else, I just end up miserable." Elizabeth sighed. "I don't want to be safe if it means I'm unhappy. Why can't there be something in the middle?"

"I don't know if there can be. And I don't know what's going to happen with Jason, but I think you should tell him what you've been through. Because you need to tell the people that matter. I mean, Patrick and I matter, sure," Robin said before Elizabeth could protest, "but not the way Jason does. Not the way Emily does. And not the way your grandmother does."

"I—"

"Because as long as you don't tell the people who you love the most—the people who are your family—you're *still* hiding it, Elizabeth. And hiding it means you're not dealing with it."

"I know." Elizabeth sighed. "I almost told Jason last night. I wanted to tell him today. But we went to the apartment, and Lucky had busted up Cameron's room. He broke some of his toys—"

"Oh, Elizabeth—"

"Jason just looked at them—he knows how much Cameron loves those toys—and he didn't look at me with any kind of disgust or blame for going back to Lucky. He just—he just wanted to sort the broken ones so they could be replaced before Cameron knew they were gone. He loves my son, Robin. And I—we haven't said it—but I think we love each other. And maybe it's insane, but I don't care about the rest of it. Because that's what's important."

"Then be honest with him," Robin advised. "And put Lucky in the past where he belongs." She took Elizabeth's hand in hers. "I think maybe you file a police report with my uncle. He'll listen."

"Would he? He didn't after the kidnapping—"

"He will when you show him the pictures I took before Manny kidnapped you. He will when I back you up." Robin nodded. "I'll bring you the pictures. Just—just think about it. Because leaving Lucky—that's important. That's the hard part, I know, but the scary part comes now. When Lucky realizes you mean it. He already broke your son's toys. You need to make a report—even if it goes nowhere—because it *needs* to be on the record."

"I'll—" Elizabeth managed a weak smile. "I don't know if I'm ready for Mac. But I think—I think I do need to tell Jason. And Emily and my grandmother. I need to stop hiding and pretending it will go away."

Chapter Thirty-One

*One day she will tell you that she has had enough
It's coming round again
Do you feel like a man
When you push her around?
Do you feel better now, as she falls to the ground?
Well I'll tell you my friend, one day this world's got to end
As your lies crumble down, a new life she has found*
- Facedown, The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus

Sunday, May 14, 2006

Courtland Street: Alley

Jason parked his bike a block away from the area where he knew Santiago Escobar dealt drugs and did most of his business. He didn't want the engine to give him away.

The night before, when Lucky had shown up at the gatehouse, there had been a light in his eyes, a weird energy in the way he carried himself—Jason had wondered at the source but hadn't let the thought really take control. He didn't have time to worry about Lucky Spencer, not with Elizabeth looking more done with him than ever before.

She'd walked away from Spencer last night without blinking, and he'd planned to follow her lead. Until he'd seen Lucky at the PCPD the night before—until this morning when Elizabeth's jewelry was missing. The valuable pieces that might bring some decent cash at a pawnshop.

The cop buying drugs from the Escobars, a problem with a customer, stolen jewelry—it all added up, and Jason didn't know how any of them had missed it. He'd avoided Lucky, and he knew Elizabeth felt guilty—

But it was clear to him that Lucky had become addicted to something in the last few months which meant Elizabeth *had* been the target last night—and Beaudry, the victim of a ricochet by a young, immature idiot who didn't know better.

Santiago Escobar had his back to the street, dealing with a customer when Jason reached the entrance to the alley. The greasy man buying from Santiago paled when

he realized who was standing behind his dealer.

“Uh, never mind—” He spun and took off down the alley, tripping and falling into a pile of trash.

“What the hell—” Santiago started to call after him, but his words were choked out as Jason grabbed him by the shoulders, threw him up against the brick wall of the building. He pressed his forearm against the dealer’s neck, watching as Santiago’s eyes bulged slightly.

“Morgan—what—”

“Didn’t your uncle tell you we were interested in you?” Jason shook his head. “Because I am. Do you *know* who was at the park yesterday?”

“Listen—it was a misunderstanding—a customer—”

“Who’s the customer?” Jason increased the pressure slightly, and Santiago gasped. “*Who?*”

“Uncle Matty told me not—”

“You think you can take a shot at me and walk away—”

“It wasn’t you—it was—”

“You shot at Elizabeth, didn’t you?” Jason demanded. “Because Lucky Spencer wasn’t paying his bills?” When Santiago gulped, Jason knew he’d been right. He released the dealer suddenly, letting him drop onto the filthy concrete ground.

Santiago was on all fours, gasping for air. “I didn’t know—”

“You’re too stupid to live,” Jason said, nearly as insulted as he was furious. He grabbed Santiago by the hair and threw him back against the wall. “You didn’t know who Elizabeth Webber is? You don’t pay attention to the news?”

“Her name is Spencer, dude—” Santiago wheezed as Jason slammed his fist into the asshole’s gut. “Oh, shit, shit. Shit. She was there *with* you?” His eyes bulged in horror. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah, oh, shit,” Jason repeated. Without breaking a sweat, he threw Santiago

against the other brick building. He slumped, falling to the ground. “You touch her or her kid—you even *breathe* in her direction, I’ll make you sorry you were ever born.”

“It was a mistake,” Santiago blubbered. Blood was seeping from a deep gash on his forehead. “A mistake—”

“You sent two shooters to a crowded park full of kids and innocent people so you could shoot at a customer’s wife because he owed you money?” Jason crouched down to look at the nearly incoherent drug dealer. “The only reason you’re not already dead is because your uncle said he’d deal with you.”

“B-But—”

“You stay away from Kelly’s. The high school—Luke’s—” Jason stood up and looked around the alley. “You see this alley? *This* is yours. You don’t leave again. You or anyone else. This is the only warning you get.”

“You—” Santiago rolled over onto his side, coughing. “Sonny would never go against my uncle—”

Jason kicked him hard—Santiago fell onto his back, moaning. “This isn’t about your uncle or Sonny. This is about you.” Jason knelt one more time. “Don’t make me regret leaving you alive.”

When Santiago just nodded, finally out of his bravado, Jason took a deep breath. “Now tell me about Lucky Spencer.”

Greystone Manor: Living Room

Sonny frowned when Jason walked back into the room three hours after he’d left. “What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

Jason took a deep breath and looked at him. “I know what happened yesterday. Mateo swore it wasn’t about us. It wasn’t, but Elizabeth *was* the target. He just didn’t know who she was.”

“How can you be so sure?” Sonny wandered over the minibar, then winced. It was barely two in the afternoon. Without pouring the bourbon, he turned back to his partner. “Where have you been?”

“I took Elizabeth to the apartment to pack a few things, and when we got there—” Jason swallowed hard, remembering the destruction of Cameron’s bedroom, of the

broken pieces of plastic that had once been the toddler's prized toys. "It looked like Lucky had gone on a rampage. Things were torn up everywhere."

Sonny winced. "Oh, man—"

"And Elizabeth realized her jewelry was missing. Jewelry that was there on Thursday. *Before* the shooting."

Sonny furrowed his brow, but Jason could see his point was getting through to the other man. "What kind of pieces?"

"Elizabeth said they were relatively valuable. Not insanely expensive, but not cheap. A few things passed from her family. Something that might interest a pawnshop."

"The cop we thought might be undercover," Sonny said slowly, "was a cop making a legit buy. A cop who might want something to relieve the pain." He exhaled slowly. "Damn it."

"I went to Courtland Street," Jason said flatly. "And I found Santiago Escobar. He confirmed it. Lucky Spencer's been buying from him since March. At first, it was just oxycontin. But in the last month, he's been buying heroin—"

"*Christ—*"

"On credit," Jason finished. "When Lucky refused to pay on Friday, Santiago told his boys to send him a message. They were supposed to shoot at Elizabeth to make it clear to Lucky they could get to his family. Beaudry—it was a ricochet or something —"

He shook his head. "Lucky stole her jewelry and pawned it along with anything else he could find in the apartment. Their television was missing, too. Elizabeth didn't realize it when we were, but I went back to the apartment to check. He made good with the Escobars today. Because he knew that the Escobars had shot up the park and why."

"Oh, man—this is—" Sonny sat in the armchair. "They really are dumb as *hell*—" He stared at Jason. "That's why Lucky was looking for Elizabeth last night. Why he was so desperate for her to come with him. He knew they were shooting at her."

"The Escobars aren't like you, Sonny. They're not even like Moreno or Sorel. Or they weren't. Mateo's always been happy as long as you let him run his product in his territory. But Santiago is greedy, and he didn't even think twice about going after a

cop's family. That's a special kind of stupid."

"So Elizabeth was, again, the target for something that had nothing to do with us."

"Yeah." Jason exhaled. And he'd nearly walked away from her again, thinking she might be safer without him. "I put Stan on the pawnshops — I want to get her things back. But I have to tell her, Sonny."

"She didn't know about the drugs? She never said anything?"

"No, but—" Jason hesitated. "She never got into the details of what was wrong with Lucky. I thought it was mostly about me, but maybe—maybe it wasn't." He shook his head. "I don't think she knew."

Sonny sighed. "You should go tell Elizabeth. She needs to get that divorce filed immediately and make it known to the world she's not to blame for that idiot husband. Man, Lucky was such a great kid. I don't know what the hell happened to him." He grimaced. "And I'll talk to Mateo again. We need to put a lid on this before the PCPD makes trouble for us all."

Jason shook his head—it wasn't the action he wanted Sonny to take, but he hadn't expected much anyway. He'd have to keep a closer eye on the Escobars himself and step up if Sonny wouldn't.

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

Elizabeth sighed as she wrote down the name of the fifth broken toy from the box she'd had one of the guards bring up from storage. She wanted to get Cameron's things replaced as soon as possible—she didn't want him to even know they were missing.

She turned over the Spiderman figure—one of four Cameron owned—and searched in the box until she found the missing leg. It had been broken into two pieces—

This had been deliberate. Lucky to have smashed it with his heel. Some of the pieces had been so obliterated, they were still shards of plastic in the carpet back at the apartment.

She'd save this toy, save these broken pieces as a reminder of why she could never—*ever*—go back.

Elizabeth turned at the sound of the key in the lock and managed a half-smile for

Jason as he returned, tossing his keys onto the table. “Hey.” She got to her feet and folded her arms. “I was just thinking about dinner. I haven’t eaten since—” She stopped at the look on his face. “What’s wrong?”

Jason scratched his brow, then looked at the broken toys she’d been sorting through. “Let’s—let’s sit for a minute.”

“No, Jason. Tell me what’s wrong.” She crossed the room to him and put a hand on his forearm. “What happened?” She turned his hand over to look at his knuckles. The skin was broken slightly, and a bruise was forming. “Jason?”

“I know what happened to your jewelry,” Jason said after a long moment. He stripped off his jacket and tossed it on the sofa behind them. “Lucky pawned it to pay off Santiago Escobar.”

“Pay off—” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “You said he was a drug dealer. Patrick refused to write him a new prescription for his pain pills a few months ago,” she said in a soft voice. “I know Lucky struggled with that. I thought he’d figured it out—Patrick said he’d stopped screaming at him for a new script. He just...found someone else to give him the pills.”

“Yeah, I talked to Escobar. Lucky started going to him in March. And then...last month, he started buying heroin regularly. It’s a stronger high—Lucky probably had built a tolerance—”

Elizabeth shook her head. “You don’t—” Her mind spun for a moment. “You don’t have to explain. I get it. He’s been on drugs. For months.” She hadn’t even thought—hadn’t even *considered*—

“Yeah.”

Elizabeth turned away from him and dragged her hands through her hair. “Oh, man. I didn’t—I *knew* he was in pain. I knew he was angry all the time. But I was just—I was so wrapped up in my own guilt about what was happening with you, and then Manny—I didn’t see it—didn’t carry it to the logical conclusion.” She turned back. “He pawned my jewelry to pay them off. Which meant he owed them money. *That’s* what yesterday was about?”

“It was just supposed to be a warning to Lucky,” Jason said. “It looks like Beaudry really was an accident. Lucky paid up this morning.”

“Oh, my God—” She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. “Oh, my *God*. I let

my son live in a home with a man high on drugs—I left Cameron *alone* with him—
That day—at the hospital—he drove Cameron there—”

“Elizabeth—”

“There were probably drugs in the apartment. What if Cameron had gotten his hands on them—”

“He didn’t.” Jason reached for her hands and pulled them away from her face, forcing her to look at him. “*Hey*. He didn’t. He’s safe. You left, and Cameron is safe. We can go get him if you need to see for yourself—”

“I just—”

Elizabeth collapsed onto the sofa, feeling like she’d been punched in the gut. “I went back to him. I—” Her lip trembled. “You don’t even *know* the half of it, Jason. You don’t know how bad it was. And I went back because I thought I could save him. I thought if I could just be patient—but he was doing drugs—heroin. He was on *heroin*. And—”

Jason sat next to her and picked up the broken Spiderman. He stared at it for a long moment before looking back at her. “How bad was it?” he asked softly.

She clasped her hands into her lap. “The first time was the day Cameron got sick. You remember? You went into the store, and you bought him that Pedialyte because he couldn’t eat.”

“I remember.”

“You wouldn’t let me pay you back, and I—I—it was name brand. I wouldn’t have bought it. We can’t afford that. When Lucky came home, and he realized you had bought it—he was angry. I hadn’t seen him that angry since—”

Since the brainwashing. Since he’d attacked Jason with a knife.

Elizabeth swallowed hard and looked at Jason. His face hadn’t changed, although she was sure he knew where this conversation was going. “He was screaming at me about taking favors from you, and then he started to dump it out—and I was so tired—I even—Cameron needed that, Jason. He *needed* it. And I just—I tried to st-stop him.”

She didn’t even realize she was tapping her foot so hard her knee was bouncing until

Jason put a hand over her clasped hands, the weight of his arm keeping her leg down. “I think it really was an accident the first time. He pushed me away from him—and I just—I went flying. I guess—I don’t weigh a lot.” She sighed. “Maybe I *need* to think it was an accident.”

“The bruise on your face,” Jason said slowly.

“I hit the door frame of the kitchen.” Tears slid down her cheeks. “He was so upset. I told him to leave, but he was crying, and he said he was sorry—and I just—I *thought*—it was an accident.”

He swallowed hard. “You said it was the first time.”

“The next night. We—we were fighting.”

“Because I was there—” Jason closed his eyes, shook his head slightly. “I’m sorry—”

“No, don’t be—I knew I should make you leave. I knew he would be angry if you were still there, but Cameron—he just fell in love with you, Jason. And he was so happy—” Elizabeth dipped her head. “He grabbed me that day. Left bruises.”

“The next day, you left him. That Thursday before you were kidnapped.” Jason straightened. “You had a cut on your face. And you looked like your shoulder was hurt.” He shook his head, disgusted.

“Lucky found out Cameron was with Morgan. He—he said he was going to the Brownstone, and I thought maybe he was going after my son, so I had to stop him—and it was just—he shoved me, and I hit the table, fell over, and the lamp broke—I—”

She wept bitterly now, sobs spilling from deep inside—because just recounting it out loud, saying it like this—

How could she *ever* have gone back—how could she have *forgotten*—

Jason drew her close, put an arm around her shoulder, pressed his lips to her forehead. “Hey. Hey—”

“I went back. I felt so guilty—that’s why Lucky—Manny saw the bruises. He kidnapped Lucky because he hurt me—how fucked up is *that*, Jason? And Manny was telling him about you on my speed dial, and Lucky was looking at me—and I was so scared—because I thought if Manny let him go—”

She drew in a deep, shuddering breath. “But I went back. I went back. Because Luke asked me to. He just—he asked me to fight for the boy. Again. And I didn’t want to, but I thought—well, Lucky never gave up on me—”

“Damn it, Elizabeth—” Jason muttered under his breath. “Do you *really* think this is the same thing?”

“No, of course not.” Elizabeth swiped at her cheeks, trying to get herself under control. “No. I know it’s not. But I think—God, I think I needed to go back, Jason. I need to stop making excuses. I thought if I could love him enough, if I could be a good wife, I could save him. But it’s not my job to save Lucky. And I don’t want to. I don’t think he *can* be saved.”

She sighed. “I went back because I thought maybe it was a crazy couple of days. Because Lucky had never ever hurt me like that before, and I really thought if he could acknowledge it, get counseling, it was something that we could get past. I don’t know if I really thought I was staying forever when Luke asked—he only asked me to stay for a little while. Until Lucky was out of the hospital and had recovered.”

“He didn’t have any right to—”

“He knew that, Jason.” She shook her head as Jason scowled. “I’m not making excuses for him. Luke told me he hated himself for asking. He’s Lucky’s father. You know what it is to love a child. Is there *anything* you wouldn’t do for Michael?”

“If Michael were an abusive asshole who took his anger out on someone who loved him, I wouldn’t be asking the woman to go back,” Jason said. He got to his feet. “I’d be kicking the shit out of *Michael* and asking who the hell raised him—” He took a quick, sharp breath. “I’m sorry. You don’t need this from me.”

“I went back because I thought there was still a chance I could help him. And if I hadn’t done it, Jason, I might have lived for the rest of my life thinking there might be a chance.” Elizabeth stood up as well, hugging her arms around her torso. “There’s not. I know that now. I know it with every breath in my body. I knew it before that last day on Friday. I was already done. I just didn’t get the chance to tell him before —”

“Did he—” Jason fisted his hands at his side.

“He grabbed me from behind the way Tom Baker did, and then threw me against the wall,” Elizabeth said in a flat tone. “And I sat there, and I just—I just wanted it to be

over. He left. Blaming me. Because he knew I didn't love him. And—man—for a few minutes there, I thought, "This is my fault—"

"No—"

"Because I went back to him knowing I didn't love him. I wanted my vows to mean something, but I forgot the most important one. To love and to cherish. I don't love him, and he didn't cherish me. Because the vows—it doesn't matter if I was keeping any of those promises—we *both* had to keep them. And we didn't."

She felt stronger now, more at peace with this now. "I wasn't going to tell you, Jason. I was going to let you think we'd fought over you and me at the docks, about anger management—but yesterday—you tried to push me away again because you wanted me to be safe."

Jason just looked at her, anguish in his eyes. "I didn't *know*—" His voice was rough, pained.

"I'm tired of being safe. Of taking the easy way out. Of lying to myself. I don't love Lucky. And I don't want to be safe. I want to be happy, and I was last night with you. Yesterday at the carnival, when you were on that silly roller coaster with boys—I just —"

She smiled at him. "I saw our future. I saw what I thought I might want if we didn't run away again. And that's what I want. *You* make me feel safe and happy."

"I was happy, too," he said in a low voice. "Because—" He shook his head. "No. Not yet." Jason took a deep breath. "You want to take this slow, and that's what I want for you. Since we know the reason behind the shooting, you don't have to stay if you don't want—"

"I do want to stay," Elizabeth said softly. "But that's why I should go. Because the next time I spend the night in your arms, Jason, I want it to be because I'm ready for it to be a permanent step."

She sighed. "I should go home. Because you're not the only person who deserves to hear this from me. I need to tell my grandmother. And Emily. Robin thinks I should tell her uncle—to make a report—"

"Robin knows?" Jason frowned. "What—"

"She and Patrick saw the bruises, and she convinced me to take pictures the day I

was kidnapped. So she has those if I file a report.” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “And I think I should. Because Robin said something else. I did the hard part — I left. But now I have to make it count. I should call Justus and make it permanent.” She sighed. “And yeah, I should call Mac. Not just about the abuse. If Lucky’s on drugs, I’m not the only person who should know that.”

Hardy House: Living Room

Audrey must have heard the car pull up in the driveway or seen them through the window, because she was already on her feet, in the middle of the living room with a scowl fixed on her face.

“Gram—”

“I cannot *believe* you’re still with him,” Audrey said flatly. “Where’s Cameron? Is he still with Sonny Corinthos?”

“No, he’s with Carly and Morgan,” Elizabeth said, already feeling exhausted. “Gram —”

“I don’t know what’s going on here. One second, you’re married to Lucky, and now you’re spending the night with Jason Morgan—” Audrey looked at Jason. “You should leave, Mr. Morgan—”

“I should,” Jason agreed, touching Elizabeth’s elbow. “I don’t want to make this any harder than it already is—”

“No—don’t—” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “Not yet.”

“Elizabeth—” Audrey began.

“Do you remember when I told you Manny Ruiz kidnapped me because he was obsessed with me? That it had nothing to do with Jason and you decided that wasn’t true? Just like the PCPD, you ignored that.”

“I—” Audrey hesitated. The certainty, the righteousness, faded from her face. “Elizabeth—”

“The shooters at the carnival were there for me. To shoot at me. Not to kill me, but to send a message to someone that they could get to me at any time or place.”

And she could see the minute it was starting to click for her grandmother because, of course, Elizabeth wasn't referring to Jason—why would Jason still be there?

Audrey's hands fell to her side. "Send a message to who?"

"You saw him last night, Mrs. Hardy," Jason offered, his voice quiet, respectful. "You know something is wrong with Lucky. You told Mac you knew Elizabeth was safe where she was. You didn't help him."

Audrey touched her throat, took a deep breath. "I have to admit—there was something in his eyes that I didn't like. Something in the way—" She looked at Elizabeth. "Oh. Oh. It *is* the same."

"Gram—"

"Just like Tom." Color slid from her grandmother's cheek, the angry red flush paling into a stark white. "Oh, Elizabeth." She strode forward. "Are you all right?"

"I am now." Elizabeth took Audrey's hand in hers. "Because I left. I wasn't going to tell anyone, but last night—" She looked at Jason, who looked a bit mystified at Audrey's turn around. "Last night, I realized that pretending it didn't happen is the wrong thing to do. I need to face it. I need to tell the people who matter to me."

Audrey touched her face, then looked at Jason again, with a gentler expression. "I—I'm sorry. I shouldn't jump to conclusions—"

"It's okay, Mrs. Hardy—"

"It's not," Elizabeth said fiercely. "I love you, Gram. But Jason is part of my life. He loves Cameron. He loves my little boy more than Lucky *ever* has. I'm not—it's not like I'm running out to divorce Lucky so I can move in with Jason. But he's important to me. And he's important to Cameron. I need to know if that's something you can deal with."

"Well, I suppose that since I've suggested you stay with Ric Lansing and Lucky Spencer, my ability to judge a person's character is lacking," Audrey said finally. She looked at Jason. "I can accept that."

Jason's phone buzzed. When he saw Stan's name on the voice mail list, he sighed. "I have to go take this. Are you okay?"

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay. Can you go get Cameron for me? I want him home with me, and with Gram.”

“I’ll be back in a little while.” He nodded to Audrey, then left.

“Darling, do you want to talk about it?” Audrey asked.

“No, but I need to,” Elizabeth said with a sigh as she followed her grandmother to the sofa. And then told her everything.

Chapter Thirty-Two

*This is a song for the broken girl
The one pushed aside by the cold, cold world
You are
Hear me when I say
You're not the worthless they made you feel
There is a love they can never steal away
You don't have to stay the broken girl*
- Broken Girl, Matthew West

Sunday, May 14, 2006

Hardy Home: Living Room

Elizabeth was crying again as she finished telling her grandmother about Friday, about the final time Lucky had hurt her. Audrey was in tears, too, her voice trembling as she hugged Elizabeth. The two of them rocked back and forth on the sofa.

"I'm so sorry, darling, that I didn't see it. That I didn't make you feel safe enough to tell me—" Audrey drew back and wiped tears from Elizabeth's face. "I love you so very much, and all I've ever wanted is for you to be happy. But you haven't been. I blamed you, and I had *no right*—"

"No, Gram, you did the same thing to me that I did to myself—"

"But *I* know better. I saw you after the kidnapping." Audrey pressed her lips together, tried to get herself under control. "I saw the way you broke down—and I kept going. I *kept* blaming Jason. But it's never been his fault. It's mine. And Jason is right. I saw Lucky last night. I should have seen the signs."

"I should have had more courage and faith in myself. I knew I wasn't in love with Lucky weeks ago. I don't know when it changed—" Elizabeth took a deep breath. "Gram, I had an affair with Jason. I knew it. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't stop myself. And I let my guilt over that blind me to what was happening in my marriage. I couldn't see that Lucky's anger was dangerous, I didn't see that he taking drugs—and I didn't just put *myself* in that situation, I let it happen to Cameron—"

"I put myself back into a marriage with a man that nearly destroyed me," Audrey told her. "You know that. I could say times were different — and they were. The judge wouldn't give me custody of Tommy unless I stayed with his father. And, of course, in the state of New York—" She sighed.

"A husband couldn't rape his wife," Elizabeth said with a sour taste in her throat. "I know. It was never that bad with Lucky, and part of me wants to say it never would have been, but I also—"

She swiped tears from her cheeks. "I *never* thought it would be like that with Lucky at all. I kept thinking we could have the magic back. I never once stopped to ask myself if I even wanted it."

"I'm sorry, darling. But you've left him now, and I won't ever let you change your mind." Audrey hesitated. "And...this...affair with Jason...is it—well, is it still—"

"When I went back to Lucky, Jason and I stopped seeing each other. I promise. I ran into him last week on the docks by accident. We weren't sleeping together. It was just...a few kisses. A few conversations we shouldn't have had. But it was enough, and I should have listened to my heart."

Elizabeth waited a moment, but Audrey didn't say anything, so she continued. "But yes. Now it's...something. I've told Jason that I want to take it slow. I want to end my marriage, I want to take a breath and give myself space. But I don't want either of us to ignore how we felt. How we feel. I don't want to miss my chance again. He loves Cameron, Gram."

"Does he love you?" Audrey asked carefully.

"I—"

Elizabeth's answer was cut off as there was a harsh knock on the door. Elizabeth frowned and went to the door to look through the peephole. She grimaced, stepping away. "Go away, Lucky!"

"Let me in! Now! You're my wife, and I'll be damned if you're going to keep *humiliating* me—" Lucky hit the door, kicking it so hard that it shook in the frame.

"Lucky Spencer, you leave this property right now, or I will call the police," Audrey shouted back.

"Open this goddamn door, Elizabeth, or I will break it down!"

Her heart pounding, Elizabeth fumbled for her phone. “I’m calling Jason—he can send a guard or—”

“I’m calling 911 right now!” Audrey shouted as she grabbed the landline. She went to the window where she could see Lucky on her doorstep. She held up the phone, so he could watch her dial. “Get off my property!”

“This isn’t over, Elizabeth!” Lucky slammed his fist against the door again but finally stalked away.

Elizabeth closed her eyes, took a deep breath. “Gram—”

“Darling—”

“Don’t call 911. Call Mac Scorpio. Robin was right. I need to report him. Because this *isn’t* over.”

And while Audrey was calling Mac, Elizabeth made two phone calls of her own. One to Emily, to ask her to come over, and the other to Justus to make an appointment for the next day.

She was done hiding.

Kelly’s: Diner

Jason opened the door and found his tech guy sitting with one of the guards at one of the back tables. Jason hurried over to sit by Stan. “Were you able to find it?”

“Yep.” Stan sipped his iced tea then nodded to Marco, who drew out two plastic bags of jewelry. “Everything Lucky Spencer pawned since March. I just told the owner you were an interested party, and he couldn’t give them to me fast enough.”

Jason took the bags and frowned at the first bag—a man’s wedding ring. “He pawned his wedding ring?”

Stan leaned forward. “Oh. Yeah. Guy said Lucky pawned it in March, and never reclaimed it. Came in yesterday around nine, looking all wild-eyed—typical addict crap—and pawned the rest of it.” He looked at Jason. “That’s what you wanted, right? You didn’t care about the television, right?”

“Yeah, I just wanted the jewelry.” Jason exhaled slowly, then shoved the bags into his pocket. “What do we owe the owner? Did you tell him we’d make it worth his while, or did you just threaten him?”

“Turns out your name is apparently enough to make the guy crap in his pants,” Marco said with a grin. “Probably could have cleaned him out of the diamonds if I’d been interested.”

“Thanks. Keep this to yourself, okay?”

“We’re protecting a cop?” Stan asked with some confusion. “Isn’t he Elizabeth’s husband? I mean, maybe I’m overstepping, but wouldn’t it be easier for you if he got in trouble—”

“We’re protecting the woman who owns the jewelry,” Jason said flatly. He got to his feet. “Thanks for doing this so quickly.”

Stan accepted his danger and sat back with a shrug. “No problem. We got a break — it was at the second store we contacted.”

Jason left them then, intent on heading to Carly’s house to pick up Cameron. He wanted to keep moving, to keep focusing on what was next—

Because if he stopped, he’d have to think about the fact that he’d *seen* the bruises on Elizabeth, had seen her that last night with a cut on her face, with an injured shoulder—

And had never once questioned if Lucky was hurting her. Not even after Sonny had suggested it might be possible. And hadn’t Jason told himself then that she’d never confide in him about it—

How could he blame the rest of the world for not seeing it? He hadn’t. And now he’d have to live with the guilt.

He shoved open the door to Kelly’s and ran straight into Robin. “Sorry—”

“Oh, hey, I was hoping to run into you.” She frowned. “You look upset.” She tipped her head to the side, squinted her eyes. “Have you been back to the penthouse?”

“Uh, yeah.” He let the door to Kelly’s close behind him. “I know—” Jason shook his head. “I know. Elizabeth told me. And she told me you knew.”

“She told you what?” Robin asked slowly, drawing out the words with a suspicious furrowing of her brows.

“Robin.” Jason just sighed. “I know what she’s been through. And that you were there for her. That you encouraged her to tell me. Thank you. I’m glad she had someone.”

“Okay.” Robin folded her arms. “A lot of good it did her — she wouldn’t listen to me back when it happened. I wanted her to leave then. I thought about telling you.”

“You should have,” Jason said flatly. “*Someone* should have told me—”

“Or maybe *you* should have seen it—” Robin scowled. “I mean, it was right in front of your face. Patrick and I both saw it—” She pursed her lips. “But I should have told you. I knew if you knew—if Emily knew—she might not have gone back. But—” She shrugged a shoulder. “Water under the bridge. She told you. She left. And now—” She bit her lip. “She did the hard part.”

She arched a brow. “Now comes the dangerous part. Most women in an abusive relationship are hurt worse after they leave. Does she have a guard?”

Jason scowled. “No.” Damn it. And he’d seen Lucky the night before. He knew exactly how angry he could get. He pulled out his phone. “I’ll send Cody over. I promised her I’d get Cameron and bring him home.” He started out of the courtyard.

“Tell her I have those pictures,” Robin called after him. “She’ll need them when she calls my uncle.”

He turned back to her for a minute. “Okay. Thanks. For being there.”

“I like Elizabeth, too, Jason. And I want her happy. She’s been through enough.”

That was something they could agree on. So Jason left, leaving Cody a voice mail to head over to the Hardy house in case Lucky showed up.

Hardy House: Living Room

Mac arrived just after Emily did, and the police commissioner was in a rotten mood. Elizabeth understood that—he’d lost a police officer the night before, and she knew Maxie must be traumatized. It was only out of respect for Audrey and her grandfather that Mac had even taken Audrey’s call and come over as quickly as he had.

"I don't have a lot of time," Mac snapped as Audrey closed the door behind him. "What's this about?"

"You will *not* take that tone with *me*, Mac Scorpio," Audrey snapped.

Emily looked back and forth between Elizabeth's grandmother and Mac before meeting Elizabeth's tired and puffy eyes. "What's going on? What's happened since last night?"

"Yeah, that's what *I'd* like to know. I've been trying to find you for nearly twenty-four hours," Mac retorted. "You fled the scene of a crime—you're lucky I don't have an arrest warrant—"

Elizabeth arched a brow. "You mean, I fled a place where a maniac was shooting at people? Yeah, I can see why that would be suspicious. You can't get an arrest warrant for that. If you could make those charges stick, Jason would still be at the PCPD."

"Don't get me started on that—"

"You're here because I need to file charges against Lucky," Elizabeth said. Emily's head snapped up, and she stared at Elizabeth, startled. "For assault."

"Assault," Mac repeated, slowly. He tensed with the air of a man who knew what was coming but was hoping like hell he was wrong. "Against who?"

"Me." Elizabeth folded her arms tightly. "On four separate occasions, Lucky assaulted me, the last being Friday night."

Mac cleared his throat. He scrubbed a hand over his face, then sighed. "Okay, uh, let's just—let's just start from the beginning. What happened?"

So Elizabeth told him. She told him in the same detail as she had Jason, but this time she was able to keep herself together. Some of the details were new for Audrey, who was weeping again. Emily put an arm around Audrey's shoulder, her own face pale, her expression frozen like granite.

"And then Lucky left the apartment," Elizabeth finished finally. "I got up, looked at myself in the mirror, took a call from Emily, and then left. I didn't see Lucky again until last night when he came to Greystone and tried to get on the grounds to make me leave."

Mac frowned, squinting. “You—You saw Lucky last night—when—”

“Before Jason and Sonny were arrested,” Elizabeth told him. “He knew where I was and knew I was there because I wanted to be.”

“Which is a very different story than he told either of us at the station last night,” Audrey reminded Mac.

“Yeah, I caught that,” Mac muttered. “Your grandmother said you’d seen him today —”

“Yeah, about a half hour ago, when he came to Gram’s door and threatened to break it down.”

Mac closed his notebook and stared down at it for a long moment. “He’s been under a little pressure,” he said, but it was clear from his tone even he didn’t believe that.

“You should have him drug tested,” Elizabeth said. “Because I’m pretty sure he pawned my jewelry to pay off his drug dealer. I think he started buying oxycontin on the street because he was always taking pills, and Patrick cut him off months ago.”

“You’re accusing him of taking drugs, too?” Mac said. “Look, I can—I can believe the rest of it, but do you have proof of *this*? I know this has been a rough time for you, and maybe you want to make sure Lucky can’t see your son—”

“Don’t you *dare*,” Emily said in a tightly controlled voice. “Because if you’re about to accuse her of lying, I will call my grandfather and make sure *he* calls the mayor. I am *done* watching you and the rest of the PCPD treat Elizabeth like this.”

“I didn’t even get a chance—” Mac looked at Elizabeth. “I believe you,” he repeated. “I don’t know about the drugs, but I don’t think you’d accuse him of the abuse if it weren’t true. I know that Lucky’s been under a lot of pressure from the job, and the injuries didn’t help. That doesn’t excuse it, but it means I believe you.”

“But?” Elizabeth prompted. “Because I can hear you saying it.”

“But it would be your word against his without evidence. The incidents that caused injury were from a month ago, and you didn’t report it—”

“Robin took pictures,” Elizabeth said. “They’re dated. Before Manny kidnapped me

that night. So hopefully, you'd believe *her*."

"I..." Mac pursed his lips. "I would, yes."

"And Patrick has seen Lucky screaming at me. He's a witness to the anger."

"Elizabeth—"

"But you're not going to do anything. Even with the pictures."

"I'm going to file the report," Mac told her. "And I'll interview Robin and Patrick. I'll get the pictures. I'll take it to the DA, but Alexis probably won't look at the case because she's related to Lucky's brother. And I don't know that another DA would file charges."

"Why?" Audrey demanded. "My granddaughter is a credible witness with proof!"

"Because of Jason," Elizabeth said with a sinking feeling. Mac looked away. "For the same reason no one believed me about Manny. No one believed me that I hadn't been kidnapped because of Jason. Because people will blame me for it. There are members of your department who think I got what I deserved when Manny kidnapped me. And they'll think that I deserved what Lucky did."

"I'm not one of them—"

"But that's what will happen."

Mac sighed. "Look, you did the right thing. You got out. And I'll put together a report. There will be a paper trail. I'll talk to Lucky about leaving you alone. And I'll encourage him to get counseling. And a drug test. Elizabeth—"

"This is *bullshit*," Emily said flatly. "I can't believe you're not going to do more—"

"There's nothing else he *can* do," Elizabeth said with a sad sigh. "Because he's right. The DA's office will never take this case. Even if it were Alexis. Because Lucky would never plead guilty. And a jury would never convict him. They'd just—they'd see the same thing everyone else does. A cop's wife who had an affair with a criminal and ended his career. And got what she deserved for it."

Mac, at least, had the decency to look ashamed as he nodded. "I think that might be the outcome, yeah. I'm sorry, Elizabeth. I work in the system, I can't always make it

do the right thing.”

“Especially when you agree.”

Audrey’s voice was carefully controlled as Mac looked at her. Elizabeth blinked at her in surprise, but her grandmother kept her eyes on the commissioner.

“You could push the DA. You could remind them that Jason has never *once* been convicted of a single thing. You could *also* remind them that he is, nominally, a Quartermaine. But you’re giving up. Because you think if my granddaughter had not been around Jason Morgan, *none* of this would have happened.”

Mac hesitated. “I wouldn’t go that far, but I think we’re forgetting that a good cop is dead because he was standing too close to Jason Morgan—”

“He’s dead because he came over to scream at me for being a whore and was standing too close to *me*,” Elizabeth said flatly. “Because Lucky’s drug dealer was sending him a message about paying his bills. You might believe me about some of it, but you clearly have your own narrative.”

“Elizabeth—”

“You can go. Thanks for coming. Let me know when the report is ready, so I can ask Justus to get a copy for my divorce petition.”

“I’m sorry,” Mac repeated, but he left.

“I cannot believe—” Emily took a deep breath, then dragged her hands through her hair. “Are you okay?” she asked, looking at Elizabeth. “I’m so sorry. I should have seen it—”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I didn’t want you to see it—” She sighed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for you to find out while I was telling Mac—I didn’t know how fast he’d get here—”

“You don’t have to apologize to me.” Emily took her hands in hers. “You didn’t tell me because I think a part of you was scared I might tell you the same thing I’m sure Luke did. That this isn’t Lucky, that the Lucky we know and love would never do this to you. That’s what he told you to make you stay, right? He told you had to fight for the boy who we used to know.”

“Em—”

“Because that’s the crap I used to say to you all the time. *Never* again,” Emily declared with a shake of her hand. “Because the boy I knew wouldn’t do that. The man he is today? I believe it. He doesn’t get *one* more minute of my time. You and Cameron are who matter to me.” She embraced Elizabeth tightly. “Let the Spencers worry about Lucky. He’s their problem. He *never* has to be yours again.”

Jake’s: Upstairs Hallway

Sam shoved open her door and frowned when she saw Alexis waiting in the hallway. “How did you know—”

“You said you were leaving, so I had someone find out which flight you were on. And I took a chance you’d be staying at Jake’s because it’s under the radar.” Alexis looked down at the duffel bag in Sam’s hand. “You *have* to leave today? Now?”

“There’s nothing here for me,” Sam said with a shrug. “What’s the point? What are you doing here?”

“I’m here because there’s something I need to say before you walk away forever.” Alexis waited, but Sam didn’t drop the bag or offer to let her in. “Fine. We’ll do this it this way. I understand you were disappointed to learn I was your biological mother —”

Sam snorted. “*Disappointed* isn’t the word—”

“And being connected by blood doesn’t mean anything. I’m a Cassadine. We spend a lot of time running from our blood relatives.” Alexis folded her arms. “Sometimes, we get to choose our family, Sam, but I understand that right now, you don’t have a lot of interest in choosing me.”

“No, I don’t. Can I go now—”

“But you’re not just turning *me* away,” Alexis continued. “You’re walking away from Kristina and Molly. I know how close you were to your brother. How fiercely devoted you were to him.”

“Don’t talk to me about Danny—” Her throat tightened. “How *dare* you—”

“My girls could use an older sister who loves like that.” Alexis stepped to the side. “You can go, Sam. Knowing you’re alive, that you’re in the world—that gives me

peace. For so long, you were a devastating memory. I blamed myself for a long time for not being stronger, for not finding a way to keep you. I thought you'd died because I was weak."

Sam just stared at her biological mother as Alexis took a bracing breath. "But you're alive, Sam. And that's enough for me. I can make it enough."

"I'm going to go now." Sam started down the hallway, but she heard Alexis following her. When they reached the empty bar downstairs—it hadn't yet opened up for the night rush—Sam turned to her. "I don't need you. I don't need your kids. I don't need a family. I'm fine on my own."

"If you ever change your mind," Alexis said, "I'll be here."

"I won't."

And then Sam left.

Hardy House: Front Porch

Emily stayed for a little while longer, but then she had to get back to the hospital. About an hour after she'd left, there was another knock at the door.

Audrey had gone upstairs to start putting together a list of people to call in case Elizabeth decided she wanted to go war against the PCPD and force charges to be filed.

Elizabeth didn't think she was going to go that far, but she appreciated how much support her grandmother had offered her since she'd come home. She knew Audrey wasn't totally sold on Jason, but she was willing to lay down her guard and give him a chance.

She hoped it was Jason at her doorstep, bringing Cameron back to her—and when she opened the door to find her grinning son, smiling sunnily at her from Jason's arms, Elizabeth couldn't help but grin back.

"Hi, Mommy. Jason bringed me home." He leaned forward to hug her, and Jason transferred Cameron into her arms. "Love you, Mommy."

"I love you, too, Cam." She closed her eyes and hugged him tightly. "Did you have fun with Aunt Carly and Morgan?"

“We eated lots of sugar. All the candy. Morgan says it’s cuz his daddy says no fun, and his mommy says too much fun.” He grinned at her, flashing his baby teeth. “Then Jason comed, and said I get to go home to Gram. He said my toys be here later.”

“Cody is bringing over Cameron’s things,” Jason told her. “The toys and clothes at least. I figured you’d want them.” He hesitated. “I can go—”

“No, no—wait—” She pressed a kiss to Cameron’s cheek. “Guess what? Gram is upstairs in her room, and I think she needs a great, big Cam hug.”

“I go do that. I love my Gram.” Cameron waved, then started for the stairs. She and Jason watched he gradually climbed the staircase, carefully holding onto the railing as he lifted his tiny legs onto the next step.

He waved again from the top of the stairs, then disappeared down the hall. Elizabeth smiled after him, then looked back at Jason. “Let’s talk outside. “It’s a nice day, and I’m tired of being inside.”

Jason nodded. “Uh, when Cody gets back, I asked him to hang out—”

“I was going to ask you about that,” she said as she leaned against the wall of her house. “Because Lucky showed up here, and I just—I don’t want to deal with it. I’d rather someone stopped him before he got that close again. I don’t want my grandmother or Cameron to have to worry.”

“You won’t have to worry about him anymore.” Jason paused. “I have something for you—” He reached into his jacket and drew out two plastic bags. “I thought about leaving these with the pawnshops because I didn’t know if you’d want to report them stolen, but—”

“You found my jewelry.” Pleased, Elizabeth took the bags. “I thought about filing charges of theft, but—we’ll get into that—” She hesitated, looking at the bag with just the wedding ring. “Well, at least he didn’t just pawn my stuff—”

“He pawned it in March.”

Elizabeth blinked at Jason, then looked back at the bag, with the pawn slip attached. “March 27,” she murmured. “Less than two weeks after Patrick cut him off, he was already out of money for the drugs. I know you said it had been that long, but I guess —” She shook her head. “You know what makes me sad about this? I mean, more

than the rest of it. What really gets me?”

“What?”

She met his eyes. “I never noticed his wedding ring was gone. All those weeks—and I *never* noticed.” She opened the door slightly and tossed both bags on a table just inside the door, then closed the door again. “I’ll give it to Luke or Bobbie. They can give it to him. It’s not my problem.”

Jason nodded. “How did, uh, how did your grandmother take it?”

“She was upset. You know she felt bad for how hard she’d been on me. And then when Lucky showed up, she wanted to call Mac. So I agreed. I called Emily, too. They both came over.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “I filed a report, but Mac doesn’t think the DA’s office will press charges. Even with the pictures Robin took.”

“Because Lucky’s a cop,” Jason said. “And—”

“And the department still thinks I’m the whore that ruined his career,” Elizabeth finished. “Yeah, pretty much. Mac believes me, he said, but he’s not willing to push for it either. So...” She shrugged. “I did what I could. And Emily is—she’s taking my side. Which I’m not sure I one hundred percent expected. I made an appointment with Justus to file for divorce.”

“Good.” Jason nodded. “And Santiago Escobar will not be a problem,” he told her. “Don’t worry about that.”

“I figured.” She smiled up at him. “You know how hard as this day has been, I’m glad I did it. I’m glad I told you, that I told Emily and my grandmother—that I stopped hiding.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t see it—” Jason shook his head. “I should have—”

“We were both swimming in guilt, Jason,” she said softly. “I realize now part of me thought I deserved it. Because maybe he was right. Maybe if I had loved him better or at all—it wouldn’t have been that way.”

“Elizabeth—”

“I know that’s not true—that I didn’t deserve it. But *that’s* why I could hide it. Because to you, it looked like guilt for what we were doing. You felt it, too. For what

you were doing to Sam.” She bit her lip. “I’m not proud of what we did, Jason. But I don’t know if we could have stopped it. We should have.”

“I—” He cleared his throat. “Yeah, I guess we should have.”

“I don’t want to live my life in the dark like that again.” She met his eyes. “I know you’re okay with taking it slow. I need it. I need this time and space. But I also need you. And I’m not sure how we make that work.”

“We’ll figure it out,” he told her. Then he tipped his head to the side. “I love you.”

Elizabeth blinked. “I—” Her chest tightened as tears stung her eyes. God, she hadn’t realized how much she’d wanted to hear him say it. Even if she knew it was probably true—

She really *had* needed to hear him say it. At least once.

“Jason—” Her voice faltered, and she looked down.

He shook his head. “I didn’t say it so you’d say it back. I just—I didn’t want you to think that it needed to be a secret. It’s not something you have to pry out of me. I know I don’t...that I don’t always tell you what I should.”

“I begged you once to ask me,” she murmured. Elizabeth lifted her eyes to meet his. “And I wanted you to do that. I wanted it to be your move. I didn’t want to be brave. It seemed easier if it was a question. But you were right. If you had to ask me, then I wasn’t ready to offer it.”

Elizabeth fisted her hand in his shirt and drew him in for a long, slow kiss — right on her front porch where anyone driving past could see them. “I love you, too,” she murmured when he pulled back. “I know whatever happens next might be hard, but I just—I don’t want us to throw it away again.”

“We won’t.” He kissed her again. “I promise.”

“Stay for dinner,” she said. “Cameron will want pizza and his Spiderman movie. And I want my grandmother to see you with him.”

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

She smiled at him as she pushed open the door and they went inside. She stood at the

bottom of the stairs. “Hey, Cameron, Gram—we’re going to order pizza for dinner! Jason’s staying—”

“YAY!” came her son’s excited shout. She heard his footsteps as he ran down the hallway and started to hurry down the steps. Audrey came to the top of the stairs just as Jason met Cameron halfway, both obviously worried Cameron might fall.

Audrey smiled as Cameron threw himself into Jason’s arms. “We watch Biderman?” Cameron demanded. “Get sausage pizza?”

“Yeah, but you have to sing the song for me again. I forgot how it goes,” Jason said as they came to the bottom of the stairs.

“Biderman, Biderman, Biderman. Does what Biders can! Look out! Biderman!” Cameron sang loudly as Elizabeth caught her grandmother’s sparkling eyes as Audrey fought a smile.

Then Elizabeth laughed, watching her son sing happily with his new best friend, excited to watch his favorite movie for the hundredth time.

She couldn’t think of a better way to end the day.

THE END

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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?

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?

The answers to that question will change everything.