



Just a few words too many // In my head // A few words too many // I n this bed  
A few words too many // Left unsaid // Oh, I wish that we were strangers // We could start again

# *A Few Words Too Many*

by Melissa (LissieLove)



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This story was written in 2014.

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

I'm just saying.

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# Dedication

This novel is dedicated, first and foremost, to anyone who remembered me after I stopped writing for six years. Your feedback and response have made all the difference.

Secondly, to my little sister Megan, whose experiences in childbirth and childrearing have made writing so much easier. She did the hard job so I didn't have to, and in the process gave me the most amazing nieces and nephew.

# Background & Time Period

This story begins in April 2003, but nothing that happened in 2003 happened the way it did on the show, particularly Ric's storyline. When I originally wrote *Poisonous Dreams*, it seemed like they were setting Ric up to be slightly psychotic, especially considering the things he did, but then they changed his character and Rick Hearst is so amazing that I've learned to forget most of 2003. That being said, I wanted to take the opportunity to keep sending his character down this path. Any important deviations will be in the story.

So, just assume that Ric has done nothing beyond date Elizabeth, pretend to sleep with Carly and work for her at the club, and defend Jason and Brenda (along with Alexis) during the Alcazar trial in January 2003. Sonny never fired Jason (because dude, stupid) but Jason and Courtney are dating. That asinine confrontation in Kelly's between the three of them did not happen because...well...no. Emily returned in March as scheduled, but she doesn't have cancer. I picture Laura Wright's Carly while writing this story, although Tamara Braun was in the part. I think LW is the superior Carly. And yes, you see Nadine. I loved her and I still grieve taking her off contract.

# **Part I: I Wish That We Were Strangers**

# Chapter One

*Friday, April 11, 2003*

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

*All alone I didn't like the feeling  
All alone I sat and cried*

Elizabeth Webber sat on the sofa by the elevators, staring straight ahead, ignoring the ball of nausea in her stomach. Fiercely trying to block out the memory of the test results Dr. Kelly Lee had delivered twenty minutes earlier.

Somehow, it was all a dream. This entire week of terror and nightmares, would be a dream.

Any moment now, she would wake up and maybe if she were truly lucky, she would wake up months and months ago. God, if she could just go back to the fall, and wait five lousy seconds for Jason to talk to her, to apologize to her. It might all be different.

Or even further back. Maybe if she had thrown Jason's cell phone into the harbor, he wouldn't have taken the phone call that had sent him out the night the lights went out and she'd slept with Zander.

What she wouldn't do for the power of time travel.

*All alone I had to find some meaning  
In the center of the pain I felt inside*

But it wasn't a horrible dream. It was her reality. She had gone from a man who was too stubborn to say anything that really mattered to a man who used words as a weapon.

In her loneliness, in her aching need to be loved and to matter, she'd allowed Ric Lansing into her life. He was everything Jason wasn't, she'd told herself. He told her how beautiful she was, and how happy she made him, and how much he wanted to be with her. She'd lapped it up like a stupid little girl, too needy and desperate to see the truth

Ric Lansing was everything Jason Morgan wasn't. He was a liar, who used all those words to pump her for information about Jason and Sonny, information she wouldn't have given even if she'd known all the answers to the questions he wanted. He was a user, who'd only sought her out after finding her talking to Jason one night at Luke's.

And she wished to God she'd known she was just a pawn in his game to get to Sonny Corinthos. His half-brother.

*All alone I came into this world  
All alone I will someday die*

She had ignored all the warning signs, had ignored Jason's words of caution because she told herself he might be jealous or something else stupid and inane to explain why Jason would say these things about a man he barely knew. Jason didn't know Ric like she did. She had never listened to Taggart, Nikolas, her grandmother or anyone else who talked about Jason like that, why should she listen to these things about Ric?

It wasn't like she could trust Jason to tell the truth. He'd let her comfort him at Sonny's funeral. He'd told her they would try to be more, to finally capitalize on the years of feelings and emotions, and they'd be together.

She'd thought she mattered. Until Courtney. Until the lipstick on his neck, all the days he never stopped in the penthouse while she was there...and the loft he'd bought for Courtney.

So she'd told herself Ric was a good man, and that Jason hadn't done much but lie to her for months.

*Solid stone is just sand and water, baby  
Sand and water, and a million years gone by*

And instead she'd learned the truth the hard way. She'd learned that Ric had targeted her to bother Jason, and when that hadn't worked, he had pretended to sleep with Carly when she was drunk.

Not that Ric had admitted these things or even felt bad, but he'd taunted Sonny and Jason one night earlier that week at Kelly's. Sonny had learned about Carly, had tracked Ric down in the courtyard and none of them had bothered to look inside the restaurant, where Elizabeth had been closing up for the night.

And Elizabeth had learned the hard way that she couldn't trust herself.

*I will see you in the light of a thousand suns  
I will hear you in the sound of the waves*

And now...she was pregnant. She was pregnant with Ric Lansing's child.

She stared down at the pamphlets Kelly had handed her, after Elizabeth had broken down in tears. Not to push her way or another, but to understand that she had options if she didn't want the child. Adoption. Abortion.

And all Elizabeth wanted to do was crawl under the covers and stay there for the rest of her life. Anything not to make this decision.

How could she have a child? She was a waitress who lived in a broken down studio without her own bathroom, much less a kitchen. She had a degree in art, but what the hell could she do with that? Of course she couldn't have this baby. She'd have to have an abortion. There was no other choice.

*I will know you when I come, as we all will come  
Through the doors beyond the grave*

And yet, how could she blame an innocent life for the crimes of its parents? This child was half her, and despite her many failings, she still had time to pull her life together. She had options. She could get her teacher's certification. She could go into the nursing program like her grandmother kept hinting.

Ric Lansing didn't have to be a part of this child's life.

And, maybe it was selfish, but if she had this child...if Elizabeth became a mother, there would finally be someone in this world who loved her.

Just the way she was.

## **Elm Street Pier**

*All alone I heal this heart of sorrow*

Her heart heavy, her body tired and her mind racing with ways to keep this pregnancy a secret from the worst choice of her life, Elizabeth blindly walked towards Kelly's, stopping at the top of the stairs to the Elm Street Pier when she heard voices.

Familiar voices.

Hanging back around the corner, Elizabeth waited for Ric Lansing and whoever he was with to disappear so she could head to work.

"What have I told you about seeking me out in public?" Ric demanded.

"You like it better when we're all by ourselves in bed," a female voice purred, and the pit in Elizabeth's stomach grew, burning. She knew that voice.

*All alone I raise this child*

"Well..." God she *knew* that tone. That disgusting charming tone he used when he was flirting. When he was convincing her she was the only woman in his life. "That may be true," Ric continued. "But things are tense right now, and if anyone sees us talking..."

"You mean the little twit," Faith Roscoe purred. "I thought you were gonna cut her loose."

Oh, she was going to be sick. She was going to lose it, and just start heaving for all the world to hear.

"I was," Ric said. "But she's amusing, and while it doesn't seem to bother Morgan much I'm screwing his ex-bed buddy, I know Sonny can't stand it, so she's worth the trouble."

Elizabeth sank to her knees, wishing she were anywhere else in the world. She'd known she'd been targeted to bother Jason, but to hear him...to hear him put it that way, God, she just wanted to set herself on fire.



*Flesh and bone, he's just  
Bursting towards tomorrow*

“You’re lucky I’m so understanding,” Faith remarked. “If I thought you gave a damn about her, I might decide to...take *preventative* measures.”

Tears slid down Elizabeth’s cheeks, and she just wanted to disappear. She’d been so stupid. She should have listened to Jason. She should have known better. She should have trusted him.

“Now, now. You can’t make any waves.” His voice lowered slightly and Elizabeth couldn’t really make out words other than “danger, Families, money.”

*And his laughter fills my world and wears your smile*

Their voices finally faded, and she heard footsteps indicating they were moving out further onto the pier. Even when she was sure they were gone, she remained on the ground, her arms wrapped around herself, tears sliding down her cheeks.

That was the father of her child, who talked about screwing her to annoy someone else. She hadn’t meant anything to him, not even a little.

If she could just curl up into a ball and fade into nothing, it might be for the best.

*I will see you in the light of a thousand suns  
I will hear you in the sound of the waves*

She heard footsteps on the stairs, and told herself to get up, to move, but her legs were frozen, her brain sluggish. When the steps stopped in front her, she opened her eyes and saw the boots a few feet from her.

If Elizabeth possessed any energy left to be embarrassed, she might have actually burst into flames as she watched Jason Morgan crouch in front her, his eyes concerned.

She was too shattered to care.

“Elizabeth,” he said quietly. “How long have you been here?”

*I will know you when I come, as we all will come  
Through the doors beyond the grave*

And oh, God...he must have heard. Oh, God. She opened her mouth to respond, to say something... anything to stop this torment. She could lie to him—she’d only just gotten here, she’d tripped and stumbled.

But she just couldn’t drag it out of herself. “Long enough,” she murmured.

*All alone I came into this world*

She heard Jason's inhale of breath, and wondered what he thought of her being targeted because of him. He'd always said his enemies would use her to get to him, he probably hadn't thought it be through sex and that she'd *let* them.

"I wish I could blame you," she said softly, keeping her eyes on the ground, not meeting his gaze. "That Ric only came for me because I...because of you. But I can't." Her breath was shaky as she slowly exhaled. "Because you *told* me, and I ignored you."

"I am so..." He stopped, and slid his hands under her elbows to help her stand. "Elizabeth—"

*All alone I will someday die*

"There's nothing you can say." Another tear slid down her cheek. "I heard most of it at Kelly's earlier this week, but you know...he didn't put it that way then." She struggled to keep from sinking back to the ground. "He just told you he'd had to use Carly when you didn't seem to give a damn about me."

"I—" But Jason didn't seem to know what say.

"It's okay." Elizabeth offered a shaky smile. "Really. I needed..." She took a deep breath, trying not to collapse under the weight of the devastation of her life, of her dreams. "I needed to hear him put it that way. To know that he'd been sleeping with other women, with Faith Roscoe. I hadn't broken up with him yet, you know. I didn't think I could be in the same room with him, I was afraid he'd explain away his words to you and Sonny the way he always seemed to explain everything else. I was afraid I might believe him because I needed..." She pressed her lips together. "But now I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that I outlived my usefulness a long time ago, and I was only kept around for amusement."

*Solid stone is just sand and water, baby*

After a long moment of silence, Jason cleared his throat. "Can I—Can I give you a ride somewhere?"

No. Taking a ride from Jason Morgan when her life had shattered four years ago had been the reason she was in this mess. For her own sanity, she could not let him be her sounding board. He already thought her to be pathetic, to be desperate, if he knew she was pregnant by Ric, he'd feel sorry for her. He'd pity her.

And she really *would* throw herself into the harbor at that point.

"No." When her voice was weak, she forced herself to take a deep breath. "No. Thank you for being concerned, but I think that sometimes the truth is better..." She looked at him now, for the first time, meeting those beautiful eyes that had broken her heart. "Sometimes the truth is better, even when it's harsh. I have no illusions left." Another tear escaped her eye, and she found her lips curving into a smile. "I never mattered at all."

*Sand and water and a million years gone by*

**Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Sonny Corinthos was going to have to start tricking his wife with healthy cookies or almond ice cream. He'd found another bag of Oreos tucked under the sofa. He was going to have ferret out who was smuggling this contraband into his home. Carly was going to have the safest pregnancy he could provide, and nutrition was the only thing under his control.

Or at least he'd thought so.

He was searching under the cushions for any other junk food, particularly candy bars because they would fit without changing the shape when Max Giambetti knocked briskly and then opened the door. "Boss, it's Jason."

Sonny got to his feet, holding the Oreos by the corner of the package. "You're not Carly's dealer are you?" he asked, tossing them on the coffee table. He glanced over at Jason as he entered and faltered. "What's wrong?"

"Um..." Jason scrubbed his hands over his face. "I'm just tired, Sonny. It's been a rough week." He looked around the penthouse. "Where's Carly?"

"She took Michael to see Bobbie. They're having dinner there." Bobbie. Could she be behind this processed sugar? He pushed Carly's food choice aside. Jason looked tired, but more than that... Sonny cleared his throat. "Jason, what happened?"

"I..." Jason hesitated. He exhaled slowly and looked at Sonny. "I was near the Elm Street Pier, and I saw Faith Roscoe with Ric."

Sonny scowled. "Well, we suspected he was working with her." He walked towards the mini bar and poured himself a whiskey. "What'd you overhear?"

"Ah..." Behind him, he heard Jason's voice falter. Sonny turned, the tumbler in his hand. Jason rubbed the back of his neck, and Sonny realized that Jason looked tired, but he looked pissed and sad as well. "It was a variation of what we heard at Kelly's."

Sonny closed his eyes. He'd been so angry that night Carly had finally divulged to him what had happened at her club opening. She didn't think she'd *actually* slept with Ric, but she'd been afraid of Sonny's reaction. Sonny had torn out of the house to track the son of a bitch down and Jason had followed to keep Sonny out of serious trouble.

They'd cornered Ric in the courtyard and Sonny had gone for his throat. He could still hear the mocking laughter in his voice as Ric taunted him. Sonny had demanded answers—why was Ric coming for him, for his family?

And he'd learned the disgusting truth. That Ric Lansing was his mother's son, by an affair with her boss. He'd blamed Sonny for pushing her down the steps while she was pregnant, forcing Trevor Lansing to tell Adela to choose between her sons.

Sonny sighed, the heavy breath whooshing out from his lips as he remembered the rest of the conversation, and why Jason would be so upset. "He talked about Elizabeth again."

“Yeah.” Jason cast his eyes away. “But it was...Sonny, she heard us that night. At Kelly’s.”

Sonny tightened his grip on his tumbler. “We never looked inside. Kelly’s was supposed to be closed.”

*I didn’t have much choice but use Carly. I thought it might be amusing to pick up Morgan’s ex-girlfriend, but he didn’t seem to give a damn. It’s about leverage, Sonny, and Carly gave me more than Elizabeth Webber. But man, it sure was fun.*

“Damn it,” Sonny hissed. “He’s slime, and believe me...” He pressed his free hand to his chest. “If—if he were anyone else, Jason, he’d already be gone for what he did to Elizabeth and Carly.”

“Sonny, she was there again today,” Jason continued. “Around the corner. Ric and Faith were on the docks, and Faith threatened to do something to Elizabeth if she thought Ric actually gave a damn.” His face twisted into a grimace. “And the way he talked about her...” He closed his eyes. “They walked further onto the pier, but I didn’t want to follow and press my luck. So I went up the stairs, and Sonny...”

“Elizabeth had heard them. Found out Ric had Faith on the side.” Nausea welled up in Sonny’s stomach. This was his fault. To use Elizabeth that way, a young woman who had once been raped, it made him physically ill. “I would have spared her that. I’ve been trying to think of way to talk to her about Ric all week, but you know, I, uh...” He paused. “I didn’t think she’d listen to me anymore than she did the last time I tried. Or when you did.”

“She just looked so shattered,” Jason said softly, almost to himself. “You remember that night at the garage, when she thought Lucky was dead...and she just collapsed?”

“Yeah,” Sonny replied, hoarsely. He’d been standing just behind her as Lieutenant Marcus Taggart explained that the subway token Elizabeth held in her hand had been found on the body. She had just sunk to the ground, as if she could no longer support her own weight.

“That look in her eyes,” Jason continued. “She had it again today. And you know, she told me she didn’t blame me.” He exhaled, his breath almost shaky. “But I blame *myself*. If it hadn’t been for me, he never would have focused on her—”

Sonny sighed and sipped the whiskey, feeling the burn slide down his throat. “I hope the Families torture him before they kill him,” he muttered. He looked at Jason. “I’ll let them know that despite my newfound relation to the man, I don’t give a *damn* about his life. I—” He fisted his hand. “I can’t be the one to order his death, Jason. I can’t do that, and I know you think less of me—”

“No...” Jason shook his head. “I get...I get it.” He cleared his throat. “But you’ve got no problems with the Families taking care of it?”

“Not a damned one. He made a mistake there.” Sonny threw back the rest of his whiskey. “He thought he could weaken them, sabotage their operations, embezzle money while screwing with my head, he

made his bed there. Until this week, I was just gonna..." He waved his hand, dismissively. "Let them take care of it in their own time. He wasn't much of a problem. But now?"

After seeing the tears in his wife's eyes, trying to explain why she'd needed to order a paternity test, apologizing for a night she just couldn't remember. After learning of the way he'd used Elizabeth...

"As far as I'm concerned, he's a dead man." Sonny set his tumbler down. "Did Elizabeth say whether she'd broken things off with him?"

"She said not yet," Jason answered. "Sonny, until Ric is...dealt with..."

"Say no more." Sonny held up a hand. "I had Francis on her that year you were in her studio and then for a couple of months after you left that first time. I'll tell him keep an eye out."

# Chapter Two

*Under your breath I hear your soft voice break  
Can we still be friends  
I hear you talking but you're just not making sense  
I've been hoping for a happy ending  
Now I know that there won't be any*  
A Few Words Too Many (Billie Myers)

*Sunday, April 13, 2003*

## Kelly's: Courtyard

Emily Bowen-Quartermaine sipped her iced tea and perused her anatomy textbook, waiting out Elizabeth's shift. Her friend had been avoiding her all week—avoiding everyone really, as far as she could tell—and today was the day Emily pinned her down about it.

She turned a page and reflected at how different their friendship seemed to be now that Emily was home. They'd called, emailed and written each other while Emily had been in rehab in Arizona, and then at UCLA last year, but Emily had abruptly cut off all contact for almost three months last year after Elizabeth had admitted to sleeping with Zander Smith.

Emily wrinkled her nose, thinking about it again. *Nothing* bothered her more than thinking of the two of them together, and the only way she could look Elizabeth in the eye was if she put that completely out of her head.

Finally, Elizabeth emerged from the diner, a large tote bag over her shoulder. She tucked in green apron inside and took the seat across from Emily. Smiling wanly, she set the bag on the ground. "Hey."

"Hey." Emily took a deep breath. She *was* still best friends with Elizabeth. If she just ignored how angry she was about Zander, then she could get through this. If she pretended everything was good between them, then eventually it *would* be. She marked her page and closed the book, leaning back in her chair. "You look like crap."

"Thanks." Elizabeth rubbed her eyes. "I haven't really been sleeping."

Emily smiled brightly. "Is Ric keeping you awake?" she teased, but was surprised when any color the other woman had possessed faded from her cheeks. "Liz?"

"I'm..." Elizabeth hesitated, twisting the napkin in front of her. "I'm not seeing him anymore."

"Oh." Emily frowned. "He seemed really nice, you know. And I thought you liked him."

"Yeah..." Elizabeth sighed. "Well, I think maybe it was just too soon for me to get involved with someone seriously." She bit down on her lower lip. "Em...I'm pregnant."

Emily blinked. “But you just said you broke up with Ric.” She furrowed her brow. “I don’t understand, Elizabeth. I mean, maybe he’s not perfect, but he was really nice to you. And you *need* to move on. You know you do. You’re pregnant.” She nodded firmly. “You should give him another chance. Don’t...don’t give up too quickly.”

“I know I need to move on,” Elizabeth murmured. “It’s just not as easy as you might think.” She exhaled slowly, and Emily resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “There are reasons I can’t...I can’t be with Ric.”

“Liz.” Emily hesitated, but decided the blunt truth was for the best. “Look, I totally know what it’s like to love someone who doesn’t love you back. It really sucks, but you can’t sit around pining for Jason. My brother, even if he really was that interested, is dating Courtney now.”

Elizabeth stared at her for a moment, as if confused by her words. “If he really was interested...?” she repeated faintly.

Nope, Emily was *not* going to feed into this. She’d become friendly with Courtney Matthews since coming home, and it was clear that Jason had been interested in the blonde all last fall, long before Elizabeth had moved out of the penthouse. “Liz, I know you were staying at the penthouse, but that was to protect Zander. It’s not like you were *living* together.”

“I...” Elizabeth twisted her fingers together. “We talked about it...”

“You know Jason’s a man of action. If he wanted to be with you, he would,” Emily assured her. “Look at everything he did for Courtney.” Guilt settled in her stomach as Elizabeth’s cheeks flushed. “I’m not trying to hurt you, but I just...I want you to live in reality.”

“I know...I know you’re right about one thing,” Elizabeth said after a long moment. “If Jason wanted to be with me, he would.” She looked away. “I ruined it, and maybe he was trying to be nice when he told me it was too dangerous.” Her lips twisted. “It’s not too dangerous for Courtney, clearly.”

“The sooner you face the truth, the better off you’ll be.” Emily nodded firmly. “So if you’re pregnant, you should tell Ric and give him the opportunity to be the man you deserve.” Pleased, she stowed her text in her bag. “I’m glad we could talk about this honestly. You *know* I only want you to be happy.”

“I know.” But Elizabeth wouldn’t meet her eyes. Emily thought they might need to have this conversation once or twice more before Elizabeth really understood that her brother was out of her life for good. Emily was aware just how Elizabeth *ruined* her chance with Jason. After screwing with him two years earlier, she’d jerked him around again last summer, and probably slept with Zander to make him jealous.

Jason was better off, and one day, Elizabeth would find someone who would remind her how nice she used to be. Emily missed the girl who’d been dating Lucky. *That* Elizabeth had been her best friend, and Emily wanted her back.

**Elm Street Pier**

Elizabeth stopped at the bottom of the steps and took a moment to sit on the bench, closing her eyes and trying to force the conversation with Emily out of her head. She knew that her friendship with Jason's sister would suffer a little considering what had happened last summer, but somehow she thought they would be able to get it back, rebuild it.

Emily had come home without warning the month before, and though they'd tried to be close again, it had felt hollow. Elizabeth had gone to a few dinners with Emily, Lucky and Nikolas, and it just felt like the four of them felt they *should* be friends like they had been four years ago and if they spent enough time together, it would feel natural again.

Despite Emily's coolness, Elizabeth knew that she couldn't blame Emily for trying to push her back to Ric. Emily didn't know all the information. And even if the words had hurt...she needed to be reminded that the relationship she thought she'd been building with Jason really *had* been in her head.

"I knew I'd finally track you down."

Elizabeth's eyes snapped open as she saw Ric stepping off the bottom stair, with a grin on his face. Oh, she was going to be sick right here in front of him, she just knew it.

Ric continued towards her and Elizabeth fought the urge to get up and run. "You haven't returned my phone calls all week." He stopped in front of the bench and slid his hands in the pockets of his light tan khakis. "What's going on, Beautiful?"

Elizabeth squared her shoulders and stood. Time to channel her inner Lizzie Webber. That annoying smart-ass was still inside, somewhere. She was sure of it. "Can't take a hint, Ric?" she asked coolly.

She watched his narrow, and wonder how stupid she'd been to miss the calculation in those brown eyes. "A hint?" he repeated, his tone matching hers.

Elizabeth tightened her grip on her tote bag slung over her shoulder. "Usually," she bit out, "when someone stops returning calls and texts, they're trying to brush you off."

She took a step towards the other side of the docks, towards her studio, but he stepped in front of her. "Whoa, what changed, Elizabeth?" He put his hands up, preventing her from darting to the side. "I thought we were having a good time—"

"Well, you thought wrong." Elizabeth tossed head back, her hair swinging over her shoulder. "So I'm going to leave now, Ric, and you're *going* to let me."

He took a step towards her, and Elizabeth felt it necessary to step back, feeling her ire fade and her nerves kick in. This was the man who was in league with Faith Roscoe. Maybe she should have handled this differently. "Listen, Ric—"

"You've been talking to Sonny or Jason." She tried to keep her expression level, her eyes unchanged, but there must have been something, because his lips pressed together. "Jason. He told you something. Now, you *know* you can't trust him—"



“It has *nothing* to do with Sonny or Jason. They’ve told me nothing,” Elizabeth cut in. Maybe they would have warned her again, had Jason not seen her two days earlier, almost in a fetal position, after hearing the truth. “I can make my own decisions—”

“No, no...” Ric wagged a finger at her. “They’ve poisoned you against me, Elizabeth. I can’t believe you’d *trust* them after everything Jason has done.” He stepped towards her, voice softening. “I know he broke your heart, Elizabeth, but I care about you—”

“I would like you to leave me alone,” Elizabeth said. She tried to step around him again, but again Ric stepped in front her. Oh, God. What was she going to do if he didn’t move? Could she run? If she turned and ran the way she came, back up the stairs...*could* she get away? “Ric, please let me walk away.”

“No, I want to know what they said to make you run away from me,” Ric snarled, all charm vanished from his voice. His face changed, and Elizabeth knew she was seeing the Ric Lansing now, all layers of charm stripped away. “What did they *tell* you, Elizabeth?” He reached for her arm, and Elizabeth stumbled back.

“Nothing,” Elizabeth repeated, struggling to keep her voice level. “Ric, I’m telling you the truth. I haven’t talked to Sonny or Jason in weeks.”

“Right,” Ric drawled. “Well, that’s certainly possible since we both know they’ve basically forgotten your existence.”

Nausea was climbing up her throat, and Elizabeth thought this was a hell of a time to be suffering that morning sickness that never seemed to happen in the morning. He could not, absolutely could not, see her getting sick.

Ric could never find out about this baby. This conversation had sealed the deal on that.

“It’s true we’re not close anymore,” Elizabeth said, slowly, “but I’m sure if I needed them, I could ask for help.” When Ric just smirked, Elizabeth took a small step back. Get close to the steps. Maybe she could kick him and then run. “But I *don’t* need them, because they’ve said nothing to me, okay? I just...” She licked her lips. “I just don’t want to date you anymore. Why isn’t that enough?”

“Because you’re lying to me. Sonny told you something, I know he did.” Ric reached out for her, and Elizabeth stumbled back again. She was lifting her leg to kick him in the knees, just like Jason taught her once, when boots clattered down the steps like a freight train.

Before Elizabeth could really process what was happening, Jason had passed her, grabbed Ric by the throat and sent him sprawling on the docks. She just blinked.

“You just *don’t* know when to quit, do you?” Jason snarled. He reached for Ric again, to do what, Elizabeth couldn’t imagine, but Ric crawled away frantically. “Sonny told you to get the hell out of town.”

“I knew it,” Ric hissed, glaring at her, rising to his feet. “I knew Jason told you everything—”

“Told me what?” Elizabeth said, feeling some of Lizzie filter back in. “That I’m amusing and it’s entertaining to screw Jason Morgan’s ex-bed buddy? To pretend to sleep with Carly because sleeping with *me* wasn’t giving you enough leverage?” She raised an eyebrow. “Is *that* what you think they told me?”

Ric stared at her, and Elizabeth was stunned at the loathing that crept into his expression. He took a step forward, but a growl from Jason stopped him. “You *would* believe them—”

“They didn’t have to tell me.” Elizabeth folded her arms across her chest. “No one bothered to check to see if Kelly’s was empty. I was closing when you decided to tell your *half-brother* all the details.”

“Elizabeth,” Jason said quietly, looking at her. “Francis is at the top of the stairs. He’ll walk you back to the studio.”

“Oh, so she can leave me here and you can *deal* with me?” Ric growled. “Don’t bother.” He sent Elizabeth another glare, and disappeared into the shadows.

Elizabeth released a breath, and lowered herself to sit on the bottom step of the stairs, wishing she could just disappear. “Well, go ahead and yell at me.”

She felt Jason sit next to her. “Why would I yell?”

She opened her eyes, but didn’t dare look at him. “At least an I told you so would probably suffice. I wouldn’t be in this position if I had just...” She sighed, remembering her conversation with Emily. “If I had just kept my head on straight.” Elizabeth stood and bit her lip. “Thank you for getting rid of him.”

“He might come back and harass you,” Jason warned. “He’s in trouble with...” He looked away. “He’s in trouble with people who aren’t in Sonny’s position, so it might not be a problem for too much longer.”

“Hmm...” Elizabeth nodded, understanding. Well, then maybe Ric would be out of her life before he could find out she was pregnant. “Well, let’s hope that’s true.” Her stomach rolled in protest and she wondered if she was going make it to her studio. She could not get sick in front Jason. “I’m going to get going. I, ah...” She smiled weakly. “I’m not feeling that great, so...”

“I’ll walk you back to your studio,” Jason said, taking a step towards her but Elizabeth shook her head. Because that would be a disaster.

“No, no. Um.” She licked her lips. “That’s really not necessary, okay? I don’t think...” She cast her eyes up the top of the stairs. “Maybe Francis can walk me. It’s not far.” She frowned and then looked back at him. “How did you know I was down here?”

When Jason looked away, Elizabeth felt a little of her ire at him fade. Despite everything, maybe he still thought of her as a friend. “Francis called you because he’s watching me.”

“Ah...” Jason dipped his chin to his chest. “Yeah. After Friday...I figured you’d be breaking things off with Ric, so I just...” He jerked a shoulder. “Sonny thought it was the least we could do.” He paused. “Since it’s really our fault Ric targeted you.”

Immediately, the warmth in her stomach faded. Pity. Guilt. No, that fit her life much more. “No, it’s my fault,” Elizabeth said, firmly. She was not going to let them take this on. “Maybe he sought me out because we used to be friends, but I didn’t have to date him.” She sighed. “And maybe his research should have been better. I’m sure he’s pissed he wasted all those months asking me questions.”

Jason frowned. “He asked you questions? About us?” He paused. “About me and Sonny, I mean.”

“Yeah, which should have been my first sign.” Elizabeth rubbed her forehead, forcing the bile down. “But you know, I thought the threat would come with explosives or guns, not questions from someone who said I was beautiful.” *Shut up, Elizabeth. Shut up.* “Anyway, you don’t have to worry. I don’t know anything, and even if I did, I wouldn’t say anything.” She straightened her shoulders. “I don’t want you feeling guilty. I got myself into this situation, and I don’t need you get me out of it.” She hesitated. “I may need you to throw Ric around again, but other than that...I can take care of myself.”

“Okay.” Jason nodded slowly. “Well, if you don’t want me to walk you home, then...I’ll get Francis.” After another moment, he walked passed her and started up the stairs.

The last thing she needed was more time in Jason’s company. She would rather jump in the harbor. She just needed Ric to get out of town, and then figure out the best way to support herself and a baby.

And figure out what to tell people about the father. No one could ever know about Ric. She had to protect her child.

# Chapter Three

*Don't know where she belongs, where she belongs  
She wants to go home, but nobody's home  
It's where she lies, broken inside  
With no place to go, no place to go to dry her eyes.  
Broken inside  
- Nobody's Home, Avril Lavigne*

*Tuesday, April 15, 2003*

## Kelly's Courtyard

Lucky Spencer closed his arms around Elizabeth's shoulders and squeezed her tight. "I'm going to miss you guys." He drew back and reached for Emily's hand with a broad smile. "But I'm glad Nikolas and I waited to head to London. We might have missed you otherwise, Em, and I would have hated that."

"Well, I was excited to get the Musketeers together for a few reunions," Emily replied, her hand on Nikolas's shoulder. "It won't be the same without you guys."

Elizabeth cleared her throat and smiled at her two oldest friends, though their friendships had been difficult over the last year. "It really won't. I was just getting used to all four of us in the same city again."

"But it'd be *selfish* to ask you to stay," Emily said, her voice almost sharp. Elizabeth frowned at her, but Emily never met her eyes. "You should be with Laura now that she's getting better. I'm so glad you guys are taking Lesley and Lulu with you. You know she'll recover so much faster with everyone in the same place."

As if missing the underlying tension, Nikolas squeezed Emily's hand. "Well, you'll be here to take care of each other and carry on our Kelly's traditions."

After a few more hugs, the brothers started for the parking lot, leaving Elizabeth and Emily standing alone in the courtyard. Elizabeth looked over at Emily, who was staring after the others, wistfully.

"I'm glad Laura is showing some improvement," Elizabeth said, breaking the silence. "It's hard to think of her like that, locked inside her own mind."

"I know," Emily murmured. "She was always so wonderful to me, like a second mother." She folded her arms across her chest and turned towards the doors. "Are you working today?"

"I had the opening shift," Elizabeth answered. "So I'm done now." She hesitated. "Do you...want to get some lunch?" Her throat was thick. "I could really use a friend right now."

"I would," Emily said, biting her lip, "but I'm meeting Courtney." She tucked her hair behind her

ears. “Do you want to join us? You guys should really start working past—”

“I’m not really in the mood to have this conversation,” Elizabeth replied. She rubbed her eyes. She still had so much to figure out, and she just...she just couldn’t find it in her to tell Emily how much she really needed her right now. She wasn’t sure Emily would hear her.

“All right,” Emily said, shrugging. “Well, I guess I’ll see you later.”

“I guess so.” Elizabeth waited another moment, but finally left the courtyard. She no longer had the patience to pretend she and Emily were as close as ever, when the truth was...Elizabeth had never felt further away from her.

## **Kelly’s: Dining Room**

Emily set her bag down at an empty table to wait for Courtney. She wished Elizabeth *had* joined them for lunch. She knew Courtney and Elizabeth had been friendly before, and if Elizabeth could just see how much more suited Courtney was for Jason, she’d really start getting past her feelings.

She had no doubt what Elizabeth had wanted to talk about—Emily had thought of the pregnancy news for days, wondering what Elizabeth intended to do. Emily hoped Elizabeth *would* confide in Ric—he clearly had monetary resources to support a child, and Emily didn’t think her friend was being all that realistic about her options. Maybe Ric wasn’t the love of her life, but Emily thought that entire concept was a fallacy anyway.

No one fell in love forever.

She was tugging her anatomy textbook from her bag when she saw Ric emerge from the back, having come down from his room. He looked annoyed when he sat at the counter, perusing a menu she was sure he’d memorized. She didn’t know what the problem was with the man. He was handsome and charming, and while he seemed to be focused on getting a job connected to Sonny and Carly, Emily didn’t think that was too awful. It meant Ric was ambitious, that he wanted to make money.

Elizabeth could do worse, Emily decided, and to prove to herself that Elizabeth’s happiness and well-being was still a top priority, she grabbed her bag and abandoned her table for the counter. “Hey. I’m not sure we’ve been introduced,” she said.

Ric glanced at her, and she was surprised at the irritation in his eyes. “I know who *you* are,” he said shortly. He sipped the coffee Penny had just served him. “And I’m not in the mood for any sanctimonious lectures from Jason Morgan’s little sister or Elizabeth’s best friend.”

Elizabeth must have already broken up with him. Emily took a seat and signaled to Penny that she wanted her usual chamomile tea. “I know you and Liz are having some difficulties,” she said, and winced when Ric snorted. Elizabeth really *had* burned her bridges, but Emily wasn’t deterred. “She’s just...confused right now. It’s been a tough year for her, and I think you’re exactly what she needs.”

Ric set his coffee down and twisted on the stool to fully face her. “Just...*what* did Elizabeth tell you

about us?" he asked.

"She was thinking of breaking up with you," Emily answered, spooning some sugar into her tea. "I told her that she shouldn't be too hasty." She flashed a smile at her friend's boyfriend. "I know it might not seem like it right now, but Elizabeth is usually warm and generous. She's just...it's been a bad year." She leaned forward, lowering her voice. "And she really needs the support right now, Ric. No woman should have to face something like this alone."

His dark brow furrowed and Ric tilted his head to the side. "Face what?" he asked softly.

Emily had no intention of telling him outright Elizabeth was pregnant—that was not her place, but she felt a responsibility to Elizabeth to keep her from making a major mistake, so hints were okay. She cleared her throat. "It's not something I should be telling you, but I would ask Elizabeth."

She saw the door swing open and Courtney walked in. Reaching down to grab her bag, and picking up her tea with the other hand, Emily smiled again at him. "I'm serious, Ric. It's important that you don't let Elizabeth push you away right now."

She slid into a chair at the table Courtney had set her things on, and smiled. "Hey!"

"Hey." Courtney eyed Ric at the counter, and her gaze turned wary as he stood and walked past her without a word. "Why were you talking to Ric Lansing?" She lowered herself into the other chair and turned her coffee cup over.

"Just giving him some encouragement." Emily sipped her tea. "Elizabeth is pushing him away, but I can't let her do that. She *needs* to move on, Courtney, you know that."

"I know..." Courtney grimaced. "And I hope she does, because I like her, which I *know* she wouldn't believe. And I get how easy it is to fall in love with Jason." She smiled now, as if lit from inside from her happiness. "And he is a wonderful friend, so it must be hard for her to lose that, but I wouldn't..." She shook her head, her smile dimming. "I wouldn't wish Ric Lansing on my worst enemy, much less someone I like."

Emily fisted her hand under the table. "What's wrong with him?" she asked, irritated. "Elizabeth wouldn't tell me why she was breaking up with him and now you're saying these things....he manages Carly's club, he helped get Jason and Brenda acquitted. What's *wrong* with him?" she repeated. She was so tired of being on the outside. This was why Elizabeth was irritating now—because she only told Emily what *she* thought Emily ought to know, and *never* the full truth.

"I can't..." Courtney looked up as Penny poured coffee into her cup. "Thanks, Penny." When the waitress left, she sighed. "I can't really talk about it, but if my brother told Elizabeth half of what I think he should have, then Elizabeth should have left a vapor trail in her rush to get away."

Oh, no. "Is he really that bad?" Emily asked, feeling light-headed. What if he *was* an awful person who would just hurt Elizabeth and drive all those wonderful qualities she missed so much deeper under the surface? "I just...encouraged him to pursue her."

“Em...” Courtney shook her head. “That’s just...that’s *not* a good idea. Jason and Sonny want him out of town, and if Elizabeth knows what they know, she’s just going to resist.” She sat back. “And that’s just going to make it worse.”

And Emily had just hinted to Ric Elizabeth was pregnant. Oh, man. Uneasy, Emily looked towards the door and felt nauseous. Maybe she hadn’t read the situation correctly.

“Maybe it’ll be okay,” Emily said softly. “Maybe she can just get rid of him again.”

“I hope so.” Courtney picked up her tea spoon and tapped it restlessly against her mug. “Because my brother and Jason are going to feel obligated to help since they blame themselves for Ric.” She pressed her lips together. “And the *last* thing I want is Elizabeth to get involved with Jason again in anyway.”

“Well, it’s not like it would matter,” Emily said. “You said they were never really together, that you and Jason were falling in love when Elizabeth thought they were together. Jason wasn’t really interested.” And she wanted Elizabeth to have access to protection if Ric was as awful as people seemed to think.

Courtney shifted and looked away. “I may have...glossed over a few things,” she admitted. “I know he cared for her, but I didn’t get the impression they were *actually* dating. He never said anything to me about it and we were together enough, I would have known. And you know, I made Jason promise I wasn’t a rebound.” She placed her hand flat on the table. “It’s just better if...Jason doesn’t think Elizabeth needs help. I don’t...want to take any chances.”

“Right.” Emily frowned, troubled by Courtney’s explanation of the facts and wondering how much of what she thought had happened last summer and last fall was actually true.

### **Corinthos & Morgan Warehouse: Jason’s Office**

The numbers on the ledgers were beginning to blur together as Jason struggled to keep his focus. Three days since he’d warned Ric to get out of town, and the scum was still in his room at Kelly’s as if nothing had changed. He really thought being Sonny’s half-brother offered him protection. Sonny didn’t want him evicted because it was easier to keep an eye on him this way, but Jason just wanted to shove him in the harbor with weights on his feet. He wanted the disgusting son of a bitch to sink to the bottom struggling to breath for what he had done to Carly, to Elizabeth.

He wasn’t a man who could picture things that well, but he would never forget the hitch in Carly’s breath, the tears on her cheeks as she promised Sonny she hadn’t slept with Ric for revenge, that she honestly didn’t remember anything and that her skin felt dirty for just having been in bed with him. Carly was his best friend, for all her faults, and just for that scene alone, he wanted to dismember Ric Lansing.

But the look in Elizabeth’s eyes last Friday, as she sat on her knees, her arms wrapped around her torso as if that action alone could hold her together. She had refused to meet his eyes as he’d crouched in front of her, and pulled her to her feet. Not until the last moment, making him wish he

could go against Sonny's orders. She was wrecked, as if nothing could put her back together. She hadn't looked that way since they'd first met and now he was powerless to do anything about it.

He closed the books and reached for his phone when it lit up. Francis. "Morgan," he said, clenching his free hand into a fist. "Is Elizabeth okay?"

*"Uh..." Elizabeth's guard sounded hesitant. "You told me not to intervene with Lansing unless he put a hand on her, but he's tracked her down on the Elm Street Pier, and Jason, you're gonna wanna get down here."*

Jason was already on his feet, heading for the doors. "Is he threatening her? I'm at the warehouse, I can be there in just a few minutes."

*"He's not...but it's not good. And it's going to get worse. Get here fast."*

"If he lays a finger on her, throw him in the harbor. Sonny's orders be damned."

## **Elm Street Pier**

Jason found Francis standing at the top of the stairs, watching the scene below intently. As he stepped up, he heard Elizabeth choking something out, the tone and the words themselves making him clench his fists even more. As he prepared to step in, Francis held out an arm.

"Just wait," he murmured. "Miss Webber might have a plan and you know how angry she gets when you help and she doesn't want it."

"Ric, I am *not* pregnant. I don't know where—"

"You're telling me Emily lied to me? That's bullshit, and you know it—"

Jason pushed Francis away, so he could have his own view, to see how close Ric was to Elizabeth. If she *was* pregnant, this situation had become much more dangerous.

Ric had Elizabeth cornered the edge of the harbor. She had backed up so much that any further step would send her into the still icy water. Her face was contorted in apprehension and wariness...but not fear. Not yet. "Ric, I am not having your child—"

"I told myself that I would *never* let my children grow up without me, that after what my mother did," Ric snarled, "I would never let myself be separated." He reached for her arm, and Jason tensed, ready to leap over the railing if he needed. "You *aren't* keeping me out of this—"

"I'm not pregnant." *Now* Elizabeth sounded desperate. "Please. I don't know what Emily told you—"

"I got your records from the hospital!"

And in that second, Jason saw Elizabeth's expression freeze. It was the truth. She was pregnant. His heart stopped.



“How did...” Her voice faltered, and she glanced behind her, as if gauging the water’s proximity. She turned back and sighed, looking annoyed. “You’re lying.”

“You’re not as smart as you think you are.” Ric grabbed her arm. “If you think you’re keeping me from my child—”

“It’s not your child! *You’re* not the father!” Elizabeth cried, trying to jerk away from him, but she stumbled and almost slipped in. The time to stop watching this was over, and Jason started to move forward.

“Oh, the *hell* it’s not. Who else could it be?” Ric demanded.

If Jason could have had another moment to really think about his next actions, about the repercussions, then maybe he wouldn’t have done it. But there were only seconds, and so Jason made his decision.

He stormed down the steps, and grabbed Ric’s free hand, twisting it behind his back. “Who do you think?” he growled. “Let her go.”

Ric released Elizabeth and Jason sent him flying backwards. Francis placed a foot on his chest to keep Ric planted on the ground. His face impassive, he looked at Jason. “What should I do to him?”

“Hold him there a second.” Jason turned to Elizabeth, who was staring at him like she’d never seen him before. “Elizabeth. Are you all right?”

“I...” Her throat worked, but she never said anything else. She just stared at him.

“I don’t believe you,” Ric grunted. “You’re lying to protect her.”

“Let him up,” Jason told Francis. When the bastard was standing again, Jason started for him, his heart pounding. Ric had to believe this. He *had* to believe Elizabeth was not having his child. He needed to leave town and get the hell away from Elizabeth. He would if there was no child to hold him here. “I don’t lie. It’s my baby. Why do you think she didn’t tell you?” He glanced back at Elizabeth, meeting her eyes. *Play along*. They’d figure out the next step later, but in this moment, she *had* to play along.

“I’ve...” Elizabeth swallowed. “I’ve known for a few weeks,” she admitted. “Before what happened at Kelly’s and on the docks last week.” She forced herself to look at Ric. “And back then I thought you were a good guy, so I—I didn’t know how to tell you, and Jason and I—” She looked back at him and he nodded slightly. “We d-didn’t know how to handle it. It’s...not an easy situation.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “And I felt guilty.” Her face hardened, as if she remembered now why it *had* to happen this way. “And now I just feel sick I *ever* let you touch me.”

“You *goddamn* whore!” Ric started forward, but Jason had him by the throat and against the pillar of the docks.

“Keep doing this, Lansing. By all means,” he growled. He wanted Lansing to come at him, wanted to have an excuse to wipe him from the Earth. Sonny wouldn’t quibble with self-defense. “Keep coming

at me, the people I love and I'll forget I work for Sonny.”

“Jason,” Elizabeth said, her hand soft on his shoulder. “You have to let him go. Anyone could see here.” She was right, but it felt so good to have his hand around this bastard’s throat that he squeezed hard once more before releasing him.

“Get out of town, Lansing. Because I don’t know how much Sonny is going to be able to protect you if you go after Elizabeth again.”

Ric glared at them and then looked at Elizabeth with such hatred that Jason stepped in front of her. “You think this is over?” He chuckled, the sound harsh and twisted. “You have no *idea* what I’m capable of.”

He disappeared into the shadows of the docks, his footsteps fading away. Finally, Jason squared his shoulders and looked at Elizabeth.

“Jason.” Elizabeth wrapped one hand around her waist, and then other fisted at her mouth, tears sliding down her cheeks. “What...”

“Not here.” He looked at Francis. “We’re going to the penthouse. Follow, make sure Lansing doesn’t.” He took Elizabeth’s elbow and steered her towards the steps.

“Jason,” Elizabeth said, turning to him at the top of the stairs. Her face was white, her eyes large and still full of fear. “What have we *done*?”

# Chapter Four

*I'm finding my way back to sanity again  
Though I don't really know what  
I'm going to do when I get there  
Take a breath and hold on tight  
Spin around one more time*  
- Breathing, Lifehouse

*Tuesday, April 15, 2003*

## Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

Jason pushed open the door and signaled for Elizabeth to go inside. He turned to Francis. “No one gets past you. No interruptions. I don’t care what Sonny or anyone else says.” He hesitated and glanced at Elizabeth, who was doing her best to keep her face expressionless when all she wanted to do was dissolve into a puddle of nothing. “And it goes without saying that you heard nothing on the docks that you didn’t already know to be the truth. That’s why you were assigned last week, got it?”

“Message received.” Francis nodded and took up his station at the door.

As soon as Jason closed the door, Elizabeth felt her composure leave her. She sank onto the sofa, his words were ringing in her head. *I don’t lie. It’s my baby.*

“Elizabeth,” Jason began, putting his hands at his waist, but he said nothing else, and she knew exactly how he felt. How the hell had they gotten into this mess and how were they going to get out?

“It’s not that I don’t...” Elizabeth twisted her fingers together. God, she couldn’t look at him. “I appreciate you stepping in because I wasn’t sure...” Restless, she got to her feet and started to pace.

“I know this...this is a mess,” Jason said. She turned and just stared at him.

“You don’t think that’s a *bit* of an understatement?” Her arms wrapped around her torso, her fingers tapping her on arm. She wanted to jump out of her skin. “Let’s...let’s go back here a minute. You told Sonny’s half-brother that you...” She couldn’t even say the words. “Oh my *God*, Jason. What are we going to do?” Her eyes widened. “You have to get Sonny and Carly...and Courtney right now and tell them the truth. He’s going to head straight for Courtney or Carly, you just *know* it.”

“No.” Jason shook his head, pained. “No, we can’t tell them.”

“I...” Her hands slid to her sides, as if boneless. “What do you mean we can’t *tell* them?” Her voice had climbed almost to a squeak, and she struggled to take a deep breath. “Of course we have to tell them. Ric is going to tell everyone he sees what just happened!”

“Maybe...maybe not.” But Elizabeth could see Jason didn’t believe a word of that. “Maybe he’ll get out of town. I made it clear that he goes after you again, I’m not gonna care what Sonny said.”

“And if he were a normal and logical person, that *might* have worked,” Elizabeth retorted. She dragged her hands her hair and turned towards the windows. “We can tell them it’s a lie, that it’s not...that you’re not...” She swallowed hard and turned back. “I’ll tell them it’s Lucky’s. I can call him, he’s on his way to London, but I bet he’d help—”

“We can’t bring anyone else into this.” Jason strode forward and took her by the shoulders. “Elizabeth, I know you’re upset and you’re scared, but we need...” He paused and slid his hands down her shoulders to take her hands. “We *need* to focus. *No one* but the two of us can know the truth. Even Francis doesn’t really know what he heard isn’t the truth.”

“Jason, we cannot lie to our family, to the people who love us.” She hated how shaky her voice was and the tears were sliding down her cheeks. “We can’t. Do you know what people will think?”

“I...” He nodded. “Yeah. They’re going to think we cheated on the people we were seeing.” He squeezed her hands. “But we need to keep you and your child safe.”

Right. That was paramount, and Elizabeth could understand that somewhere inside, but in this moment, she could only see the problems. The damage. “Jason, you cannot let Courtney believe you did this to her.” She closed her eyes. “You have to tell her the truth, she’s going to be so hurt—”

“I know she is.” His hands fell from hers, and already she was aching the loss of his strength. “But I learned the hard way that things like this...they work when no one else knows.” His eyes darkened and Jason looked away, clearing his throat. “I told Robin about Michael being AJ’s son because I didn’t want her to think I had slept with Carly while we were together. I didn’t want to hurt her.”

“And she told AJ,” Elizabeth said. She sighed and rubbed her eyebrow. “Okay. Okay. But that was different, right? Courtney hates Ric, too. For what he did to Carly. She’ll understand that no one can know. We’ll just...” She stopped when he shook his head.

“We can’t take that chance.” He leaned against the pool table. “I know I’m asking you for a lot—”

“Are you *insane*?” Elizabeth cut in. “*You’re* the one who stands to lose in this, Jason.” Her heart was racing, and her skin was clammy. “I get why this works for *me*, but you’re the one who’s going to lie to his family. Jason, I can’t ask you to do this. It’s insanity. There *has* to be another way—”

“You heard Ric on those docks.” Jason shook his head and looked at her. God, he was so upset, and she knew it was because she wasn’t agreeing to this plan. There was no way she could, because he wasn’t seeing how it was going to end. How it was going to kill them both. “He has to believe this isn’t his child, or he’ll come back for it or you. And when he doesn’t need you anymore...” He pressed his lips together and clenched his fists. “You can’t ask me not to do whatever I can to keep you safe.”

She had a troubling premonition that he wasn’t going to let her talk him out of this. “Jason, what if Ric doesn’t go away?” she asked softly. “I know you can’t really talk about it, but I know he’s in trouble with the other Families, that they’re looking for him.” Elizabeth tilted her head. “You’re counting on this not being a long-term solution, and it might just be for a little while.”

“If the Families know what’s good for them,” Jason began, but stopped. He wouldn’t say it to her, she knew it. “Ric shouldn’t be a problem for long. And after that, we can tell the truth.”

“So how long are we supposed to let the world think we’re having a child together?” Elizabeth pressed. “Weeks? You think that’s going to make it any better?” Her eyes burned. “You think Courtney’s going to forgive you for not trusting her with something like this? That’s what you’re doing. You’re telling her you don’t trust her to keep a short-term secret. You think that’s not going to hurt her? That Carly is just going to let it go? And Sonny...” Fresh tears burned as they slid down her face. “He’s your best friend, but he’s Courtney’s *brother*. Jason—”

“I wanted to tell you about Sonny,” Jason said, almost muttering the words, and she blinked.

“W-What?”

“That’s what you’re talking about.” Jason looked towards the doorway, as if remembering the night he’d come in and stumbled over her suitcase. “Me not trusting you with a short-term secret. You were so angry that I didn’t tell you—”

“It’s not about that, Jason.” She could not have this conversation now, not six months after it would have made a difference. If he’d just said those words that night instead of telling her it had nothing to do with her, oh *God*...

“I asked Sonny to tell you, I told him we could trust you, that you were...” He shook his head. “But he just wanted Carly to know. He said it was safer that way.”

Her hands were shaking, so she hid them behind her back. Why was he telling her this now? “Okay. Okay. But that’s...that’s not what this is about right now, okay. We’ve just...” She gestured out the window, as if the docks were just in the next room. “We just told a ticking time bomb that we had, at the very least, a one night stand, and created a child. What do we do if Ric disappears and goes underground?”

“We’ll find him,” Jason said. “He’s *not* going to hurt you again.”

She pressed her hand to her stomach, fighting the nausea. “Jason...”

“I know this isn’t a perfect solution,” Jason said. He straightened and crossed to her, stopping short of touching her, which she did not think she could handle right now. “We don’t have all the answers right now, but trust me...” He tilted her chin up so their eyes met. “You know I’m right, that no one can know. No one else matters but your child, and it’s safer if it’s just us.”

God, she couldn’t ignore that argument. She just couldn’t. He had trusted Robin once, and she’d blown his world apart. He’d known Robin as long as he could remember anything, and if *Robin* had done that to him...why wouldn’t Jason wonder if Courtney might as well. If he was willing to do this for her child, then how could she really argue?

“Okay,” she said softly, finding it difficult to look away from him. “I trust you. We won’t tell anyone.”

Relieved, he leaned down so his forehead brushed hers and if she weren't already exhausted from tears, she would have wept for this moment. This one beautiful moment where they were totally in sync. Like they had been once.

He stepped away from her after a moment. "I want Francis to stay on you during the day, and I'll put a guard on your studio door for the evening. I don't want Ric to think for a moment you're not being protected." Jason took a deep breath. "We'll just take everything else one day at time."

"Okay." She licked her lips. "Okay." They stood there in awkward silence before she stepped forward. "I'm tired. Is it all right if I go home and rest now?"

"Yeah, yeah." Jason scrubbed hand down his face. "You...you've been to a doctor? You're okay, I mean?"

"Yeah." Elizabeth hesitated. "I'm about five weeks along," she said. "In case...in case we need to figure out...a story."

"Okay." Jason started for the door and turned back. "I promise you, Elizabeth, he's not going to hurt you again," he told her.

He sounded so determined, so convinced, that she could almost believe him.

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

"Hey." Carly Corinthos smiled, spying her sister-in-law seated a table, picking at some fries. "I didn't think you'd be here today." She sat across from her.

"I had lunch with Emily." Courtney shrugged. "But she had to run. She's worried about Elizabeth."

Carly frowned. "Why?" She hesitated. "Did Sonny tell her about Ric yet? Because I told him he should tell her, and repeat it several times so she listens this time." Irritated, she snatched one of Courtney's fries. "She can be thick-headed when she wants to be—"

"I don't know but Elizabeth told Emily she was going to break up with him, and I guess Emily doesn't know what a psycho he is." Courtney shuddered. "So she encouraged Ric not to take no for an answer."

Carly rolled her eyes. "And people say *I* butt in when I should stay out. What a sanctimonious little brat. I wish Elizabeth could have overheard exactly what Ric said at Kelly's. I'm sure Sonny paraphrased to me to make it less...disgusting, but even his glossing over would make her nauseous. But if she doesn't know, and was just breaking up with him..." Carly sighed. "I hope she doesn't let his oily charm change her mind."

"Well I just hope she doesn't go back to Jason for help," Courtney muttered. "He loves me now, but I don't...he has a super hero complex, you know that."

“Which is how *you* snagged him,” Carly reminded her, cross at the criticism of her best friend. Jason was a good guy who liked to help when he could. It didn’t mean he only fell in love when he was rescuing someone.

“I know she doesn’t mean anything to him anymore,” Courtney continued. “She drove him crazy when she wouldn’t listen to him about Ric—”

Carly sighed. “I think you should just let it go. I mean, Jason is not the type to cheat on anyone—”

Courtney bit her lip. “Well, I don’t know about that.” She glanced away. “I know we were attracted to each other while he was helping me last fall, when he stayed with me at my apartment, and you know Elizabeth was staying with him at that point. I think they were *technically* dating, but it didn’t... feel like they were.” She shrugged. “I know Jason told me he never loved her—”

At that Carly, raised her eyebrows. Not in love with her? Carly couldn’t stand Elizabeth Webber, but she remembered how frantic Jason had been to find her last summer, even going to Taggart, Edward and AJ. She’d seen Jason under pressure, looking for other people, but there’d been something in his demeanor, in the look in his eyes that told the world that if *anything* happened to Elizabeth on his account...

“Courtney, I—” She opened her mouth to defend Jason, because of course he hadn’t let himself be attracted to Courtney before things were over with Elizabeth. He wasn’t that kind of man. Except, how else to explain how quickly he’d moved on? Troubled, she closed her mouth.

The door to the restaurant flew open, and Ric stalked in. He drew up when he saw them, and Carly saw him narrow his eyes in malicious glee. “Oh, crap.” Carly reached for her purse, intent on making a hasty getaway.

“I am so relieved to find the two of *you* here.” Ric stood in front of them, his arms folded across his chest, bouncing on his heels like a five-year-old who just couldn’t want to tell his sister he’d hidden a frog in her bed. Carly saw Rocco in the courtyard, peeking in the window, but she didn’t give him the sign to come in. It was a public place, what could Ric do?

“Ric, why don’t you just...” Carly shrugged. “I don’t care what you do, as long as you don’t do it in my face—”

“Don’t worry,” Ric snarled. “I’m out of here, but I thought you ladies might like to be the first to know the reason why.”

“I cannot imagine why I’d be interested,” Courtney retorted. “Where’s Rocco?” She twisted in her seat towards the door.

“You should be asking...where’s Jason?” At the hiss in Ric’s voice, Carly felt the skin on her arms begin to rise, a chill down her spine. “Or even better, *who*’s he with?”

Courtney hesitated and glanced at Carly. Should she give in? Carly rolled her eyes. “All right, Ricky, we’ll play it your way.” She smirked. “Where’s Jason? Who’s he with?”

“Oh, the mother of his child,” Ric declared, his voice loud, and carrying. Even those who’d been trying to pretend not to be listening to the spectacle abandoned the pretense. Carly felt all eyes on them, and watched the blood drain from Courtney’s face. “That’s right,” Ric continued, enjoying himself. “I found out Elizabeth was pregnant, went to go see her, to figure out what to do next, and guess who came across us?”

“This isn’t...” Courtney’s voice faltered and she looked at Carly, fear and revulsion in her expression. She licked her lips. “This isn’t true.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t have thought so if I hadn’t been there to hear it. Oh, you would have *loved* it, Carly. All the drama you so enjoy. Jason couldn’t wait to have me out of the picture. Elizabeth didn’t even have the decency to tell me herself—I had to hear it from *him*.”

Carly opened her mouth and closed it again. This didn’t...this didn’t make sense. She didn’t understand what was happening. Why would...why would Ric tell them—the whole world—something so easily disproved?

“Jason wouldn’t do that to me,” Courtney said, finding her voice finally. “He—”

“Oh, save it, sister. You know better.” Ric shrugged. “So I’ll just go upstairs and pack. I’m sure you have somewhere else to be.” He sent them one last malicious smile before disappearing into the back.

Carly looked at her sister-in-law, and then around the diner. “We should...” She cleared her throat. “We should go.” She felt disengaged from the moment, like an out of body situation, as if she was floating overhead and watching Ric spew these lies. Surely that would explain why she couldn’t scream back a denial, go after this piece of scum for lying about her best friend, for putting Courtney through it.

But somehow, she just couldn’t find a source of denial. She had no doubt Jason had claimed to be the father of Elizabeth’s child. The only question for Carly...

Was it true?

### **Jason’s Penthouse: Living Room**

Something inside Jason knew, the moment Elizabeth walked out of the penthouse, that she was right. That this was a disaster that was completely out of their hands now, and maybe he’d been hasty, claiming paternity.

But watching Ric tower over her, the tension in Elizabeth’s posture, the fear in her eyes—he just wanted Ric out of her life and he was under orders from Sonny not do anything against him for the sake of their mother.

The words had just tumbled from his lips without thinking, and Jason wasn’t sure he’d take them back. If it got Ric out of Port Charles and away from the people he loved...it would be worth it.



When Courtney shoved his door open, her face ravaged by tears and anger, he knew...he knew he was about to pay the price he had told Elizabeth he was prepared to.

He set his pool cue on the table and started towards her. "What happened—"

"What *happened*?" Courtney cried. "*That's* what you say to me?"

Behind her, Carly entered, and he was surprised to see that while Courtney was acting the way he thought she might...Carly looked subdued, sad even. She quietly set her bag on his desk, and turned to him, bracing a hand on her back. "Jase...Ric came by our table at Kelly's."

Jason closed his eyes, and he supposed Courtney took that action as an admission of guilt. He felt her purse slap against his chest and opened his eyes to see Carly holding Courtney's arm, to keep the blonde from rushing across the room.

"Courtney," Carly said. "Why don't you let him explain—"

"Explain?" Courtney cried, her voice rising to almost a shrill shriek. "*What* is there to explain?" She yanked her arm away from Carly and stalked towards him. "*I told* you," she growled, "I told you that if you loved Elizabeth, then you should go be with *her*. Didn't I?"

His chest felt tight, but he realized it was sorrow at hurting her, not necessarily for what was coming next. What should have come months ago.

The end of something that never should have started.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. Because he was. Elizabeth had been right about Ric intent on causing damage—and he felt stupid, because he should have found a way to mitigate the fallout. "I didn't mean to hurt—"

"Go to hell." Courtney pressed her hands flat against his chest and pushed. "I told you I didn't want to be your goddamned rebound, and you made me it anyway. If you wanted her all along, you son of a bitch, then why did you ever come to me?" Her chest heaving, her voice thick with tears. "Why did you leave her all alone here and come to *me*, and make me think I mattered?"

"I..." Jason's voice faltered. Because that's not the way it had happened. He frowned. Was it?

"As if it's not *abundantly* clear," Courtney snarled. "We are done. I hope you, your whore and your *bastard* are happy—"

"Don't..." Jason bit off the automatic defense, but Courtney's eyes bulged, because everyone in the room knew what he'd been about to say and Carly rolled her eyes. "Maybe you should..."

"And you have the *nerve* to tell me to leave when I'm breaking up with you." Courtney's laugh was rusty and bitter. "I don't know what the hell I saw in you in the first place. You always want what you can't have. I hope Elizabeth's happy knowing she's with a man who can't *ever* be satisfied with what he has." She raised her fist, as if to shove him again, but lowered it to her side. "I hope you both rot in

hell.”

She stalked past Carly and slammed the door. Jason sighed, and sat on the arm of the sofa, waiting for Carly to unleash her own fury.

Instead, he heard her footsteps come closer and her fingers on his shoulder. He opened his eyes confused. “Carly...”

“I’m disappointed that you hurt Courtney like this,” Carly said after a moment. “That you didn’t have the decency to warn her, and let Ric stomp around with...*this*.” She pursed her lips. “After you told Ric the baby was yours, you should have made a beeline for the people in your life that would take this badly, especially Courtney.” She paused. “But maybe you thought Ric would just leave town, and it wouldn’t need to go further than that.”

“Carly,” Jason said slowly, because he could not have *Carly* a part of this lie. Carly was Courtney’s friend, and she might promise to keep the secret, but she also might eventually tell Courtney to spare her feelings. “I did not lie to Ric.”

“No, I know.” Carly patted his shoulder again. “It’s good...” She paused, as if trying to find the words. “It’s good that he’s not going to think he’s a father. You know...he’s obsessive about family, and if he thought Elizabeth was trying to keep him from his child, there’s no telling what he might do to her.” She swallowed hard. “So you know, it’s good he doesn’t think he’s going to be a father.”

Jason stared at her, but Carly just stared back, almost blandly as if she didn’t mean anything except exactly what she said. “That’s right,” he agreed. “Ric is dangerous, and I’m glad he’s going to be out of Elizabeth’s life. Out of all our lives.”

“I am, too.” She paused. “You should tell Sonny if Courtney doesn’t get to him first. He’ll be happy to know he has a niece or nephew on the way.” At Jason’s sharp look, she continued, “Because you’re a part of our family, so any child of yours is part of ours.” She hesitated. “But maybe you should warn Elizabeth that Ric announced her happy news in a crowded diner, with Courtney in tow.”

Jason closed his eyes, and felt dread in the pit of his stomach. Elizabeth hadn’t had much choice in this debacle—she’d been forced to follow his lead in front of Ric, because what choice had he left her? And now, people would look at her and think... He nodded. “I will.”

# Chapter Five

*I'm broken in two  
And I know you're on to me  
That I only come home  
When I'm so all alone  
But I do believe*  
- I Shall Believe, Sheryl Crow

*Tuesday, April 15, 2003*

## Elizabeth Webber's Studio

The light knock on her door jerked Elizabeth out of a fitful nap. She scrubbed her eyes and tossed the light blanket to the bottom of her sofa. She blinked at the door, wondering if she'd heard anything at all. When it didn't come again, she glanced at the digital clock on her table across the room. Six o'clock.

It felt like days since she'd left Emily at Kelly's, heading for the docks to sit and stare out over the water. Instead, Ric had cornered her, Jason had claimed to be her child's father and somehow, managed to make Elizabeth feel like they were making a *reasonable* decision.

Her stomach rolled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since breakfast and apparently, her unborn child wanted food.

Her unborn child. Oh, good God. These last few days had been such a nightmare that she'd barely come to terms with the idea of being someone's mother, and now she had to deal with being Jason Morgan's pretend baby mama.

"I want to set myself on fire," she muttered, swinging her feet to the ground to slide them into her flats.

The knock came again and she frowned. "Who is it?" she called, hoping her voice would carry through the steel door so she wouldn't have to stand just yet. She was so tired.

"Jason."

She stifled a groan. Months of no contact and *now* she couldn't get rid of him. The irony would be delicious, except this was her life. She thought about telling him to come in, but the door was locked and she didn't think he would have kept the key.

Elizabeth stood and crossed the short distance to her door. She opened it to find Jason standing there, and Francis next to him. Right, Francis was her new companion until Ric was no longer a danger. "Um. Hey." She rubbed the back of her neck. "I didn't...what's going on?"

"Let's go inside." Jason pushed her slightly inside and looked at Francis. "No interruptions." He

closed the door and took a deep breath.

“Oh, God. What’s happened?” Elizabeth asked. “Have you changed your mind? Because if you have, that’s okay, because this is *insane*, Jason. I tried to tell you—”

“Ric saw Courtney and Carly in Kelly’s.”

Elizabeth snapped her mouth shut, and her hunger pangs shifted into straight out nausea. “Oh. Oh. Oh. God.” She pressed a hand to her mouth. “He announced it to the whole room, didn’t he? Oh, my God.”

“Yeah.” Jason rubbed his forehead. “I’m sorry, Elizabeth. You told me he’d do something like that and I just...” He exhaled shortly. “I don’t know what I could have changed, but I could have done *something*.”

Elizabeth turned away from him and stumbled back to her sofa, collapsing. “This is the day that never ends. Any minute now, Emily is going to be coming to that door, followed my grandmother and they’re going to be asking how I could dump a Harvard lawyer for you and of course, I can’t tell them I wanted to throw myself in the harbor when I found out exactly what Ric Lansing is, and they’re just...” She squeezed her eyes shut. “Oh, God, and you had to deal with Carly and Courtney.” She sprang to her feet and looked at him, her heart aching. “And you didn’t change your mind, so they think...”

“Yeah.” Jason just stared at the ground. “I guess the good news is that Ric believed us.”

Elizabeth laughed, almost hysterically, until the tears she’d thought she exhausted fell again. “Oh, yeah, that would be the *good* news.” She covered her face with her hands. “Oh, God, Jason. Did you talk to Sonny? Is he angry?”

“Not yet.” Jason sat next to her on the couch. “Courtney left, and Carly suggested I come tell you what Ric did. So you’re not blindsided by someone showing up here.”

Elizabeth lowered her hands and just blinked at him. “What do you mean *Carly* suggested? She didn’t want to throw me out a window?”

“I’m not sure...” Jason hesitated. “I don’t know if Carly believed it. I told her it was the truth, but she just looked at me like...” He shook his head. “I don’t know. But if she does suspect I was lying, she doesn’t know for sure, and she’s not going to betray me on a suspicion and possibly put *my* child at risk.”

“This has gotten out of hand so fast, Jason.” Her hands were shaking as she lowered them to her lap. “I just found out on Friday that I’m pregnant and I had barely decided to keep the baby before finding out Ric was sleeping with Faith and then he threatened me...” Her voice faltered. “Because that’s what he meant when he said he wouldn’t be separated from his child. I was so *stupid*, Jason. How could I believe him? How could I ignore all the signs?”

Her shoulders shaking, she struggled to take deep breaths and get herself under control. Jason didn’t need her falling apart. He was the one whose girlfriend had obviously broken up with him over his

lie.

Before she could regain her composure, she felt Jason's arm hesitantly around her shoulders, tucking her into his side. She wanted to lean on him, she wanted to use his strength to bolster her own, but how could she justify it?

"I'm so sorry, Jason," she murmured, swiping at her eyes. "This is all my fault—"

"You had a right to care for someone," he replied quietly. "And to believe him when he told you he cared. I—I understand why you didn't take me or Sonny seriously. We had no proof. We just...we had a feeling about him, but I didn't know if I disliked him because I didn't trust him or if..." He hesitated and she looked up at him. "I don't think I would have liked anyone you dated."

Elizabeth sighed and straightened, sliding away from him on the sofa a little. She was not going to go down this road with him. "I should have known better," she said. "I should have *known* if you or Sonny were going to bother warning me, it wouldn't be without a good reason. I just kept..." She bit her lip. "I just kept seeing Taggart calling you names right in front of me, like you couldn't hear him. He was so good to me, Jason, after I reported...my rape, and when we thought Lucky was dead. He was only trying to protect me when he said those things." She pushed her hair behind her shoulders. "I thought it was like that, but I should have been smarter—"

"Elizabeth," Jason cut in, "is it going to change anything to keep going back over what you could have done differently? Or are you just going to make yourself sick thinking about it?" He reached for her hand. "Ric is slime, but even Carly trusted him for a long time. We hired him as a lawyer for a little while. How can you blame yourself for trusting him like we did? Elizabeth, you can't keep going back to that. You have to think about what happens next."

She closed her eyes. "You're right. I know you're right." She looked back at him. "What *does* happen next?"

"Well..." Jason said. He looked hesitant, as if he hadn't been expecting that question. "Are you feeling okay? Do—do you have everything you need?"

"For now," Elizabeth said. She glanced around her small studio. "I'm going to work overtime while I can and put some money away so I can afford a better apartment. Maybe one with a kitchen or an actual bathroom." She sighed. "Jason, you should go see Sonny. I'm sure Courtney or Carly have already talked to him, and you don't want to make things more difficult with him than they have to be."

"All right." Jason stood and tugged on his ear. "Listen. Francis is on duty for another hour, then Cody is going to be on the door until about six tomorrow morning. I want you to have someone twenty-four hours a day, so they're going to be in eight hour shifts. I'm not sure who the third guard is going to be. I don't..." He hesitated. "Do you remember who you had last September? While you were...at the penthouse?"

Elizabeth tucked her legs underneath her and nodded. "Yeah. I didn't go out much, so I shared Max

with Carly on the door, and then I went out, depending on what time it was I had Cody or Marco.” She smiled hesitantly. “They were really nice, so I’m glad Cody will be familiar.” She tilted her head. “And Francis was really patient with me the first time I had a guard. I forgot a few times he was supposed to be with me, but he never got angry.”

“Good.” Jason looked a bit bewildered, as if he’d forgotten how much experience she had now with being guarded. “I think I can put Marco on you then. I want...you to be comfortable with them, but I know it can be restrictive—”

“Not really.” Elizabeth shrugged. “They’re there to keep me safe, so I can’t really complain. I worry for them because I don’t want anyone to get hurt because of me, but...” She sighed. “It’s better than the alternative, so there’s no use in complaining.”

“I’m going to go talk to Sonny, now, but I want you to call me if you need anything.” He paused. “We have to talk about money eventually.”

“Jason—”

“I have it and if people are going to believe this...is my child,” Jason said, trying not to look pained, “then you have to let me...you have to let me help. Maybe just medical expenses if you’re uncomfortable with anything more.”

Conscious that Jason was making so many sacrifices to keep her safe, she just didn’t have the heart or energy to argue with him. “All right. When you’re right, you’re right.”

He eyed her, almost in disbelief. “All right.” He stepped back to the sofa and crouched in front of her, taking her hand in one of his. “I know that this seems like too much all at once, and I don’t really know what we’re going to do next. But we’re going to get through this, and I’m going to make sure you and your child are safe.”

She saw the resolution and determination in his eyes and sighed. “I believe that, Jason, and I know this is difficult for everyone involved, so thank you for everything you’re doing. I just hope...you don’t hate me one day for this.”

“That,” Jason said, looking at her like he used to before she set fire to everything they had shared, “will *never* happen.”

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Sonny Corinthos, to the shock of no one, was not always a good friend. Most of the time he was barely decent. He knew that he had overreacted when he’d discovered Jason’s relationship with Courtney, but he was entitled to some reservations when the little sister he barely knew was dating his best friend. Sonny didn’t think Courtney was cut out for Jason’s life long-term—women always thought they could handle it, but most couldn’t. Carly liked the lifestyle too much to quibble about the drawbacks. Not his sister. Courtney always wanted to help, always wanted to know what was going on.

It made Sonny miss the hell out of Elizabeth Webber, who had hidden Jason in her studio all those years ago with no questions asked. She'd kept him fed and safe and left the room when asked. And had Sonny had remembered that last fall and agreed to let Elizabeth know he wasn't really dead when Jason had requested it, well...then things might have been different.

So Sonny knew when Elizabeth had walked out, it wasn't about the life, it was about Jason. He'd figured they'd get over it eventually—they always did. Until Courtney and Ric complicated things.

Standing in Jason's living room, watching as Jason, with a pained expression, attempted to explain that Elizabeth Webber was now pregnant and that it was Jason's baby, he knew it was a lie. Courtney had rushed to Sonny earlier that day, angry and hurt, babbling this nonsense, so he'd come to find out what was going on.

Jason looked uncomfortable. He looked irritated. He did *not* look like a man who had accidentally impregnated a woman he'd been in love with for years.

Sonny exhaled slowly and put his hands at his waist, waiting for Jason to awkwardly finish apologizing for hurting Courtney, but that he was going to stand by Elizabeth. "You done?" he asked.

Jason winced and Sonny knew what he was expecting. Anger. Promises of retribution. The usual Sonny Corinthos MO and maybe...if Sonny believed that it had actually happened the way Jason had described, there might have been some.

But clearly, Elizabeth was pregnant by his psychotic half-brother. Which meant she was family.

"Sonny, I—" Jason started, as if to begin the nonsense all over again.

Sonny held up a hand. "Let's recap. You and Elizabeth break up last fall. We *both* know it's partially my fault—"

"Sonny—"

"You start dating my sister and Elizabeth starts dating Ric." At Jason's scowl, Sonny nodded. "Yeah, but she doesn't listen to our warnings, because you know, she likes to make up her own mind. How many people told her you were a dangerous, brain-damaged thug?" Sonny chuckled fondly. "I liked seeing her go after Taggart. He never knew how to deal with it."

"Sonny—"

"And somehow, in all that mess, you sleep with Elizabeth and now she's pregnant."

Jason pinched the bridge of his nose. "I never meant to hurt Courtney—"

"Didn't think you did." Jason narrowed his eyes and Sonny made an attempt to inject some annoyance into his relaxed tone, but he just couldn't muster the anger Jason wanted to see. "So, how'd this happen?"

“I—” Jason blinked and actually stepped back. “Are you—” He blinked again. “Are you asking for *details*?”

“Absolutely,” Sonny nodded. He raised an eyebrow. “Did she throw herself at you? Were you drunk? Was it more than once—”

“I’m not...” At a loss clearly, Jason shook his head. “I’m *not* going to discuss that with you.”

“Ah, ah,” Sonny wagged his finger, enjoying the crap out of this. He so rarely caught Jason off guard, he was going to milk this for all it was worth. “You have to think of these details, Jason. You have to not look so shocked when someone asks about this fictitious affair.”

“I think I need to sit down,” Jason muttered. He sat on the sofa and put his head in his hands. “Sonny, I’m serious. I...” He cleared his throat. “Elizabeth and I...” He closed his eyes. “God.”

Sonny shrugged and lowered himself into the armchair adjacent to the sofa. “I would be relieved that you find it so difficult to lie to me if this situation weren’t so serious.” He leaned forward. “Jason, we don’t have to say the words because we both know these things only work when very few people know the truth, but if Elizabeth needs a certain kind of protection, I’m *going* to give it to her. You don’t have to *lie* to me or anyone else. Her baby is my family.”

“We have to,” Jason said quietly. “Because if...certain people know the truth, she’ll be in even more danger.” He looked at Sonny. “People have to think this is my child, because it’s the only way she’ll be safe. From...” He hesitated. “From people.”

“Okay, so the world has to think that, and I think...” Sonny hesitated. “I know that Robin told the truth about Michael, so you think you can’t trust anyone else other than Elizabeth. I get that. But you *know* I’ll protect Elizabeth with my life. Even if I didn’t feel like an ass because I refused to tell her about my death, but to be honest...” Sonny paused and leaned even closer. “If you had told me she was not just the woman you *wanted* to be with, but someone you were *actually* with, we could have discussed it. You never told me things had changed.”

“Would it have mattered?” Jason asked quietly. “*Should* it have mattered? This was *Elizabeth*, who’d never let either of us down when it mattered and you knew it.” He shook his head. “We’re not... Sonny, for all the times she’s protected me and kept me alive, going back to that December, I owe it to her to keep her and her child safe.”

“I certainly owe her for keeping you alive,” Sonny agreed. “But that’s not why you’re doing it.” When Jason looked at him, his mouth set in a mutinous line, he held up a hand. “We won’t talk about motives. I think you and I understand each other, but you’re right. Carly and Courtney, God love them, are liabilities. And it’s not like people don’t know your history with Elizabeth. Even the Families will swallow this after Elizabeth was kidnapped last summer, so we can pull this off.”

“I wanted Ric to leave town,” Jason admitted, “I thought if he didn’t feel like had anything to stay for, particularly a child, he’d run before the Families caught up to him. Elizabeth *never* asked me to do this. *I* volunteered.”



Well, naturally, but Sonny wasn't going to antagonize the already irritated younger man with that smart remark. "And maybe it would have enough to send him out of town had it been anyone other than you, but Ric hates you. He may come after Elizabeth *even* if he believed you, because now he'll think he has leverage."

"I should have thought about that." Jason shoved himself to his feet. "He was...he had her cornered on the docks, and I could tell she was scared." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I could hear him badgering her about the baby, and she tried to deny she was even pregnant, but he tricked her, told her he had her records from the hospital, and she gave it away. So she tried to tell him it wasn't his but she wouldn't tell him who."

"And you jumped in." Sonny nodded. "I get it, Jason. Heat of the moment. She's in danger either way, but claiming the kid as yours works for us. I can call in other protection. The Families want Ric's head on a platter, especially Tagliatti. We tell them the situation and they'll go after him full-throated." He nodded and rubbed his jaw. "Maybe we downplay the odds Ric is the father. You and Elizabeth were dating, some problems occurred, you both rebounded with others, but worked things out—"

"Sonny, that's—" Jason shook his head. "It's *not* going to work."

"You leave the particulars to me." Sonny stepped towards him. "You made the decision to claim the baby, Jason. To break my sister's heart, which I find doesn't bother me as much as it should since I never thought she was right for you, anyway. And if you had come to me with this before you did it, I would have said the same thing. Your first instinct was to protect Elizabeth. Let me help." He pressed a hand to his chest. "I know it's going to be rough on you both, but let me make up for the problems I caused last year. Let me protect Elizabeth and my niece or nephew the way my family should be protected." When Jason finally nodded, Sonny continued, "I'll set up a meeting with Families."

He started for the door but Jason held up a hand. "How did you know I was lying?" he asked.

Sonny turned back and looked at his best friend, sorrow in his chest. "Because if it were true, you'd be upset that you'd hurt Courtney, a little worried about my reaction, but, Jason, if Elizabeth Webber was pregnant with your child, you'd look a lot less miserable and pained. You wouldn't have to choke out the words." He hesitated. "You're going to have to sell this, you know. Can you pretend that Ric Lansing's child is yours?"

Uncomfortable, Jason looked away. "I figure it won't take long to deal with Ric," he muttered. "He's impatient. He'll strike and we'll get him. He's isolated and desperate."

"Ah." Sonny dipped his chin into his chest. "You're banking on this being a short-term solution. Well, that's moronic." When Jason glared at him, he just shrugged. "Ric could go under for months. He could wait until the kid is born to try to snatch it. Until Ric is dealt with, the world *is* going to think Elizabeth is carrying your child, despite both of you having been dating other people. You think it's going to be a walk in the park for her to deal with this?"

"No." Jason cleared his throat. "I know that the Quartermaines are going to have a field day with this,

but still—”

“And if Ric goes underground for years, if we don’t find him, what...” Sonny arched his eyebrows. “You gonna pull the protection and claim after a while? You gonna say, well, it’s been an entire year. Doesn’t matter that the world thinks this kid is mine, it’s not and I’m not gonna pretend anymore?”

Swallowing hard, Jason looked down. “Yeah, I know this is complicated, and I don’t have all the answers today, Sonny. I just know...I just know I *can’t* let anything happen to her.”

“Well, *start* working on those answers.” Sonny pointed at him. “Because no matter what happens with Ric, there are going to be people who keep believing this. Elizabeth may end up raising a child that is yours legally as well as in the eyes of everyone we know. So I’d think about the consequences of that.”

*Wednesday, April 16, 2003*

### **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

Elizabeth put a few dishes into her bin and glanced over at the entrance of the courtyard where Francis was standing. “You sure you don’t want coffee?” she asked.

“No, thank you, Miss Webber,” he answered as he had the other three times she’d asked in the six hours she’d been working so far. She knew the guards were a necessary evil, but she felt so guilty having these men follow her around, as if her life was worth more than theirs.

Her first day at work since the tumultuous events of the day before had gone relatively well. Her grandmother had called her that morning, and had merely said they would talk about this in person. Elizabeth knew what that tone had meant, but she was relieved not to have to deal with it right at that moment. A reprieve was welcome. There had been looks and some whispers, and Bobbie had gently asked how she was doing, but no one had said anything awful to her face.

But as Emily stalked into the courtyard, Elizabeth should have known the other shoe would drop. She perched the plastic bin full of dishes on her hip, and squared her shoulders. She had not called her friend, understanding that it would not be a pleasant conversation and she really just wanted a break from that.

Emily stopped in front of her and arched an eyebrow. “I received a phone call yesterday,” she said. “Courtney was crying.”

Elizabeth bit her lip and sighed. “Em, I would have called, but I just—”

“Save it.” Emily shook her head. “I cannot *believe* this, Elizabeth. You’re supposed to be my friend and you let me think *Ric* was the father. You should have told me.” She stepped towards her. “You know, I thought you’d grown up. I thought you were better than the annoying, manipulative shrew that tortured Sarah when you first moved to town, but maybe *that* was just an act to keep Lucky around.”

Elizabeth blinked. She slowly set the bin down, and for the first time since nightmare had begun, it

wasn't nausea that rolled in her stomach or sorrow, but anger. "*Excuse me?*" she asked coolly. "You think I should have told you that I was pregnant with Jason's baby?" She fisted her hand on her hip, and slightly cocked it out a bit, channeling Lizzie Webber. "When would I have done *that* exactly? After you called me selfish for missing Lucky and Nikolas yesterday? Maybe I should have told you last week when you were telling me that Jason wasn't all that *interested* in me anyway. Maybe it should have been when you were calling me everything short of delusional about my feelings." She stepped closer, feeling the anger spread in her veins. "So tell, Emily, when the *hell* do you think I should have told you something so difficult?"

Emily glared at her. "Oh, you're going to play the victim. Well, that's no surprise. You've always been a martyr. Oh, woes me, I'm the *only* one who lost Lucky. Woes me, I'm so *confused* because I'm a tramp who can't stop playing two men off each other. Woes me, Lucky doesn't love me anymore." She pointed her finger at Elizabeth. "I *watched* you chase Jason out of town two years ago, and I know you screwed around on him last summer with Zander. I thought we could still be friends, but it's clear that you're the same bitch that rolled into town to make everyone's lives miserable."

Elizabeth took a step back and just stared at the stranger in front of her. "Are...are you *serious* right now, Emily?" she asked. "You're angry with me about Zander, even though you broke up with him. I told you I was sorry, that it was a mistake, and believe me, I paid for that a hundred times over every time Jason looked right through me like I didn't exist."

"Sorry doesn't *change* what you did," Emily hissed. "Sorry doesn't change that you're not some little angel. You screwed around on my brother last summer, and then you screwed around on Ric. You wanted Jason when you had Lucky. You're just never *satisfied* with what's in front of you."

"I don't even..." Elizabeth shook her head. "I don't even know you right now. I think we're...I think we're done talking."

"We're *done* when I *say* we're done," Emily snarled. "I'm going to tell my brother he should demand a paternity test, because God knows who *else* you slept with." She tossed a glance at the guard at the courtyard entrance and smirked. "But maybe you just want my brother's money. I see he's already got a guard on you." She folded her arms under her breasts. "Sure didn't take you long. And here, I was *worried* about you since Courtney told me Ric was awful—"

"Yeah, let's talk about *that*, Emily, you being the one that told Ric I was pregnant." And here was the root of all her anger. This...person standing in front of her, as if they were actually friends, had put this entire disaster into motion. "What the hell gave you the right to tell him *anything*?"

"He deserved to know the truth," Emily retorted. "Because you never bothered to tell me who the hell knocked you up. How was I supposed to know it wasn't his?"

"You were supposed to keep your mouth shut!" Elizabeth cried. "You were supposed to be my *friend*. I trusted you. I didn't tell anyone else I was pregnant, so as soon as Ric came and found me and demanded to know why I hadn't told him, I knew you said something and I just...I *died* inside Emily, because I was terrified of him finding out." She clenched her fists at her sides. "Do you know why I was breaking up with him? Because he only dated me to annoy Jason. He laughed at the idea of caring

about me. I was just *leverage* to him, but I couldn't tell you those things because I just *knew* that you wouldn't believe me. You'd think I was overreacting or that I was using it as an excuse to go back to Jason."

Emily narrowed her eyes. "If you're so sure this baby is Jason's, why were you terrified of Ric finding out?" She gasped. "You're *lying* to my brother, aren't you? I cannot believe—"

"I was terrified that Ric would find out I was pregnant and assume the baby was his," Elizabeth lied. "I was terrified that he wouldn't believe that he wasn't, and that he would use my child as *another* reason to go after Jason. But you don't think about things like that, do you? You're such a self-righteous little bitch. You think you know what's best for Jason, what's best for me? You've spent the last month trying to convince me that your brother never gave a damn about me, and I almost *believed* you."

"He didn't," Emily argued. "If he had, he would have come after you. He wouldn't have spent all that time with Courtney. Because when my brother wants something, he goes after it—"

"You weren't even *here*!" Elizabeth stamped her foot in frustration. "You have *no* idea what was going through our minds."

"And what since you're knocked up, it's all good again?" Emily bit out. "You're going to move in together and live happily ever after?"

"Not that it's any of your business," Elizabeth snarled, "but no. I'm not the slut you seem to think I am." Her ire faded, and she suddenly blinked back tears. "You know...better than most, what I went through after my rape. How difficult it was for me to develop a physical relationship with someone again, even Lucky. I made mistakes last summer, Emily, and I *am* truly sorry that it hurt you. Believe me, I know the damage I caused, but for you to stand there, and insinuate that I sleep around when you damn well should know me better than that..." Her throat burned. "Well, then I guess I don't know you after all."

Emily pressed her lips together. "I guess the feeling is mutual." She spun her heel and left the courtyard.

Elizabeth pressed her hands to her burning cheeks and turned to find Francis still at his post, his face as impassive as ever. "You guys...you don't report to Jason everything do you?" she asked softly.

He cleared his throat, and looked at her, uncomfortable. "No, Miss Webber. Our only instructions are to keep you safe. The only thing I tell Mr. Morgan is that you got to work without incident or home that way."

"Good." Elizabeth turned back and sighed, resigned, as Carly walked towards her, her own guard behind her. "And the hits just keep coming." She sank into a chair, and looked at Jason and Courtney's best friend with apprehension. "Carly."

"Elizabeth." Carly stopped in front of her. "So you know I know."

“I do,” Elizabeth nodded. “Can I ask you to yell at me tomorrow? Because I’m just...I’m not sure I can handle it right now.”

“Hmm...” Carly tapped her fingers on the purse at her side. “No, I don’t think I’m going to yell at you at all.”

Elizabeth’s head snapped up and she narrowed her eyes, remembering Jason’s worries from the day before. “Why?”

Carly shrugged. “I don’t like being predictable. Takes the spice out of life.” She cleared her throat. “I don’t like that Courtney’s hurting,” she admitted. “But this is...Jason’s life. His decisions, his choices. I’ve spent a lot of our friendship not respecting those things. And judging by the shouting I heard as I walked up, you don’t have a lot of people who *aren’t* going to yell at you about this.”

“My head hurts,” Elizabeth said, blankly.

“Like I said. I hate predictability. I’m going to have lunch. If you’re still on the clock, maybe you want to come serve me.” She pushed the door open, and disappeared inside, her guard Rocco taking up position with Francis at the entrance.

“I’m living in the twilight zone,” she murmured before she stood and got back to work.

# Chapter Six

*And I claw for solid ground  
I'm pulled down by the undertow  
I never thought I could feel so low  
Oh darkness I feel like letting go  
If all of the strength and all of the courage  
Come and lift me from this place  
I know I could love you much better than this*  
- Full of Grace, Sarah McLachlan

*Monday, May 19, 2003*

## **General Hospital: Kelly Lee's Office**

After a month of pretending to be carrying Jason Morgan's child, Elizabeth wished that she could have some of the benefits that title ought to bring. Like having Jason at a doctor's appointments. She'd had one shortly after starting this debacle, but she'd gone alone and had had to struggle to fill out forms with the father's medical history.

She'd had to deal with Monica and Alan cornering her outside the appointment, and asking questions about her child, wondering if Jason would allow them to be part of his child's life. She'd had to deal with Emily's angry stares as the medical student passed her during her rounds.

She'd had to deal with the whispers of people wondering if she'd tricked Jason Morgan into believing this was his child because he had more money than Ric Lansing, who had slunk out of town and disappeared. He was off the radar, and tension was building in Elizabeth's world, because this was exactly what she was afraid of. Ric was gone, and the world believed she was having Jason's baby. This ridiculous plan had *no* exit strategy.

And here she was again. For her first ultrasound, now that she had money to pay for such things. She was nervous about seeing her child on the screen for the first time, hoping that she could actually understand what she was looking at, and praying she would feel connected to this child that had changed her life, and caused her jeans feel slightly more snug than they had just two weeks ago.

She was doing this alone, and knew the world would pity her. Jason may have claimed her baby, and people might believe it, but other than checking in with her guards and having someone set up an account so that she could pay her hospital bills, she had barely seen the alleged father. He told her he was chasing down leads on Ric, but Elizabeth thought he might be regretting even getting involved.

"It's you and me, kid, against the world," she murmured, her hand on her abdomen. "I won't promise to be an amazing mother, but I'll do my best."

The door popped open and a perky blonde entered, wearing some sort of stuffed animals fastened at her wrist. "Hello! I'm Nadine Crowell." She thrust her hand out. "Kelly's running late, and she asked me to get you set up."

“Okay.” Elizabeth leaned back on the table and sighed. “Are you new? You weren’t here last time.”

“I just started two weeks ago. I moved here from Manhattan.” Nadine smiled and reached for the blood pressure cup. “I was glancing at your chart before I came in. Your first baby, you must be so excited!”

Elizabeth looked at this friendly woman, with her bright smiles and enthusiastic eyes and she felt tears burning in her eyes. “I guess you haven’t lived here long enough yet to know the answer to that.”

Nadine frowned and fitted the cup on her arm. “Oh, you mean the hospital gossip about you being knocked up by the local alleged mob enforcer while you were dating other people.” When Elizabeth just blinked at her, Nadine shrugged. “I don’t see what that has to do with being excited. Sure it’s a crazy situation, but does that mean you can’t be happy about your baby? My Aunt Rayleen always said that a baby is sunshine and moonbeams and bits of stardust blown by the hand of God.” When Elizabeth said nothing, Nadine bit her lip, looking embarrassed. “I’m probably overstepping—”

“No, no.” Elizabeth exhaled slowly and winced as the pressure began to build on her arm. “You’re absolutely right, Nadine. Just because I managed to get myself into a massive disaster, I get to feel how I want about becoming a mother.”

“Oh, good. You’re not mad.” Nadine smiled, but it dimmed when she read the print out. “Hmm... 140/90.” She frowned, letting the cup deflate.

“Is that bad?” Elizabeth asked. “Is too high?”

“It’s not good.” Nadine made a note in the chart. “But I guess you’ve been more stressed since your last visit. It was slightly elevated then, but it’s even higher now.” She bit her lip. “We’ll let Kelly know.”

After Nadine took Elizabeth’s blood, and reluctantly convinced her to step on a scale, Kelly Lee bustled in. She was a pretty Asian woman who had immediately put Elizabeth at ease the month before with her brisk and friendly manner. These were the only two women in the world who didn’t look at Elizabeth like she was gum on their shoe.

She wanted to hug them.

“Good morning, Elizabeth.” Kelly sat on the stool next the ultrasound machine and took the chart from Nadine. “How are you feeling? You’re not as nauseous as you were last month, I hope?”

“No.” Elizabeth sat up a little. “I’m tired still, but not as much as I was a few weeks ago. I’m only throwing up like twice a week and not twice an hour.”

“Good, good.” Kelly clucked her tongue. “Your blood pressure is still up. I need you to relax more, honey, before it becomes a serious issue. If I see these numbers again at your next appointment, I may have to suggest bed rest.”

Great. Bed rest. Just what she needed working to save money for a new apartment and for the essentials. “I’ll try, Dr. Lee, but you know...my situation hasn’t been ideal.”

“I know.” Kelly reached over and squeezed her hand. “But hopefully, all the people who want to yell and scream at you have finished and they’ll let you get back to your most important job for the next six and a half months—growing your beautiful baby.” She hesitated. “I see you turned in a more complete medical report from Mr. Morgan. That’s good. I don’t expect any complications, but it’s always good to have a full picture.”

It had been the most mortifying experience of her life taking those papers to Jason’s penthouse and being forced to leave them with Sonny because Jason hadn’t returned her phone calls, but it was a necessary fiction. Jason’s parents worked at this hospital and they were Quartermaines, so they were likely checking records.

Kelly glanced around. “And I see we’re on our own again.” Sympathy shone in her dark eyes for a moment before she turned to switch on the machines. “Well, maybe when we do the ultrasound and find out gender next month. That sometimes kicks fathers into gear.” She smiled at Nadine. “Sometimes it’s not real to them otherwise.”

“Maybe,” Elizabeth murmured. But she knew better. Jason might have promised her he wouldn’t resent her for putting him in this situation, but a lousy four weeks into this ruse and she felt as alone as she had in that penthouse last fall.

She was never going to learn.

“We’ll how about we look at this kid and see a heartbeat,” Kelly said. “You up for it, Elizabeth?”

“Absolutely.” Elizabeth wanted to feel connected to her child, to see it on screen and make it real in her head, because it was clear that they were going to be on their own.

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Master Bedroom**

Carly hummed as she flipped through her brand-new maternity clothing. She rarely needed an excuse to go shopping, but pregnancy was proving to be a great excuse to keep Sonny from snarking at her when she made Rocco carry bags inside.

Sonny was downstairs even now, planning a nutritious dinner that made Carly’s stomach revolt. No sugar. No chocolate. Nothing sweet. Nothing fun.

“Hey, Carly.” Courtney entered and flopped down on the bed. “You’re going to have to turn the other guest room into a closet pretty soon.”

Carly smirked and hung another summer dress. “I’m saving that for the middle of the summer when I’m driving Sonny crazy.” She looked at sister-in-law. “How are you doing? You haven’t been over here for a while.”

“I called Sonny before I came,” Courtney replied, reaching for one of Carly’s bags. “To make sure



Jason was out for the day and Elizabeth wasn't around." She grimaced. "I'm trying *really* hard to be okay with this, Carly, but it's so hard. I have to work with her twice a week, sometimes three. Bobbie could only do so much with our schedules."

"Must be tense." Carly reached for an old dress to toss it on the giveaway pile. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell Courtney that she needn't have worried about seeing Elizabeth. Carly hadn't seen her at the penthouse once. In fact, she wasn't aware that *Jason* had even seen the mother of his child all that often. "Have you two talked about what's going on?"

"No." Courtney sighed. "I mean, maybe we should but I can't really think of what I'd say." She pulled out a tank top from the bag and stacked it on the bed with some others. "I've been trying to figure out how it happened, and I guess I initially assumed it meant they still loved one another."

Carly turned and looked at her. "Why?"

"Well..." Courtney hesitated and blinked at her. "Jason won't tell me how it happened. I ran into him on the docks last week, and I didn't mean to, but I started yelling at him. And then I begged him to tell me it was a mistake, that it was never going to happen again, but he refused. And you know, he almost defended her the day we found out." She jerked a shoulder. "I thought that meant that Elizabeth was going to be in his life, but you know...I only see her with guards. He never drops her off at work or picks her up. I thought he was trying to avoid shoving my face in it, which I appreciated, but Penny told me he never shows up on *her* shifts either." She bit her lip. "Carly, you know people are talking about Ric."

"What about Ric?" Carly's hands tightened on the sweater she was going to donate.

"Well..." Courtney paused. "That maybe Elizabeth doesn't *know* who the father is and she told Jason it was his because she wanted it to be—"

"No." Carly spun around, her heart racing. "No. I know that would make everything easier, and I am so sorry, Courtney. But it's not true. Jason is the father."

Courtney stared at her. "You sound..." She swallowed hard. "You sound really convinced."

Carly cleared her throat. "Yeah...well... I had my suspicions, and I badgered Jason quite relentlessly until he told me that he had no doubts. He wouldn't give me details, but I gathered from that and some...arguments I may have had with Elizabeth that she and Ric were only together once or twice and it was not in the right time frame." She smoothed out the wrinkles in the sweater she had twisted in her hands. This rumor had be squelched. It simply *had* to be. "I'm sorry, Courtney, I really am."

"Well, I guess it make sense." Courtney sighed. "I mean, once Elizabeth thought she had a chance with Jason again, she probably wouldn't have screwed it up by sleeping with Ric again."

"Exactly." Carly nodded and took the stack of tank tops from the bed and shoved them into a drawer. "If *Jason* had any doubts, that'd be different. But he's convinced."

"Okay," Courtney drawled. She stood and folded her arms across her chest. "Then why doesn't he at

least act like he's going to be a father?"

Carly frowned and looked at her. "What do you mean? She has guards on her. Jason's paying for her medical bills. I think she's being stubborn about anything else."

"I guess." Courtney pursed her lips. "Though if I were pregnant, I guess I might want the father of my child to pay some attention to me." She sighed. "I think I just want to believe that he did this because he loved her and wanted to be with her. He hasn't even asked me to forgive him, so it means that he's sorry he hurt me, but he's not interested in getting back together. Why not if he's not going to be with her?" A tear slid down her cheek. "If he didn't want *me* anymore, why didn't he break up with me before he slept with her?"

"I'm sorry," Carly said. "I just... I don't know the answer to that."

### **General Hospital: Cafeteria**

Nadine sipped her iced tea and smiled across the table at Elizabeth. "Thanks for asking me to coffee." She wrinkled her nose. "Though neither of us seem to be drinking that."

Elizabeth laughed and stirred her hot chocolate. "I just had a craving for hot chocolate. I know it's getting warm out, but I just..." She shrugged. "I love my chocolate."

"I hear ya." Nadine set her tea down. "I haven't had a chance to meet a lot of people yet with my work schedule. I decided to move up here on a whim, really, a few months ago and had to wait for an opening." She played with the wrapper of her straw.

"You may have noticed from my appointment," Elizabeth began, "that I don't have a strong support system right now." She tucked her hair behind her ear. "I burned a lot of bridges getting pregnant with..." She hesitated, still finding it difficult to say. "With my ex-boyfriend's baby, and most of the people I might have confided in are out of town or are angry with me. So I hope you don't mind that I saw a friendly face and hoped to have someone talk to."

"Oh, *absolutely*." Nadine wiggled in her chair. "It totally sucks to be basically alone in the world. My dad took off ages ago, my mom died and my Aunt Rayleen raised me and my sister until Jolene—that's my sister—killed a patient in a mercy killing and then injected herself with a drug that left her in a vegetative state. Then Aunt Rayleen died, and my ex-boyfriend turned out to be total jerk I wanted to throw out the window, so I decided I need to get the hell out of New York." She finished this dialogue with a sip of iced tea.

Elizabeth blinked and couldn't fight a smile. "It's brave to pick up leave. To start a new life." She twisted her fingers together. "I thought about it when I found out I was pregnant. I thought maybe everyone would be better off if I never told anyone and just headed out." She pursed her lips. "But as you can see, that didn't work out for me."

"Well, maybe the father of your kid will get more involved after the next visit." Nadine hesitated. "Is there a chance he might come to this one?"

“Unlikely,” Elizabeth admitted. She looked across the cafeteria where Monica and Alan were sipping coffee and studiously trying not to look at her. “I think he’s regretting his decision to get involved.”

“Oh.” Nadine frowned. “Well, that sucks large.” She squared her shoulders. “Well, then you know what? I’ll be your other person in the room. You should have someone with you when you find out the gender. Someone who will smile and be happy with you.”

Elizabeth looked down, her throat tight. “That would be...” She swallowed. “I would really like that, Nadine. Thank you.” She hesitated. “You know...until you asked me if I was excited about the baby, no one else had. It was just...everyone looking at this baby like she was a disaster that just needed to be fixed or taken care of.” She swallowed again. “No one...no one’s asked me about being a mother, or if I was happy.”

Nadine reached across the table. “I’ve known you all of an hour, Elizabeth Webber, but I promise you, I will be your person. I think we’re both in need of a friend, and I’m taking applications if you are.”

Elizabeth squeezed it, and felt the tears sliding down her cheeks. “I’m not only taking them, I’m accepting them on the spot. And to celebrate our new friendship, I want you to be the first to know that although the circumstances are less than ideal, I am *ridiculously* excited about my child.” She took the sonogram photo out of her pocket and smiled down at it, feeling like a mother for the first time. “And I cannot wait to hold her for the first time.”

Nadine grinned. “You’re having your mommy senses tingle. You think she’ll be a girl?”

“I do.” Elizabeth’s breath hitched, but she continued to smile, feeling lighter than she had in months. “I do. I’m going to have a little girl, and *you’re* going to be my person.”

“Fantastic.” Nadine sipped her iced tea. “Does your person get to go shopping for baby stuff? Because I *love* shopping for baby stuff.”

## **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Sonny looked up as Jason entered. “Hey...thanks for waiting until Courtney left.” He rubbed the back of his neck, as if exhausted from the worry of the last month.

Jason nodded. “It’s just easier if we avoid each other,” he said. “We had a fight on the docks last week and I just...” He rubbed a hand over his face. “I’m not in a hurry to hurt her again.”

“Yeah, I hear that.” Sonny reached for a file. “I heard from Stan and Benny. Ric’s still in the wind. He and Faith are just...gone.”

Jason scowled. “Any chance the Families took care of things and are just keeping it quiet?” He shifted. “I want him *out* of our lives, Sonny. I’ve spent almost every waking hour tracking him this last month, but I’m coming up as empty as Stan and Benny.” He shook his head. “He shouldn’t be able to disappear like this.”

“I know, I know.” Sonny sighed and poured himself a whiskey. “I have a meeting with the Families in a few days to confirm the rumors about your kid and ask to them to step up their search.” He sipped his drink and Jason became wary, as a familiar light entered his eyes. “Jason, we gotta talk.”

“We’re *not* having this conversation again—” Jason stopped when Sonny held up his hand.

“I have Francis, Cody and Marco reporting to me as well,” Sonny told him and Jason frowned at this, wondering why Sonny would force Elizabeth’s security detail to report to both of them. “Because I’m concerned...” He hesitated. “I’m concerned that you’re not doing your part.”

He knew he wasn’t, and he was painfully aware of it the few times Elizabeth had contacted him and he’d responded through her guards. He didn’t need *Sonny* lecturing him. “I’m tracking Ric to keep her safe—”

“I get that, and it’s important.” Sonny nodded, and pressed his hand to his chest. “But we gotta keep up appearances. You know that. You don’t ask the guards for anything other than to confirm she’s still breathing.”

Jason frowned. “They’re not there to *spy*—”

“I’m not...” Sonny rolled his eyes. “You’re not talking to her about her condition, and her guards are painfully aware of this since they’re herding her to work and the hospital without you being there. Jason, we’re asking them to protect Elizabeth with their lives because she’s carrying your child, but the guards just see *you* not giving a damn.”

His hand fisted at his side. “Are they not paying attention?” Jason demanded. “Because if they’re screwing around with her protection because they don’t think I’m involved—”

“No,” Sonny cut in swiftly. “But you’re not earning any points with these men, and they need to believe they can respect you. They see this woman going through a tough pregnancy alone, coming close to being the town pariah and...” He shrugged. “You know. It’s not helping. They don’t say anything to me, but I can see it in their faces. Cody’s with her when she’s working most of the time, and it’s painful when he tells me the things people are saying. He’s not spying, he just wants me to be aware of the trouble Elizabeth is having, and he tells *me* because you *don’t* ask.”

His chest tight, Jason swallowed. “What...what trouble is she having?”

Sonny sipped his whiskey. “Alan and Monica always know when she’s at the hospital. She had an appointment earlier today and they cornered her outside, according to Francis. He came by after the shift change. They want to know if Lila will be able to see the baby, if maybe Elizabeth will come by once in a while, so they can get to know her as the mother of their grandchild. Emily gives her hard time, always sits in her section at Kelly’s and then has some rude comments. Cody used to stand outside, but the first time Elizabeth came out in tears, he asked Bobbie if he could set up shop inside while she was working.”

Jason exhaled. “I’m sure there’s more,” he said. “What else aren’t you telling me?”

“You may not listen to rumors, but Carly told me that Courtney is wondering if what people saying is true. That Elizabeth didn’t know which one was the father, and picked you because you have more money. There are too many people speculating about this baby, and you’re not around to cement this notion in people’s heads.”

“Courtney told Carly...” Jason repeated. “What did Carly tell her?”

“I told her that you and I had argued about it.” Carly stepped off the stairs. “That I hadn’t gotten much from you, but during one of my arguments with Elizabeth that I’ve *never* had, she led me to believe the time frame doesn’t work. I assured her that *you* had not a single doubt.”

Sonny and Jason stared at her. She raised an eyebrow. “What, I should tell her the truth?”

“Carly,” Jason growled. “You *know* the truth. I told you the truth.”

“Yeah...” Carly planted one hand on her hip. “Yeah, you did. Which is why I told Courtney no doubts exist.” She flicked her eyes to Sonny. “I thought about talking to Mama where I know Amy Vining would overhear, so my convictions would be on record with the rest of the town.”

“Carly,” Jason began, pinching the bridge of his nose. Christ, if *Carly* knew the truth, this plan was doomed.

“Relax, Jase.” Carly patted his shoulder. “I’m not plotting, I’m not planning. I don’t even want you guys to tell me the truth, because then I can honestly say I only know what I’m told.” She shrugged. “You’re the father. Message received. I’m just saying that we need to take measures to make sure everyone *else* knows that.” She eyed him with annoyance. “Especially if you’re going to continue ignoring her and making Sonny chase you down with medical forms.”

“I didn’t know she needed me to fill out anything,” Jason retorted, wondering why he was letting Carly bait him like this. God, she was so frustrating sometimes.

“Well, no doubt since you always pawn her off on guards,” Carly said, her eyes wide. “You think I don’t notice? Elizabeth was upset and embarrassed when she came to the penthouse because you weren’t home. Again. And she told Sonny that she’d tried to call you, and that you told Francis you were going to be unavailable all week.”

“*You* weren’t in the room when Elizabeth was here,” Sonny remarked, putting his whiskey down. “What have I told you about eavesdropping?”

Carly dismissed him with a wave. “Unimportant. I’m not telling you what to do, Jase, because you won’t listen to me anyway, but I am the *only* person in this room who’s ever been pregnant, so let me give you the inside information she won’t.” She glared at Jason.

“Pregnancy is god damned stressful enough without being treated like the town whore. There is a *person* growing inside and it’s our responsibility to give the kid nourishment and a safe environment. Having to be looked like nothing better than dirt every time you leave your home is *not* conducive to safe pregnancy.” She folded her arms under breasts. “I went through that with Michael. I dealt with

that before I lost our first child, Sonny. And now every time I go to Kelly's, Elizabeth is fielding whispers and looks from everyone, including your annoying twit of a sister, Jase."

"What's your point?" Jason said spreading his hands out. "What do you want me to do? I can't change what people say or do."

"You could yell at your holier-than-thou sister," Carly retorted. "You could *maybe* drop in Kelly's once in a while and pretend you don't see the mother of your child as an obligation, a burden, or worse, a horrible mistake. You could go to a damned doctor's appointment. *You're* the one who keeps telling me this is your kid, Jason Morgan." She narrowed her eyes. "So *act* like it."

# Chapter Seven

*It's down to this  
I've got to make this life make sense  
Can anyone tell what I've done  
I miss the life  
I miss the colors of the world  
Can anyone tell where I am?*  
- Away From The Sun, 3 Doors Down

*Saturday, May 24, 2003*

## Kelly's: Dining Room

It was one of those unlucky days of the week when Penny's school schedule forced Bobbie to schedule Courtney and Elizabeth on the quiet morning shift. Elizabeth was surprised by how the two of them had managed to co-exist for the last month. Of all the people who had raged and insulted her this last month, Courtney had been the only not to say anything to her face. Elizabeth would have preferred her anger—the quiet desperation the blonde utilized to pretend that nothing had changed made her guilt so much sharper.

But there were moments when Elizabeth felt completely in sync with Courtney, and it was standing behind the counter as a new pot of coffee brewed while Courtney organized a few receipts that they felt...almost united. The stares and whispers of their patrons were impossible to ignore, and Elizabeth could feel the heat of those eyes on her eye as she kept her eyes down.

"I *hate* them all," Courtney hissed. "Look at them, watching us, hoping like hell I'll go for your hair or something. It's disgusting. They have nothing better to do than comment on our lives." She flicked her blue eyes to Elizabeth, and Elizabeth was unsurprised at the anger burning there. "I hate you and I hate Jason for what you did to me. If he wanted to be with you, he should have just left me instead of cheating, and maybe you think I deserved having it done to me because I know you think I went after him last fall—"

"Courtney, no," Elizabeth said softly. "No, it's not—"

"But I'll be *damned* if my private life is going to be on display," Courtney cut in. "So this..." She gestured at the space between them. "*This* is a neutral zone. We're going to do our jobs and confuse the shit out of everyone else. But outside this restaurant, Elizabeth, I want you to cross the street when you see me and I hope like I hell I've found a better job once your bastard begins to show."

She grabbed a pot of the now finished coffee and went onto the floor to serve. Elizabeth sighed and rubbed her eyes. When the front door of Kelly's opened to reveal Nadine coming in with a smile for her, she felt her own mouth curving into a matching one. Since meeting her a few days earlier, she and Nadine had gone out to lunch twice. Francis had been nervous about escorting Elizabeth to Eli's both times because it was inherently insecure, but Elizabeth had craved the normalcy.

“Good morning,” Nadine all but sang out as she sat down. “Green tea if it’s available.” Elizabeth flipped her mug over and poured it, setting a tea bag next to it. “Do you have a break coming soon? I have to head to work in a half hour.”

“I’m due for fifteen minutes soon, but…” Elizabeth hesitated. “It’s just me and Courtney today, and I always hate asking her. It’s…hard enough.”

“Oh, the other woman,” Nadine murmured. She flicked her eyes to the doors where the blonde had disappeared into the kitchen. “Well, yeah, I figure.”

“But I’m entitled to one and she literally *just* declared this restaurant a neutral zone.” Elizabeth glanced over as Courtney reappeared and joined them behind the counter. “It’s slow. So I’m going to take my fifteen.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

Elizabeth poured herself a cup of tea and gestured towards the courtyard. “Let’s go outside. It’s gorgeous out.”

“Sure thing.” As they walked out of the restaurant, Elizabeth saw Francis out of the corner of her eye, standing up and following them.

As they sat down at one of the empty tables, Nadine watched Francis head to the courtyard entrance to take his position. “You know, you don’t have to worry about me being uncomfortable with your guards.”

Elizabeth sighed and stirred sugar into her tea. “I’m lucky that Jason assigned me familiar faces, and it’s not so bad. But I know people look at me weird—”

“No, seriously.” Nadine hesitated. “Look, the reason I stopped by this morning is because I heard from my jerk ex-boyfriend, and I realized this might be something we can totally bond over.” She met Elizabeth’s eyes. “Have you ever heard of Anthony Zacchara?”

Elizabeth blinked and tilted her head. She tried to keep up on the people in Jason’s world, always worried for his safety, but the name was only vaguely familiar. “Somewhat, but not really.”

“Well, he lives and works out of Crimson Pointe,” Nadine explained, referring to a small town outside of New York City. “But his son Johnny lives in Manhattan.” She bit her lip. “We dated for almost a year.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows in surprise. “I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“I’m not proud of it, but Johnny was never involved in his father’s business. At least, not when we met.” Nadine flushed and looked away. “He was an investor in a medical clinic I was working at, and he flirted with me. He has a great smile, and he’s wickedly charming.” She closed her eyes. “And things were *amazing* for six months.”



“And then?” Elizabeth prompted.

“And then, his father had a stroke,” Nadine continued. “And Johnny’s sister and his dad’s lawyer kept trying to get him involved. Johnny was torn because he thought he had a duty to keep his sister out of things, but he still didn’t really want to do anything.”

“But he did,” Elizabeth guessed and Nadine nodded. “Is that why you broke up?”

“I wish, because at least I could have walked away with some good memories, but Johnny never does anything in half-measures.” She blew out an exasperated breath. “I guess he figured I wasn’t going to stick around, or maybe he was tired of me. It’s hard to know why because the lousy bastard never says anything. He just...he wouldn’t call for days at a time, and he stopped talking to me about a future. I hadn’t even really broached anything, but we’d...discussed moving in together.” Nadine sipped her tea. “And that all just stopped. He stopped being this amazing man and turned into this complete asshole who didn’t call, didn’t come over, but got angry every time I asked him why he was pulling away. I couldn’t deal with it anymore, so I broke up with him and found a new job.”

“Nadine, I’m so sorry.” Elizabeth reached over and squeezed her hand. “That must have been so difficult. I know what it’s like to be with someone who is absolutely incredible one day, and the next, it’s like you never knew him at all.”

“Anyway, he called me which pissed me off because I really didn’t want him to know where I was.” She huffed. “He told me I left some CDs at his place and did I want them. I told him he could throw them out a window, himself along with them.” She shook her head. “I was just *so* annoyed, and *then* I realized that I hadn’t mentioned I was connected to the Zaccharas, even a little, which I know enough about this world to understand that if I’m not upfront with it, it may come up later and you’ll wonder why I never said anything.”

“I appreciate it, Nadine, I really do.” Elizabeth smiled. “Honesty is great, and you’re right, if I didn’t know it now, I might have been upset later simply because...” She stared down at her hands. “I’ve learned the hard way to wonder about people and their motives.”

“You know, Elizabeth, I get we’ve known each other for five minutes,” Nadine said hesitantly, “but you really *can* talk to me.”

“I would if I thought it make a difference to talk about it, but trust me, Nadine,” Elizabeth leaned back in her chair and sighed, “verbalizing the crappy choices I’ve made only makes me feel worse about them, so it’s better if I just...don’t. For now.”

“No problem.” Nadine checked her watch. “I better get to the hospital and you better get in before the other woman comes out here.”

“Technically, I think *I’m* supposed to be other woman,” Elizabeth said, with a smile she wouldn’t have expected. Nadine shrugged.

“Yeah, but who cares about technicalities?” Her breezy smile and light hug before she left gave

Elizabeth the strength to head back and complete the last four hours of her shift.

## **General Hospital: Monica Quartermaine's Office**

Monica smiled brightly when she opened her door and let Jason enter. "I didn't believe Margo when she told me you were out here, but here you are." She gestured to the sofa. "Sit, sit. Tell me what brings you around the hospital."

Jason sighed, but did so because this visit was going to be difficult enough without making it more complicated. "I wanted to talk to you and hope that you could talk to the family for me." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I know you and Alan have..." He didn't want to say harassed or bothered, but he was sure the characterization wasn't too far off. "I guess you heard that Elizabeth and I are...that is, we're..." He exhaled shortly, hoping she would take his difficulty as not liking to speak to the Quartermaines about his personal life rather the difficulty in saying these words out loud. "That she's pregnant."

Monica smiled, almost sheepishly. "We have. And I know that we might have come on too strong with Elizabeth. We just..." She spread her hands out. "We like her *so* much, Jason, and I was so sorry when things didn't work out for you two last summer."

He closed his eyes and hoped for the strength to get through this, to say words that weren't true and some that he wouldn't mind if they were, and not have it all seem like a jumbled mess. "I know....but...it's not..." He paused. "We're not really together right now. I mean, we're not..."

"Jason, it's okay, you don't have to explain yourself to me." Monica hesitantly reached out and covered one of his hands with hers. "You and Elizabeth will figure this out for yourselves."

"I...it just came at a difficult time and it's not the way I would have wanted to do it," he said, knowing those words, at least, were the honest truth. "I hurt Courtney when I didn't want to, and I haven't been as supportive to Elizabeth as I should have been."

He knew she was wondering why he was telling her these things, but Jason knew that his mother would immediately tell Alan, and somehow it would travel the hospital grapevine that Elizabeth had his support and that he knew her child to be his. "And maybe you heard some rumors—"

"I don't pay attention to rumors like that," Monica shook her head firmly. "The ones accusing Elizabeth of picking the richer man. I know her better than that, and I know *you* better than that. So don't you worry about that. I told Amy Vining so myself, and I saw Carly complaining about how people were badmouthing you to Bobbie."

Jason closed his eyes, annoyed Carly had helped despite his best efforts. She was right, he was going to have to do more to act like the father of this child, but he just...

He knew that he was going to find Ric and deal with him. And when Elizabeth was safe, she could take her baby and herself and walk out of his life again. He couldn't imagine why she'd stay now when she never had before.

“Thank you.” Jason hesitated. “And if you could talk to Emily. She’s been very angry at Elizabeth, and it upsets her that her best friend is treating her that way.”

“I can try, Jason, but...” Monica sighed. “Emily’s stubborn and she may not listen.” She took a chance and rested her hand on his shoulder. “I’m sure Courtney is very nice, but can I say again how much I really *do* like Elizabeth. I know it’s wrong, but I like that she’s separate from Sonny.”

Jason blinked at her and shook his head. “I don’t—”

“Robin was close to Stone and Sonny,” Monica said slowly, “and Carly ended up with Sonny. Courtney is Sonny’s sister, so the women you’ve been involved with seriously up until now have always been...connected to Sonny.” Jason tensed, but Monica continued. “I just...I like that Elizabeth is something—*someone*—separate. That you met her away from Sonny, and she’s yours in a way that no one else has been.”

Jason exhaled slowly and looked away. Monica was right of course—Elizabeth was only connected to Sonny now because of him. Because he had cared for her, and Ric Lansing had utilized those emotions to gain leverage against his half-brother. Was that why he and Elizabeth had never worked outside the studio, outside their own world? Because she was so separate from everyone else in his life that he’d been unable to find a balance?

“I’m sorry, Jason, I don’t always know when to shut up and stop pushing,” Monica said, her face stricken. “I just want you to be happy.”

“I know.” Jason squeezed her hand on top of his. “I’m trying to be. I just wanted you to know what was going on.”

“Thank you.” Monica smiled but wagged a finger at him. “Now you take care of Elizabeth and see that her blood pressure stays down.” When he only looked at her blankly, her cheeks flushed. “I may have...asked your father to keep track of Elizabeth’s charts. Just to...” She cleared her throat. “Her blood pressure was elevated at the last two visits. If Dr. Lee sees it again next month, she may put Elizabeth on bed rest.”

“I’ll make sure she takes care of herself,” Jason said, worried and filled with guilt that he had avoided Elizabeth for so long. He stood. “But if you could stop looking up Elizabeth’s chart, I’d appreciate it.”

“Right, of course.” Monica stood, embarrassed. “I just...I’m concerned. I have one grandchild I’m unlikely to know, I suppose I just...wanted...” She trailed off.

“I’ll ask Elizabeth to keep you informed of any changes,” Jason said, because he didn’t know what else to say. There was little chance Sonny or Carly would *ever* allow Michael to know the Quartermaines Jason actually liked, and this child...

This child was unlikely to be in his life long enough to matter.

## No Name Restaurant: Back Room

Sonny leaned back in his chair, knowing that Johnny and Milo were behind him. He hated meeting the representatives from the other Families on the East Coast, but he'd promised Jason that he'd do whatever it took to keep Elizabeth safe.

He glanced at Sammy Tagliatti, from Philadelphia, whom he loathed for his lack of respect to Carly the previous fall and to the other men, whom he rarely saw. Anthony Zacchara, who controlled most of lower New York, Hector Ruiz from Miami and Daniel Vega from Boston. In fact, now that Sonny reflected upon it—he hated all these men. Ruthless bastards willing to do anything to survive with little consideration for collateral damage.

“Well, Corinthos, I suppose you're finally deigning to confirm the rumors we've been hearing for almost a month,” Daniel Vega remarked, sipping from a tumbler of Scotch.

“I am,” Sonny nodded. He looked to Anthony Zacchara, and the man standing behind him. “But since this is the first time we've met since last fall, we should congratulate Zacchara on his recovery.”

Anthony Zacchara scowled. “Like you give a damn—”

“And ask why his lawyer's son slithered into my town without mentioning his connection you or to my mother.” Sonny looked at Trevor Lansing, who blanched slightly. “Or were we going to pretend that the man who embezzled from Vega and Ruiz *wasn't* connected to you?”

Both men eyed the older man with mixtures of suspicion and loathing. “Were you behind this attack?” Ruiz snarled. Sonny smirked, knowing that Ruiz had two of the most lethal and dangerous sons in the business.

“No,” Trevor said immediately and Anthony glared at him, as if for daring to speak. “I'm sorry, Anthony, but I gotta tell them Richard and I don't speak. We've had no contact since he graduated law school.” He smoothed a hand down his tie and met Sonny's eyes. “And I know what we're here to discuss. I have no objections.”

“We'll be keeping our eye on you,” Tagliatti murmured. “But, Corinthos, where is Jason Morgan? Should he not be here to relate the happy news?”

“Jason's busy protecting his family,” Sonny said carelessly. “Ric Lansing came after his ex-girlfriend because of the connection, he came after my wife to gain leverage. We're just lucky Elizabeth saw through his act.”

“Did she?” Ruiz murmured, raising an eyebrow. “I have heard stories to the contrary.”

“It's true that like the *rest* of us,” Sonny stressed, “Elizabeth was initially taken in by Lansing. But she was upset and hurt. She and Jason had broken up. They both made mistakes, but they have worked out their differences, mostly because Jason learned Ric was targeting the woman he loves and put aside what broke them apart.” He raised an eyebrow. “They're having a child and Ric has threatened that

child because he's angry Elizabeth threw him over and went back to Jason."

"Does that sound like the son you raised?" Tagliatti demanded of Trevor. "Would he go after a woman just because she left him?"

Trevor arched an eyebrow. "Richard isn't known for subtlety. He hates Corinthos because his mother chose *him* rather than my son to raise. He blames him for her death." His eyes hardened. "As do I."

"But why should we waste our resources looking for this man?" Vega cut in. "It's over a woman. A paltry thing, really. If she was reckless enough to get involved with him, shouldn't she deserve everything she gets—"

He was glad he'd told Jason he would handle this alone because it was likely Jason would have found it difficult not to react to such a response. "This *woman*," Sonny repeated, "has been nothing but loyal to me and Jason for years. When Moreno's men shot Jason, she kept him alive. When Sorel put a bomb in her apartment, she did not go to the police with what she knew. When I needed Jason in town to investigate a traitor that was disrupting *our* profits," he said to Tagliatti and Zacchara, whose territories were often intertwined with his own, "Elizabeth hid him in her apartment without a word to anyone. She has been kidnapped by Roscoe's men, shot at by Alcazar's goons and now, because she made the mistake of trusting a man that the rest of you trusted as well, you think I should leave her to the dogs?"

Ruiz sat back in his chair and nodded. "Loyal women are hard to find," he admitted. He glanced at Zacchara, who had notoriously shot his own wife during one of his rages. "And sometimes, harder to keep since they expect so much of you." He cleared his throat. "Ric Lansing stole much money from me, and for this, I would like to see him roasted over a pit of coals, but I also do not like what I hear about threatening a pregnant woman. It's...uncouth. I've had to reprimand my own sons when they've strayed from honorable actions."

"I hate Ric Lansing as much as the rest of you," Vega said. "I don't care much for this woman and looking for him in order to protect her doesn't appeal much to me. Her protection is not my concern. However, I find Faith Roscoe to be a boil on humanity. If she *is* working with him, then I think it's for the good of the business that we exterminate them both."

"I don't much enjoy things that cut into my profits," Tagliatti said. "And there's no doubt Lansing and Roscoe did so." He flicked his dark eyes to Zacchara, the last of the four men. "But will Zacchara agree to hunt down his lawyer's son?"

"I got no problem with hunting down scum, but Ric Lansing ain't come for me and mine," Anthony snarled. "He didn't take money from me and I got no sympathy for women who curl up to dangerous men and then cry about it later."

Sonny tensed, but he knew Anthony Zacchara well enough to know what to say. "But, perhaps, as a sign of good faith that you weren't involved in his plans," he said softly. "You might consider offering your help. Your resources."

Anthony narrowed his eyes. "I'm *always* one to preserve the peace," he replied with a malicious smile. "Sure. You got my vote."

"Well, that settles it." Vega tossed back the rest of his Scotch. "Ric Lansing and Faith Roscoe are to be executed upon sight."

## **Elizabeth Webber's Studio**

There was a knock on her door before Cody opened it. "Jason's here to see you, Miss Webber." Elizabeth frowned and looked at him oddly. She hadn't had many visitors since this debacle began, but none of the guards had ever announced anyone. "Do you want him to come in?" His face was impassive, but there was a slight clenching in his jaw and suddenly she realized what was going on.

Jason had been by exactly twice since putting twenty-four protection on her, and the guards had had to take her to the doctor's appointments and everywhere else. Elizabeth had embarrassed Cody last week by crying on the way home, showing off the sonogram of her child that was now framed on the table. Francis looked annoyed every time someone said something to her, and she knew he'd started the routine of coming into Kelly's during her shift rather than being in the courtyard.

They were protecting her from being hurt, and clearly, they perceived Jason as a threat. Touched, but disturbed at the same time, Elizabeth set down the sketchbooks she had been stowing in a carton and shoved a stand of hair behind her ear. "Cody, Jason can come in any time he wants." A smile tugged at her lips. "But thanks for checking."

Jason was scowling slightly as Cody finally moved from the doorway and let him in. "I have had enough of this," he muttered.

"Sorry..." Elizabeth dipped her chin, embarrassed. "Cody...he saw me crying last week after my appointment and I guess..." She shrugged. "You know, they don't understand..." She bit her lip. "I had my first ultrasound and I had no one to show it to except my doctor and my nurse, so when Cody asked how my appointment went, I was just..." She stopped, realizing he looked irritated. "I'm sorry, that's *not* why you're here. Did something happen? I don't...I don't want to keep you."

"I came to apologize," Jason said, but her heart sank. She suspected that Sonny had said something after the medical history fiasco or maybe one of her guards had let their own annoyance slip.

"No, Jason..." Elizabeth stepped forward. "Please. I-I know that there are some people who might... I'm sure Sonny said something about you not..." Feeling awkward, she wrapped her arms around herself. "I *never* told anyone I expected you to be involved, and I am so sorry if anyone—"

"That's not..." Jason rested his hands at his waist, looked down and took a deep breath. "Yeah, Sonny and Carly don't think I'm doing enough, and I can't get a read on whether Carly actually knows or just suspects, but she read me the riot act."

Elizabeth sighed and started to rake her hands through hair, tugging out the messy ponytail. "This is a disaster." For want of something to do so she didn't have to look at him, she continued to pack up her

sketchbooks, books and other miscellaneous papers. “I don’t know what we’re supposed to do about other people, how to manage their expectations.”

“You told me when we started this that I wasn’t thinking this through, and I...you were right.” Elizabeth blinked and turned to look at him. He scratched the back of his neck. “I didn’t think any further than protecting you, and I thought this would be the best way—”

“We can still change our minds,” she said softly. She stared down at the magazine in her hands, wondering why she wasn’t just tossing it away. “Maybe Ric and Faith are cutting their losses. You can—”

“Elizabeth, we just have...” He was quiet for a long moment. “We *have* to figure out how to do this without...complicating things.”

Logically she understood that the heart was a muscle, and that emotions came from the brain, but Elizabeth could feel the weight settle on her chest, could literally feel the ache spreading to her limbs. “You mean how to make people think you’re the father of my child without actually having to *be* the father of my child.” She closed her eyes and willed the tears to stay away. How could she not be out of tears? Why couldn’t she be one of those women who had problems with tear production?

“I...” When Jason’s voice faltered, she looked up and sighed. He looked helpless, as if he hadn’t wanted to say that but that it had been exactly what he meant.

“Jason,” Elizabeth said, turning back towards him. “The only way this is going to work is if we’re honest with each other. We have to lie to the rest of the world, we shouldn’t lie to each other. I can’t...” She paused, swallowing hard. “I can’t blame you if you don’t actually want to be involved, but if we were still friends, you’d be...” Elizabeth shrugged. “I don’t know, friends ask about health and how doctor’s appointments went and sometimes they go. For support.” When he said nothing to that, she bit her lip. “Or you just ask if I’m alive and once a year, we have lunch. I can’t *help* you with this, Jason, if you don’t *talk* to me.”

“I’m sorry, you’re right.” Jason lowered himself to the sofa. “I just...I don’t know how to do this. I know that Monica and Alan have been...overly interested in your case, so I talked to Monica about backing off.”

“Jason...” Elizabeth sighed. Trust Jason to warn away the only people remotely interested in her pregnancy, even if it was for the wrong reasons. “They weren’t really bothering me. They just...want to be connected to you.” She hesitated. “But I understand that you don’t want them to led on about a possible grandchild, so—”

“I told Monica that if they left you alone and stopped looking up your records, you’d be more likely to tell her what’s going on,” Jason interrupted.

“Oh my *God*.” Elizabeth sat next to him on the couch. “Jason, are you listening to yourself? You just promised your *mother* that I would keep her informed about a child you’re not raising!” She covered her face with her hands. “This is *insane*, Jason. It’s *always* been insane. And we cannot keep this up.

We can't."

"We have to—"

She snapped her head up. "No, then *I* can't. Do you understand this is so much worse than it was that December people thought we were sleeping together?" She dug the heels of her hands into her eyes. "We are lying to *everyone*, and it's just not going to work, because we don't know how this is going to play out. Jason, what if we never find Ric?"

"That's..." Jason shook his head. "We can't think like that—"

"I *have* to think like that." Elizabeth felt like wrapping her hands around his throat because he just wasn't getting it. "Jason, I need you to listen to me. I am pregnant. No matter *who* people think the father of this child is, I am having one. She is going to be here in six months. Do you get that? I am dodging your ex-girlfriend, your sister, your parents, and your best friends who are all judging me, all making my life a living hell in their own special ways. I am trying like hell to keep my head on straight, and you are making this impossible."

Jason got to his feet and if she thought he was irritated before, now he was simply angry. "*I'm* making this impossible? Are you serious, Elizabeth? I have done nothing but look for Ric for the last month. I've barely slept!" He jabbed a finger at her. "I didn't get us in this situation—"

"The hell you didn't!" Elizabeth launched up, her ears ringing. "*You* decided I needed rescuing and told him I was having your child. *This* was your goddamned idea. I begged you to tell people the truth! I told you this wouldn't work and you kept telling me you wouldn't end up *hating* me!" Her voice broke on the last word, but she struggled to continue. "And you're so angry at me because I got myself pregnant by a psychotic freak that you can barely stand to look at me!"

"That's not..." Frustrated, he groaned and slid his hands into his hair, actually pulling at it. "Damn it, Elizabeth."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I am *drowning* here. Everyone is angry at me, I get it. Everyone blames me. Well, I can't change what happened. I don't know what you want me to do. You won't tell anyone the truth, and then you're angry that people don't think you're stepping up." She clenched her fists in front of him. "And I am begging you to tell me what you want to do, because you're not listening to me. Do you want to tell people the truth or do you just want to tell them that the baby is a mistake?" Tears slid down her cheeks. "You wouldn't even be lying, because you *do* think that. You think my baby is a mistake, that maybe I'm too stupid to be a mother, that I don't *deserve* to have a child—"

She stopped when he reached out and covered her clenched hands with his. "Just...just *stop*." Jason lowered his head and took a deep breath. "You're right. This isn't going to work if we're not honest with each other."

"Okay." Elizabeth nodded, taking a shaky breath.

"And Monica told me that your blood pressure has been high, that your doctor will want to put you on



bed rest if it doesn't come down, so let's just..." He gently pushed her to sit down. "Let's just stop arguing."

"Okay." Everything inside her ached, because she knew he was only being nice now because she'd been crying, because he was worried about her health. "Please, Jason, let's just tell the truth, and try —"

"If Ric thinks this is my child, he may want to come after you as revenge, but he won't be ruthless about it, not the way he would if he thought it was his own." Jason hesitated. "He'd be *relentless* if he knew the truth, and that's not a risk I'm willing to take. Are you?"

"No," Elizabeth admitted.

"Okay. So we have to...we have to figure a way forward." He stared at their joined hands. "I do *not* think your child is a mistake, Elizabeth, and I am so sorry if for one minute, you think I am blaming you in this situation, okay?" He tilted her chin up to look at him. "We have been so worried about protecting you and keeping this lie that we haven't...you haven't even been allowed to be happy. To think about becoming a mother."

"My nurse asked me if I was excited last week and I started to cry," she confessed. "Because it was the first time anyone had asked, and I hadn't...I hadn't thought about it until then." She took a deep breath. "I wish that this were happening any other way, but I want...I want my child." She felt her lips curve and looked away. "I want this baby so much, so if you tell me that this is the best way to keep her safe, I'll agree."

Jason let their hands fall away and he was quiet for a moment. "Sonny has already told the Families that this is my child, and gained their cooperation in hunting Ric and Faith down, so at this point..."

"We can't change our minds," Elizabeth murmured. "Because he lied to them." She sighed. "Okay, well, there's an argument I can't dismiss. Sonny went to bat for me, we'll have to make this work."

"Let's just..." Jason hesitated. "Let's just take it one day at a time. I'll go to some doctor's appointments, and we'll have lunch together in public a couple of times. You can tell Monica what's going on, and I'll try to keep Emily from arguing with you in public. Can that...can that be enough for now?"

The weight on her chest only grew heavier. If they had still been friends, *truly* friends, she would not have had to convince Jason to offer this type of support. He would have seen her struggling alone and done what he could to alleviate the stress. If he'd known being alone at the appointments would be difficult, he would have volunteered. He would meet her for coffee without looking as though his arm was twisted.

She didn't think he was going through all this trouble due to a sense of obligation or pity, but she also knew that they were *never* going to truly be friends again, and somehow, the loss of that was so much more difficult than accepting that they were never going to be together romantically.

But he looked so tired that Elizabeth finally nodded. “I think that will help the rumors,” she replied quietly. “One day at a time.”

# Chapter Eight

*I know I let you down  
Again and again  
I know I never really treated you right  
I've paid the price  
I'm still paying for it every day*  
- I Don't Know You Anymore, Savage Garden

*Friday, June 6, 2003*

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

Another tense dinner shift with Courtney. Elizabeth wished she could find another job—she wished Courtney would find another job. Something to keep her from having to see Jason's ex-girlfriend three times a week for hours on end. Courtney's earlier apathy towards the entire situation had begun to wane this week, since Elizabeth had tied her apron and they had both realized that her waist had thickened. Just a little—but enough so Courtney realized that this wasn't some sort of lie. Elizabeth really was pregnant.

In the two weeks since she and Jason had come their sort of agreement as to how to go on in this situation, he'd been true to his word. He had come by Kelly's twice for lunch, and once for breakfast, letting the people see them together. He asked after her health in general, but he'd never asked about the baby again.

She was going to take what she could get. There was still no sign of Ric or Faith, or least none that Sonny or Jason were reporting to her, so Elizabeth was keeping her head down and trying to do this one day at a time, but she knew that she had decisions to make. She was in her fourth month—only five left before she was going to be a mother.

The only bright spot had been her burgeoning friendship with Nadine Crowell. The vivacious nurse had invited her out for dinners at Eli's that still drove Cody and Marco, her evening guards, insane, but Elizabeth loved bonding with someone who was completely unconnected to Jason Morgan, since it appeared that her friendship with Emily was on permanent hiatus.

"I think Table Six wants their check," Courtney said shortly, setting the coffee pot back on the burner. "They've been making those faces."

"I've got it." Elizabeth reached into her apron pocket to withdraw the check from her final table of the night. "Thanks."

"Quicker you get them out of here, the quicker I can go home."

"No argument here," Elizabeth murmured. She smiled brightly at the couple seated just inside the doors. "Can I get you anything else?"

After dispatching the table and collecting their payment and her tip, she returned to the counter. “I think we can close up.”

“Great.” Courtney untied her apron and shoved it in her purse. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to go. You can get Cody to help you clean up, can’t you?”

“I...” Elizabeth blinked. “It’s not really his job—”

“Like I give a crap.” Courtney swung her purse over her shoulders. “Or maybe you want to be alone with me so I can be reminded some more of how much I hate you.”

Elizabeth could see her future at Kelly’s spread out in front of her—Courtney using this terrible situation to duck out of any work possible, and Elizabeth’s guilt at the lie preventing her from arguing the point.

“Fine.” Elizabeth glanced at Cody, who was seated silently at the counter, nursing a glass of iced tea. “Do you mind, Cody?”

“No problem, Miss Webber.” Cody straightened. “Good night, Miss Matthews.”

“Go to hell,” Courtney tossed over her shoulder as she left through the back door.

Elizabeth’s shoulders slumped and she took a brief moment to collect herself. “I’m sorry, Cody. I know it’s not your job description, but honestly, it’s just easier—”

“No problem, Miss Webber,” Cody repeated. He stood and came around the counter to retrieve a plastic bin and wet a washcloth for the tables. “I’ve sat here enough nights to know how it’s done.”

Elizabeth smiled and called into the back to let the cook know he could switch off and clean up the back. She began to organize receipts and the deposit to put in the safe for Bobbie in the morning. “Are you ever going to call me Elizabeth?” she asked.

“It’s unlikely, Miss Webber.” But Elizabeth heard the humor in his voice and decided that it wasn’t worth arguing at the moment. Her guards were sweet teddy bears who still bristled when Jason was around, and she knew Jason hated the dirty looks from the three men entrusted with her safety.

“I’m sure Courtney will calm down eventually,” Elizabeth said, “and she’ll stop forcing the extra work on me, so I hope this...that this doesn’t go in any report to Sonny or Jason.”

Cody remained silent as he washed down another table. She narrowed her eyes. “Cody, I’m serious. Courtney has a right be upset—”

“With all due respect, Miss Webber,” Cody said, stacking a chair on a table. “She had a right *two months* ago. It’s not as though she and Jason were engaged. She’s only holding on to the anger because she knows how guilty you feel.” His cheeks flushed slightly and he moved on to clear, clean and stack another table.

Elizabeth rubbed her eyes. “She’s just...upset this week. I knew when I began to show...it would make things worse.” She dumped the last of the coffee pots. “But you’re right, Cody. I can’t let her get to me. It’s not like Jason and I are dating now. I didn’t steal her boyfriend.” She hesitated. “I guess I merely...*borrowed* him.”

Cody snorted. “You’re not kidding,” he muttered.

“What was that?” Elizabeth arched an eyebrow. “Cody, you, Marco, and Francis have got to *stop* irritating Jason. He’s doing the best he can—”

“Again, with respect, Miss Webber, Jason Morgan *is* a good man. I am extremely loyal to him,” Cody said, stacking up the last table. “And I would give my life for him. That being said, he’s goddamn moron who doesn’t understand how lucky he is.” He coughed. “Such as it is.”

“Still.” Elizabeth couldn’t fight the small smile. At least there were people still on her side—even if they were paid to be.

### **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

Elizabeth waited for Cody to do a sweep of the courtyard before she followed him outside. “Just let me lock the door,” she said, turning with her keys in hand.

Just as she slipped the key into the tumbler, she heard a muffled swear and a gloved hand slid over her mouth, an arm around her waist. She tried to force out a scream as she was lifted into the air. As her captor swung her around—probably trying to make a quick escape to the parking lot—she saw Cody struggling with another man.

*Get away. Get away. Have to get away. Can’t let Ric get my baby.* With all her strength and visualizing the courtyard in her mind, she launched her weight against the man holding her, cracking the top of her head against his jaw, and kicking back with her legs. They went sprawling into the tables, his grip released enough that Elizabeth could scramble away. She started for the door, but somehow...

She *knew* she would never make it in time. *Kneecaps. Kneecaps.* She whirled around, stunned by how close the hulking shape was to her, but she couldn’t let the fear freeze her. She kicked out with her leg toward his knees and with a grunt, the man crumpled to the ground. He started to rise, but Elizabeth grabbed one of the nearby chairs and swung it over his head, crashing it over his head.

“Elizabeth, run!” She heard Cody grunt, but Elizabeth just...couldn’t. A piece of the chair was still in her hand, so she just started hitting her would-be kidnapper. She kept swinging and swinging, as pieces of it continued to break off, until the man stopped moving.

“Miss Webber...” Cody was breathing heavily. “I got this.” He put his hand on her shoulder and Elizabeth stumbled back towards Kelly’s, her eyes wide, her breaths shallow. “It’s all right.” He gestured towards the end of the courtyard. “My guy is out, too. I gotta get them tied up and inside the restaurant, out of sight. Can you call Sonny and Jason? We need a cleanup crew. I gotta get this done.”

He held out his cell phone.

Elizabeth closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Yes. Yes.” She took the phone from him, and then looked up. “I didn’t...I’m sorry I didn’t run.”

“Well...” Cody looked down at the incapacitated man at their feet. “I guess it worked out this time. Call Jason, Elizabeth. It’ll be okay.”

She nodded and punched in the number. Jason’s voice came over the line, sounding worried. “*Cody, what’s up? Is Elizabeth all right?*”

“J-Jason, it’s me. Cody and I were...attacked outside of Kelly’s.” She took a deep breath.

“*Elizabeth—*”

“We’re, um, okay, but he’s dragging the guys inside and he says he needs a clean-up crew.” She dragged her free hand through her hair. “I went for the knees, just like you told me.”

“*I’ll be right there. Sonny and I will be right there.*” The line went dead, and Elizabeth hurried to hold the door open for Cody as he started to drag the first man in.

## **Harborview Towers: Penthouse Level**

Jason had been home when Elizabeth’s harried phone call had reached him. He’d taken only a second to tell Max outside Sonny’s door that they were needed at Kelly’s before jabbing at the elevator. He wanted to take the steps, but he knew the elevator was quicker. All he could hear was Elizabeth.

*I went for the knees, just like you told me.*

That meant the bastard had been close enough to grab her. He swore and jabbed the button again. Sonny’s door was yanked open and he was soon joined by Max and Sonny, Rocco stepping out and taking up Max’s post.

“What happened?” Sonny demanded as the elevator finally arrived and the trio were able to get inside for the parking garage.

“Elizabeth called me from Cody’s line. They were attacked at Kelly’s.” Jason wished he’d taken the steps just to have something to do. “She says they’re fine but they need a crew. I already called Johnny. He’ll meet us there, but *damn it.*” He punched the side of the car. “I should have doubled her guards. One wasn’t enough—”

“One is all I send with my own wife, Jason,” Sonny said, his voice level. “Unless we’re positive of a heightened threat, we don’t raise the security. The cops will get involved when they see that many men following one of us around. No way to know for sure Ric or Faith would come after her.”

“She told me she went for the knees,” Jason muttered. “Like I taught her. You know what means, Sonny. If she had to go for the knees, the piece of scum had his hands on her.”

The doors opened and Jason was about to go for his bike, but Sonny tugged him towards a waiting limo. “We’ll need to bring Elizabeth back here. We’ll call Harry to take a look at her, and if she’s cut up or hurt, you can’t bring her back on the bike.”

Hating that Sonny was right, he followed the other men into the limo.

“Did she say anything else?” Sonny asked, as the car pulled out of the garage and started the five minute ride to the docks and Kelly’s.

“No.” Jason squeezed his eyes shut and searched inside for the focus he was going to need to see this through. “She sounded shaken up.”

“Jase...” Sonny hesitated. “I’m sure it’s all right. We didn’t know what the threat level was. Now we know and can take precautions.”

“I *promised* to protect her,” Jason murmured. “How is letting her almost be grabbed protecting her?”

## **Kelly’s: Dining Room**

By the time Jason and Sonny arrived at Kelly’s, the cleanup crew had arrived. Sonny swore when he saw the broken tables and chairs outside. He was going to have to get them replaced before morning or Bobbie was going to know exactly what happened here.

Cody and Johnny were inside, standing by the table where Francis was examining Elizabeth’s hands. Jason ignored everyone and went for her, crouching in front of her. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“We were leaving,” Elizabeth said. She straightened and took a deep breath. “I turned to lock the door and I’m not really sure how it happened—”

“One guy grabbed me from behind,” Cody growled. “I swept the parking lot and the courtyard before I brought her into the open, Jason, I *swear*, but they must have been waiting somewhere—” When Sonny just gestured for him to get on with the events and skip the excuses, Cody huffed. “The guy got me from behind and I was struggling to get rid of him, but the other one grabbed Eliz—Miss Webber.”

“I remembered my self-defense lessons,” Elizabeth said softly. She looked at Jason and tried to smile. “I threw my weight against him to get him off balance, hoping he’d stumble into the tables. When we fell, I started to run, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to get the door unlocked in time and I wasn’t sure I could get past him to the parking lot. And you...last summer, you told me not go for the head because I’m too short, so I kicked him in the knees.”

“And *then* you ran,” Jason prompted, but scowled as she looked away. “Elizabeth, I told you that you need to get him on the ground and *run*—”

“I grabbed a chair and swung it at him,” she said softly. “And I kept hitting him with pieces of the chair until he was passed out and Cody stopped me.”

Jason closed his eyes, torn between relief that she'd had the presence of mind to not only fight her captor but use his advice and anger that she hadn't acted with a sense of self-preservation. "Elizabeth —"

"I'm sorry. I should have run, I know...b-but I was afraid I might not get away or that Cody would be hurt a-and I d-didn't know if I could get inside—"

"Jase..." Sonny touched his shoulder. "We gotta clear out of here."

"Right." He took Elizabeth's hands in his own, and flinched at the nicks and cuts from the chair she'd wielded. "We have a doctor coming to the penthouse. Are you okay? Do you feel any cramping?"

"Just sore." He stood and drew her to her feet, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

Sonny looked at Cody. "All right, where are the sons of bitches?"

"I locked them in the pantry closet until Johnny got here with the cuffs. They're in the van on their way to the warehouse," Cody answered. "I'm sorry, Jason. Miss Webber. This is my fault—"

"No," Jason said, roughly. "No. I asked you to protect Elizabeth a-and you did that. It's my fault. I should have put more men on the building." He looked at Sonny. "I know I should go to the warehouse and wait for them to wake up, but—"

"No, no, you're right." Sonny shook his head. "I'll go with Cody and Johnny to the warehouse. Max," he looked at his bodyguard. "Give Marco a call. He's supposed to be at Elizabeth's studio waiting for the switch off. You go back to the penthouse with Jason and Elizabeth, and tell Marco to go on the door there. Rocco will stay on my door and you make sure the rest of the building is secure."

"All right." Jason steered Elizabeth toward the front doors and then to the waiting limo.

After they were gone, Sonny turned and looked at Cody. "Tell me, how close did they come to getting her out of here?"

Cody closed his eyes in disgust. "Too goddamn close, Boss. If she hadn't known how to take him down, he could have had her out of here before I got loose. Lucky for us, Miss Webber's a fighter. She knocked the bastard out cold." He rubbed his forehead. "I hate that she had to do that—"

"Better than the alternative." Sonny heaved a sigh. "All right. Get in a call in to replace the furniture in the courtyard." He looked to Johnny. "Make sure this place looks like it did before this incident." He looked at Cody. "You ready to go get some answers?"

"Looking forward to it."

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Jason opened the door and stepped to the side to allow Elizabeth to enter. She looked like she was in one piece, but he didn't know if the fall to the ground had injured her. "Our doctor will be here soon



to check on you. Are you sure you don't feel any cramping or—”

“I don't.” Elizabeth turned to him and bit her lip. “Are you mad I didn't run? You told me to run, but I just—”

“Hey.” Jason stepped forward and brushed her hair back from her face, letting his thumbs drift down her cheeks until they fanned over her jaw line. “I wasn't there. I know that you're standing in front of me and not missing, so at the end of the day, I don't care.”

“I just...” Elizabeth leaned forward until her head rested against his chest. “I just kept thinking that I couldn't let them take me, because they'd take me to Ric and my baby would be in danger. I *had* to protect her, Jason. I couldn't let him near her.”

“I know. Instinct takes over in moments like that.” He drew her over to the sofa where they sat down and he examined her hands. “I'm just...I'm sorry you had to go through this. I promised you I'd keep you safe—”

“What did you just say to me five seconds ago?” she cut in with a wan smile. “I'm sitting *here*. I'm not missing. So I don't care. Jason, if Ric had sent two men to grab me, and Cody hadn't been there, I'd be gone. I just...I got lucky we were in the courtyard and I know it like the back of my hand. If we hadn't been so close to the tables, I'm not sure it would have worked.”

“You're right.” He couldn't let go of her hands, couldn't stop looking at her, as if to reassure himself that she'd come through this experience unscathed. If Ric had succeeded tonight, they may never have found her. He might never have seen her again. “We got lucky.”

There was a knock on the door. When Jason opened it, Marco nodded. “I just wanted to let you know I'm here, on duty for the night and that Harry's here for Miss Webber.” Marco edged around Jason just slightly, as if trying to look inside the room. “Is she all right?”

“Marco?” Elizabeth leaned forward as Jason stepped to the side to allow their doctor through. “I'm glad you're here. And I'm fine.”

“We'll let the doctor be the judge of that,” Jason told her. He looked back at Marco. “Thanks. Let Sonny and whoever he brings to the door get through, but no one else. Elizabeth needs rest.”

“Understood.” Jason closed the door and turned to see Harry Lowenstein taking Elizabeth's blood pressure.

“So how far along are you, Miss Webber?” Harry asked. “You said you're not feeling any cramps?”

“I'm fourteen weeks,” Elizabeth said, casting an uneasy glance at Jason. “And so far, I'm not. That's good, right?”

“Well, based on the details Max gave me over the phone, it should be. You said you fell backwards but got up right away? Did you fall on your stomach? On anything hard?” Harry asked.

“No.” Elizabeth winced as the pressure increased on her arm. “No. I think I was maybe three feet in the air, but I fell on the man I was trying to get away from. After that I just kicked him and hit him with a chair. I never hit the ground again.”

“Hmmm...” Harry hesitated. “Your blood pressure’s pretty high, Miss Webber.”

“Well, that’s not news,” Elizabeth sighed. “It’s been high at my last two appointments. Dr. Lee said if I came in again that way, she’d prescribe bed rest to prevent hypertension.”

“Well, she’d be right.” Harry looked at Jason. “Other than some bumps and possible bruising, I’d say she’s in pretty good shape, all things considered. I’d recommend getting an ultrasound as soon as possible to be sure, but I’m more concerned about her blood pressure.”

“But after what happened tonight, it *should* be high,” Elizabeth said. She looked at Jason. “That just makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“It does, but you just told me that it’s been elevated for most of your pregnancy.” Harry started to pack up his instruments. “That’s a bit disconcerting.”

“I’ll make sure she rests,” Jason said. Elizabeth scowled at him. “At least until she can go see Dr. Lee. If it’s just high because of tonight, Elizabeth, then it’ll go down. Your next appointment is in what, a week, two?”

“Two.” Elizabeth leaned back, her face pale. “All right.”

There was a knock, then Marco pushed open the door. “Mr. Corinthos to see you.”

Sonny strode in, Max, Johnny and Cody on his heels. “Hey, Harry. What’s the prognosis?”

“Bed rest.” Harry stood. “At least a week of light bed rest, and then just taking it easy. She’ll see her regular OB by then who will have more specific instructions. Keep an eye on yourself, Miss Webber. If you feel any stomach cramps or pain, get to the hospital. Don’t bother with me.”

Jason watched as Elizabeth clutched her abdomen. “Is it likely?” she asked.

“No, no. Just as a precaution.” He smiled at them, said his goodbyes and headed for the elevator. Marco closed the door behind him.

Elizabeth eyed the men gathered by the door. “Should I go upstairs?”

Jason immediately went back to her side, worried that she might overdo it. “Do you want water or anything?”

“You can stay down here a moment, Elizabeth,” Sonny told her. “It didn’t take more than a few minutes to learn that the men who went after you tonight were Faith Roscoe’s soldiers, which likely means it was Ric. We assumed that, but it was good to get confirmation. Ric is apparently pissed that you left him for Jason.”

Elizabeth flushed, and Jason squeezed her hand, knowing that she hated to perpetuate the lie in front of men who were protecting her. “It’s because he hates me,” he told her. “You know that.”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth looked back at Sonny. “So what now?”

“Doubling your guards,” Sonny responded. “You can’t go back to Kelly’s. It was one thing when we weren’t sure you were in danger, but it’s a nightmare to secure it hour after hour, so you’re going to have to stop working.”

Jason could see the tension in Elizabeth’s shoulders, and he knew she hated the loss of her independence, of her ability to provide for herself. She raised an eyebrow. “And what else?”

“You’ll have to stay here,” Sonny said. “It’s more secure than anywhere else we could house you, and we can control access to it.”

Elizabeth looked at him, and Jason tried to keep his expression neutral. It was difficult enough to keep himself detached from her pregnancy when she lived apart from him. To know that she would be living here again, for an indeterminate length of time, as her body changed and her pregnancy advanced...

Jason finally nodded. “It makes the most sense,” he told her. And only half for the benefit of the men watching, “And I want you close anyway. With the baby...” He rubbed the back of his neck, uncomfortable. “It...works, Elizabeth.”

She bit her lip and then looked back at Sonny. “You’re right. At the end of the day, I should do whatever you guys think will keep my...*our* child safe.” She flicked her eyes back him, full of nerves. “So...I’ll move in.”

“Good.” Sonny nodded. “Jason, why don’t you get Elizabeth settled upstairs, and then we’ll...” He coughed and shrugged. “Talk.”

Jason stood and helped Elizabeth to her feet. “I’ll be back down in a little while,” he told Sonny as he led her to the stairs.

“Take your time,” Sonny called.

Once they were upstairs, Jason left her in one of the guest rooms while he went for a shirt for her to wear that night. While she changed, he grabbed a bottle of water from the mini-fridge in his makeshift gym and returned to the guest room to find her sitting up in bed, her legs covered by a sheet and his light blue shirt listing to one side, baring one of her shoulders. “Here,” he said gruffly, holding out the water.

“Thanks.” Elizabeth hesitated. “Jason, I know this isn’t an ideal situation—”

“It’s the best solution,” Jason interrupted. He had to get out of this room and not dwell on the fact that she was only wearing his shirt. He sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. “Elizabeth, I told you. Nothing matters to me more than keeping you and the baby safe. There’s *nothing* I wouldn’t do to

make that happen.”

The corner of her lip curved up as she held the plastic water bottle in her hands. “Yeah, I’m getting that, considering you lied to everyone you love and you’re letting me stay with you until this over. I know you hate when I thank you but…” She looked up, her eyes filled with something he couldn’t quite define. “The fact that I can look forward to raising my child with any sense of…safety and freedom from my horrible choices…it’s because of you. So, thank you.”

He nodded, because he didn’t know what else to say. “I should…I should get back downstairs. If you need anything—food or…anything, just let me know.”

“Okay.”

Jason left the room, and headed down the stairs. Johnny, Max and Cody had left, leaving Sonny seated in the armchair adjacent to his sofa. “So what do we know?”

“Not much more than I came in with,” Sonny sighed. “The men are pissed. Cody was ready to hand me his gun and tell me to do away with him. He’s sick over this.”

“I-I don’t blame him for this happening.” Jason sat on the sofa. “You were right, earlier. We didn’t even know if there’d be a threat to Elizabeth, if Ric hated me enough to come after me when his life was at stake.” He hesitated. “Do we know *why* they came for Elizabeth? Does Ric believe the child is his?”

“They weren’t forthcoming,” Sonny replied. “But the men assume it’s due to Ric’s hatred of the situation, of you. I’ve let it circulate that my mother picked me over him, and that now he thinks I picked you over him as my brother, and *Elizabeth* picking you is just another stack in his crazy pile of shit. They buy it.”

“Good.” Jason clasped his hands together. “We don’t know where they were taking her?”

“To a van that was a long gone by the time we went looking for it.” Sonny leaned his head back, looking weary. “She all right? I know she must have been scared.”

“She’s holding together.” Jason shook his head. “After last summer, I *never* wanted her to go through that again, to feel that fear.”

“The one whose head she bashed?” Sonny said. “She knocked him out good. Would have had a nasty concussion if we’d let him live long enough. Word’s gonna spread to anyone else Faith Roscoe might send. If you mess with Elizabeth Webber, your life isn’t worth much.” He sat up. “You taught her well, Jase. She went for the kneecaps, and kept herself safe. I hate that she went through it, but she did and she’s going to be all right.”

“Sonny…I—I know you wouldn’t give the order, but…” Jason paused. “If I see Ric, I’m *not* gonna care he’s your brother.”

“After this?” Sonny grimaced and shook his head. “I don’t care much either. You see him, you do

what you gotta do. He signed his death warrant the moment he came after Elizabeth. I was willing to keep her safe, look for him so I could deliver him to the Families, but after tonight? I hope I can personally remove that psychotic son of a bitch from her life. No one is going to get that close to her again, Jason.” He pressed a hand to his heart. “And not because that’s my niece or nephew she’s carrying, but because I can’t see her go through it again.”

“Good.” Jason got to his feet. “Then you go to tell the Families to get off their asses, stop *pretending* to help, and hunt this son of a bitch down. We can only do so much if they’re not fully cooperating. Tell them to get the word out to anyone who matters, Ric Lansing went after my family. He’s a dead man walking.”

# Part II: Can We Still Be Friends

# Chapter Nine

*More than angry words I hate this silence  
It's getting so loud  
Well I want to scream  
But bitterness has silenced these emotions  
It's getting hard to breathe*  
- Hold Me, Savage Garden

*Saturday, June 7, 2003*

## Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

If Carly hadn't decided to keep her mouth shut and cooperate with this situation because it was simply the right thing to do, the added benefit of confusing the crap out of her husband and best friend might have been reason enough. Not flipping out when Jason broke Courtney's heart, or screaming like a shrew at Elizabeth at every opportunity, pretending not to know the truth...Carly was enjoying this far more than she ought to have.

But that had been before. When Jason had been lying to make Ric leave town thinking he had nothing to stay for, not when this lie was keeping Elizabeth and her child alive. Now, as Sonny explained to Carly that Jason had decided he needed to support Elizabeth more so they were moving in together, she knew something terrible had happened.

It was time to stop playing around.

Carly stood in front of the fireplace, her hand braced on the small of her back. "Does Ric know the truth, Sonny? Do we know how much danger Elizabeth is in?"

Sonny blinked at her, and she wanted to roll her eyes. "Yes, yes, I knew all along. I'm not an idiot. I also know I'm the last person Jason would have trusted with this, considering my track record with trying to help him and then making everything worse." She pressed her lips together. "Plus, I'm supposed to be Courtney's best friend, so if he couldn't trust prissy Robin Scorpio to protect the truth about Michael when she *loved* Jason, why should he expect me to do the same when I don't even *like* Elizabeth much? So, let's not focus on the reasons I wasn't told outright because I'm *not* angry, Sonny."

"I..." Sonny hesitated. "We thought you might know, you hinted at it, but we weren't sure. Carly—"

"Paternity secrets work better when no one knows them. I know Jason tried to lie to you, but you never bought it either, and if this were Jason's child, he'd be doing a better damn job of protecting Elizabeth. She would have been moved into the penthouse weeks ago, but instead, Jason let her out into the world, working and living in buildings that are far from secure," Carly said. "He didn't go to her doctor's appointments and he couldn't be bothered to fill out a simple medical form to keep the Quartermaines from sniffing around, wondering why the histories didn't match. Sonny, I don't know about the search for Ric, but I'm out there, and this *story* is falling apart."

“It’s not the story we’re worried about so much right now.” Sonny rubbed his face. “He’s working with Faith Roscoe, and she sent two men to grab Elizabeth last night after she closed. One guy jumped Cody, and if Elizabeth hadn’t had the presence of mind to send her attacker crashing into the courtyard tables, she’d be gone right now. So I’m even less concerned with the lie at the moment.”

“We *need* to be concerned about it,” Carly said briskly. “I know you don’t want me to know about business, but I think a woman who’s ignorant in this world, who ignores details because it’s better to have plausible deniability is an idiot. You told the Families to go after Ric because he’s threatening Jason’s family. If they found out you lied, we’d have worse problems on our hands than Ric and Faith.”

The hands slid from Sonny’s face and he looked at her, apparently for the first time. “I told you, Sonny. I accept your life. So we keep Elizabeth safe from that psychotic twisted piece of shit, but we have to make sure this lie *stays* credible.”

Looking exhausted, Sonny lowered himself into the armchair in front of her. “Sometimes, Carly, you drive me insane. And then others, you remind me exactly why I married you. You’re a schemer, which means you always have to stay one step ahead of the person you’re manipulating. I should have...I should have thought of it, of what would happen if the Families knew...”

“That’s fine. Most of the time, Sonny, I could give two damns what you’re doing in your business beyond what it means for me and my children. But right now, this is *personal*. Ric Lansing came after you for personal reasons. He targeted Elizabeth because Jason’s stupid for her, so do not shut me out of this. I can *help*.”

“Yeah.” Sonny looked at her. “Yeah. So, her guards are doubled, she’s not going back to work, and the doctor told her bed rest because her blood pressure is too high anyway. She’s moving in with Jason because she can be protected better. I cannot think of a single thing to protect her more than that.”

“Me either, and I leave that stuff for you anyway.” Carly sat on the adjacent couch. “Sonny, I’ve spent the last two months thinking about this, trying to understand why Jason would agree to claim Elizabeth’s child to the entire world and then ignore her. Because if I could figure that out, I could figure out a way to tell him to knock it off. I could figure out how to fix any problems he was having, but Sonny...I think I *know* what the problem is...and I *can’t* fix it.”

Sonny looked at her, his eyes dark and pained. “I think I know too. He loves her, and he’s afraid she’ll walk out the door again.”

“And take her child with her,” Carly concluded. “And the last thing he wants is to watch another child walk out of his life. He knows the truth, and he knows what could happen when this ends. So I guess...he’s trying to protect himself. So how do we stop him from doing that?”

“I’m not sure we can any more than I think he can stop himself from getting hurt.” Sonny sighed. “Because the longer he tries to be detached, the more Elizabeth is going to think it’s because this baby is Ric’s. And she’ll walk out anyway.”



Her throat burning. “I can’t fix that, Sonny. I *can’t* take back what I did with Michael, what *we* did together. I can’t talk to Elizabeth about it, because I know better than to get involved in Jason’s life. I’ll probably mess it up even more. I can’t make Jason trust Elizabeth to stay because I don’t *know* if she will. How do I fix this, Sonny?”

Sonny closed his eyes. “We can’t. Talking to them isn’t going to make it better. They’ll never believe it coming from us. And, going by the last two months...they’re not going to talk to each other long enough to fix it themselves, which is the only way this gets better.”

“If they don’t fix this,” Carly said softly, “And Jason keeps avoiding this pregnancy, the seeds of doubt are going to be there. The Families probably don’t want to help as it is. It won’t take them much to want to turn on you, so you at least...have to tell Jason *that*.”

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Jason came down the stairs, and stopped in front of the sofa where he had carried her that morning. Apparently, Jason Morgan took light bed rest very seriously. No stairs for her. No further than the bathroom or kitchen.

“I swear I haven’t moved,” Elizabeth said, forcing a smile and holding up her hands. “Not even a single inch.”

“I know.” Jason sat in the armchair adjacent to her, his legs spread out and his hands clasped between them. “I...we should talk...about how this is going to work. I—I know you stayed here before, but things...things are...” He exhaled. “Well, it’s not the same and—”

He looked so uncomfortable, so pained and suddenly, she just couldn’t do it anymore. She drew her knees up to her chest and rested her chin on top, looking at him. “Jason, do you remember the night we met at Jake’s?”

Jason broke off his protracted and distressed speech to look at her, bewildered. “Yeah. Why?”

“From the moment I met you,” Elizabeth began, “you were so *different* from everyone else. You made me feel comfortable in my own skin because you just...let me ramble and then *you* would just talk to me. And we were *so* good at that, Jason. Even when things were difficult between us. When you pushed me away that first time, after the bomb in my studio, you listened to my argument and you acknowledged it. I knew you left Port Charles for your own reasons, and not just because geographical distance kept me safer. And every time you came back...it was like you’d never left.” She smiled at him, remembering the way she’d run to him that first time, on the docks.

“I...remember.” And he must have thought of those times as fondly as she did, because he was smiling now.

“I know...things started to get complicated between us that second time you were home, but, still, you were *always* honest with me.” She tucked her hair behind her ears. “Even when I wasn’t honest with myself. I always felt like you weren’t even angry with me, though you should have been. You were

annoyed and irritated that I was lying to *myself*. I miss that, Jason. I really do. I miss having one person in my life that I could be completely honest with.”

“I miss...I miss it, too,” he admitted. And she watched as his shoulders slackened, as if the words themselves lifted weight and tension. “Elizabeth, I know things haven’t been right between us for months.”

“I know. I know I messed everything up,” she sighed. She stared down at her toes, wiggling them. “I thought...when you came home last year, that this...this was *finally* going to our chance. We were finally going to get our timing right. I wasn’t mourning Lucky or trying to make things work with him, and you weren’t...” She looked up and wrinkled her nose with a wry smile. “I don’t know, I never knew why you didn’t think it was the right time, but I could tell...even back in the studio that December, that you felt the same way I did.”

He looked away, but his mouth had curved into a slight smile and his eyes were soft. “I thought I did a good job at hiding it. You were...just getting past Lucky, and I know...we don’t have a huge age difference between us, but—”

“But it was a lot at the time,” Elizabeth acknowledged, and just sitting here, honestly discussing the fact they’d been attracted to one another even then made her feel as though they really *could* have this conversation. “So, I guess I understand it. And though sometimes I wished you had pressured me more two years ago, when I was clearly torn because I didn’t know how to explain to Lucky, the world, *myself* that I wasn’t in love with him anymore, that I wasn’t same the girl who’d buried him...I *was* glad that I eventually figured it out for myself. When Lucky slept with Sarah, I wasn’t angry because I was jealous. I was angry because they lied to me.” She sighed, remembering the pain and the hurt and thinking it all seemed so small now. “Because I had asked them and asked them, and they had denied it. But you were back, so it didn’t...hurt for long.”

“I hated to see you so upset,” Jason said. He stood and joined her on the couch. “But I...I was glad you were finally going to be away from Lucky.” He hesitated. “And I thought it going to be our chance, too.” His eyes darkened and he looked away. “But you were kidnapped.”

“I never...” Elizabeth crawled forward slightly, tucking her knees underneath her. “I *never* blamed you, Jason. Not once. In all those hours I was scared...I knew you were going to come for me. Somehow. I knew it.”

“Not fast enough,” Jason shook his head. “I wasted time because I thought it was about ELQ and Edward and AJ couldn’t help me—” He hesitated.

Elizabeth drew back and just blinked at him. “Edward...AJ?” she repeated. “You...You went to *them*?”

“I asked Taggart, too,” Jason admitted. “Because he always cared about you, and he...they all tried, but I wasted time going to dinner at the Quartermaine’s because it was the only way Edward would help—”

Her heart was going to leap out of her chest. “Jason, you went to dinner at the Quartermaines and you asked Taggart.” Was this reality? Was she dreaming this? “Why...”

“I would have done anything,” he said, fiercely. “*Anything* to bring you home safely. I would have asked anyone...” He turned on the sofa and surprised her by feathering the back of his hand down her cheek and tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. “Elizabeth, if I hadn’t found you...”

She was hallucinating. Pregnancy could create delusions, because he was looking at her the way he always had. “But you did find me,” she said softly. “Like I knew you would.” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “But I know...that I messed everything up after that. Like I always do. I know...I ruined things long before I said that *you* did.”

Jason frowned. “You didn’t...Elizabeth—”

“Don’t...we’re being honest now, aren’t we?” Elizabeth said, her breath hitching, because here was the difficult part. If they were *ever* going to get that friendship back, they had to discuss how she’d torched everything they’d had. “The night of the storm, when you got a phone call and you had to go. I should have told you...I should have told you how terrified I was to be alone right then. I know you had something important to do, so maybe you couldn’t have done anything, but I was so scared....” She closed her eyes when he brushed a tear away. “And then the lights went out, and I was in the stairwell, and I was back in that moment. I was praying that you’d find me...” Her eyes flew open. “I’m not...I’m not blaming *you* for Zander. I—I’m not because I made...well, up until this last spring, it was the worst mistake I’d ever made in my entire life.”

“Elizabeth—”

“But I was so terrified,” she rushed to explain. “I wanted...to feel something. And Zander kissed me, so I just...I let him. And I...” She shook her head. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I still can’t really explain it to myself. I don’t know if I would have told you if you hadn’t...seen...or if you hadn’t been there the next day...I like to think I would have been honest, but I felt so *dirty* and disgusting...” The tears were falling in earnest now, burning hot trails down her cheeks. “And you...you looked right through me. I thought...”

“Elizabeth, you and I...” He cradled her head in his hands, using his thumbs to brush away her tears. “We hadn’t said anything to each other—”

“Does that *change* anything?” Elizabeth asked. “Does the fact you and I hadn’t sat down and made promises change what we were? What we could have been? I thought I had lost my chance with you, so I clung to Zander so I wouldn’t be alone, but I just...I couldn’t do it. I didn’t care about him that way. I didn’t...” She hesitated. “But that day I was shot, and you looked at me that way...” The way he was looking at her now. God, if she could paint that look, she could keep it forever. “I thought maybe...maybe you didn’t hate me anymore, but you still didn’t want me. You kept telling me it was too dangerous, but I wish...you should have been honest with me.” She licked her lips. “I *know* I hurt you, but you wouldn’t just tell me that it was over, and I hated you for months for making me feel like I still mattered...”

“You mattered,” Jason said. “You...you always mattered. You still...” He frowned. “I *was* honest with you, Elizabeth. After you were...grazed by that bullet, I didn’t want you to be hurt because of me. Not again. It was too dangerous—”

“No, no,” Elizabeth pulled back, her breath hitching as sobs slipped out. “No, we’re supposed to be *honest*, Jason. You told me it was too dangerous and I wanted to meet in secret, but you said it wouldn’t work, but you...” She forced the words out. “You did *all* of that with Courtney, a—and you were with her during the trial even though you could have gone to jail, so I *know* you were lying to me. Because you didn’t want tell me how I ruined everything, how I was *always* ruining things, so you just...you told me that so I’d go away.”

“No, I didn’t.” Jason reached for her, but she shook her head again.

“No, because it wasn’t too dangerous to Courtney, so I don’t...I don’t understand it. You *had* to be lying, because you were with her all the time, you even walked her home before you came back to the penthouse the night I found out about Sonny. You went to the hospital to see Alexis, you went to the police station, you went to Courtney’s...and I kept sitting on the couch, *waiting* for you to call, to explain, but it was hours and hours and you let me sit there, thinking about how stupid I was, and how —” She closed her eyes, and forced herself to calm down. It did no good to get so upset. It was over...things had changed. “I ruined everything, Jason, and I know that, but you should have told me you had feelings for Courtney by then. You never should have sat on this sofa and promised me we could try.”

She turned away, and maybe would have stood to leave the room, but Jason gently took her elbow and forced her to look at him. “Elizabeth, I am not lying to you,” he said. “I didn’t lie then, either. Listen to me...” He took her by the shoulders, and Elizabeth forced herself to look at him. He’d sat there and let her pour her heart out, it was only fair he’d be granted the same courtesy.

“Okay.” She took a deep breath. “Okay.”

“When I said those things to you last summer, when I said it was too dangerous...” He hesitated. “It *was*. Because even though we didn’t know much about Alcazar at that point, we knew he was out there. He was a threat, and he’d already ordered you to be kidnapped. I don’t know...if maybe I thought after it was over, we could...try again. It didn’t work out that way. Elizabeth, *nothing* ever happened with Courtney while you were in my life.”

Her eyes flew to his, because how could that be anything but a lie, but he didn’t look like he was lying. He didn’t look as though the words were false. “M-maybe not physically, but—”

“I wanted to tell you about Sonny,” Jason told her. “But he...he gets these moods, and he snaps, and you can’t get through to him. He was questioning me a lot, especially after you were kidnapped. So when he told me you couldn’t know, I didn’t feel like I could argue, and if I went against him to tell you anyway...” He shook his head. “I should have. I should have handled everything better. You thought Sonny was dead, and you just...wanted to be there for me, but I could not accept your comfort, your worry because it was a lie, and I was trying *so* hard not to lie to you. It went on for much longer than I thought it would. And...when it came out the way it did, I knew it was on the

news, I knew you knew the truth, so I delayed coming back here. Because I didn't want to see how much I hurt you."

She licked her lips, because all of that made so much sense. "Why...why didn't you say that when you came in?" she asked. "If you...if you'd said that..."

"You told me I ruined everything," Jason reminded her. "And you had that look in your eyes. You were already packed and ready to go, and you..." He swallowed. "You told me I was Sonny's enforcer, that's all I was—"

"Because that's all you were acting like," Elizabeth cut in. "It was like I wasn't there, like I hadn't been kidnapped or shot at, like I wasn't living in this penthouse for my protection. After all those months of being lied to by Lucky about being in love with me, and then not being attracted to Sarah, I just...I couldn't do it again. I couldn't be ignored, placated, patronized. You told me it was none of my business." She pressed a hand to her chest, her heart still breaking from those words. "Like I don't *get* your life. I found you, bleeding in the snow and hauled you home where I proceeded to let everyone think you and I were lovers so the police wouldn't suspect." She laughed ruefully. "I'm not sure people don't *still* assume that, now that I think about it. Because I never told anyone any differently. I lied to everyone in my life to hide you in my studio two years ago, and every time Sonny asked me to leave my own home, I walked out without another word."

"I—I know all of that," Jason said, his voice hoarse. "And you're right. I can't argue with any of that. Elizabeth, I can't go back and make it different—"

"I know. That's—that's not why I wanted to talk about this." She exhaled slowly and closed her eyes. "Jason, I want us to be honest with each other, so we can move forward and handle this situation. We have all this baggage between us, and I don't..." Frustrated, her voice breaking, "I don't want to look at you and regret not having you in my life anymore. I know I ruined any chance for us ever to be together, if not then, then certainly now, but to not even have you as a friend..." She hesitated. "I don't know if it even bothered you that we weren't friends anymore, but—"

"Every time I saw you," Jason interrupted. "I thought about just talking to you, trying to...get back to that place, but I never could. I didn't know how to start, how to handle it if..." He trailed off.

"If what?"

"If you didn't want me around." Jason exhaled slowly. "Because I knew you were hurt about Brenda, after that night at Luke's. I should have tried harder to make you understand what had happened, but I kept...I kept leaving it up to you, because I was afraid if I told you what I wanted...you wouldn't want the same thing, and I didn't...I didn't want to face that."

"So, that night at Luke's..." Elizabeth said slowly, "if I had just told you that we still had a chance...you would have still wanted one?" She frowned, and shook her head. "No, no, I don't believe that. Because something was going on with Courtney by that point, I know. She's told me that you guys...that it started while you were guarding her, and that you were guarding her *while* I was still living here—"

“No,” Jason said, firmly and with a slight irritation. “I don’t...maybe Courtney was having feelings, I’m not sure. I—I never asked. But I felt nothing for her when I was with you. I was thinking about you, even when I should have been concentrating on work, but—”

“I don’t...I don’t understand.” This didn’t work, this didn’t line up. “Courtney moved to that loft in December. You still wanted a chance with me at Thanksgiving, Jason, and you’re telling me two weeks later you rented that loft for her, for the two of you—”

“You tell me you can’t explain what happened with Zander?” Jason said. “Well, I know exactly what you mean because I don’t...Courtney was just there, and I...you wouldn’t *talk* to me.” He rubbed his forehead.

She just stared at him. How could she have been so wrong? She couldn’t have been. “Jason, I’m not trying to trap you or make you feel bad. I know...I know that it’s possible to be with someone you care about and develop feelings for someone else. I may not have loved Lucky the way I once had, but I still cared about him, but...you were there, too and I knew how I felt about you. So...I get it. I’m not asking you to make me feel better, but I know things with Courtney started earlier than that, okay? Courtney...and E-Emily have both told me over and over again—”

“Elizabeth, I don’t care what anyone else—” He stopped and frowned. “Courtney and Emily have told you *what* exactly? I don’t...I haven’t talked to my sister about what happened between us. I wouldn’t.”

“Maybe we should...just stop here—” Elizabeth started to unfold her legs, but he reached out and held her shoulders still. “Jason—”

“If the reason you’re so upset, that you think I lied to you about it being too dangerous, is because people are telling you things, I think I should know what they are,” he told her. “Until I know what you’re thinking, I can’t respond to it. You wanted to be honest, well I’m trying.”

“It’s...” *Hoisted on my own petard*, she thought bitterly. “Fine. Emily said...and I don’t know if she said this because you’d said anything or she just ...knows you pretty well, but she said that if you had been that interested in me, it would be different, because...if you wanted to be with me, you would be.” Under his scrutinizing gaze, she lowered her eyes. “And I know that’s true. And C-Courtney told me I made up my relationship with you in my head...which made sense since you kept...you wouldn’t tell me how you felt. You...kept walking away, and...” She couldn’t keep going on, explaining. “Jason—”

The hand on her shoulder slide up her neck to cup the back of her neck and then she felt him drawing her forward. This was like an out of body of experience—she had the sensation of floating overhead and watching Jason kiss her.

God, she never thought this would happen to her again. She’d thought, for her mistakes, that two incredible moments with his arms around her and his lips hers would be it, but maybe...

Maybe it would be at least three, so she was going to make the most of it. She slid her hands in his

hair, and rose up on her knees. His arms slid down her torso, wrapping around her back, and pressing her against him. If she could stay like this forever, if he never stopped kissing her...

The knock on the door roused her faintly, but she decided to ignore it, because damn it, this was her *chance*.

“Miss Webber?” Francis called. “Jason?”

Jason drew back, and she actually whimpered at the loss. He rested his forehead against hers. “They...” He cleared his throat. “They were packing up your studio and bringing things over.”

“Oh...” Elizabeth blinked, and drew back, her hand sliding from his neck down to his shoulder. “Oh. Okay.”

“Give us a second, Francis,” Jason called, not looking away. “There has never been a single moment since the day I met you that you didn’t matter to me. Tell me, at least, you believe me about that.”

“I do,” she murmured. Feeling brave, she leaned forward and kissed him briefly. “I do believe that.”

## **Port Charles Hotel: Grille**

Carly glanced over the top of the menu to her sister-in-law and her friend. For two months, she had sat across from her and pretended she believed Jason had cheated on her, impregnated his ex-girlfriend, but she had never acknowledged the lie to her husband, so it had felt...not quite like a game, but not as serious as it did right now.

She felt guilty to be keeping the secret, but after what Elizabeth had gone through the night before, she understood better than ever why this secret had to be contained. As much as Carly enjoyed Courtney’s companionship, she simply couldn’t see trusting her.

She set the menu aside and sighed. “Courtney, there’s something I need to tell you and I wanted you to hear it from me.”

The other blonde’s fingers tightened on the menu, bending and wrinkling the paper. “They’re together, aren’t they?” Courtney asked, her voice tight.

“No...I...” Carly sat back. “Well, I don’t really know about that. Maybe.” She had to find her inner Carly Roberts, the woman who had sauntered into Port Charles and lied every time her mouth opened. “It’s...Elizabeth is moving into the penthouse.”

Courtney straightened and she narrowed her eyes. “And you’re telling me *that* doesn’t mean they’re together? I don’t believe you, Carly. Don’t lie to spare my feelings. I need to be prepared for this—”

“All I *know* is that Elizabeth has been required to go on bed rest,” Carly said, holding up her hands in protest. “She saw her doctor and her blood pressure has been too high for weeks. She’s leaving Kelly’s, and she’s staying with Jason, at least until her health has cleared up.”

“She won’t be back at work.” Some of the tension bled from her sister-in-law’s shoulders. “So I won’t...I won’t see her in there anymore. We don’t have to work together.”

“No, so at least there’s that.” Carly hesitated. “But Courtney, you might want to start preparing yourself because...they’re having a child together. That...might lead...it might not be long before you hear they *are* together again.”

“No, no...” Courtney shook her head. “The last time she lived there, he was never there. Maybe...” She squared her shoulders. “He didn’t like living with her before, so maybe he’ll remember why he left her the first time.”

“The first time?” Carly frowned. “Courtney, Sonny was faking his death, and Jason was running around trying to track down Alcazar and protect Brenda. He was with you very rarely. I know...I know you think what you guys had started *then*, but I just...I just don’t think so—”

“You weren’t there,” Courtney shot back, a smug smile on her face. “Jason and I kissed for the first time two weeks after she walked out on him, so obviously she didn’t mean that much.”

“Let’s...let’s just order.” Carly signaled for the waiter. She hadn’t realized how quickly Jason had started looking at Courtney that way, and while that information told *Courtney* that Jason hadn’t cared for Elizabeth all that much...Carly knew her friend better than that. Jason had a habit of going through a bad time and turning to something else to drown it out. He’d gone back to Jake’s after Michael was gone and Robin had betrayed him, staying there most nights and getting into bar fights and drinking a bit too much.

And she wondered if Courtney had been anyone other than Sonny’s sister...if she would have stayed a rebound relationship.

### **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Cody pushed the door open. “Miss Webber, Nadine Crowell is here.”

Elizabeth sat up on the sofa, setting her book on the coffee table and smiled at her friend. “Hey. I was hoping you’d stop by when I left you the message.”

“Seriously?” Nadine crossed the room and sat on the end of the couch. “I could not *wait* for my shift to end before I could get over here.” She hesitated and glanced around. “Um, is anyone else here?”

“No, Jason had to go to the warehouse.” Elizabeth’s cheeks flushed and she looked down. After Francis had interrupted them earlier, Jason had busied himself directing the guards who had packed her studio to put her art supplies in one of the guest rooms and then her suitcases and personal belongings in her room. After that, Sonny had called for him and there’d been no opportunity to continue their conversation.

“Oh, good.” Nadine grinned. “So, you’re moving in with your babydaddy. This is fantastic, right? And you thought he was regretting even being involved—”



“Well, it’s not exactly that simple.” Elizabeth sat cross-legged next to her. “Without going into details because I really can’t...there was an incident last night, so Jason had someone take my blood pressure.” She sighed. “And it was pretty high. He suggested light bed rest until I go see Kelly at the end of the month.”

“I won’t ask for any details.” Nadine held up her hands. “You look okay, so that’s enough for me.” She hesitated. “So you’re staying with Jason for a few weeks?”

“No.” Elizabeth dipped her head back and smiled lightly. “It’s for the foreseeable future. He’s worried about...danger. I’m leaving my job as well.”

“Well, hell...” Nadine blinked. “Things changed pretty damn quick.” She chewed her bottom lip. “Can you... are you going to be able to stay here? I know...we haven’t talked about your ex in any detail, but I *can* tell you’re still crazy about him and he’s been so MIA during this—”

“We’re...” Elizabeth hesitated, wishing she could *really* confide in Nadine. “We’re talking. Being honest for the first time...I don’t know...maybe ever. I don’t know if it means anything, or if it could go anywhere, but before we tried to be more, he *was* my best friend and if we walk out of this situation with just that intact, it’ll be worth it.”

“Well, being friends is good,” Nadine said, but her eyes were skeptical. “Raising a kid together always works better when you’re friends.” She paused. “But Elizabeth, I hope that while you guys are being honest about each other, you’re being honest about the baby.”

“Maybe the next time we talk,” Elizabeth said, but she was so hesitant to bring up the baby. If they had a chance to make things work again, of course the baby would be a factor but...wasn’t it implied? That if they were going to try to build something, her child would *have* to be part of the equation?

But maybe they weren’t. Maybe that’s not what the kiss had meant. After all, the last time he’d kissed her senseless, he’d walked away for days.

No. No, she wasn’t going to do keep doing this. She looked at Nadine. “It’s really complicated...this situation, I mean, but you’re right. It’s not enough that we’re honest about what went wrong before. We need to be honest about what comes next.”

Nadine smiled, but the gesture didn’t reach her eyes. “But you don’t think you will be.”

“It’s easy to be honest about what’s already happened,” Elizabeth replied, “Because those things are over, and all that’s left is to explain what happened. But...to talk about tomorrow, and the day after...*that’s* making plans.” She looked away, towards the pool table, towards the window where they’d once stood in front of and talked about yachts. “We’ve never been good at that. We talk about things we might do in the far future, months away, but never about tomorrow.” She looked back at Nadine. “Which I guess really says it all, doesn’t it? We never talk about tomorrow, which is probably why when it stops being today, we screw it up so much.”

# Chapter Ten

*I'm falling apart, I'm barely breathing  
With a broken heart that's still beating  
In the pain, there is healing  
In your name I find meaning  
So I'm holdin' on, I'm holdin' on, I'm holdin' on  
I'm barely holdin' on to you*  
- Broken, Lifehouse

*Tuesday, June 24, 2003*

## **General Hospital: Kelly Lee's Office**

She couldn't believe Jason was actually sitting in this office with her, prepared to sit through her doctor's appointment and watch an ultrasound that would reveal whether Elizabeth was having a boy or a girl, and he was going to do that knowing full well Kelly and Nadine thought he was the father.

What a difference two weeks could make.

They had never really returned to the conversation Francis had interrupted her first day in the penthouse, but Elizabeth didn't mind. Though they had not discussed their relationship any further than the days after their disastrous meeting at Luke's, the tension and discomfort had all but vanished. She'd spent the majority of her first two weeks in the penthouse sitting on the couch, reading, sketching or watching mindless daytime television while Jason ferried her from living room to bedroom, and arranged for most of her meals.

They sat in silence much of time, while she read magazines or sketched and he worked on files or read travel books. There had been no recurrence of the interrupted kiss either, but...sometimes she caught him looking at her out of the corner of her eye, and his eyes had that soft, tender look she'd become so accustomed to during the years of their friendship.

She had not taken Nadine's advice and asked him about tomorrow or spoken about the baby. Somehow, Elizabeth innately understood that *these* were not subjects that would preserve the peaceful status quo, and having just re-established the old comfort level...she did not want to disturb it.

Which would probably happen after today. She'd told him about her appointment last week, he'd promised to clear his schedule because he needed to start taking a more active interest. But this morning, the tension was back in his shoulders and the longer they sat in this office, her already on the examining table and him in the chair adjacent, the less comfortable he looked.

"Sonny came by this morning," she said finally. "While you were at the warehouse."

"Did he need me?" Jason frowned. "I told him I was—"

“No, no, he came to check on me.” Elizabeth clasped her hand over her abdomen. “I think he was inspecting the cabinets for contraband.” Her lips curved. “He thinks I’m Carly’s cookie dealer.”

Jason laughed softly and leaned back, his shoulders relaxing slightly. “Yeah, he’s not sure how she keeps getting them past the door, but I think Bobbie’s giving packages to Michael.”

“It’s almost adorable,” Elizabeth said, “but then he started complaining about my cookie stash and I had to kick him out.” She tossed him an unapologetic smile. “Sorry about that.”

“No, he gets...very...” Jason paused, as if searching for the right word. “Cranky about nutrition. He wants the baby to be safe and this is the one area he thinks he can have complete control over.”

The door opened then, and Nadine and Kelly came in. “Hey, Elizabeth!” Kelly greeted. She stopped and blinked at Jason. “I see we finally have company.”

Nadine grinned and walked around them to start getting a tray together for Kelly. Elizabeth nervously tucked her hair behind her ears. “Jason, this is Dr. Kelly Lee, and I think you’ve seen Nadine in and out of the penthouse the last few weeks.”

“Hello,” Jason nodded briefly. But he looked away, not knowing what to say next.

“Well...” Kelly smiled brightly. “Let’s get some blood drawn and then we’ll check your blood pressure.” As Nadine prepared Elizabeth’s arm for the needle, Kelly continued. “Have you been feeling better? Your blood pressure was high at the last visit.” She glanced down. “I see they weighed you before you changed came in, and you’re finally gaining back the weight you lost during the first trimester. Very good...”

Elizabeth grimaced at the needle prick and then closed her eyes as Nadine fitted the blood pressure pump to her arm. She just wanted this one to be normal. She’d done nothing but rest and her stress level was better, wasn’t it? “I’ve done what you asked,” she assured Kelly as the pressure built. “Jason barely lets me off the sofa to use the bathroom. I told him what you said at the last appointment about the blood pressure, so we talked about it, and I quit my job.”

“Good.” Kelly nodded. She frowned. “Well, the blood pressure is down but it’s still more elevated than I might like.” She clucked her tongue and made a notation. “But it’s a *vast* improvement. Sounds like you’ve been on bed rest for a bit, so maybe you could keep doing it...” She looked over at Jason. “Not complete bed rest. She can climb the stairs, move about, but I’d like to see her spend more time sitting than standing.” She tipped her pen at Elizabeth. “And I *am* relieved you won’t be waiting on the hypocrites of this town and taking their crap anymore, Liz.”

Elizabeth flushed and looked away, wincing when she saw Jason’s frown. “I’ll continue to rest, I promise, Kelly.” She bit her lip. “We’re doing an ultrasound right? You said I could find out the gender.”

“Yup.” Kelly wheeled the machine over and smiled at her. “Nadine tells me your mommy senses are telling you this is a girl.”

“That’s...what I think, anyway.” Elizabeth shivered as Kelly spread the gel over her abdomen. “I’m not...I’m not showing much yet. Is...that okay?” She saw Jason’s eyes focus on her teeny bump—nothing more than a healthy Thanksgiving dinner might accomplish.

“Yep. You’re a tiny woman and first pregnancies take longer to show. Another month, you’ll *wish* you still had your waistline.” Kelly placed the ultrasound wand on her skin and tapped a few keys. “And...there’s your baby.” She twisted the screen towards them and started to point. “Here’s the head...the legs...and the arms...” She looked at Jason, and Elizabeth was relieved to see he was looking at the screen. “Sometimes fathers have a hard time finding some of the details, so don’t be afraid to tell me it looks like a blob.”

“No...No, I can...” Jason hesitated. “I can see what you pointed to.” He looked at Elizabeth and then back at the screen. “Do you know if Elizabeth is right...about the gender?”

“This is my favorite part of the job,” Kelly remarked with a smile. She pointed. “And this tells me you’re having a beautiful little girl.” She looked at Elizabeth. “Sometimes, a mom just knows, doesn’t she?”

A tear slid down her cheek, and Elizabeth leaned back against the table, her eyes closed. “I don’t know...I don’t know why I thought it was a girl, I just...” She sighed. “I just did.”

“I knew you were right,” Nadine said, reaching out to squeeze her hand. “I am so ridiculously excited about this, you know, baby girl clothes are so much more fun to shop for.” She blinked. “Not that a boy would have sucked, but I mean, the choices are just so much more prolific.” She literally bounced on her feet. “And just think of all the awesome color schemes for the nursery.”

Elizabeth hesitated and looked at Jason, who hadn’t said a word yet. His face was impassive, impossible to read. It had already been two full months since this business had started and Nadine had reminded her that in four and half months, her daughter was going to need a place to sleep.

She couldn’t keep putting off the conversation about tomorrow. She was a mother now, and just concentrating on today was no longer enough.

### **General Hospital: Waiting Area**

Elizabeth saw her grandmother behind the nurse’s station as she and Jason walked in silence from Kelly’s office to the elevator where Francis was waiting. Audrey looked up and saw them, causing Elizabeth to sigh and wonder if the reprieve her grandmother had promised two months earlier was finally at end. Though Audrey had wanted to speak in person, she’d never contacted Elizabeth to arrange it, and Elizabeth certainly hadn’t been in a hurry to do so.

Audrey approached them, flicking a hesitant glance at Jason. “Darling...would you mind if we talked alone? Just a minute.” She looked at Jason more fully. “I can drive her home afterward if she needs it.”

Elizabeth bit her lip and looked at Jason. “You were meeting Emily for lunch anyway.” She touched

his arm. “Cody and Dominic will make sure I get home all right. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay.” But Jason kept his eyes on them until the elevator doors open and he stepped inside.

“Let’s...have a seat.” Audrey put a hand on Elizabeth’s shoulder and directed her towards the waiting area and the sofas. “I...I know I haven’t been in touch since I learned about the baby.”

“I’m not surprised.” Elizabeth sat next to her grandmother. “I was actually relieved, because I had a lot of people yelling at me, so one less made my life much easier.”

Audrey nodded and twisted her hands together. “Which is precisely why I did not contact you after saying we would speak in person. I wasn’t sure what I would say or how to react in a way that would not hurt you or make you unhappy.” She paused. “You’ve lived in Port Charles for so long, and yet I don’t believe I’ve seen you stay happy for more than a few brief moments. You were so combative with your sister...” Her grandmother sighed. “And then you were...raped. You were happy with Lucky for a while, but then we thought he was dead.” She reached out to Elizabeth and took her hand. “And then you met Jason. And I don’t...altogether know the details, but you’d come in from seeing him or taking a ride on his bike, and you...”

Elizabeth blinked in surprise as her grandmother’s voice broke. “Gram...”

“Let me say this, Elizabeth. Please.” She squeezed Elizabeth’s hands. “You were lit up from inside. You were *so* happy, and after all the sorrow and the terrible events, that should have been enough for me, but I was just...so scared for you. I knew you might be in danger, but instead of talking to you rationally, instead of realizing you were an adult, I treated you like a child.” She reached out and tucked Elizabeth’s hair behind her ear. “And pushed you away.”

“I...always understood why people said what they did about Jason, why you, and Lt. Taggart told me I shouldn’t be friends with him,” Elizabeth said hesitantly. “And Gram, I’d be in denial if I said being with him, being friends with him...didn’t come without risks, but...the worst thing that ever happened to me...happened *without* him. I had my life torn apart because I walked in the park one night. Just being alive can be a risk. No one is ever safe all the time.”

“I know, I know.” Audrey sighed. “And I saw how sad you were when he left town, but I was just relieved. And when Lucky turned out to be alive, I thought you’d be happy again. But even though you told us you were, and even though you smiled like you were...you never lit up again the way you had when you were dating Lucky that first time or...seeing Jason.”

“I *wanted* to be happy,” Elizabeth told her. “I knew I should be. I had my miracle, and I tried so hard to go back to that dream, to that perfect memory of who Lucky and I were before the fire.” She looked down at her lap. “But he wasn’t the same boy, and I was...”

“In love with someone else,” Audrey concluded, her eyes filled with sorrow. “Which we could all forget when Jason didn’t live in Port Charles. I was so scared when he moved back last summer, because I knew...I knew you were finally going to let yourself be with him...”

“Gram, I—”

“I thought I had gotten my wish when you moved out in the fall, because this time you were fighting with him. You were upset, and you were hurt, but you were *angry*, too. I thought...” Audrey pursed her lips. “I thought you had seen him for who I thought he was, and you were done with him. And you started dating Ric who seemed so nice...” She paused. “But like with Lucky, you were only pretending. You haven’t been truly happy for more than a few weeks, a few days, since Jason left town three years ago.”

A tear slid down Elizabeth’s cheek as she acknowledged the truth in that. “Pathetic, I know, all things considered.”

“So when I found out you were having a child, but it was with Jason, the man I’ve been trying to keep you from all this time...I realized that I could continue to contribute to your unhappiness,” Audrey said, “or I could support you. I wish I could have realized this sooner, because I know how difficult these last few months have been when they should have been the happiest.”

“Are you saying...” Elizabeth’s heart was pounding. She loved Nadine, but the nurse had only been in her life for a month. She’d lost Emily, Lucky and Nikolas were out of town, Jason was still hesitant at times...but *Audrey*...her grandmother had always been her rock. “Are you saying that you accept my choices?”

“I do,” Audrey nodded. “They are not the ones I would make, but it is not my life to live.” She put her hand under Elizabeth’s chin and tilted her granddaughter’s head up. “I just want you to *light* up again. I want to see you happy, and if having Jason Morgan in your life, and having a child with him is what it takes, then yes, I will not only accept it. I will support it.” Her lip curved up in a smile. “I’ll worry, but that’s just my job.”

Elizabeth leaned forward and wrapped her grandmother in a tight embrace. “You have no idea how much that means to me or how much I need you.”

“I love you so much, Elizabeth, even when you drive me insane.” Audrey leaned back to kiss Elizabeth’s cheek. “And maybe...because of it. You remind me so much of myself, you know. I was a hell raiser when I came here to annoy my sister, Lucille. I made bad choices, I walked away from people I loved, I drove your grandfather out of his mind before we both realized we were being stupid and avoiding the inevitable.”

“So what you’re saying,” Elizabeth said with a sly smirk, “is that you were me and Aunt Lucille was Sarah.”

“I don’t know if I’d go *that* far,” Audrey mused. “Lucille never did sleep with my boyfriend.” As if realizing what she’d said, her cheeks flushed and they broke into laughter. When that had subsided, Audrey laced her fingers through Elizabeth’s. “Now, tell me everything I need to know about my brand-new great-grandchild.”

**Kelly’s: Courtyard**

Jason would never be able to sit in this courtyard, in the hastily replaced chairs that Bobbie had just sighed and accepted...and not remember that Elizabeth had nearly been kidnapped. Since that day, he had not allowed her out of the penthouse without him. If she went to the store, he went with her. Even the double guards didn't seem to be enough. If he couldn't see her, then he didn't know for sure she was safe.

He hated leaving her alone at the hospital even though he knew her afternoon guards, Cody and Dominic, would see her home safely—and he knew Cody would give his life before allowing Elizabeth to be hurt. He'd hoped to bring Elizabeth here for lunch, to show a united front to his sister so that Emily might stop...*whatever* she was doing to mess with Elizabeth's head, but he had seen the expression on Audrey Hardy's face and hoped she was going to offer Elizabeth the support she wanted.

He found his sister flipping through a journal and sipping iced tea. "Hey, Em."

"Hey, stranger." Emily stood and hugged her brother. "I'm glad you called." She flicked her eyes around him. "You said you might bring Elizabeth."

They sat down and Jason leaned back in his chair. "No...her grandmother wanted to talk to her at the hospital, so she told me to go ahead." Jason hesitated, but knowing this conversation would be painful, but knowing that honesty was best. Though talking to Elizabeth when she first moved in had been difficult—it had been for the best. All the ugliness was in the open to deal with even if they hadn't yet.

Sometimes it just good to know where a person stood.

"I know you and Elizabeth haven't been getting along much," Jason said after a moment. "I'm sorry if...I've contributed to it—"

"*You* haven't," Emily said swiftly. "It's...It's been building for months. You know, we used to be close." She closed her journal and stared down at the cover. "But that came later, after she was... attacked. You didn't know who she used to be, Jase. When she first moved to town, everyone called her Lizzie—"

"She hates that," Jason said, but he saw that his sister ignored that.

"And Lizzie Webber was a hardcore bitch," Emily told him. "If not for her rape and for Lucky, *Lizzie* would have grown up and made Carly look tame."

Jason blinked and shook his head. "That's...Emily, you *know* that's not true. I knew Elizabeth a little before. You were friends with her, so I...kept an eye out. She was there the night Nikolas Cassadine was shot at Luke's club, with her sister. And I remember she stole Ruby Anderson's invitation to Sonny and Brenda's wedding."

"And she also tried to trick Nikolas and Sarah into thinking the other one wanted to have sex, and she framed Sarah for cheating—"

Jason held up a hand, still bewildered by his sister's tirade. "Elizabeth was a teenager when she did those things. You...weren't exactly innocent either—"

"You just don't get it. I thought Elizabeth grew up. I thought she cared about other people, but..." Emily pursed her lips. "But clearly I was wrong. I remember the way she played you and Lucky against each other. If you hadn't left town, it just would have continued. And *then* she slept with my boyfriend—"

Jason did not want to talk about Zander Smith or last summer. It was painful enough to watch Elizabeth rip herself apart over the mistake when he hadn't held it against her nearly as much as she seemed to think. It had been agonizing to see them, to know that she had done that, but he knew it hadn't meant anything to her, and she was so upset over hurting him that it no longer stung the way it once had.

But Emily hadn't been here, and he didn't understand why she was holding something against Elizabeth like this. "Emily, that doesn't...you were still friends when you came home in March. Why did you suddenly turn on her when she got pregnant?"

"Seriously?" Emily raised an eyebrow. "Courtney's my friend, too, Jase. Elizabeth told me she was pregnant and decided not to tell me it was your kid, and then freaked out on me when I dropped hints to Ric."

Jason clenched his jaw, and tried to remember his sister was not in possession of all the information...but if not for Emily, none of this would have happened. "Yeah. I can see why Elizabeth might have kept you out of the loop about it if this is the way you've been treating her."

Emily opened her mouth, "Jason...you don't *understand*. She kept...saying things and giving me partial truths and I just..." She shook her head. "I wanted what was best for her. I wanted her to move on. If she had done that, then she wouldn't have thrown herself at you and got pregnant—"

"First of all," Jason cut in, leaning forward and pitching his voice low. "I don't appreciate you telling Elizabeth I didn't care about her last fall when she was living with me. I don't appreciate you telling her that I was already seeing Courtney before Elizabeth left. Do you have any *idea* of the damage you caused?"

Emily leaned back in her chair and pressed her lips together in a mutinous line. "You just don't understand, Jase. I was trying to *protect* you—"

"I do not *need* you to protect me from anyone, least of all Elizabeth. You were not here." He stood. "I'm not in the mood for lunch. I wanted you to back off Elizabeth because you guys have been through so much. I remember how upset you were when you told me about Tom Baker and the photography studio, how scared she was when she realized who he was. I remember when we thought Lucky was dead, and how the two of you consoled each other. I remember that Elizabeth helped you hide a dead body for *months*. It might be convenient for you to forget all of that because Elizabeth made a mistake—that she was honest with you about, I might add—but I don't get it. The stuff you're holding on to? It's nonsense."



“Jase...” Emily got to her feet, wary. “I just... I love you so much—”

“Robin used to tell me that, too,” he said. “But the kind of love she had for me, the kind you clearly have...neither one of you seems to think I can handle my own life. That I can make my own decisions. Elizabeth is pregnant and between you and the rest of this self-righteous town, you had her blood pressure so high she needed bed rest. Do you *get* that, Emily?” Jason said, raising his voice for the first time. “So that you could feel the satisfaction of *protecting* me from her, you put her health and the baby at risk.”

“I...” Emily closed her mouth, looking worried. “I didn’t...think about that—”

“No, I didn’t think you did. I don’t give a damn what you or anyone says about me, but I do care that what you say to Elizabeth or about her. So if you love me as much as you say you do, you’ll knock it off.” He stepped towards his sister. “I love you, Emily, but I don’t like you very much right now.”

### **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Elizabeth walked into the penthouse, and smiled over her shoulder at Cody, carrying her bags. They’d left Dominic downstairs in the parking garage because she was planning to be in for the rest of the night, which meant Cody could go on the door until Marco’s shift began. “I can carry those—”

“And have Jason catch me?” Cody snored. “Not on your life, Eliz—” He stopped when he saw Jason on the sofa with ledgers in his hands. He coughed. “Miss Webber.” He set her bags on the desk. “All clear, Jason. I’ll be on the door if you need me.”

“Thanks,” Jason stood and crossed to join her at the desk as Cody left. “Where’d you go after the hospital?”

“Gram asked me to lunch at the Grille,” Elizabeth said, tugging out some of the books. “And then she wanted to go shopping. I thought she meant for baby stuff, but my grandmother is nothing if not practical.” She held up a cooking book. “Beginner’s cookbooks because apparently, babies *can’t* subsist on brownies and takeout.”

She saw Jason smile at that, but was disappointed that his shoulders were tense. Still, she forged on. “So, she bought me some of these and then dragged me into the aisle of baby books so I could apparently clean them out on name books.” She unpacked the rest of her purchases, tucked the gift receipt in her jeans pocket and threw out the plastic bags from the store. “I was just so relieved she’s being supportive, I couldn’t argue.”

Jason took her books from her and led her over the couch. “Jason, I can carry the books. They’re not even that heavy. Kelly said I don’t need strict—”

He waited for her to sit before handing them back. “Is it worth having an argument you’re not going to win?”

“No,” Elizabeth sighed and flipped through the first pages of one of the cookbooks. “How...how did

lunch with Emily go?”

“Ah...” Jason sighed and looked at the ceiling. “Not as well as I would have hoped. I wanted to reason with her, but that didn’t work, so I decided to take a page from Carly—”

“Oh...that *cannot* be good—”

“—and guilt her into being nicer to you,” he finished. “I told her that the way she’s been acting contributed to your forced bed rest. Which isn’t entirely true, because you didn’t go on the bed rest until after...” Jason shook his head. “But it’s true enough. She looked upset after that, so maybe she’ll knock it off.” He leaned back against the couch and looked at her. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Elizabeth murmured. “But you know...she loves you, Jason, and as much as you hate it, she wants to protect you from being hurt.” When his mouth tightened, she held up a hand. “I get it, that’s annoying to you because you think it means she doesn’t trust you to make your own decisions. But...” She shrugged and looked down at her book. “She just thinks she’s helping. Maybe...it’ll just...get better on its own.”

“You mean just ignore the problem and hope it goes away?” Jason asked, his eyebrows raised.

“It’s my patented life technique that almost never works, but...” Elizabeth hesitated. “She’s angry at me because of last summer. Zander’s not in town right now to mitigate her anger, and she thinks he left town because of me, but we both know he headed out after last fall because his dad showed up. She thinks I’m going to hurt you.” Staring down at instructions for cooking an omelet, Elizabeth bit her lip. “It’s not like she doesn’t have some history on her side.”

“Elizabeth, what’s between us is no one else’s business,” Jason began.

“Come on, that’s just not true.” She closed the book and leaned forward to set them on the table. “Jason, she’s your *sister* and until the last year, she was my best friend. She had a front row seat. Yes, we both know that I didn’t...mean to hurt you, that you weren’t angry at me, but she wasn’t there when we talked about these things. She thinks I’m the reason you left town last year, but you...” She paused. “I think you were already on your way out. I don’t...I don’t *think* I made you go.”

“No.” But he waited a moment. “I would have stayed a little longer, but after you...after that day in the park, I just moved up my departure.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth shook her head. “Anyway. I think Emily just needs...time. Maybe she and I will never be that close again, but I don’t know...” She twisted her fingers together and remembered that she wasn’t going to avoid talking about tomorrow anymore. “I guess...if the situation *were* what she thinks it is, I’d say that she’d learn to get past it because she knows how much you love Michael, and that having a child would be something you wanted. Except...” She took a deep breath and met his eyes, disconcerted that they seemed to be closed off to her. “That’s not...necessarily the situation we’re in.”

She hoped he would take the bait, hoped that he would say something, even if it was just to say they’d

be in each other's lives after this was over.

But he didn't. Instead, he rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know what's going to happen with Emily. Maybe you're right, and she just needs time."

Fine. She was going to have to be the brave one. *Again*. "Jason, what's...going to happen after...Ric is dealt with?" she asked softly. "You told me we couldn't change our minds because the Families are involved now. Won't they be angry if they found out you...that we lied to them?"

"I..." Jason paused. "I guess I hadn't really thought about it that way. I've been so focused on taking care of Ric and Faith...I guess I figured if they were out of the picture, the Families won't care about this situation."

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow. "You think they won't care that you and Sonny asked them to use their resources on this child's behalf after lying to them about the father?"

He closed his eyes. "You *know* there are things I can't talk about—"

"Oh, God, Jason, that's such a god damn cop out." She got to her feet, her body tense. "You said that to me last fall, standing in this room. You told me there were things I couldn't be told. Well, it wasn't true then and it's *not* true now. I am not asking for trade secrets or what you do when you go the warehouse or what you and Sonny talk about. I am talking about something that affects us personally, *our* possible safety. If the Families knew I *was* having Ric Lansing's child, and that you and Sonny lied about it, even after Ric and Faith are dead, is *that* going to be an issue for you down the line?"

Jason blew out a slow breath before also rising to his feet. "I don't know. I—Sonny wanted to involve them, I just said what I said to get Ric out of town. It wasn't supposed to be this complicated."

"Complicated." Elizabeth closed her eyes. She was getting the picture. "Jason, I have been telling you from the start that we have to be honest with each other, but you're just not getting it. So maybe it's time I stop being vague. People think I'm having your child. And I'm not talking about your mother, my grandmother, our friends. I'm talking about men who see families as a target, as a point of weakness. I remember when Carly was dealing with them when Sonny was...gone...and they were harassing her, using what they thought was her grief and your weakness to push drugs through Port Charles. These are not men who are going to forgive a lie."

"I...I get it." Jason pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead. "I get that you don't want your child in danger—"

"Jason, that's not it." *Do not stamp your foot*. She pressed her lips together and then tried again. "My child is in danger whether you're her father or Ric is her father. You told me that they hated Ric and I'm sure they hate Faith Roscoe because she's a woman. Do you think that we can just stop this when Ric and Faith are gone? Do you think that it's going to be that easy? After putting guards on me, doubling them, putting me *back* in this penthouse?"

She jabbed a finger at him. “This is what happens all the time. You think it’s enough to walk away from me, as if people are just going to forget who I am. You walked away from me that first time, and it sure didn’t stop Sorel from badgering me or approaching me when you were gone. I was kidnapped because people saw us together, because they knew about our history.” She gestured toward the door. “You let me walk out of here last fall without a word, and didn’t seem to notice I was dating a psycho until he used Carly. It didn’t occur to you he was trying to use *me* to get to you.”

“Are...” Jason shook his head, irritated. “Are you actually blaming me for Ric, for getting you kidnapped? You told me you didn’t—”

“Sometimes I just want to *scream*,” Elizabeth muttered. She dragged her fingers through her hair and dipped her chin to the floor. “No. I am not blaming you for those things. But I do blame you for thinking that walking away is all it takes. You honestly think that after Ric and Faith are gone, I can just walk out this door, lose the guards and not have a problem. Is *that* what you’re hoping for?” she demanded. “That I’ll walk out of your life for good this time?”

“Why not?” Jason retorted. “You’ve never stayed before.”

“That...” Elizabeth fisted her hands at her side, her voice thick. “That is not *fair*. You left first, Jason. I begged you to stay, but you left anyway. And let’s talk about that day in April, where I finally have the courage to tell you I have feelings for you, that I care about you in a way I shouldn’t considering I was dating Lucky. And then you asked me to go. To leave with you.” When she saw him huff, she held out a hand as in protest. “But wait...*that’s* not true. You said I should go with you, or maybe *not* with you. It didn’t matter. Yeah, I was really supposed to walk away from my life on a *maybe* you’d be with me. How should I have trusted you?”

“Fine. I shouldn’t have asked you to leave with me. It was too soon and unfair. That’s clear,” Jason bit out. “But you walked out that door nine months ago and you *never* looked back—”

“All summer...” Elizabeth forced herself to take a deep breath. “You walked away from me. You took phone calls from Carly and left me for her. *Every* time she called, you were out the door. Do not tell me each and every one of those calls was an emergency *you* had to handle right there. I knew you cared about me, maybe you wanted to sleep with me, but I knew I didn’t rate above Sonny and Carly. And then you went and *proved* it—”

“I told you that Sonny and I were having issues—”

“I might *actually* scream this time.” Elizabeth stalked towards the kitchen. “I cannot keep saying the same things over and over again—”

Jason rounded the sofa and grabbed her elbow. “Damn it, Elizabeth, I told you I was sorry about not telling you about Sonny, about not coming home, not calling—”

“Now. *Now* you’ve explained it.” She yanked her arm away. “You have the nerve to stand there and tell me that I’ve never stayed before...well, Jason...you’ve never given me a *reason* to.”

Her heart pounding, she continued. “Even now, you’re doing everything you can to shove me out the door faster. Every time I bring up my child, you get this haunted look in your eyes, this *trapped* look, and I know what’s going to happen. Even after Ric and Faith are out of the picture, you’re going to look like that. Because you can’t let yourself for one minute forget that this baby is Ric’s. So don’t worry, Jason. The next time I walk out that door, it *will* be for good.”

She turned again, to go upstairs or to the kitchen, she was never sure, but Jason grabbed both her arms and whirled back to face him. She opened her mouth to protest, but he covered with his, all his anger and frustration pouring into her like a volcanic eruption. Startled, Elizabeth tried to draw back, but he just tightened his grip, almost as if he thought she had meant she was leaving right now.

Well, hell. She kissed him back, letting her own frustration and desire through. This time...she wasn’t stopping unless the building collapsed.

# Chapter Eleven

*And how can I stand here with you,  
And not be moved by you?  
Would you tell me  
How could it be  
Any better than this?*  
- Everything, Lifehouse

*Tuesday, June 24, 2003*

## Harborview Towers: Penthouse Level

Hands in the pockets of his slacks, Sonny ambled around the corner of elevator to step in front of Jason's penthouse. In front of him Cody stood like a sentinel, his hands at his side, looking straight ahead.

"Hey, Cody. Jason home?" Sonny asked. "I need to talk to him." He was surprised when the normally stone-faced man opened his mouth, and then closed it. And...were the tips of his ears...turning red? "Cody?"

"Ah, Boss..." Cody hesitated. "Well, he and Miss Webber are home, but I, um...wouldn't knock if I were you." He coughed into his fist. "Sir."

Sonny furrowed his brow. "Jason said no interruptions?"

"Ah...not exactly." And now the guard's cheeks were turning red. "They...were...arguing earlier...and..." The man actually looked up at the ceiling, as if to look to a higher power for answers. "Well, they stopped."

"Okay..." Sonny drawled. "Then...I can..." He paused when Cody just shook his head. "C'mon, man...just say it."

"Well...they stopped...arguing the way that you, and ah...the way you and Mrs. C do...sometimes," Cody finished, refusing to meet Sonny's eyes.

And then Sonny grinned. Because he knew *exactly* how he and Carly ended some of their arguments. "We should soundproof these doors, is that what you're telling me?"

"It...wouldn't hurt," Cody admitted. "So...I don't know...what you'd be..." He tugged on his year and looked like a man who desperately wished he were anywhere else. "I don't know what you'd be *interrupting*. So to speak. Sir."

"Fair point." Sonny dipped his chin to his chest. "And whatever I have to say can hold for a bit. Don't want them to...have setbacks in their..." He twirled his finger in the air. "Whatever."

“Yes, sir. That is...yes.” Cody’s shoulders slumped. “And if you could never tell Jason or Miss Webber we had this conversation, it would be most appreciated.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” Sonny called over his shoulder as he headed back to his penthouse.

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

There was something to be said for silence. They hadn’t really spoken since she threatened to leave, and he’d kissed her. Jason had lifted her onto the edge of the pool table, and without removing much of their clothing, they’d had the kind of sex she’d only read about. Hard, fast...and god damn fantastic.

And then, he looked at her, with those beautiful eyes filled with mixture of tenderness and fear, as if she’d reject him now, and she’d kissed him again. He picked her up and then they’d moved to the sofa, and this time...Elizabeth was sure she’d remember this as the first time they’d made love. Slow, delicious, and almost lazy. Reverent. The kind of lovemaking that spread warmth and tingles down one’s spine and lingered in the fingers, the legs, and even the toes until long after it was over.

And now, lying here, her caftan blanket hastily thrown over them, they still lay in silence. She was draped over his chest, his fingers trailing up and down her back.

She just wanted to close her eyes and lay here forever.

But she knew that wasn’t realistic and she’d promised herself only that morning that she couldn’t live in a fantasy anymore.

Tracing a pattern on Jason’s chest, she finally spoke. “This...it doesn’t...fix anything.”

His fingers stilled, and then slid up to smooth her hair away her face. “I...I know.”

“But I also...” Elizabeth hesitated, wondering why she always had to be the brave one when it came to words. “I don’t regret it.”

“Me either.” Some of the tension she hadn’t even felt relaxed from his body. “I don’t...I don’t want you to leave.” She felt his chin dip, brush her hair as his lips found the top of her head. “I just...don’t know how to make you stay.”

Well, at least that was something. “Just...knowing you want me here...” She slid her hand up his chest until she was cradling his cheek, then raised her head to kiss him briefly. “That makes me *want* to stay. I didn’t...I felt like...not really an obligation, but maybe a burden...”

His hand cupped the back of her head, their eyes met. “The last thing I feel when I look at you is burdened or obligated. I just...want you safe. I want you happy.”

“And being right here...” Elizabeth closed her eyes and leaned until their foreheads touch. “I feel both. You always wanted to push me away, when I always *knew*...that being with you *was* the safest thing. For my heart,” she added when he saw his mouth tighten. “If we trust each other, Jason...that

can be true for both of us.” She curved her lips into a half-smile. “Do you...think we can try that...again?”

Remembering the question, his eyes were soft as he answered. “Yeah...we can try.” He covered her mouth with his own, deepening it as she pressed herself closer.

A familiar buzzing sound from behind the couch had Elizabeth drawing back, and sitting up. Jason sighed and followed suit. “Elizabeth...” He didn’t get up to find his jeans or answer the phone, and she knew why. She’d accused him of answering that phone and abandoning her for whoever was on the other line last summer.

“It could be Sonny,” Elizabeth said. “I never cared that you *answered* your phone, Jason. Everyone does that.”

Still looking uncertain, Jason stood and rounded the sofa to drag on his briefs before reaching for his jeans and the phone in the back pocket. She peered at him over the back of the sofa, thinking it was almost adorable he didn’t want to be completely nude while speaking on the phone.

“Hey...Yeah?” She his eyes close and his face tense. “It can’t...no, okay. Yeah. Give me a few minutes. I’ll be over.” Jason sighed, closing his phone and setting it on the edge of the table. “I...have to go over to Sonny’s. I’m...” He just shook his head.

“Jason.” He didn’t answer right away, just pulled his jeans on and zipped up. “Jason, I’m not...angry you have to go to Sonny’s.” He looked at her, and she could see he wasn’t buying that. “I heard you ask him if it could wait. And if can’t, it can’t. That’s life. Just as long...” She bit her lip and tilted her head. “If you have to go out and you don’t know when you’ll be back, or even if you do, if you could...just let me know you’re going.”

“Yeah...” Jason exhaled slowly. He dragged his shirt over his head, and then sat on the sofa to put his socks and boots back on. “Yeah, I can do that.” He looked at her, and Elizabeth saw the regret in his eyes, so she held her breath until he spoke. “This isn’t...the way I would have planned for us to be together, Elizabeth...” Using one hand, he slid his hand through her hair and she closed her eyes, leaning into his touch. “But I’m *not* sorry,” he finished, his voice almost gravelly.

She grinned and opened her eyes. “Good. Then hurry up so you can come back.” She kissed him again, and then watched him open the door and close it before Cody could see her curled up on the sofa, wearing nothing but a blanket.

Elizabeth leaned her head, and had the insane urge to laugh. She had never seen this coming.

## **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Sonny looked when Jason entered, regret in his eyes. “Sorry man, I know you and Elizabeth were in the middle of...something, but...”



Jason hesitated and just blinked at his friend. Was he wearing a sign or something that broadcasted what he'd just been doing for the last hour? He cleared his throat. "It's fine. What's up?"

"Benny just called from the warehouse." Sonny poured a tumbler of whiskey. "They opened the shipment from last night and..." He shook his head. "It was empty."

Jason tensed, the last vestiges of his good mood evaporated. "Empty—it was *fine* last night. I checked it myself."

"Yeah, yeah, I know that. It means we got someone in our own organization screwing with us." Jason watched as Sonny tried to calmly sip the whiskey, but his hands were trembling...just a little. "We got a traitor."

The last thing they needed. Jason exhaled slowly. "Do we know who was in and out of the warehouse between its arrival and finding it empty this afternoon?"

Sonny nodded and set the glass down. "Not yet. Benny and Stan are working on it. They think it'll take a day or so to put it together. Jason, you know better than me, we don't time for this shit." He took a deep breath. "The Families might think our resources are stretched thin looking for Ric and Faith. One of them might think it's a good time to screw with us."

"Can't overlook that." Jason hesitated. "We...are investing a lot of our manpower in the search." With great difficulty, he continued, "Do you think we should pull back?"

"I..." Sonny looked at the ceiling. "I want to say no. Because the quicker Ric Lansing gets out of our lives, the better off we'll all be, but the point of involving the Families was to avoid this kind of nonsense. So that we wouldn't have to put all our energy into Ric. The burden would be shared."

"Sonny, we can't protect Elizabeth if we're fighting a war on another front without resources," Jason pointed out. "At the end of the day, if Ric is going to come for Elizabeth and the baby, he'll have to come near Port Charles to do that. We haven't found any evidence that he's in the area, not since the kidnapping attempt."

"Yeah..." Sonny huffed. "And I can't even say who'd be after us, because it could be any of those bastards. I want to go after Zacchara because of the connection between his lawyer and our scumbag, but how do I know Tagliatti didn't set it up to make it look that way? I don't...think it's Ruiz or Vega because of the distance involved. They're more likely to team up with Tagliatti or Zacchara rather than come for us directly." He pressed his hand to his chest. "Jase, I got no easy answers here. I want Elizabeth to be safe, I want her pregnancy to go smoothly, but—"

"I know." Jason rested his hands at his waist and looked at the floor. There was only one choice. They couldn't divide their focus between searching for Ric and fighting a territorial dispute. "You have to pull back some of the men looking for Ric and Faith. We have Elizabeth as protected as she can be, and maybe..." He hesitated. "Maybe if Ric thinks he can get back here without tripping us up, he'll get cocky. He'll think he can get to her. And he'll make a mistake then." But everything in him fought against using Elizabeth as a lure, using her child as bait. He'd promised to protect her, and had

made even deeper promises to her not more than twenty minutes ago.

“I get the problem.” Sonny rubbed his chin. “I just...I don’t know what else to do. If this escalates into an outright war, everyone is in danger. With Carly and Elizabeth pregnant at the same time, I just can’t...I can’t risk it. Their immediate safety has to come first. We have to work with what we know. And we know that someone is coming for us, whether it’s one of the Families or someone else. We don’t know why Faith Roscoe sent the soldiers after Elizabeth. We can assume it was on Ric’s behalf, but you know...maybe Ric is obsessing about the situation, and Faith wanted to eliminate her like she threatened to on those docks. Maybe Faith is the threat, and Ric’s planning another move on us.”

“If this is Ric coming for us from another angle, then we’d find him either way.” Jason nodded. “It’s possible. Let’s...let’s cut the men outside Port Charles looking for Ric in half. Just to start. If we have more problems, we can reduce it further. I don’t...want to give up the search just yet.”

“Jason, I wouldn’t ask you do to this if we had any other choice,” Sonny told him even as he headed for the phone to make the call to Johnny.

“I know that. But you’re right. We can’t ignore an actual threat because we’re not sure Ric hasn’t given up. Elizabeth’s safety is my top priority,” Jason said. “Regardless of the source of the threat.” He took a deep breath. “I should go to the warehouse, help Benny and Stan. The quicker we find out what’s going on, the better off we’ll all be.”

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Several hours after Jason had regretfully told her he had to go to the warehouse, Marco knocked and pushed open the door. “Miss Crowell is here, Elizabeth.”

From her vantage point at by the pool table, Elizabeth waved Nadine and her bags from Eli’s in. “Thanks, Marco. Hey, Nadine.”

“Hey!” Nadine smiled brightly and followed Elizabeth into the kitchen where a folding table was set up. “No dining table?”

“We usually eat takeout on the sofa,” Elizabeth replied. “Thanks for understanding I couldn’t go out tonight. Jason...he’s just asked that I stay in at night for a while.” She reached into a cabinet and drew out paper plates.

“Not a problem. Besides, we can talk more in private.” Nadine arched an eyebrow. “For example, Miss Webber, that is *mighty* fine hickey on your collarbone.”

Elizabeth flushed and pressed a hand to the area. “I...I didn’t notice or I would have changed.” She set down some bottles of water and took a seat. “Um...so I guess you know how I spent the day.”

“Do I!” Nadine dug into her ribs and gestured for her to continue. “He’s gorgeous, by the way. You see his picture in the paper sometimes, but I don’t think I’d ever met him in person.” She wiggled her

eyebrows. "I can understand why you threw over the Harvard lawyer."

Elizabeth laughed and opened her own Styrofoam container. "Well, hands *off*. I've had enough of blondes going after my boyfriends." When her friend widened her eyes, Elizabeth shrugged. "My ex-boyfriend Lucky liked my blonde sister first, and then long after we had broken up, he ended up dating her for a while. And then Jason's best friend is blonde. She was always calling and nagging him to leave me. And of course, you know about Courtney. And then Ric..." she hesitated. "Well, I would say one of the reasons we didn't work out is he was sleeping with a blonde on the side."

"Ugh. Skanks." Nadine twisted off the cap of her water. "So I guess Kelly was right. Finding out the gender does it every time."

"No..." Elizabeth leaned back in her chair. "No, it wasn't that. We still...we still have to work out a lot of things, the baby being one of them." She hesitated. "There's...the situation is really more complicated than I can explain, Nadine. It's not because I don't trust you—"

"It's because we've known each other five seconds," Nadine said. "I get it, Elizabeth. And sometimes I see you pause, searching for a lie. I'd rather you just gloss over the details you can't share. Don't feel bad."

"Well..." Elizabeth licked some of the barbecue sauce off her finger. "Let's just say...Jason stepping up to be involved with the baby was not something I expected, mostly because of how we broke up and that he was dating his best friend's sister. We've talked a lot about why we stopped seeing one another, but we haven't...we're not really talking about the future beyond...the immediate."

"Still doing the one day at a time shtick guys cling to?" Nadine grimaced. "I get it. Johnny always said maybe someday we'd move in together, but any time you tried to put a date on that *someday*, he'd get this look and..." She shook her head. "I don't know, maybe for them it's just too scary to think about something that far in the future, about making a commitment. Me? It's scarier *not* to make it. Because today could be amazing, and so could tomorrow. But I want...some assurance, I guess, that next week, next month, next year...that it's going to be just as amazing."

"Yeah..." Elizabeth exhaled slowly. "Yeah, I know. And if you can't talk about anything beyond tomorrow, then how do you know they see it as a possibility? What if they don't see a place for you next month?" She bit her lip. "Well, I tried to bring it up today. I asked him about the future, about how we were going to handle it, and it turned into an argument about our past. I think...Jason has this idea...that I won't stay forever."

She looked at Nadine. "And I can't... I *can't* blame him for not trusting me. With the exception of the first time we were friends, before he left town a few years ago, I've always walked away from him. Last fall, I walked out and then refused to talk to him. I was just so angry and hurt...but he didn't come after me. So he's accusing me of never staying, and I told him that..."

She hesitated. "I told him that I felt like he was pushed me out the door last time, and that he was doing it again. Every time he looked uncomfortable talking about the baby or we talked about the future. So I told him that he's never given me a reason to stay, so the next time I walk away, I won't

come back.”

“And...*this* turned into a day of sex?” Nadine frowned. Her eyes widened. “Oh, *oh*. I get it. You told him that and then he kissed you to stop you from leaving!”

“Yeah...” And Elizabeth dipped her head down, unable to stop herself from smiling. “The first time...it was on the pool table.”

“Well, hello...” Nadine craned her head to look out the door way. “That’s reason enough to keep it around.” She turned back. “So...?”

“And after we...on the sofa...he told me he didn’t want me to go, he just didn’t know to make me stay.”

“That is...” Nadine shook her head. “I am so freaking *jealous*. First, this gorgeous man sexes you up on a pool table like a scene right out of a hot romance novel, and then he lays a line like that on you, except I’ve seen him—he does *not* look like the type to drop a line, so he means it.” She scowled. “I hate you so much right now.”

“I guess...I’m just nervous,” Elizabeth admitted. “Because I don’t...there’s so much still up in the air. We’re still not talking about the baby. There’s still a ton of tension with his family because of the baby, particularly his sister who used to be my best friend, and his job...” She shrugged. “It’s not like it ever leaves us in peace. Before we could really...resolve anything...he had to go down to the warehouse.”

“Well...my aunt Rayleen used to say that when you’re too scared to do something, you should go out on a limb, because that’s where the fruit is,” Nadine said. “You’re already better off then you were when we met, right?”

“We are,” Elizabeth said, with a smile. “So nothing worth having is easy to get, huh?”

“That’s what I’m told.” Nadine picked up a rib and gestured to her with it. “Don’t get in your own way, Liz. It’s usually the best way to make yourself miserable.”

“Hm...” Elizabeth leaned forward. “Nadine, have you thought about calling Johnny?”

“Pfft...” Nadine shook her head. “Absolutely *not*. Would you believe he sent those CDs anyway? How’d he get my address, I’d like to know? And now I’m mad because I forgot I left some of them with him, and turns out I really missed one or two of them and I’m glad he didn’t throw them out. Which just makes me angrier, because he’s a turd.” After she swallowed a bite, she continued. “Our situation is completely different, Liz.”

“What makes it so different? We both walked away from men who were hurting us.”

“True.” Nadine sighed, wistfully, and propped her chin on her fist. “But my guy didn’t have crazy sex with me on a pool table to keep me from leaving.”

“Well, there is that.”

## **Morgan Penthouse: Jason’s Bedroom**

It was nearly midnight when Jason finally climbed the stairs to the second floor. It had been a long day, beginning with the morning appointment at the hospital and then the fight with Elizabeth...and then everything else that came afterward. He hated fighting with her, *hated* making her cry, but if it meant they could...get back to where they’d been last year before everything fell apart, maybe it was worth it.

But before they could really fix anything, his damn phone had rung, nearly screwing it up. But she hadn’t looked angry, and he didn’t think Elizabeth would lie about that when they were trying so hard to be painfully honest.

The evening at the warehouse had been a bust, and he would have rather been here, watching Elizabeth sketch or just sitting in the living room, watching ridiculous television. Except maybe they would have gone back to the conversation they’d been having before they’d been sidetracked...and Jason did not want to talk about her pregnancy or the daughter she was going to have. The daughter he knew would never really be his, no matter how much he wanted her to be. Elizabeth said she wanted to stay, but what did that really mean?

He stopped in front of the guest room where Elizabeth had slept since moving in, the same one she had slept in last fall. He raised his hand as if to knock, but then let it fall to his side. Maybe tomorrow...

Jason pushed open his door, and stopped short. In his bed, her dark hair spread across the white pillow, and in the shirt he’d given her the first night...Elizabeth lay curled up, under a thin sheet.

Slowly, not wanting to wake her, he stripped down to his briefs and hesitantly slid the sheet back to slide underneath, but she was a lighter sleeper than he remembered, because her eyes slid open, shadowed in the darkness of the room. “Hey.”

“Hey,” he replied softly.

“Hope you don’t mind I’m here,” Elizabeth said, her voice hesitant and quiet. “I just...”

He reached out and drew her closer, until she was tucked into his side. “I was hoping you would be.”

# Chapter Twelve

*Lord knows I'll fail you time and again  
But you and me are alright, yeah  
We won't say our goodbyes  
You know it's better that way  
We won't break, we won't die  
It's just a moment of change  
-All We Are, OneRepublic*

*Saturday, July 26, 2003*

## **Morgan Penthouse: Bedroom**

Elizabeth knew it was early when she felt him shift at her side. It was always early when Jason slipped from the bed they had shared for the past month. He would move slowly to avoid waking her, press a kiss to her forehead, and then disappear into a guest room so he could dress.

She usually let him think that, because she didn't want to see him looking guilty for having to disappear for most of the day. He was trying so *hard* this time, in so many ways. They spent nearly every night together and he tried to be at the penthouse for at least one meal, usually a quick dinner of takeout.

"Don't go..." she murmured, only half aware. She tightened her arms at his shoulder, and felt him hesitate. "Just...a little longer."

"I'm sorry," Jason sighed. He looked down at her, and she could see that he really was sorry, that if he'd had the choice he'd spend the day with her, preferably in bed. "I just..." He closed his eyes and rested his forehead on her shoulder. "Elizabeth..."

"No, I'm sorry." She slid her hand through his short dark blonde hair, trailing her fingers down his neck. "I know you have things to do. I just..." *Don't know how long this moment is going to last.* Because as wonderful as things were...Elizabeth knew these last few weeks had been a calm before the storm. That they wouldn't see eye to eye forever.

"I'll talk to Sonny," Jason said. "Maybe...I can work something out." He pressed a kiss to her bare shoulder. "Things are just..." He trailed off, but she knew what was going on even if he didn't give her specifics. Shipments had gone missing from inside the warehouse, others weren't on ships when they arrived in the harbor. The warehouse had been raided by the PCPD once.

"I'll see you later." Elizabeth leaned up and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "Be careful."

"I will." He kissed her once more before sliding out of the bed.

She closed her eyes as the door quietly opened and then shut. Jason had clearly listened when she told him her reasons for leaving last fall. He'd never come home, he'd never called, he'd never spoken to

her. He was changing all of that, and there were moments Elizabeth believed that this time....they were going to get it right.

But then she would remember that it was more than just the two of them in this situation. Her hand slid under the sheet and covered her belly, with its new roundness. They were still avoiding the future, still not talking about what this baby meant.

How much longer could she deny that while Jason cared for her, he was apparently finding it difficult to care for a child that was half Ric Lansing?

### **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

“I am going to start investing in board games,” Carly grumbled as she looked at her card. “Hit me.”

Elizabeth smirked and slapped another card on the coffee table. “I hear ya. I actually started watching soap operas this month. Do you know how much I want to hit myself?”

“Frick.” Carly squinted at her sixteen. “Hit me.” When Elizabeth slapped down a ten, she scowled. “Screw this. Put on *Guiding Light*. At least I can wallow in someone else’s misery for a while.”

Elizabeth laughed and started to slide the pack of cards back in the box. She knew that things were... uncertain. Not outright dangerous, but they didn’t seem to know where the threat was coming from, so for the time being, Sonny wanted all pregnant women cooped up. Michael, the lucky bastard, Carly had muttered, still got to go to his swimming lessons and summer camps, since kids were usually collateral damage rather than outright targets. No one wants the cops looking at them for murdering a kid, Carly had declared.

So when Carly had tired of her own four walls or hanging out upstairs when Sonny kicked her upstairs, she’d started coming across the hall. Elizabeth figured they’d never be close, but she was relieved they’d called a truce since she became pregnant and moved in.

“We could always put on one of those court shows,” Elizabeth offered. “The ones where girlfriends sue their exes because they tried to buy their love.”

Carly eyed her. “We *need* to get you out of the house, Muffin. Too much daytime television for you.” She leaned back and stared at her rapidly expanding belly, now deep into her sixth month and about to hit her final trimester. “Jason doesn’t think double guards are enough to let you out once in a while?”

Elizabeth pursed her lips. “I get to go to the hospital to meet my grandmother or Nadine for lunch mostly, because Jason likes the security Alan set up after that kid was kidnapped a few years ago. Plus, the hospital really took it on the chin when it turned out the Cassadines had built an elaborate laboratory right under their noses in the sub-basements, so it’s basically under lock and key.”

“Oh, you poor bastard.” Carly rolled her eyes. “Ugh. I love Sonny, so this is mostly worth it, but man...how am I supposed to sneak snacks if Sonny never lets me go out without him and the guards?”

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow. “How do you feel about some pistachio ice cream?”

Carly reached across to her, and clutched Elizabeth's shoulder. "Don't toy with my emotions, Muffin. I need sugar, and I need it *now*."

There were moments Elizabeth actually enjoyed Carly's company. The woman had a sharp sarcastic wit and a healthy dislike of idiots. If it hadn't been for Jason all those years ago, maybe they wouldn't spent four years loathing the sight of one another. She smirked. "Jason doesn't care what I eat."

"Oh, I take it back." Carly slid off the couch and tugged Elizabeth with her. "You're a lucky bitch. I had some delicious mint chocolate chip and that bastard switched it out for almond ice cream." She wrinkled her nose as the two moved towards the kitchen. "It's an insult to good and proper ice cream."

"I even have chocolate syrup and whipped cream," Elizabeth said as she crossed to the freezer. "Grab some bowls. I could use some, too."

"Hmm...I'm suddenly seeing the benefits of having another pregnant woman within walking distance." Carly took down the bowls and grabbed some spoons. "How come *you* get away with eating what you want?"

Elizabeth frowned. "Do you think Jason really cares? It's all I can do to make sure *he* eats, he's not really that worried about me. He assumes I want my baby to be healthy, so..." she shrugged.

"Yeah, that's usually the argument Sonny gives me, and since I usually have my methods of getting what I want, it's been all right."

When Carly hesitated, Elizabeth looked at her. "What? You were going to say something." She handed a bowl to Carly and then sat down at the folding table. It would be easier to hide the evidence in case Jason and Sonny came by if they stayed in the kitchen.

"It's not my business," Carly began, "which doesn't generally stop me. That being said, I...guess I was wondering if maybe the reason you don't have my issues with Sonny and food is because...you and Jason don't...discuss things that directly...affect the baby." She grimaced. "And again, it's none of my business—"

Elizabeth let her spoon sit in her bowl for a long moment as Carly dug in to her impromptu sundae. "You would be...correct," she admitted. "We don't consciously avoid the topic, but it's not one we bring up willingly either." She cleared her throat. "Still, I don't see Jason being a nutrition Nazi anyway."

"This is true." Carly licked her spoon. "Listen, as much as this is going to pain me, and I *promised* Sonny I'd stay out of it, it's hard because I love Jason. He's family. So...I know..." She jerked a shoulder. "I know you guys are...you know..." She wiggled her fingers. "Doing stuff."

Even as Elizabeth felt her cheeks burn, she raised her eyebrows. "Doing stuff?" she repeated.

"*Don't* make me repeat it," the blonde said. "It's clear that some things have changed, since you moved in, and particularly since you found out you were having a girl. You both are more relaxed and



there's just..." Her grimace deepened. "Christ, how is this my life? Look, when a guy hasn't been getting laid regularly, he gets all tense. And then there's a looseness to his stride when he is, so I figure it's due to you. Can we stop making me explaining *why* I know you two are...doing dirty stuff and move on to the next part?"

"Carly, why *are* we discussing my sex life in the first place?" Elizabeth asked, torn between amusement and irritation. "I don't ask you about Sonny—"

"Hey...I am trying to do something helpful." Carly jabbed her spoon in her direction. "Do you think I want to discuss this? God..." She wiggled her shoulders and huffed. "Anyway, now that we've established this, I guess I just...wanted to know why you and Jason avoid talking about the baby."

For a long moment, Elizabeth stared into her slowly melting ice cream, and thought about how to answer Jason's best friend. If she were honest, there was a possibility it could make it back to Jason, and she wasn't sure she was ready to have this conversation with him. Though she was trying hard to prepare for the future, there was a large part of her that wanted to live in *this* moment.

"The only reason I'm going to answer this is because I know you love Jason," Elizabeth began, "and I know how uncharacteristically supportive you've been since this started. I know you never truly believed Jason was my child's father, and even when it hurt Courtney, you still stood by Jason's decision and even helped spread gossip to stop rumors. So, keeping that in mind, I do not discuss my daughter with Jason because...there are just some things I know we can't talk about. Not if I want..." She hesitated. "Not if I want to keep things the way they are. Aren't there things you don't talk about Sonny with because they disturb the status quo?"

Carly licked some whipped cream off her thumb. "Absolutely. Brenda, Brenda, Brenda, and Brenda. In that order. So I get what you're saying." She paused. "But Brenda lives in Europe now. And your baby will be here in December. How long do you think you and Jason are going to avoid talking about this? You're going to have to figure out how to make it work."

"Are we?" Elizabeth asked softly, more to herself. "Carly, I just...I want this time with Jason. For all the times I walked away from him, the times he walked away from me, the time we've lost. I just want...these moments with him, for as long as I can."

Carly opened her mouth as if to add something else, but closed it. "All right. I promised Sonny I wouldn't help and Jason's always telling me to butt out. Usually because I just make it worse. So listen, you and I are going to have learn to stick together. At least for now, okay? Security is going to be tight until Jason and Sonny deal with things, so we're all we've got. So, I won't bug you too much about Jason, you'll be my junk food dealer." She paused again. "But before I start with the butting out, here's what I'm going to say."

Elizabeth regarded her warily. "What?"

"Before you close the book on you and Jason, make sure you two have a frank discussion about this kid, and what it means. Do not just assume you know what's going on in his head. People rarely do," Carly said. "Because if you assume you know what he's thinking, he's doing the same thing, and you

know the two of you are probably not thinking the same thing. I'm not saying you should talk about it today, or even next week. But..." She chewed her bottom lip. "Do not walk away from Jason before you talk to him. You'll end up regretting it."

"I usually do," Elizabeth admitted.

## **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Jason set a folder down on the desk next to the door and looked at his friend, the exhaustion of the last month etched into every line of his face. From the moment the empty shipment had shown up, it had been all they could do to stay one step ahead of whoever was screwing with them. Someone in their organization had turned, and so far Benny and Stan had no idea who. There were too many suspects, too many people that had been trusted.

"I think it's Ric," Sonny sighed, pressing the heels of his hands to his forehead. "I really do. Benny's been looking into the other Families and there's nothing from them. They're suspicious because we're not looking for Ric the way we were, so they're not looking for him as hard as I hoped they would. This is..." He scowled. "We are fucked, Jason. And I can't see an end to it."

"It gets worse," Jason said, hating to add more burdens to Sonny's shoulders, because as much as Jason felt the weight of the organization on his shoulders, he knew it was ten times worse for Sonny. "We sent Tommy down to Puerto Rico because we needed Johnny here in the warehouse, running the investigation, but the problems are more than he can deal with."

He saw his friend eye the mini bar, whether to drink it or flip it, Jason wasn't sure. He felt the weariness down to his bones, the way he hadn't in years. Not even last summer, when Alcazar had been looming over them. He'd thrown himself into work then, at first to stop thinking about taking Elizabeth up on her offers to meet in secret, and then later, to forget about her after she'd walked out of his life.

But there was something about this threat, this summer that felt more dangerous than Luis Alcazar ever had. And maybe because they all had so much more to lose now. Carly hadn't been pregnant the year before, and Elizabeth was in his life in a way she never had been before. He couldn't let anything happen to her, to Carly, to Michael. But there were moments he felt like he hanging on by a thread.

Sonny sighed, the sound weary and resigned. "Tell me. Don't sugar coat it."

"There was a fire in a casino," Jason began, "which is why Tommy went down there, to oversee restoration. But he discovered money problems. It's been disappearing for months, but the managers didn't seem to notice. He thinks it's from laziness more than anything else, because he can't find the money in their accounts. I'd put Stan on it, but he's dealing with so much up here, and Benny is barely keeping his head above water trying to find the traitor as well doing his regular work."

Jason knew what the solution to this latest problem would entail, what something like this always had before. They needed people in Port Charles to deal with the problems here, so Johnny couldn't go. Which meant it had to be Jason. There no was telling how long it would take to wrap this up, so he

could be away for weeks.

Weeks away from Elizabeth, who was safest here in a secure penthouse and not traveling to an island during hurricane season during a pregnancy.

“Well, we need someone else to work the computers,” Sonny said finally. “I fucking *hate* computers and technology. Maybe they make some things easier, but they just give people more ways to screw with me. I’ll put Stan on it.” He hesitated. “I’ll go to Puerto Rico, Jase.”

Jason frowned. “Sonny, you need to be here—”

Sonny held up a hand. “Listen. I know it would normally be you, and under normal circumstances, I’d say you should pack Elizabeth up and head off. Sun and relaxation would be good for her, but not the way things are right now. If this is a distraction, who’s to say it’s not to get you away from Elizabeth? Hope that I won’t pay as much attention to her as I do my own family. Or a trick to get her down there, where our security isn’t as tight. I’d say send her to the island while you’re in Puerto Rico, but there’s not fair to her either. She needs to be with the doctors with her blood pressure.” His friend shook his head. “And honestly, I owe you this.”

“You don’t...” Jason shook his head. “You don’t owe me *anything*. This is my job. I know Elizabeth understands—”

“I’m not blind, man.” Sonny crossed to the bar and poured himself a glass of water. “I know the two of you are trying to work things out—”

“It’s not that...” Jason cleared his throat. “We are, Sonny, and I’m not saying I wouldn’t rather stay here with her. I would, but she knows I have responsibilities—”

“You’ve got enough problems to deal with without you disappearing for two weeks or more,” Sonny cut in. “Plus, I need you focused, and no matter how good you are what you do, Jase, you’re going to be thinking about her. Worrying. Because if you can’t see her, how do you know she’s safe? What if something happens while you’re gone and you’re stuck having to waste time getting back?” He shook his head. “I can’t ask you to go to Puerto Rico. We’re partners. I may be in charge out there—” Sonny gestured out the windows towards the city. “But we do this together, Jase.”

“I—”

“This is my fault,” Sonny said. “All of it. You’ll never say it, *she’ll* never say it. But it’s my fault.” He sipped his water and looked away. “I was selfish last year. I didn’t get it. I didn’t see it. Instead of helping you do everything you could to find Elizabeth when she was in that crypt, I questioned your actions, made you feel like you had to justify yourself. You want to tell Elizabeth about faking my death, I can’t figure out why, because clearly, I’m an idiot. She walks out, upset. She’s vulnerable to my insane half-brother because of it, and here we are. Because I’m a selfish bastard.”

“Sonny...” Jason closed his eyes. He couldn’t disagree with Sonny’s word choice. He was a selfish bastard, but still... “It *is* selfish to think that you were the only problem Elizabeth and I were having.

We were...we weren't talking to each other. Weren't saying the things that would have changed things. I could argued with you more, she could have listened more, let me explain. Yeah, you didn't help, but you know..." He shook his head. "None of this matters now. We've got bigger problems. Elizabeth and I can't make anything work if we don't get rid of whoever is doing this."

"Yeah..." Sonny exhaled slowly. "I get it. So I'm going to Puerto Rico. I would take Carly with me, but she's almost in her third trimester and I don't want her to end up being stuck down there, unable to fly until the baby is born. I know you'll keep her safe."

Because a part of Jason was relieved that he didn't have to leave town and leave Elizabeth while things were so unresolved between them, he finally nodded. "All right. I can see you're not going to change your mind. I'll take care of Carly and Michael."

"Good." Sonny set his water glass down. "So, I'll call Stan and tell him we need another computer person. I'll break him in while we're in Puerto Rico. We'll send Tommy back up to help Johnny with security at the warehouse." He rubbed his eyes. "I know it makes sense to delegate some things, Jason, and I'm glad we started doing it more, but man, it makes life complicated when one of them betrays you. These men you trusted to carry out the business, to protect your child, the woman you love, and for the most part, you can never be sure they're not thinking of the best way to stab you in the back."

### **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Jason nodded to Cody before opening the door to his penthouse to find Elizabeth curled up on the sofa, talking on the phone. The last month had been exhausting, but in other ways, Jason wouldn't have traded it for anything. He would get home for dinner or lunch and find Elizabeth somewhere in his home, waiting for him, painting, reading and he wondered if it could have been this way last year. If he had just tried harder, shipped Zander to a safe house so he could be alone with her. If he had been clearer with his words, more obvious in his actions, would she have given him the benefit of the doubt and stayed?

"I *would* have told you earlier, Lucky," she was saying as he set down a pile of ledgers and folders and grabbed the newspaper to join her on the sofa. "But you were so excited about going to see your mother, and you know...things were so up in the air. I didn't even know what I'd say." She grimaced at whatever her ex-fiancé was telling her, but she didn't look upset, so Jason let it go. She'd let her hair dry into soft curls, and had put on some sort of strapless stretchy dress that clung to her. Her legs were tucked underneath her, but he wondered what color she'd painted her toenails today. She was bored enough, he'd noticed, to change the color every day.

"I *don't* want you to choose sides, Lucky. You or Nikolas. Things with Emily...they'll be fine eventually." Elizabeth sighed and picked at the seam of the sofa back. "The reason things are what they are with Emily is *because* she got in the middle, so it won't help matters—and I don't care what you heard from Amy Vining when she visited your mother last month. I am absolutely fine, and I don't think you flying back here to beat up Jason would be a good idea."

Jason frowned and looked at her, but she just rolled her eyes. "Well, I *do* know you'd lose, you

always did before and it's not like Nikolas would fare much better. I've also seen *them* fight, which just tells me I'm friends with a bunch of meddling nitwits." She mimed shooting herself in the head, but he could tell she was almost enjoying the conversation because it seemed like Lucky was giving her a hard time on her own behalf.

"And stop arguing with Nikolas about godfather rights. I can hear him in the background. You're both out. What do you mean why? Seriously, Lucky. You think either one of you idiots are going to be the godfather to my child? Please. I talked to Sonny last week and we agreed it's—oh, you are not even funny. No, that doesn't mean Carly will be godmother. Honestly, how I ever thought I would marry you and not strangle you in a week is beyond me at this point."

He shook his head and looked back at the newspaper. It was good to hear the smile in her voice, the brightness in her eyes. He had never forgotten that look in her eyes, that day when he'd found her on the docks. He'd thought then that she'd really loved Ric, and that had been why she was so devastated, but she must have known by that point she was pregnant. She'd looked almost fragile, and he was relieved that the inner strength he'd always admired in her had reasserted itself over the last few months.

"Tell you what, Lucky, you concentrate on getting your mother well so she can come home and we'll talk about whether you can be godfather to my imaginary second child." She huffed. "I'm hanging up now because even though I think you're happy for me, I can't tell since you're making fun of me now. Bye." She clicked off button on the cordless and set it on the coffee table. "Ugh. Was he that annoying when I dated him and I was just blind?"

"I always thought Lucky was annoying," Jason said absently, but then frowned because that wasn't really true. He'd liked Lucky once, had hired him. Until that night in the garage. But that Lucky Spencer had died that night, and the boy who came home was as different from him as Jason was from Jason Quartermaine.

"Yeah, that's true." Elizabeth sighed, but then seemed to brighten. "Hey. You're home. It's not dark out or anything. And it's hours before dinner..." She bit her bottom lip. "Is...everything okay?"

Jason gave up on the newspaper—he'd barely been concentrating anyway. He folded it, and set it on the coffee table. "Yeah. Sonny has to go to Puerto Rico for a couple of weeks." He rubbed his temple. "I know I haven't been around a lot—"

"No..." Elizabeth shook her head immediately. "No, I'm sorry about this morning." His eyes widened as she moved towards him on the sofa, swinging one leg over his lap until her knees were resting on either side of him, as she straddled his middle. "Jason, I am so *sorry*. I was just..."

"It's lonely," Jason said, running his hands down the soft skin of her arms. "I know. I know Carly's over here, that your friend Nadine stops by, and your grandmother is getting more comfortable dropping in, but all in all...you'd rather be out there." He tipped his head to the side, indicating the windows. "You miss your job."

"I do." She brought her hands to his chest, her fingers spread over his blue t-shirt. "I guess...we just

really started..." She looked at the ceiling and sighed. "We just started working on things, and I guess...I get nervous when...we don't see each other. We've always been good in the moment."

He exhaled slowly, because he knew exactly what she was talking about. "But not after the moment is over," he said softly. "Elizabeth...I know..." His chest felt tight, because he didn't want to have this conversation, but he knew they were going to have to at some point. "I know there's still a lot to talk about." Primarily the baby rounding her belly that grew a little more every day. "I just..."

"Have been enjoying the moment," Elizabeth supplied when he didn't go on. "I know. After all those months of not speaking, of not...thinking about each other, I didn't want to complicate things." She smiled wistfully. "I *still* don't."

Understanding that she, too, wanted to table certain conversations for another date, he nodded. "So, Sonny's going to Puerto Rico for a few weeks," he repeated. "And he and I...have done as much as we can do for today. And since he'll be gone for a while, I'll be home a bit more, because it's just... necessary that I deal with certain things from the penthouse. Like Sonny would." He hesitated. "Or I could do it at Sonny's, and Carly could keep coming here—"

"No," Elizabeth smiled and shook her head. "It's my turn to go upstairs or nag Carly." She tilted her head to the side and her lips curved into a smile he was quickly recognizing. "So...you don't have any immediate plans? For this afternoon or tonight?"

His hand slid from her arms down to her thighs, and then up to her hips. "Well...maybe just *one* plan," he murmured

She laughed and dipped her head down to kiss him. As he deepened the kiss, he wrapped his arms more tightly around her back, and twisted her to lower her on to the sofa.

He was going to hold on to every moment with her this time, for however long it lasted.

# Chapter Thirteen

*Honesty is a hard attribute to find  
When we all want to seem like  
We've got it all figured out  
Well let me be the first to say that I don't have a clue  
I don't have all the answers  
Ain't gonna to pretend like I do  
- Trying, Lifehouse*

*Friday, August 5, 2003*

## **Kelly's: Courtyard**

This is what happened when you did the right thing, when you were supportive of your friends and a generally mature human being. You ended up sharing lunch with a woman you mostly didn't like, bonding over pregnancy and trying to avoid the evil eye of said friend's ex-girlfriend, who was well on her way to being your ex-friend, too.

"We could have gone to the Grille," Elizabeth said after Courtney slammed the door behind her again. Her most recent sonogram picture sat on the table, so she reached out and covered it with her hand.

"No, my mother *owns* this place, damn it." Carly scowled at the doorway. She'd only liked Courtney for about five minutes anyway, so the fight Courtney had picked with her the week before because Carly wasn't shunning Jason's whore (as Courtney had so delicately termed it) barely fazed her. Carly didn't change for anyone. She was who she was, and anyone who didn't like it could suck it.

"Besides," Carly continued, brushing at Elizabeth's hands. "I want to see the sonogram picture, and then you can see mine next week. This is how this works, Muffin."

"Whatever." Elizabeth removed her hand and Carly reached for the photo of Baby Girl Whatever, as she now called her in her head. She was sure that this kid would start out as a Morgan, but was no longer all that sanguine it would remain that way. She'd never met people who got in their own damn way as often as Jason Morgan and Elizabeth Webber. Bastards. If they couldn't get it together on their own, she was going to have to meddle.

And if Carly meddled, odds would be that one of them would be arrested. Someone was *always* arrested when she tried to help.

"Blood pressure is good?" Carly asked, looking at the photo and wishing that she knew what the hell had crawled up Jason's ass. It was one thing to be apprehensive about getting attached to the baby when things between the two were up in the air but they'd been sexing it up for weeks, she was sure of it. This baby was as good as Jason's, if he could just be bothered to reach out and take her.

Men. Morons. Couldn't do anything the easy way. They liked to think they were uncomplicated, that women were neurotic and insane, but fuckers. Women were neurotic and crazy *because* men were

moronic, complicated pieces of—

“Kelly was really happy,” Elizabeth answered. “It’s normal, like it was last month. Baby’s in great shape, I’m at my target weight—” She frowned and glanced down at the baby bump that was quite a bit larger now, but still nowhere near as gargantuan as Carly felt on most days. “But, yeah, things are great.”

“Great.” Carly handed the photo back. “Like I said, I have mine next week.” She pursed her lips. “And if Sonny isn’t back yet, I guess...” She huffed. “And maybe my mother won’t be available, with her work schedule and Lucas, so if you wanted to come, that would be all right.”

“I’ll have to let you know,” Elizabeth answered, and Carly huffed again, because how did *this* become her life? She didn’t even dislike the Muffin anymore, which she had always figured might happen if she ever gave her chance, which is why she had *never* intended to do so. The last thing Carly needed was more people she liked. When she liked people, she tried to help them.

No good ever came from her help.

“I can’t wait until he’s born.” Carly patted her tummy, and her son kicked in response. “Morgan Stone Corinthos. I told Jason that last week, and he just did that scowling thing.” She snorted. “As if he’s not worthy of it. Whatever. He’s a dork. Sonny and I agreed on the boy’s name ages ago, so it’s good we didn’t have to worry about a girl’s name.”

“It’s a good name,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “It honors two men I know Sonny considered like brothers to him, and it keeps Stone’s memory alive.” A mischievous smile spread across her face. “You know Robin would love that.”

“Listen, Muffin, I don’t want to hear that kind of talk.” Carly grabbed her water and sipped it. “*Honestly*. So...names...” She eyed the brunette. “Thoughts?”

Elizabeth cast her eyes away, and Carly narrowed her eyes. “Oh, what? You can’t talk about the baby with Jason, fine whatever, but that means *you* can’t think about it?”

“I think about it,” the other woman said, her eyes still not meeting Carly. “All the time. I just...I don’t talk about it.” After considering her nails for a bit, she raised her eyes and Carly sighed, because the guarded shield was still up. “I’ve been thinking about names, but...it’s hard because I want the last name to go well with it, and you know...” She shrugged a shoulder. “I don’t really know...how long the last name is going to be...”

“God save me.” Carly cast her eyes to the sky. “Fine. Let’s put that aside. Any specific thoughts?”

“I do like a few names.” Elizabeth tucked her hair behind her ear. “I like Olivia Charlotte. My maternal grandmother was Charlotte, and I always thought it was pretty.”

“Olivia Charlotte Morgan.” Carly nodded. “There’s potential.” She nibbled on a fry. “Livvy Morgan. Liv. I don’t hate it.”



“But you’re not in love with it,” Elizabeth said. “That’s how I felt. So I thought...maybe Isla, because it’s pretty, but I’m not sure about a middle name...” She twisted her fingers. “There is a name I like, but...”

“Nope. Let’s hear it.”

“Cadence Audrey. I’d call...I’d call her Cady for short. It’s a little different, but—”

“*That’s* the name.” Carly liked it best anyway, but she saw the look on Elizabeth’s face, which proved it. “I like it. Cady is cute, but it’s not too cute, like Lulu, and Audrey is the perfect middle name. Everything works.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, but she smiled. “Well, if *you* approve, then I guess it’s fine.”

“Cadence Audrey Morgan.” Carly nodded. “Good.” She leaned down and picked out one of the shopping bags from her large collection from Wyndhams. “Now you get your reward for making a decision.”

Elizabeth frowned at her. “Carly, did you buy me something?”

“No!” Carly scowled. “I don’t even *like* you.” She sniffed. “I bought *Cady* something. Here.” She wiggled the bag at her. “Take it.”

“Okay.” Elizabeth reached for the lime green bag and pulled out first, a miniature white sundress trimmed in red, orange and yellow, and then a delicate pink onesie that proclaimed *I Love My Aunt*. She arched her eyebrows at it. “Carly.”

“Listen, Muffin,” Carly said, feeling the heat in her cheeks and wishing she hadn’t given into the mad impulse. “Whether you and I like it or not, our kids are going to be cousins.” She hesitated. “Because of how close Jason is to us.”

“Right.” Elizabeth began to slide the clothes back in the bag, but they were startled when Courtney crossed the courtyard and slapped their check on the table. Frick. Carly hadn’t even noticed the blonde was out there. Her eyes were on the clothes, particularly the Aunt onesie.

“It’s not *enough* that you stole my boyfriend,” Courtney snarled at Elizabeth. “But you’re stealing my best friend, too?” She tossed a devastated look at Carly who raised an eyebrow. God, she hated people. “I can’t *believe* you, Carly. I knew you were going to take Jason’s side! You weren’t any happier than I was that this whore—”

“Courtney, I don’t think this is the place.” Carly glanced at the entrance to the courtyard where Rocco and Cody were standing. Cody had his hand in his suit jacket, as if fishing out his cell phone. She sent him the evil eye which had that hand sliding right back out. Damn right. The day Carly couldn’t handle a dimwit was the day she hung up her heels. “In fact, I *know* it’s not the place. I have every right come here and have lunch with Jason’s...” She eyed Elizabeth who looked at her with her own arched eyebrow. “With Elizabeth. We’re both having babies in a unique world, and Jason’s family to me. Why you think I’d pick *your* side after five minutes when Jason deserves my loyalty so much more...”

She shook her head.

Courtney narrowed her eyes. “You were supposed to be my friend, *you* told me to go after Jason—” At that, Carly saw Elizabeth narrow her eyes at her, and she winced. That was going to be a thing later.

“Well, clearly, I didn’t *know* the whole situation. If I thought Jason would just use you and go back to Elizabeth, I wouldn’t have encouraged it.” Carly coughed. God, this sucked. “Anyway, it doesn’t even matter. You and Jason were together for all six seconds.” She waved her hand at the brunette. “This bitch has been annoying me for *years* when it comes to Jason. History wins, Courtney. Every day, all day.”

“This bitch?” Elizabeth smirked. “Didn’t know you cared so much.”

“Don’t start,” Carly retorted, fighting a grin. “Courtney—”

“Oh, this is just great. I’m already humiliated every time she comes in here with that bastard showing —”

“Courtney,” Elizabeth said flatly. “I have had absolutely enough of this. I am sorry that you got hurt. It was never my intention, but in my defense...” A martial gleam lit in her eyes. “He *was* mine first. You were supposed to be *my* friend, too. The way you feel about Carly right now, having the nerve to talk to me? That is exactly how I felt when I found out you were seeing him. You knew I wasn’t over him. You knew how hurt I was, and you used everything I told you in confidence to go after him.”

Courtney clenched her fists. “You think *you*’re the victim in all this? I got dumped in front of a crowd of people—”

“Point of order.” Carly stuck her finger in the air. “You were informed Elizabeth was knocked up in front of a crowd of people. *You* broke up with Jason in a room with only me as a witness.” Oh...this should *not* be this much fun. God damn it all to hell. Sonny was going to set her on fire when he heard of this.

“Again, Courtney, *I* didn’t tell you to break up with Jason.” Elizabeth sat back and tilted her head to the left. “But...thanks for making it much easier for us to work things out. He really did feel so guilty about the whole thing. No telling how long it would have taken him to sort through that.”

Oh, shit. *That* should not be hysterical, but Carly watched as Courtney realized that Elizabeth was, in fact, correct. Had Courtney not broken up with him, tried to work it out, Jason would have attempted to continue his relationship with the blonde, even if was only for Sonny and Courtney’s sake.

“So...this whole martyr thing you’ve got going...really isn’t my fault.” Elizabeth casually sipped her water. “I let you guilt me for months because I truly felt sorry but it’s been four months. And I’m over it. I was wrong, but so were you. Suck it up, Courtney.”

“You are such a goddamn bitch. Everything Emily ever said about you was right,” Courtney hissed,

and Carly saw Elizabeth's smirk fade slightly. "You are a manipulative whore who only goes after what she can't have. You think you've *won*, Elizabeth? You thought you had it all last summer, too, didn't you? But he walked away from you then, and he's going to do it again. You know it. You're just an obligation."

"Courtney," Carly began, struggling to her feet. "That is enough—"

"It is not!" Courtney growled. Her eyes fixed on Elizabeth who didn't look so confident now. "I know that Jason doesn't give a *damn* about you or that baby. You're never together, Emily told me you're always alone at the hospital unless that dumb nurse is taking pity on you. He went to one appointment and then split. Maybe you're screwing him now, but you can ask Carly—that *never* lasts. If Jason loved you, Elizabeth, he wouldn't look so god damned pained every time I see him."

"Listen here, you self-righteous pain in the ass," Carly began, in the awkward position of having to defend the Muffin who looked pale. *Damn* her life. "Talk about using someone for sex? What the hell do you think you were? He screwed you, realized you weren't what he wanted and went back to her. He *always* goes back to her—"

"Carly," Elizabeth said softly. "It's not worth it—"

"The hell with that. No one talks about Jason like that. *No one*." She jabbed her finger at Courtney, who looked a little startled by the venom in her voice. Fucking twit. "You don't know a damn thing about him, Elizabeth or this baby. This baby is *loved* by every single member of her family. How the hell would Emily know anything when she hasn't spoken to either of them in nearly two months? You need to knock this shit off, Courtney, or you're going to find out what I do to people who fuck with my family." She yanked a bill out of her pocket. "Let's go, Muffin. I've had enough of the scenery."

"Since when does she rate as family? You don't even like her!" Courtney cried as Carly gathered her bags and Elizabeth got to her feet.

Carly cast a look at Elizabeth, who just looked resigned. She looked back at Courtney, with a smirk. "Since when do you have to like family? Jason picked her, that's good enough for me."

Rocco came forward and took Carly's bags, and they started out of the courtyard. Courtney's last shot echoed after them. "Sure, you're family *now*, Elizabeth, but just wait until Jason drops you, too. You'll see how fast Carly changes her goddamn mind!"

### **Sonny's Penthouse: Living Room**

Carly lounged on the sofa, enjoying the bowl of ice cream she'd filched from the other penthouse. *Courtney* might not understand why Carly had softened towards Elizabeth, but on hot days like this—when Sonny was out of town—and Carly could indulge in all the junk Elizabeth could smuggle past the guards, she thought the *world* would understand.

The door opened and Jason entered in, narrowing his eyes at the bowl. "If Sonny finds out—"

Carly licked her spoon. “You gonna tell him? Because I will dime Elizabeth out so *fast*...” She set her bowl on the coffee table and lurched to her feet. “Thanks for coming over.”

“Well, your call said it was important.” Jason crossed his arms. “You feeling okay? Michael good?”

“Everything’s fine on this side of the building.” Carly hesitated. “Listen, I’m not sure exactly how to say what I want to say, but trust me, it’s important and my promises to Sonny, be damned, I’m going to —” She scowled when she saw Jason sigh. “Hey! This is me being a good person. You’re gonna want to mark it on the calendar and take notice.”

“What is it?”

Because now he looked like he was actually listening, even if he hated the idea, Carly sniffed and nodded. “Elizabeth and I are...we are *not* friends, but we are getting along because it’s just easier—”

“Carly—”

“Do not interrupt me.” Carly wiggled her finger at him. “Anyway. Plus, we’re both pregnant and cooped up a lot, so we’ve just...reached a truce type situation.”

Jason raised an eyebrow, and the simmering impatience in his eyes told her to step this up because he was going to stop listening pretty soon and just leave. “We went to Kelly’s today for lunch and we had a pretty nasty run-in with Courtney.”

Some of the tension bled out his shoulders and he sighed, rubbing his eyes. “Yeah. I know she’s...still having a difficult time—”

“Oh, whatever.” Carly rolled her eyes. “I could give two craps about Courtney. She makes my teeth hurt, you know. People call *me* a drama queen, but that one is just holding on to the grudge because she can see how guilty Elizabeth feels. Anything to hurt the other woman.”

“Elizabeth is not the—” Jason pressed his lips together and shook his head. “Carly, I’m not having this conversation with you.”

“No, I get it. *Courtney* was the other woman. It’s pretty clear to anyone who lives on this floor.” When Jason just glared at her, Carly wanted to throw her shoe at him. Damn it. This is why she wasn’t a nicer person more often. It was goddamn exhausting and no one let you get a word out. “*But*,” she drawled, “it is not obvious to anyone who lives *outside* this building, and you are making Elizabeth miserable.”

And just like that, his face changed. The mask slid over it, and that was just the absolute last straw. No more tip toeing around this. “Jason, I know you and the Muffin are trying to work things out, or whatever, I get it. It’s clear to me that she’s your lobster, so I’m trying to be okay with that—”

“My lobster...?” The impassive look faded and now he just looked downright bewildered. “Carly, have you been drinking?”

“No!” Carly huffed. “Your lobster. Damn it, I wish you watched *Friends*. It’s the only thing I can do cooped up in these damn penthouses all summer. The Muffin and I got tired of court television and daytime television, so we’ve been binging on *Friends* and *The West Wing*. That’s not the point. Lobsters. They mate for life.” It still didn’t clear up the confusion in his eyes. Carly wished she could have a drink.

Being nice was a pain in the ass.

“Fine, forget the lobsters.” Carly waved a hand. “Whatever. I get it. You want Elizabeth in your life. She would like to *be* in your life, but you are making it impossible.”

“I am not,” Jason snapped, before he could remember he wasn’t going to have this conversation, because he put his hands at his waist and glared at her. “Carly, stay out of it.”

“I *tried* that. All summer. Sonny told me don’t help, Carly, you’ll only wreck it, Carly.” She snorted. “Well, see what me *not* helping has done? You bastards are screwing it up all by yourself. Jason, if you want her to walk away when this is all over, you’re doing a damn fine job of holding the door open.”

He cast his eyes away, but not before Carly saw the truth. God damn it he was an idiot. “Oh, you dumb son of a bitch. You already think she’s going to. That’s why...” She braced one hand at her back, clenched the other in a fist and smacked herself in the forehead. “Oh, you two are going to be the *death* of me. This is it. This is my last foray into the world of being nice.”

“I’m going to go now, Carly, but this has been...disturbing.” Jason turned, his hand was on the door knob.

“*No*, damn it. I didn’t make my *point*,” Carly protested. “Jason, this is where talking is better than just assuming. She thinks you will never love her child the way you loved Michael, the way you would if it were your own. So she’s just not talking about it with you to make things easier. But that’s not why *you’re* not talking about it, not going to the doctor’s, not setting up a damn nursery. It’s because you think she’s going to walk away *anyway*.”

“Carly, what *is* your point?” Jason demanded, but he didn’t deny her words.

“My point is that if you keep trying to protect yourself, you’re just going to make it easier for her to go,” Carly retorted. “Because she’ll put up with you not loving the baby until Cady’s here, but once she brings her home, and this situation is over, what’s going to tie her to a man who doesn’t love her child? You think you can stop yourself from loving that baby because you don’t talk about her, because you don’t get involved with doctors?”

“You done now, Carly?”

“You are *ruining* your chance—”

“I’m going.” Jason pulled open the door.

“You don’t get to choose—”

The door slammed and Carly stomped her foot. Damn it. Damn it. *Damn it*. Why wouldn’t he just let her help?

Men. Fucking morons.

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Jason fought the urge to slam the door behind him as he entered his home, dropping his keys on the desk. Elizabeth often napped in the afternoons and he didn’t want to wake her.

Goddamn Carly. Why couldn’t she just *stay* out of it? She didn’t know the whole story, and he was tired of people pretending they knew what was going on in his head. How the fuck could they know, when he barely knew on a daily basis? From the second this entire plan had started, he’d known it would end in disaster. He wasn’t the kind of person who got have everything he wanted and what he wanted more than anything else in the world was for Elizabeth and the baby to stay with him forever. That would never happen, even if *Elizabeth* promised it would. Inevitably, she’d walked away.

No one had ever stayed. Not Robin. Robin had told him she could deal with the job as long as they were together, but that wasn’t true. She’d tried to have Sonny fire him, and then she’d taken Michael from him because she wanted to protect him from Carly. Like he needed goddamn protection from *Carly*. He knew Carly better than she knew herself. Of course she was going to use Michael like a weapon against him—Carly was always on the offensive, always looking for the second shoe to drop. But Robin never understood that it was all worth it to keep Michael. She’d just thought she knew better and destroyed his life.

Carly hadn’t stayed with him either, had told him she loved him and wanted to be family, but Carly always protected herself first. She’d wanted to make sure she could keep Michael and had ran right over to the Quartermaines, accused him of kidnapping and married AJ to cement her own custody. Even if Jason had been half-in love with her then (and he wasn’t entirely sure that was the case), she hadn’t stayed either.

And it went without saying, Elizabeth had never stayed before. She had never chosen him unless he was the default. Lucky didn’t love her anymore, so it was safe to finally admit how she felt about him. Most of the time, Jason even understood her waffling back then, and he wasn’t lying to her when he said he didn’t hold it against her. He didn’t, but Elizabeth had *never* stayed. First Lucky, then Zander, then that stupid lie about Sonny.

So why *should* he get attached to her daughter, fall in love with her? Michael had been his son, but not by blood, so he couldn’t keep him. How could he keep this new child, who still wasn’t his? What if Elizabeth got angry with him? What if she thought her daughter would be safer away from him?

So Carly didn’t know what the hell she was talking about. He knew Elizabeth was going to walk out when this was over. If not the day after, then maybe months down the line. And when she left, he was going to make damn sure he kept enough of himself together to keep going.

This wasn't going to be like losing Michael. He wasn't going to find himself bleeding in the snow, wishing for death because he was alone. *Not* this time.

His resolve still strong, he started up the stairs, intending to check to see if Elizabeth was napping. He'd seen Cody outside, which meant she was somewhere in the penthouse. He looked in their room, and saw that it was empty and wondered if the run-in with Courtney had been worse than Carly hinted. He hated asking the guards for information like this but he doubted Elizabeth would tell him.

He heard rustling from the room that had been Elizabeth's room the first few weeks she'd been here, and he pushed the ajar door open to reveal Elizabeth sitting on the floor next to the bed, a collection of bags at her feet. When the door creaked open, her head twisted and her startled eyes flew up to meet his. "Jason—I—I didn't think..." She bit her lip and looked at the sweater she was holding.

The miniature white swear, meant for a baby. And then Jason realized she'd been going through baby clothes, which had been kept in bags in the guest room. He saw a cardboard box halfway out of the closet, with a few more bags.

Something twisted inside him as he realized that Carly was right. Elizabeth had sensed his reluctance to talk about the baby and had done what was necessary to keep it from coming between them, so she'd prepared for her child in secret, stuffing all the evidence in a closet.

He exhaled slowly, and she glanced away. "I...I was just...putting this stuff away—" She started shoving clothes back in their bags, reaching for the box.

"Wait a second." Jason rubbed the side of his face, and wondered if he'd ever really believed he'd be able to protect himself from watching Elizabeth take her daughter and leave him one day?

It was already too late.

"You..." He entered the room and sat next to her, reaching for one of the soft white t-shirts she'd been pulling from its package. "You need a better place to put these things."

Elizabeth looked at him, her beautiful eyes filled with apprehension. "I..." Still chewing on her lower lip, she glanced away, towards a pink outside proclaiming *I Love My Aunt*. He closed his eyes. *Carly* was doing a better job at supporting Elizabeth through her pregnancy than he was. No wonder she was so sure Elizabeth was going to walk away from him.

"You should...look at the guest rooms," Jason said slowly. "Which one you like best." When she just frowned at him, he continued. "For the baby..." Carly's words came back to him, and he hesitated. "I think Carly said you were calling her Cady?"

"You've talked to Carly?" Elizabeth said, with a shaky sigh. "I guess she told you about Courtney."

"Yeah..." Jason leaned back against the bed. "I'm sorry she's still giving you a difficult time."

"She's not saying anything that isn't true," Elizabeth murmured, lingering over a sun dress. "She was angry that I was having lunch with Carly. That I was trying to steal her life. I'm not..." Her fingers

tightened on the outfit. “I just...Carly’s been...uncharacteristically nice to me, and without Emily...” She hesitated. “I know Nadine is my friend, but with Carly...there’s not...she knows the truth.”

“Yeah.” Carly did know the truth, which Jason had half suspected all along, and he was surprised she’d handled it as well as she had so far. “I get that. Elizabeth, I—”

“And, yeah, Carly and I talked about names, because she was telling me they’re going with Morgan Stone.” When he winced, her smile deepened, looked more genuine. “Don’t be modest, Jason. Carly said you’re the reason she has Sonny in her life, that she’s having this baby. She just wants to honor that.”

“I guess.” Jason scratched the back of his neck, still uncomfortable. “So Cady?”

“Yeah...short for Cadence.” Elizabeth slowly folded the sun dress. “Cadence Audrey.” Her hand slid to her abdomen and she jolted. “Whoa.”

“What’s...” He hesitated, because he thought he knew. She suddenly reached for his hand and drew it against her belly.

“Can you feel that?” Elizabeth asked her eyes wide and shining. “She was kicking—”

And then he did feel it. A light bump under his hand, and he couldn’t help the smile spreading across his face. “Yeah, I feel her. That’s...” Jason swallowed. “She’s going to be here soon.”

Some of the light dimmed from her eyes, and he felt like he’d been punched, because *he’d* done that to her. He’d wanted to protect her from Ric, to keep her child safe, and somehow he’d ended up making her feel guilty for being excited, for looking forward to it, as if she didn’t have the *right*. “Elizabeth, I am so...” He didn’t know how to say it, how to make this better. Instead of trying to explain himself, he just said, “We’re going to need that nursery sooner rather than later, don’t you think?”

Her smile brightened a little. “Yeah...I guess we are.” She rested her forehead against his, and he closed his eyes, wondering if it was too late to change what was going to happen, if it was too late to prevent her from walking away.



# Chapter Fourteen

*There's a light at each end of this tunnel,  
You shout 'cause you're just as far in as you'll ever be out  
And these mistakes you've made, you'll just make them again  
If you'd only try turning around*  
- Breathe (2AM), Anna Nalick

*Monday, August 25, 2003*

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Francis pushed open the door, with a smirk on his face. “Mrs. C is here, Miss Webber.”

Elizabeth, at the base of the stairs, rolled her eyes. “Francis, he’s upstairs and I doubt he cares what you call me—”

“No time for this, Muffin.” Carly stepped through the door, a cardboard box in her arms. “There’s ice cream in here and it’s going to melt.” She narrowed her eyes at a thud from upstairs. “What’s going on?”

“They’re taking apart some of the furniture in one of the guest rooms.” She stepped forward. “What’s with the food?”

“My brain must be oozing out of my ears,” Carly said, following her to the kitchen where she set the box on the table. “Sonny’s going to be here in a few hours, and I forgot I got lax about junk food. It’s bad enough he knows where I hide the Oreos and the candy bars. If he finds out the *ice cream* was in there...”

Elizabeth laughed and started to unpack the box. “Well, at least since Sonny’s back that means he’ll be kicking you out again, so you can just come over here and stuff your face.” She put the pistachio ice cream in their freezer.

“There is that benefit.” Carly glanced out the doorway where she saw several men carrying down a headboard. “Why are you cleaning out one of the guest rooms?”

Elizabeth hesitated and then ducked her head, still not sure that it was all happening. “A few weeks ago, Jason suggested I pick which room I wanted for the nursery. I kept changing my mind, but I decided yesterday.”

“*Jason* suggested?” Carly pursed her lips. “Well, huh, maybe he was listening.” She unwrapped a candy bar and split it in half, offering one side to Elizabeth. “So...that does that mean things are better?”

“They’re...different,” Elizabeth allowed. They still weren’t talking about what the baby would mean for their relationship, if Jason intended on being her father in truth, and not just in gossip, but she

didn't feel the crushing weight of not being able to talk about how tired she was sometimes, or how her feet hurt.

"Hmmm..." Sounding unconvinced, Carly chewed her chocolate. "I'm having lunch with Mama later, but afterwards, I could always bring some of my books over so we can work on color schemes. I have to settle on Morgan's nursery colors since he's due in five minutes."

"That wouldn't suck," Elizabeth said. "Jason and Sonny will probably spend half the afternoon getting caught up anyway." She smiled and shook her head. "Since it's not like they can discuss their business over the phone."

"True story." Carly popped the last piece in her mouth. "All right, I've delivered my known contraband, so I'm going to do another sweep, make sure I didn't miss anything."

"I know you bitch about Sonny's nutrition issues, but I think you enjoy the crap out of figuring out how to get your junk food anyway," Elizabeth remarked as she walked the blonde to the door, already opened.

"I do," Carly admitted, "because he knows that I'm doing it, but he can't figure out how. I just hope he doesn't realize you're my dealer until this kid is out of me." With a wave, she left. "Later, Muffin."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and turned around to see Jason heading down the stairs. Behind her, Francis closed the door. "Hey, did they finish?"

"Yeah," Jason replied. He slid his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "But they left the carpet where it is. I didn't know if you wanted to change it."

Elizabeth shrugged. "I can make it work, I'm sure." She hesitated, feeling a bit apprehensive. Things were better, but they weren't where they needed to be, and more than once since Jason had suggested setting up a nursery, she'd been urged by Nadine to just talk to the man.

She knew she should. She knew they had to, but she just...wanted more time.

"Carly was by dropping off her junk food," she said finally. She twisted her fingers in the skirt of her strapless maxi dress. "She said Sonny's on his way back."

"Yeah." He stepped forward took her hands in his, stilling her restless fingers. "But it won't be like it was last month. Things are calmer." But the unspoken *for now* hung between them, and she was determined to put on a brave face for him.

"I'm not worried about that." She bit her lip, because she hated bringing it up, but knowing she didn't have a choice. "I know we don't talk about it much, but I haven't asked in a while about..." She paused. "Well...your search for Ric."

Instead of tensing up as she had expected, he just sighed and led her over to the couch. He sat and she curled up next to him. "I told you we had to scale it back when things started to get...complicated here."

“I know, and I understood.” She really did. For all they knew, Ric had given up after the kidnapping attempt fell through, and there was no point in Jason and Sonny leaving them unprotected on one side to search for a possibly non-existent threat. “I just think we’d all be better off if he wasn’t hanging over our shoulders.”

“I know. I’m hoping we can ramp it back up now that things are under control,” Jason said. “I’d like this resolved *before* you have the baby.”

Elizabeth frowned, because she wasn’t really sure what that meant. Feeling a little brave, she cleared her throat. “Because you’d like me out of here by then?” she asked softly.

He drew his brows together, and he met her eyes, his own filled with bewilderment. “*No*. I just...I know your blood pressure is back where it needs to be, and you’ve been healthy. I just...don’t want you worried about it.” He laced their fingers together and stared at their hands. “I told you...I wanted you here. I—I know I haven’t...always made it easy.”

“No,” Elizabeth confessed, “but neither have I.” She rested her head on his shoulder, her forehead against his cheek. “We’re still just living in the moment, Jason.”

“I know.” His voice was low, almost hoarse. “I know that.”

“This summer has meant so much to me...to finally be with you, to look at you and not have to hide how I feel...but I can’t live in the moment forever.”

His chest rumbled as he exhaled. “I know. We need to...figure out what’s next.”

She nodded, closing her eyes. She didn’t want to read into his words, but she knew a part of her wondered if the reason Jason had such difficulty bringing up the future with her was because he didn’t think they *had* one.

## **Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

Jason nodded to Max, who opened Sonny’s door. He’d rather be across the hall, watching Elizabeth sketch or read, or do anything. Every moment he spent with Elizabeth felt bittersweet now, because he thought they had almost agreed that what they had was all about the moment, and he knew what she meant about it not lasting forever.

He’d known that all along, but it was the first time either of them had really broached what that might mean. He’d agreed to set up a room for the baby, and hesitantly brought the topic up several times so she’d know she didn’t have to hide it anymore. He hated that she’d felt that way, but he couldn’t go back and change the past. He could only make it better.

“Hey, Jase.” Sonny poured a glass of water. “Carly’s out to lunch with her mother. Liz across the hall?”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his chest, absently. “She still doesn’t leave the penthouse much, which I know drives her crazy. Mostly for the hospital or lunch with her grandmother. Sometimes Carly takes her

shopping.”

“Yeah.” Sonny grinned. “Carly mentioned she’d been spending more time than she felt comfortable about with the Muffin.” He shook his head as he sipped the water. “I’d tell her to stop with the nickname, but I think it’s a term of endearment at this point, which pisses Carly off. So really, it’s kind of funny.”

The odd truce that had sprung up between the two women *was* actually entertaining, Jason had to admit. He was still wary of them spending time together, sure that at any moment, Carly would revert to form, but she was proving him wrong. Carly had always said in the end she was loyal to him first, which explained why she’d stopped hanging out with Courtney, but this was the first time he actually believed that might be true.

“Anyway.” Sonny sighed and set the glass down. “Let’s get down to it.” He crossed to the desk and flipped through some folders. “I got a guy on computers. He’s annoying as hell, because I’m not entirely sure he speaks English and drinks too much orange soda. He’s at PCU, which means he’s younger than I’d like, but Stan told me he’s a crafty motherfucker.” He handed a file to Jason. “Damien Spinelli. He managed to track the money that’s been skimmed off from the casinos to a series of shell corporations. He said he’s still tracing it to the original account holder, but it might take time.”

“So we still don’t know who’s behind this?” Jason glanced at the file on the new hacker and then closed it. He’d go over it more detail later. “Or why they came at us so hard last month, and then just drew back without warning? I don’t like it, Sonny.”

“Me either.” Sonny rubbed the corner of his mouth with his index finger. “It makes me surer we’re dealing with Ric and Faith. I don’t know where they’d get the resources, but that kind of haphazard attack tells me they’re running low. Maybe they thought all the problems would distract us from Elizabeth’s security.” He shrugged. “Not a chance, but I guess they don’t know that.”

“I just...” Jason looked at the ceiling, annoyed at the world. “I just wish we knew if it is Ric, if he’s after you, or still after Elizabeth. If he believed us when we told him it was my child. I don’t know, and I hate not knowing.”

“I underestimated the son of a bitch,” Sonny growled. “He was impatient. Didn’t get the reaction he wanted from you about Liz, so he went after my wife. But he didn’t even bother trying to seduce her or being her friend. He went right for blackmail. It didn’t feel like he had an exit plan.”

“I should have taken him apart the second I saw him going after Elizabeth,” Jason muttered. “I wanted to.”

“Yeah...well...” Sonny rolled his shoulders. “I figured he was so sloppy before, he’d be that away again. But I don’t know, man...if he’s still focused on Elizabeth...”

Jason saw hesitation settle over his friend’s features, and tensed. “What?”

“I think...” Sonny said slowly, “that he was impatient when he was dealing with *me*, but I’m beginning to wonder if he *ever* believed Elizabeth was pregnant with your child.” He held up a hand when Jason opened his mouth to protest. “Hear me out. It was a good plan, and I went along with it. It may have made her life difficult for a while, but it offered her a level of protection that she just wouldn’t have had otherwise. But it’s like...Ric is holding on to that, and I keep remember how you said he threatened her.”

“He said he wouldn’t be separated from his child.” Jason scrubbed his hands over his face. “So he’s been screwing with us this whole time. He made us think he believed me when he went straight for Carly and Courtney. He wanted to exact the maximum damage. He *knew* it was a ploy, and that’s *why* he announced it to an entire goddamn diner.”

“We were distracted then. By setting up this story, by getting Elizabeth’s security detail settled.” Sonny nodded. “And while we were dealing with the Families and Elizabeth’s safety, he came after the business.”

“Because he thought we might shift our focus again.” It was so goddamn clear now. How the hell had they missed this? “What are they going to do now? They still can’t get to her. I barely let her out of my sight. She has two guards on her when she leaves, and two more she doesn’t even see. We sweep the cars she uses before they get close.” He was going to crawl out of his skin, because all of this meant Ric was still focused on Elizabeth and the baby. He hadn’t fixed a goddamn *thing* yet.

“Ric has to figure she’s getting close to her due date. I can’t...” Sonny paused. “I can’t decide if he thinks it’d be better to grab her now, and wait for the baby to be born or wait until the kid is here. But it’s insane at this point. He has to know that after all the trouble we’ve gone to protect her, that we’re still sticking with the story...he *has* to know we’d protect the kid as much as Elizabeth.”

“Which means he’ll be desperate and looking for any opportunity.”

## **Kelly’s: Courtyard**

Carly entered the courtyard, Rocco just steps behind her. She hoped like hell Courtney wasn’t working today. She hadn’t seen her in the two weeks since their last run-in and good riddance to her. Why the hell she’d thought that simpering twit was good enough for her best friend, she’d never know.

She wasn’t even sure the *Muffin* was good enough for him, but they were stupid for each other, which meant Carly hoped they got their shit together and stopped causing *her* stress.

“Carly?”

The sound of her name had her pausing in front of the door. She turned to find Elizabeth’s grandmother and the nurse from the hospital at one of the tables. “Oh, hello, Mrs. Hardy.”

Audrey smiled at her and got to her feet. “Hello, how are you feeling?”

“Fat,” Carly said, always suspicious when upstanding people were nice to her, but she knew Audrey

had been an unexpected source of support for her...*not* her friend, damn it. The Muffin. Audrey supported the Muffin. Damn her life. “Ready to have this baby.”

“Would you join us for a moment?” Audrey asked. She must have seen the confusion in Carly’s eyes, because she smiled. “Just a moment. We won’t keep you.”

“All right.” Carly gingerly lowered herself into the third chair and looked at the perky blonde nurse. Nadia. Nancy. Naomi. Frick. She needed to pay more attention. “Um...I’m not sure we’ve ever really...you know, met.”

“Nadine Crowell.” The other woman smiled. Nadine, that’s right. At least she was on the right track. “I’m sure you’re wondering why Mrs. Hardy and I cornered you.”

“Um...” Carly darted a glance at the elderly woman who had taken her seat again. “The thought had occurred to me.”

“It’s about Elizabeth,” Audrey said. “Nadine and I would like to have a baby shower for her, but we...” She cleared her throat. “I understand from my granddaughter that...for security reasons...” And though phrase clearly pained her, but Carly admired how the woman just forged on. “We may want to have it at the penthouse.”

“It’d be totally easier for gifts, too,” Nadine remarked and Carly wondered idly how anyone could be that goddamn chipper all the damn time. She kind of wanted to smack her to see if she’d stop smiling long enough to cry.

“It’s true that the penthouse would be easiest,” Carly agreed. And then she realized she’d somehow been roped into planning a baby shower for Elizabeth Muffin Webber.

God damn her life. Whatever happened to the bitch on wheels? Pregnancy. That’s what. She was going soft.

### **Morgan Penthouse: Nursery**

Jason hesitantly pushed open the door to the newly designated nursery and found Elizabeth standing in the middle of the room, a sketchbook in her hand and tapping a pencil against her lips. She didn’t notice him right away, so he leaned against the door jamb. She was wearing another one of those stretchy, clingy dresses that told the world that she was pregnant. It should have bothered him—this constant reminder of their expiration date. That once she had her daughter, things between them would change, even end. And yet...it was impossible to ignore that Elizabeth Webber was one of those women who glowed when she was carrying a child.

Elizabeth glanced over and smiled. “Hey. I thought Carly said you were going to be late.”

“I have to go back out tonight,” he told her, “but I’m free for the next few hours.” He looked at her sketchbook. “Do you know what you want to do in here yet?”

Her eyes widened, and he knew she was surprised he was, once again, broaching the subject of her

daughter.

She smiled and looked back at the walls. “Yeah. Carly came by while you were meeting with Sonny, and she lugged over almost ever decorating book or magazine she could find.” She chuckled, shaking her head. “Rocco was not happy, but I guess he figures better to keep her happy.” She tapped her pencil idly against the paper. “She’s still trying to visualize Morgan’s nursery, so she actually asked me for my opinion on that.” Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. “Carly and I haven’t argued in like four months, Jason. I don’t know what to do about that.”

This time his smile felt more natural. “Yeah, I know what you mean. Carly never ceases to surprise me. I thought *she* ’d be the most difficult part of all this.”

“I know, right?” Elizabeth crossed to the windowsill to put down the pad and pick up a measuring tape. He hurried forward to take it from her. “Jason, I am capable of—”

“I’m taller than you,” he pointed out. “What do you need?”

She indicated she wanted the length of the walls, from corner to corner, to window, to door so she could make accurate furniture plans. As he did so, Elizabeth continued with their previous conversation. “Carly and I have been at odds for so long, I’m pretty sure that neither of us really remember why.” She hesitated. “Well, that’s not true. She hated me because of that December in my studio.”

“Yeah, she wasn’t a fan of you restricting my visitors.” Jason smiled now, remembering how fierce Elizabeth had been then. He’d seen the sparks in her all that fall, but he’d wondered if she’d be able to stand up to Sonny and Carly when he didn’t want to see them. The two were forces of nature, used to getting their own way, but they hadn’t been prepared for her.

“Hmmpf.” Elizabeth folded her arms and lifted her chin. “Well, you didn’t *want* to see anyone. It was I could do to make you see Bobbie.” She tilted her head to the side. “That time in my studio, that’s when I knew I was going to be okay. That I would be okay without Lucky. Before then, I was still kind of floundering, not sure how to get on with my life. But...I woke up one day when it was all over, and I realized...” He looked at her, and her cheeks were flushed.

“You realized what?”

“That you weren’t just my friend with the motorcycle,” Elizabeth admitted. “You weren’t just Emily’s brother.” She met his eyes. “You were Jason, and I...I really missed you.”

“I know what you mean,” Jason after a long moment. He wrote down the last measurement and set the tape back on the window sill. “I always knew who you were. I always kept an eye on who Emily was friends with, and I remember seeing you that night at Luke’s, when Nikolas was shot.” He leaned against the window. “And I remember you, with Lucky. That...night at the garage.”

“I only remembered you and Sonny later,” Elizabeth said. She crossed the room and leaned against the wall, facing him. “I remember falling, but not hitting the ground. Bobbie told me Sonny caught

me.” Her eyes looked pained. “And I remember going to tell Sonny that I was so sorry Luke was blaming him because the fire had been my fault, caused by the candles I asked him to light.”

“But it *wasn't* your fault,” Jason reminded her, hating the anguish talking about those days brought up. “And you know, Lucky’s alive.”

“I know.” Elizabeth exhaled slowly. “But not...not in the same way. He’s mostly okay now, but he’s not that boy anymore. That boy...the one you hired, that idolized Luke and Sonny...that Lucky *never* came back, and it took me a long time to accept that.” She forced a smile on her face. “But we were talking about how you thought of me before the studio.”

“Right.” Jason didn’t want to talk about Lucky anyway, though he found he was less bothered by her memories of Lucky before the fire than he was by the ones with the living breathing pain in the ass he always had to deal with. “There was the time you and Emily lied to Jake about me saying it was all right for you guys to go see some stupid band.”

Elizabeth laughed, and he was relieved that it was genuine. “Yeah. Oh, wow. I still don’t know why 98 Degrees was playing in some dive bar, but hey...if you hadn’t given us permission that night...I never would have gone that night you and I first...” She hesitated. “It’s weird, because I think of it as the night we met, but it’s not.” She bit her lip. “Or maybe it is, because it’s the first time I looked at you and saw someone other than Lucky’s friend or Emily’s brother.”

“You liked the bike, I think,” Jason mused, and she pouted, punching him lightly in the shoulder. “But yeah. I know what you mean. After that, we were friends, but not the way...” He paused, because he didn’t know exactly how to explain this to her. “You took apart your entire life to take care of me. You let people think the worst about you, and you never...*once* backed down.”

“You needed me,” Elizabeth said. She rested her chin on his shoulder and smiled. “And it was fun, sometimes. It sounds awful, but I used to get a kick out of how everyone looked at me differently. Before I was just little Lizzie Webber, Audrey’s granddaughter, Lucky’s friend. Afterwards...” She laughed. “I was the ex-mistress of an alleged mob enforcer.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “It helped break me out of my shell.”

He laughed, glad she could look back on those accusations with a smile on her face. He’d hated the way Nikolas talked about her, the way he’d used Lucky to make her feel guilty for not wanting *him*. Jason should have punched him harder. “I’d never had anyone fight on my side the way you did,” he admitted. “If Robin had found me in the boxcar, she would have forced me to go to the hospital. She wouldn’t have listened to me about not wanting Sonny’s help. She would have insisted.”

“Well, about halfway up the stairs to my studio, there were times I wished I’d at least enlisted one of Sonny’s men,” Elizabeth teased, but she shrugged a shoulder. “I knew I could get your medications from Sonny. I knew Bobbie would help take care of you. You weren’t in any danger. Anyway, you just would have left the hospital.”

He chuckled, because of course she was right. In the hospital, he would have been subjected to Carly, to the Quartermaines, to anyone who wanted to walk in his door. And though her studio hadn’t been



peaceful, what with Carly, Nikolas and her grandmother barging in all the time, she'd always showed up to kick them out. "How'd we start talking about this, anyway?"

"Carly." Elizabeth reached around him for her sketchpad and the measuring tape. "Why she didn't like me. Honestly, I figured I'd be hearing her screaming about this situation every other day based on how often I had to deal with her back then, but she's been downright pleasant." Elizabeth pursed her lips. "She's not up to something, is she?"

"Oh, God, I hope not," Jason said fervently. Carly with a plan was a dangerous thing. "I'm hoping she's content with figuring out how to sneak her junk food past Sonny. I do *not* have the energy to worry about what schemes Carly might be into." He rubbed his face, exhausted at the mere possibility. "Do you want order something for dinner? Or we could make something."

"Hmm..." Elizabeth tapped her lip. "How long are you going to be gone tonight?" she asked. "Most of the night?"

"Probably," Jason frowned. "I have to leave around nine."

She reached for his wrist to look at his watch. "And it's five, now." She released his arm and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I think we should order out. So...that..." She pressed a kiss on the underside of his jaw. "We can do other things."

"Yeah?" He grinned, resting his hands on either of her hips. "What other things?"

"Have I ever told you about the way a woman's libido changes during pregnancy?" Elizabeth leaned back and arched an eyebrow. "Some women...don't feel a difference. Some...can't get in the mood. And others..." She danced the fingers of one hand down his chest until it rested at the waist of his jeans. "Can't stop thinking about it."

"Well, I guess, in that case...takeout is for best." He slid his hand in her hair and drew her in for a fierce kiss, wishing it could always be as easy it was in this moment.

# Chapter Fifteen

*All that I wanted from you  
Was something you'd never do  
So let me in  
Oh please tonight  
Don't let this end  
Tonight  
Cause' I'm starting to fall  
So let me in*  
- Let Me In, Save Ferris

*Thursday, September 18, 2003*

## **Kelly's: Courtyard**

Emily pulled her cardigan tighter around her sweater, already missing the heat of summer. Days like this she missed California, where the summer lasted far longer than September, but if she wanted to live near her family, living in upstate New York was the price she had to pay.

She smiled at her breakfast partner, who was absorbed in stirring her tea, and then sipped her hot chocolate. She set the mug down and looked at the other two empty chairs at either end of the table, remembering other meals at Kelly's. Remembering when the person across from her had been a brunette and also sipping hot chocolate. They'd once split three packets of the stuff between them, overfilling their mugs with whipped cream and sprinkles.

Instead, she sat across from Courtney Matthews who sipped tea.

Her stomach rolled, as often had in the nearly three months since she had spoken to her brother or her best friend. She'd been upset at contributing to Elizabeth's bed rest, and had decided that her niece or nephew was more important than trading snide remarks with her former best friend. And that regaining her brother's respect had been more important.

But she'd seen Elizabeth at the hospital for appointments, for lunches with her grandmother and Nadine Crowell. How her pregnancy had advanced, the way the sadness in her eyes had faded—sadness Emily had never really registered. She hadn't seen her brother nearly as often—occasionally on the docks or here at Kelly's. He'd never been one to wear his emotions on his sleeve, particularly in public, but he didn't look as tense or annoyed with the world.

And the more she'd met with Courtney, the more she'd wondered how she'd got it all wrong. She'd listened to Courtney's bitter rants and realized they didn't quite match the syrupy version she'd received when she'd come home in March. How Courtney just *knew* Jason saw her that way, but he'd been such a stand-up guy that he'd broken things off with Elizabeth before he'd ever told her, showed her. That's why it hurt so much that he'd cheated on her, that he'd lied to her and wouldn't give her the time of day.

Emily glanced up as the man in question entered the courtyard. Jason glanced at their table, met Emily's eyes and then looked away. He disappeared into the restaurant. She exhaled slowly. "I miss him," she murmured.

Courtney tapped the side of her tea cup and nodded. "I'm sorry you guys argued about me—"

"We didn't," Emily interrupted. "I mean, not really." She set her mug down. "He was upset because Elizabeth went on bed rest for a while in June, and he said that the way I was...treating her had been a factor. I..." Emily hesitated, because she didn't want to make Courtney angry. The blonde had spent the better part of the summer, living on anger and bitterness, but the past few weeks had been different. The weight seemed to have lifted from her shoulders.

"You took my side against Elizabeth," Courtney said with a guilty smile. "Em, I *never* meant for that to happen. I know I put you in the middle more than I should have, but..." She leaned back and sighed. "Carly changed her mind about liking me, I guess I was only useful when I was dating Jason."

"Courtney, you were hurt." Emily paused. "No matter how my brother and Elizabeth ended their relationship, or even if you *were*...a rebound, he shouldn't have cheated on you." She bit her lip. "But, yeah, I took your side over Elizabeth's, which...seemed like the right one at the time. You were my friend, too. I mean, Elizabeth and I were close when we were teenagers, but after I had my accident, we drifted apart." Emily stared at her hands. "We both called and wrote, talked about her coming out to see me, or me coming home once I started UCLA, but it...just never happened. She got busy with life here, I was busy with life in California. And then..." She sucked in a breath. "She called me last summer to tell me she'd slept with my ex-boyfriend. I was so angry with her. I hung up on her, didn't even let her explain."

"What was there to explain?" Courtney asked dully. "I knew she and Jason were fighting after that, well not..." She paused. "Not fighting, But there was a distance that hadn't been there before. He didn't look at her the way he had before."

"Yeah, but I guess..." Emily shook her head. "Zander had lived here another year without me, and Elizabeth was one of the few people he knew. Maybe...they got closer. I don't know. There are a thousand reasons she could have done it, and I never let her tell me even one. I didn't even know about her and Jason until I came home. But I remembered the year before, when he'd been home the last time, how he'd been so upset because he cared so much about her, and she kept jerking him around..." She closed her eyes. "But maybe I didn't want to see how sad she'd been, how unhappy she'd been with Lucky for months."

"She could have broken up with him," Courtney said, her mouth tight. "She didn't *have* to—"

"No." Emily smiled, feeling sorrow at how she hadn't *seen* Elizabeth. She'd only seen Lucky. For months, she'd only seen her childhood best friend and known he wasn't the same boy, that he hadn't come back all the way, and if Elizabeth would just *concentrate* on him and forget about Jason, maybe Lucky would come back and it would be like it had been before.

"C'mon, Emily. No one has to stay in a relationship that makes them miserable." Courtney rolled her

eyes. “I came along at the tail end of that, and I can’t even understand why she loved him in the first place—”

“You didn’t know them then.” Emily looked away. “I don’t say that to make you upset or point out how far back I go with Elizabeth, but before we thought Lucky died in that fire, I wanted a love like theirs. I know they were young, but...” Emily hesitated. “They’d been so happy together. The way they looked at one another, they were so in sync. I just...” She tilted her head up the sky. “When he came home, I didn’t see that they weren’t those people anymore. He’d been through so much, she’d been dealing with thinking he was dead, but everyone told them they were perfect together, and I know they both felt an obligation to one another to live those dreams again.”

“Emily—”

“And we all pressured her when Lucky was having difficulties. We told her to keep trying, that she and Lucky were perfect together.” Emily rubbed the side of her face. “I didn’t see it. I knew she and Jason were close before he left that first time. I used to think...” Emily pressed her lips together. “That if Lucky had been really dead, if he hadn’t left...”

“But Lucky was alive, and Jason left. Emily, I don’t know the point of all this—”

“The point of this is that I...” Emily met the exasperated eyes of her brother’s ex-girlfriend. “I think maybe I blamed her for not trying hard enough. Lucky was my best friend in the whole world, the first one I made here in Port Charles, and I think...maybe I thought she should have tried harder. If she hadn’t been distracted by Jason, she could have...”

“Made Lucky be the way he used to be?” Courtney supplied. “Well, I mean, it’s not like I like her or even know him that well, but...” As if annoyed with herself for taking Elizabeth’s side, she huffed. “*Should* that have been her job?”

“No...which makes what Nikolas and I did to her so much worse. I wish I could go back, and tell that girl it was okay she didn’t want to be a model, that she had stopped loving Lucky the way she had before the fire, that it was okay that she had feelings for someone else.”

“But that’s not why you’re fighting now,” Courtney told her. “You’re fighting now because of how she hurt your brother. How she wasn’t honest with you.”

“But it’s the same thing as before,” Emily replied. “I’m not asking *her* how it happened, how she and Jason fell apart, how they came back together, why she slept with Zander. I’m just...*judging* her for those things. I’m still taking someone *else’s* side.”

“I guess.” Courtney shrugged a shoulder. “I mean, I get it, Emily, I do. She’s your best friend going back to high school. I only dated Jason a few months. I look at her now, and she’s having a baby, Em. I made it more difficult for her than I had to.” She swirled her spoon in her now cold tea. “I guess I figured I was a rebound for Jason at first. He was for me, but I really thought that changed after a while. I thought...”

“I just want to apologize to her,” Emily murmured. “I don’t expect her to forgive me, or even understand why I did what I did, but I just want her to know that I know what I did was wrong. I mean, I made the situation so much worse, Courtney. I dropped all these hints to Ric, and then Elizabeth couldn’t deal with things the way she wanted to. Instead, she and Jason have to play damage control. You find out from Ric in front of a dozen people. It’s my fault.”

“I could have been nicer to her. I didn’t have to…” Courtney sighed. “I was pretty nasty to her the last time I saw her and Carly here together. I was so angry that she was stealing my best friend after I lost Jason, but Carly wasn’t my best friend. She’s Jason’s best friend, and I forgot that for a long time. I said some really awful things.”

“But it’s not like Jason would let me within a hundred miles of her right now.” Emily put her elbow on the table, and propped her chin on her fist. “And I’m sure her guards aren’t supposed to let anyone stress her out, not with the baby due in less than three months.”

“Yeah.” Courtney nodded. “I know the guards don’t like me. Especially Cody. I used to…” Her cheeks flushed. “I used to make him help Elizabeth close up the nights we had the last shift. I knew he wouldn’t let her lift anything heavy, but…” She shrugged. “I shouldn’t have done it. So there’s no way I could get near her to apologize. Not after the last stunt.”

“Maybe I could get near her at the hospital,” Emily mused. “The security is relatively tight there, my dad has insisted on it after the crap that’s happened there over the last few years, so they don’t always follow her around. Usually, there’s one at the elevator and one at the stairwell that’s between the waiting area and her doctor’s office.” With her free hand, she tapped her fingers restlessly against the table. “I don’t even know if I should bother before the baby is born. Maybe until I can’t cause her more stress.”

“Well, Em, you have to do what’s right for you,” Courtney said. She popped a piece of strawberry from her fruit plate in her mouth and watched as Jason, now with a cup of coffee, exited Kelly’s, glanced at their table again, and then left the courtyard. “That’s all we can do, really, you know. Follow our instincts.”

“Lucky used to say you should be true to yourself,” Emily murmured. “I think it’s good advice.”

“Exactly.” Courtney nodded. “And after this crappy summer, that’s the big change I’m going to make.” She lifted her tea and finished it one gulp, even though it had to be ice cold at this point. “I’m *not* going to sit around and wallow anymore. I’m going to start being true to myself again.”

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

“It’s just for a few hours.” Elizabeth sighed, already exhausted by this argument. For two weeks, Jason had asked her to stay inside, for visitors to come to her. He hadn’t been specific, but she knew he felt her security had been threatened in some way—that Ric and Faith had been toying with them all summer, hoping for an opportunity to take Elizabeth. They were desperate, Jason told her, and he knew she was safe as long as she was in this building.

“Elizabeth—”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and stepped towards the balcony, looking out over the harbor, wishing she was out there. In the last four months, she had spent more time in this penthouse than she had outside it and she was starting to chafe. Jason had tried to make it comfortable here, clearing out a space for her to paint, but she wanted her studio, she wanted to go to Kelly’s to have lunch with her grandmother. He got to go have coffee there every morning, why couldn’t she just...be outside for an hour? She glared at the evidence of his own visit, sitting empty on the coffee table.

“This is one of the reasons I pushed away,” he said quietly. She frowned now and looked at him. “Because of times like *this*, when your safety had to take priority over your happiness.”

She bit her lip and flicked her eyes back to the outside world. “Jason—”

“You already have to be escorted everywhere by two guards,” he interrupted, his voice rough. “You can’t paint where you want to, you can’t go out and do things when you want. I *knew*—”

“Just...stop...” She held up a hand, hoping he would stop talking about how this argument was justification for always pushing her away. “I might be frustrated, but it’s not like I don’t get it, okay? I do. And I’ll suck it up. But...” She rubbed the side of her head. “I just want you to *let* me be frustrated without pushing me away. The guards don’t bother me, being driven around doesn’t either — it’s not like I was a great driver anyway. The studio is just a room, and...” Well, the third point had some merit. “My grandmother will just have to learn to be comfortable visiting here.”

He shook his head. “You don’t—”

“Jason, it isn’t *always* like this,” Elizabeth said. “I know this. I remember when Sonny and Carly got married that first time. There were threats, yeah, you came home to take care of something that ended up with the warehouse burning down, but Carly went about her business at Deception, annoying me. I remember when you were dating Robin, because Emily was my friend. Robin had a guard, but she had a life and friends.”

“But—”

“The threat right now is different,” Elizabeth said simply. “I don’t know the details, and I don’t want to know them, but I know you think Ric and Faith are trying to distract you in one area, hoping that it will lead you to loosen my security a bit. That means this particular threat is aimed at *me*. So I’ll vent, and I’ll stomp my foot. But...” She lowered herself onto the sofa next to him. “At the end of the day, my life, my *daughter*’s life is more important to me than going to Kelly’s for lunch.”

Jason exhaled and he looked away. She wondered if he was just trying to think of something to counter her argument. “It won’t be like this,” he finally said. “You’ll have one guard. You’ll...be able to get a job if you want. Come and go. But this might happen again—”

“And we’ll probably get annoyed with each other then.” She hesitated. “Jason, you are important enough to me to make sacrifices. What we have is important enough for me to take that risk. Are you

*ever* going to accept that I'm exactly where I want to be?"

"I do, most of the time." He pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead. "I just...there's so much I can't control—"

"Which is why we take precautions. Why you guys have this placed locked up tighter than Fort Knox. Nadine jokes she's sure the next time she shows up, they'll strip search her. Jason..." Normally, she would have straddled him to force him to look at her, to meet her eyes, but she'd woken up this week, and for the first time, felt seven months pregnant. She settled for taking his hand in hers and lacing their fingers together. "Sometimes the way you talk...it makes me think you don't see us learning how to make this work."

He hesitated, looking at their fingers and then met her eyes, but she was annoyed that his faced was closed. "I'm just being realistic," he said finally. "That it might not."

She sighed and sat back, letting his hand slide from hers. "What if my grandmother and I promised to eat inside the restaurant? You know that Bobbie doesn't mind if you put a guy on the exit and the entrance."

"Yeah, I guess that'll work." She was exhausted from constantly having to be the one to make the step forward. He wanted her to stay, but he hadn't been lying when he said he didn't know how make to her want to, and she was beginning to think he didn't *expect* her to. If she thought his hesitation to trust in them was something she could fix, she'd try to...but she just didn't think it was. Particularly since he couldn't bring himself to answer her hesitant questions about the future.

She was foolishly pinning her hopes on things changing when Cady was born, because she knew he'd have to be in the delivery room with her. He would hold her, and she really wanted to believe he would look at this baby he had watched come into this world and love her for who she was in her own right, and forget that she was biologically Ric Lansing's daughter.

But even though they had now acknowledged the baby, had begun to decorate a nursery, she still didn't feel any sense of...connection to the future. To the idea that they would be a family. If he didn't look at Cady with the love her daughter deserved, how could she stay? So maybe he was right have that hesitation, because until she knew he would accept her daughter, she couldn't tell him she loved him. She didn't want to say those words, and have him look at her with those beautiful eyes and say them back, knowing she couldn't trust them.

If he didn't love Cady, then he *couldn't* love Cady's mother.

Elizabeth sighed. "I'll call my grandmother to let her know I'll be there soon." She leaned over and kissed him. "Thanks."

As she disappeared up the stairs, there was a knock on the door and Francis pushed open. "Hey, Jase. Mrs. C wants to speak to Miss Webber."

Carly slowly came in, not nearly as mobile in her eighth month of pregnancy. "Man, this *sucks*. I don't

remember being this miserable with Michael.”

Jason stood to take her hand and lower her to the armchair. “You were too busy making sure AJ was out of the picture, that I was agreeing to help you and that Tony was far away from you.”

“Hmm...yeah, I *was* distracted.” She glanced around. “Where’s the Muffin?”

“Getting ready for lunch with her grandmother.”

“*She* gets to go out?” Carly pouted. “Lucky brat.” She sighed. “But even if I wanted to go out, I don’t know where I’d go. I’m fat, Jason. And this is *your* fault.”

He heard Elizabeth laugh as she came down the stairs. “Carly, how do you figure *Jason* got you in this mess?”

“*He* convinced me to marry Sonny,” Carly grumbled. “Ipso facto, that makes it his fault.”

Elizabeth frowned, with a good natured smile. “Ipso facto? When did you learn Latin?”

“I get very, bored Muffin. I read a list of Latin terms on the Internet and for funsies, I memorized them.” Carly groaned and let her head fall back. “That’s where I am in this pregnancy, Jason. I am so bored I’m *learning* crap.”

“Well, that’s a cause for alarm.” Elizabeth leaned in and kissed Jason on the cheek. “I’ll be back from lunch in a few hours.”

“Be careful,” Jason called after her as she pulled open the door. Carly twisted slightly in her chair and frowned.

“Well, frick, I didn’t even get to ask her if she finished the sketch for Morgan’s nursery. I want to paint his name on the wall, and she said she’d work on something arty for me.” She pursed her lip. “Well...now that I’ve docked myself here, I’m going to annoy you for at least ten minutes to make this trip worth it.”

Jason sighed and sat on the sofa. “Nothing new there, Carly.”

“Did Muffin show you the colors she picked out for Cady’s room?” Carly asked.

“Are you ever going to stop calling her that?” Jason asked, ignoring her. “She has a name, Carly.”

“Bah. She likes it, I think. It’s our thing.” She narrowed her eyes. “I thought you guys settled things, that you were on the same page about the baby.”

“I’m *still* not having is conversation with you,” Jason told her. He barely wanted to have this conversation with himself much less Carly, but she was, as she’d put it, docked in his living room and it wasn’t as though he could physically kick her out.



“I swear to God, Jason Morgan, if you screw this up after I’ve gone to the trouble of working the Muffin into my life, I will *never* let you hear the end of it,” Carly snarled. She pointed her index finger at him. “Do you understand me? I *bonded* with the woman. She’s designing my nursery. I helped her with the colors for hers. I bought her freaking baby clothes. I did everything you and Sonny wanted me to do, and—”

“Carly, it’s okay if you like Elizabeth. Most people do,” Jason interrupted, ignoring the purpose of her rant and just enjoying Carly’s annoyance. “It’s not a bad thing to make a friend.”

“Oh, piss off.” Carly narrowed her eyes. “Oh, no, Jason. I *see* what you did there. Trying to lull me into a sense of security by insulting me so I won’t notice you’re avoiding me again. Damn it, Jason, are you going to make me say it straight out? Again? How many times do I have to tell you that the only person screwing your relationship up this time is *you*?” She scowled. “And you know I hate to take her side, but frick it, I don’t have a choice—”

“Do you want me to help you up?” Jason said blandly. Carly’s scowl only intensified, and then he was mildly horrified to see her eyes were almost glossy. “Carly—”

“You think I’m stupid? That I don’t *get* it?” She dug her elbows into the armchair, trying to hoist herself to her feet. Reflexively, Jason hauled her up. “You want the Muffin to stay, but you’re pretty sure she won’t. Which means you’ll watch *another* mother take *another* child you love away from you.”

Because he was annoyed to discover Carly did, in fact, get it, he just shook his head. “I told you, Carly—”

“You have to have this conversation with someone, Jason.” Carly braced a hand at her back. “Because if you don’t, you’re going to get exactly what you deserve. No mother should ever feel like her child is a burden or obligation. After everything I put you through with Michael, you never made me once feel like you regretted it. You hated what I did, what Robin did, but I know you. You’d do it all over again.”

Jason swallowed hard. “Carly—”

“So why do I rate that kind of consideration, but the woman you’re stupid about doesn’t?” Tears were sliding out of Carly’s eyes, and she swiped angrily at them. “You see what happens? I’m *crying* over goddamn Elizabeth Muffin Webber.” She started across the room, but turned at the door. “You deserve everything you get if you keep making her feel like her baby isn’t good enough. And if I’m wrong, and it’s not because of Michael, but because of Ric Lansing, well, then...” She huffed. “You don’t deserve her anyway. Which only pisses me off more.”

She opened the door, stepped gingerly out into the hallway, and then slammed it behind her.

### **Corinthos-Morgan Coffee Warehouse: Sonny’s Office**

Sonny Corinthos had a pisser of a headache brewing and the reason for it stood in his office, clutching

his laptop to his chest with one hand, a sheaf of papers in the other, and a goddamn beanie cap on his head. He knew he wasn't a good person, but what had he ever done to deserve Damien Spinelli?

"So, Mr. Sir, as I had previously stated, the shell companies were quite well hidden, and it was only through the talent of the Jackal that I was able to—"

Sonny cut off the rambling young man with a hand and looked at Jason. "Long story short. I read Spinelli's report. I read it five times. I still don't understand this bullshit. He doesn't listen to me when I tell him to speak English. I'm hoping you'll scare him."

Jason, who looked worn out, rubbed his eyes and turned his best lethal glare on Spinelli. The other man gulped and cleared his throat. "Yes, Stone Cold, sir. The shell companies that were receiving the siphoned funds from the casinos were very complicated, and I managed to track them back to the Lansing family out of Crimson Pointe."

Sonny had the sudden urge to slam his head into the desk. Fucking Lansing family. Fucking Crimson Pointe. Fucking Anthony goddamn Zacchara. He was a crazy son of a bitch and made *Sonny* look like the poster child for mental health. "So it was Trevor Lansing, and therefore, Zacchara."

"Not necessarily, Mr. Sir," Spinelli bobbed his head. "The Lansing holdings are enormously diverse and therefore I am still untangling which member of the family owns what. Several of the shell companies appeared to go right to Richard Lansing, while one or two of them passed through Trevor Lansing's hands before being transferred first to one Anthony Zacchara, then back to Richard Lansing. I cannot say at this time who makes the final decisions."

Jason folded her arms and scowled. "Will you be able to at some point? You're *supposed* to be good at this."

Spinelli drew himself up, indignant. "I will have you know that the Jackal is unsurpassed in cyberspace, but I cannot create records or databases that simply do not exist. I have to hack into Swiss bank accounts and offshore Caymans to pinpoint the exact withdrawer of the finds. This is not a point and click operation." He coughed. "Sir. I should know by the end of the week. I humbly apologize for the—"

"Ah, stop talking or I'm going to shoot you," Sonny muttered, covering his face with his hands. "Go away. Drink all the orange soda you can get your hands on and come back and tell me if which son of a bitch is gunning for me."

"I will accede to your wishes, Mr. Sir." Spinelli looked at Jason. "Stone Cold, sir." And with that, the computer hacker had disappeared out of the office.

"I think Stan was fucking with me when he put me in touch with this bastard," Sonny all but moaned. "Because, sure, he knows what he's doing, but I'll end up murdering him in the process." He stabbed a finger at Jason. "And you're gonna testify on my behalf, Jase. You're going to *tell* them I was provoked."

“He didn’t give us much to work with,” Jason sighed, lowering himself into a chair. “But it’s something to keep in mind. None of the Families have been as helpful as we’d hoped they’d be, but the Zaccharas even less.”

“Trevor doesn’t like me because of my mother.” Sonny rubbed his bottom lip. “Tell you what—knowing the connection between my mother and Lansing helps me understand why Zacchara’s *always* been a pain in my ass. Always more difficult than it needs to be with negotiations. Bastard’s been after me for years.”

“But he’s been content to stick it to you in small ways,” Jason pointed out. “He apparently gets more satisfaction from needling you rather than going after you the way Ric apparently did.”

“True.” Sonny sighed. “Still no closer to tracking that bastard down. I’d be a lot happier if I could watch him sink to the bottom of the harbor.” Suddenly he felt every inch of his nearly forty years. “If I had just let you kill him after what we found out about Carly, Elizabeth wouldn’t be going through this. She must be going insane, stuck in that penthouse.”

“She negotiated her way into lunch with her grandmother today,” Jason admitted. “For two hours. I got a call from Dominic before I came in that she was home. But yeah, she’s starting to get antsy.”

“She good otherwise?” Sonny asked. “Health wise?”

“*Fine*,” Jason said, and Sonny was surprised by the edge in his tone.

“You sure? You don’t sound like she’s fine.” Sonny crossed to the mini bar and poured himself some water. “Carly wants to drag her out for baby furniture this week. *I* want them to sit in the penthouse with a computer so they can order online—”

“Why can’t either of you just drop it?” Jason demanded. “I get it. Neither one of you think I’m doing anything right. I’m a complete failure. I don’t need you two to double team me.”

Sonny blinked, his water in his hand. “Ah...I’m not sure what you mean, Jase. It’s called conversation.”

“You think I don’t *know* what the situation is?” Jason dug the heel of his hand into his eye. “I live with it every day. I know I messed this up, just like I did last year. I get it. I do not want you or Carly *shoving* it in my face—”

“Um.” Sonny turned his head slightly, trying to understand what was going on here. Clearly, Jason was having a bit of temper tantrum. He didn’t even know that was possible. “I’m sorry?” he offered.

“Whatever.” Jason grabbed a stack of files. “I’m going home.”

“Okay,” Sonny drawled and watched his best friend all but stomp out of the room. Well, what the hell crawled up his ass and died?

**Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room**

“Don’t stop. Don’t ever stop.”

Sonny grinned and dug his thumb into the arch of his wife’s foot. “Rough day?”

“Boring day.” Carly tilted her head back against the arm of the sofa, her feet in Sonny’s lap. She closed her eyes. “I went to Jason’s to nag the Muffin, but she was being granted parole for a few hours. I yelled at Jason and came home to buy more clothes. Sonny, you never should have shown me how to shop online. It’s going to be a problem.”

“We’ll have to build another closet,” Sonny mused. He continued his massage. “What’d you yell at Jason about? He seemed tense.”

“You know how you told me to stay out of it?” Carly said with a sigh. “I hate to say this, maybe you were right. I thought I was helping. I didn’t *do* anything. There were no tapes, no wires, no outside forces. I just... *told* Jason he was making Elizabeth miserable about her pregnancy. And when I saw her setting up a nursery, I thought he’d heard me. That I was getting through to him, but I don’t know, Sonny.” She leaned up on her elbows to meet his eyes. “I think I’ve nagged him too much, and he’s digging in his heels.”

“I think Jason will straighten this out without our help,” Sonny said. “He managed to get this far—”

“But *he* didn’t, Sonny.” Carly huffed and laid back down, staring at the ceiling as Sonny’s fingers stilled on her ankle. “Elizabeth told me that *she*’s brought up all the changes. That the day after she moved in, she’s the one that insisted they start dealing with their garbage. That she’s *always* the one to bring up the future. And he caught her going through baby clothes she was stashing in the closet, so she figured he felt guilty.”

Sonny paused. “Elizabeth is confiding in you a lot.”

“Bite me, bastard. I’m not thrilled about it either, but this is my life now. I figured Jason was going to keep her this time. She’s having a baby, he loves babies, he...” Her nose wrinkled. “He...loves her, I guess. If we can use that word. They’re sleeping together. So I figured I should...not chase her away. It never kept her away, so it was just a waste of energy. So I gave her a chance, and I just...” Damn hormones, because she felt tears burning in her eyes again.

“I see how I felt when I was pregnant with Michael. When I was pregnant with our first son. Desperate. Trying to make a better life for myself, making mistakes everywhere I turned. I was so sure that you didn’t want the baby, or that you wanted it with anyone but me.”

“You sympathize with her,” Sonny said. She scowled at him, opening her eyes and raising her head. “It’s not a horrible thing, Carly. You found yourself pregnant with my child, when we hated one another, when I used you to make a point to Jason. I know...” He hesitated. “I know you doubted going through with it.”

“I did,” Carly sighed. “But I was never sorry that I did. And I know Elizabeth must have thought about not doing it either, but...” She squeezed her eyes shut. “Sonny, what if we’re wrong and the reason

Jason isn't talking about a future with Elizabeth and the baby *isn't* because of Michael."

"You think it's because of Ric?" Sonny said. He sighed, absently tracing circles on her ankle. "I've wondered. I love Michael as my own son, and I know Jason did. Still does, I'm sure. But maybe it's harder when you look at the woman you love having a child that was conceived with a man you loathe during a period of time you were separated. Do you think he thinks the baby is a mistake?"

"I want to say no," Carly said softly. "I want to believe that Jason still holds true to what he used to say. A baby is a person. He doesn't belong to anyone, but himself. He used to say that he wanted to protect Michael from the Quartermaines until he was old enough to make his own choices, until Michael could decide to have AJ for himself. I remember how perfect he was with Michael, how much he loved this little boy that wasn't his, that he *always* knew wasn't biologically his. I've known children who weren't loved as well by their actual parents the way Jason loved Michael. So...how can you think he wouldn't feel that way about Elizabeth's child?"

"I'm not saying it has to make sense," Sonny sighed. "I'm saying that maybe *Jason* doesn't even understand it. I think it's more about not wanting to lose another child. I don't think he believes he and Elizabeth are going to last."

"But *why*?" Carly again leaned up on her elbows. "Believe me, I've *tried* to get rid of her, but she keeps popping back up, so I figure she wants to be in it for the long haul. I see the way she talks about him, you know, and I get it. *I* see them working, so why can't he?"

"I wish I knew," Sonny said. "But Carly, it's not *our* job to fix their problems. To make them go away."

"Why not?" Carly demanded. "Jason always fixes mine. Why shouldn't it be my job to do it for him? I just want him to be happy, you know. Because I hurt him so much, and I can't *ever* make that go away. I can't ever take back letting him fall in love with Michael, with running to the Quartermaines and calling him a kidnapper, with marrying AJ...sleeping with you. I can't take those things back, so I have to *give* him something else to make up for it. I have make sure he's happy."

"Carly—"

"I tried, I really. I thought Courtney would work. She seemed...well, I don't know. She seemed okay, and I could put up with her. I figured that would be good, if I could tolerate the woman in his life so he'd stay my friend. Elizabeth never liked me, so maybe he would have distanced himself from me if she'd stayed, but Courtney was your sister. She *couldn't* take Jason away. So I thought they'd work and I pressured them both. But she wasn't right for him."

"No, she wasn't, but Carly—"

"I *know* it's selfish, but I want him to be happy so I can forgive myself for everything I did to him. You get it, right? If he's happy, then I didn't break him for good."

"Carly, you didn't break Jason—"

“No?” Carly demanded. “Then explain to me why he has everything he wants in his reach and he’s doing everything he can to destroy it? If that’s not someone I broke, I don’t know what is.”

# Chapter Sixteen

*I grieve in my condition for  
I cannot find the words to say I need you so  
Oh and every time I'm close to you  
There's too much I can't say  
And you just walk away  
And I forgot to tell you  
I love you*  
- I Love You, Sarah McLachlan

*Tuesday, October 7, 2003*

## General Hospital: Hallway

Nadine handed Elizabeth a water from the vending machines and sat next to her in the small waiting area outside the maternity ward. “I was surprised Jason didn’t come with you today.”

Elizabeth sighed and twisted the cap off. Despite all the strides forward, Jason had only been to that one doctor’s appointment in June, though she knew he hadn’t missed the last few out of choice. It seemed every time her appointment approached, there were a dozen things he needed to do, and even hinting to Sonny about the appointments in hopes that he could clear Jason’s schedule in time hadn’t worked.

“There’s a lot he’s dealing with,” she said after a long sip. “I don’t hold it against him. It’s not like he’s missing much. I told you about his accident, right?” When Nadine nodded, she continued. “He has trouble seeing images sometimes. I can explain it to him, and that helps. I can point out where the arms and legs are, but all he can really see is a blob and the heartbeat.”

“Oh.” Nadine wrinkled her nose. “Well, that sucks for you, though.”

“It’s okay.” And it really was. Elizabeth had decided not to stress about the things she could not accept. She might want Jason’s support at these appointments, but she wasn’t going to ask him anymore, not after making it clear early on that she hoped he’d join her. He’d been here when she learned she was having a girl, so she’d cling to that. “Things are mostly fine...but I’m thinking about after the baby’s born.” Absently, Elizabeth pressed her hand over her abdomen as Cady kicked. “I can’t live with Jason forever—”

“Sure you can. If you’re in love and a family, that’s kind of the thing to do,” Nadine said.

“I think I’m running out of time to that to be true.” Elizabeth twisted slightly in her chair to face her friend. “I’m not...I think I’m pinning too much on hoping things being different after I have the baby...that Jason will look into her face, and not think about...” She hesitated. “That he won’t see *how* she got here, but just love her for who she is.”

Nadine pursed her lips. “This is one of those situations where the details get glossed. Okay. So

basically, you think Jason doesn't love your daughter right now. I can understand why you might think that. I've only seen him here once, and you told me you didn't bring the baby up much in conversation until he suggested picking out a room for the nursery...but has he ever really give you a solid reason to doubt him?"

"You mean, is there something he's said that makes me think he doesn't love her the way a father would?" Elizabeth hesitated and thought about the question, because it was a fair one. "I guess...it's the little things. When I talk about how it's going to be in the future, it's like...there's this part of him that doesn't think we have one—"

"No, no." Nadine waved a hand. "That's *you* again. You're projecting what *you* think he thinks onto his actions. I'm saying...has he done something solid to doubt him?"

"He told me that we had to be realistic," Elizabeth said slowly. "That we might not work."

"Well, that's not cheerful, but it's not really evidence." Nadine leaned forward. "Elizabeth, do you love him?"

"Yes," Elizabeth admitted, wrinkling her nose.

"Does he love you?"

"He's never said it..." She tilted her head to the side, remembering all the other things he'd never said. "But...I think he does. Sometimes he looks at me..." She smiled now. "The first time...after the pool table—"

"Which I still hate you for."

"—he looked at me..." Elizabeth looked at her hands. "And I just...thought...if I could hold on to that look, to the way it makes me *feel*—like I'm the most beautiful person he's ever seen, and he doesn't understand why I'm standing there with him...if I could always feel that way, I'd never be unhappy again."

"Oh, for..." Nadine huffed. "I'll be jealous later. Here's the advice. My aunt Rayleen used to say that love is a lot like a back ache. It may not show up on the X-rays, but you know it's there." When Elizabeth just laughed, Nadine reached out for her hand. "It sounds like you guys have trust issues. Love is amazing, but it's not enough if you don't talk about it."

Elizabeth smiled, and then got to her feet. "You're right. You're always right about this stuff, you know. You've been telling me all summer to talk to him, but—"

As they started down the hallway towards the main waiting area and elevator, Nadine said, "I get it. It's scary. You want to believe that if you don't talk about it, that your problems will work out on their own. I don't know, maybe you're right. Maybe Cady will be born, and he'll hold her for the first time, and it'll all come together. It's totally possible."

"It's what I'm pinning my hopes on," Elizabeth admitted. "But I'm also being practical about what



comes next. Even if Jason and I do work things out for the better, I still need a job. My grandmother has been extolling the virtues of the nursing program, and I..." She smiled, thinking of that winter in the studio, "have some experience caring for a sick person."

"You'd be good at it, and hey, we could hang out all the time."

It wasn't until a day or so later that Elizabeth realized she should have been paying more attention to her surroundings, but she was so comfortable at the hospital, and felt secure there that she didn't realize Dominic wasn't standing at the doorway to the stairwell as he usually did during her appointments.

As she and Nadine passed the doorway, it flew open and a man in dark clothes and a ski mask rushed out. Elizabeth and Nadine froze for a moment, allowing the man to shove a cloth in her face, with a sickly sweet smell. Before Elizabeth could think to fight, her vision blurred and tilted at the sides.

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

"Help! Someone *help!*"

Emily heard the screams from the hallway and saw Elizabeth's guard rushing from the elevator towards it. She, too, dropped the charts in her hands and followed Cody. At her heels, Patrick Drake, one of the new residents, passed by her with his longer legs.

They rounded the corner and Emily stumbled to a stop, gasping when she saw Elizabeth crumpled on the ground and Nadine Crowell on the back of a man dressed in black, holding on to him with one arm around his neck and whacking him with a clipboard with her free hand.

"Help!" Nadine screeched. The man threw her off, and she went flying backwards into the wall. He rushed down the stairs, and Cody went straight after him. Ignoring all of that, Emily and Patrick flew to Elizabeth's side. Emily reached for her pulse as Patrick rolled her to so Elizabeth was lying on her back. Around them, more doctors were swarming.

"She's got a pulse." Emily closed her eyes, feeling relief spread in her veins.

"He shoved something in her face," Nadine said, panting as she crawled towards them.

"Someone get me a stretcher and a free room!" Patrick barked. He looked at Emily. "Do you know her?"

"E-Elizabeth Webber. She must have..." Emily swallowed hard. "She must have had an appointment with Kelly."

Patrick looked at one of the other nurses just staring at them and snapped his fingers. "Find me that damn room and page Kelly Lee." He looked around and spied a white cloth. He reached for it and grimaced before it was even close to him. "Chloroform."

Alan and Monica were there, then, and the stretcher appeared. With Patrick and another orderly's

help, Elizabeth was lifted on the stretcher, and Patrick started to roll her towards the room they'd freed up.

"Emily!" Monica grabbed her daughter's arm. "What happened?"

"Someone attacked her." Emily looked at Nadine, who was wincing. "Nadine, you should get looked at. He threw you pretty hard."

"He *threw*..." Alan repeated, looking at the blonde nurse in confusion. "What the *hell* happened here?"

"He grabbed her," Nadine said, rubbing the small of her back. "She passed out, but I guess he wasn't thinking about how difficult it might be to drag a pregnant woman into a stairwell, so I smacked him with my clipboard. He was distracted enough to let go of her and then I..." She blinked and swayed a little. Emily reached out and held her steady. "Um...I guess I *actually* jumped on his back and kept hitting him."

"My God." Monica pressed a hand to her mouth, trembling. "Where were her guards?"

"Cody ran past me after the guy," Emily told her parents, and then frowned. "But...the other one. I don't know his name." She looked at Nadine. "Where...?"

"I..." Nadine stepped towards the stairwell, and pushed the door open. It was empty. "I don't know."

"We'd better call Jason," Alan said firmly. "He needs to be here with her."

## **General Hospital: Elevator**

For the second time in a span of mere months, Jason Morgan found himself cursing at an elevator slowing him down from getting to Elizabeth, who'd just been attacked.

At his side, Sonny was visibly shaken. They'd never seriously thought Elizabeth would be in danger at the hospital, but a panicked call first from Monica that Elizabeth had been attacked and was being admitted for observation followed by Cody who'd lost the assailant in the stairwell and found Dominic bleeding from a head wound one flight down had cured them of that.

"I'm not letting her out of my sight for the rest of my life," Sonny muttered and jabbed at the buttons as if that would make this goddamn car move faster. "That's it. We're assigning guards to surround her from back and front, side to side. She'll barely be able to move, but I'll be satisfied."

Jason ignored his friend's mutterings, because he knew he was to blame for this. He'd wanted to go to her doctor's appointment today, he really had, but there'd been another damn shipment problem and she'd just smiled at him, told him not to worry. It was just routine.

Never again.

Finally, the damn doors opened and Jason, for the first time that he could remember, was relieved to

find his parents standing by the nurse's station, his sister hovering nervously around them. He strode forward. "Where is she? Is she okay?"

"Her OB is with her, and one of our residents has been assigned to the case." Monica hesitantly touched his arm. "But Kelly and Patrick think she's fine." She gestured to Emily. "Emily was there when it happened."

"Em?" Jason turned his eyes on his sister, for the first time in months. "What happened?"

"I heard screaming," Emily said, her face pale. He saw her hands shaking as she pushed her hair out of her face. "Her guard at the elevator was already running towards the hallway at that point, and Nadine was whacking the crap out of the guy. He must have figured he was out of options once he heard all the commotion, because he threw her..."

"The guy got out of the hospital," Alan growled. "I'm so sorry, Jason. I thought...between the both of us, that I had covered all the bases, but there was a service stairwell that didn't have any cameras working. He got out the door just before we called the lockdown."

"I know." Jason exhaled slowly and exchanged a glance with Sonny, because further dissection of this mess was going to have to wait. "Thank you...I know you've taken Elizabeth's safety seriously." He looked at Emily. "Thanks, Emily."

"You *should* thank Nadine Crowell," Emily told him. "She bruised her back when they threw her and we think she might have a concussion, but she was hitting him, keeping him from dragging Elizabeth away."

"I just..." Jason forced himself to be calm even though he wanted to come out of his skin. "I *need* to see Elizabeth."

"Of course." Monica took his arm and started to lead him away.

Alan cleared his throat and looked at Sonny with annoyance, but concern for his grandchild outweighed his hatred. "Unfortunately, the cops are involved, Sonny. There was nothing I could do about that. Mac and Taggart are questioning the staff as we speak. Your guard with the head injury was admitted for stitches and observation. The other one isn't speaking until his lawyer gets here."

Sonny rubbed his forehead. Goddamn nightmare. "Thanks. I'll...take care of it. Ah, if there are any damages, let me know. I really..." He shook his head. "I never wanted to bring this to the hospital. We thought..."

"Well, you live a violent life, it touches everything," Alan said with an edge, because he just couldn't contain himself. "I pray to God you do a better job of protecting my grandchild than you have Elizabeth so far."

## **General Hospital: Elizabeth's Room**

Monica pushed open the door and Jason entered to find Elizabeth's doctor, Kelly, standing next to a

tall, dark-haired man he'd never met before. "Kelly, Patrick, this is my son, Jason. He's Elizabeth's..." She hesitated and looked at her son with trepidation, not knowing how to explain this.

"I've met Jason," Kelly said quickly. She nodded. "Elizabeth was given a dose of chloroform, which didn't knock her out because you need at least five minutes for that to work. However, she was apparently woozy from it, so when he released her, she was dizzy, tripped and hit her head as she fell."

Jason closed his eyes, and fisted his hands at his side. "How bad?" he asked. "Is..." He looked at her, lying unconscious in the bed in a hospital gown, her face pale and stark against the sheets. "Will she be all right? And...the baby?"

"I'm going to run a CT to be safe," the other doctor said. "But we don't think it's going to be a problem, concussion wise. She'll be sore when she wakes up, but otherwise..." He looked at Kelly, who nodded.

"And we did a quick ultrasound. Everything looks good." She made a notation in her chart. "So don't worry, Daddy. Baby Girl Morgan is as healthy now as she was an hour ago at the appointment. We're keeping her overnight, just to be on the safe side."

When Jason said nothing, but moved past them to sit in the chair by Elizabeth's side, Monica smiled at them. "Thanks, Kelly. Patrick. We'll take care of it from here. Let me know how Nadine is doing."

Jason turned at that though. "Nadine? The nurse who was with her? Can I...can she have a visitor?"

"Ah..." Monica looked at Patrick. "How's she feeling?"

"She's resting now, but she wanted me to update her on Elizabeth as soon as possible." Patrick looked at Jason. "You can see her for a minute or two, but she took a pretty good whack in the head when the guy threw her against the wall."

"I'll take you in a moment, after Patrick has a chance to check on her. Nadine's just across the hall," Monica told Jason. She smiled again as the two doctors exited the room. "Is there anything you need, Jason?"

"No." But he looked at her. "Thank you. For everything."

### **General Hospital: Nadine's Room**

After almost ten minutes, Patrick poked his head back in the room to let Monica know he was done examining Nadine, so she took Jason across the hall where the normally perky nurse was lying in her own hospital bed, looking annoyed.

"Dr. Quartermaine, can't you make them let me out of this bed?" Nadine demanded. "My head only hurts a little..." She winced. "And my back is basically fine. Nothing a hot bath wouldn't cure—"

"Suck it up, Nurse Crowell," Monica said with a fond smile. She patted her hand. "Jason wanted to

have a chance to talk to you and then Patrick said you're staying overnight to be sure your concussion doesn't worsen."

"Bah." Nadine let her head fall back against the pillows.

"Monica, can you sit with Elizabeth in case she wakes up?" Jason asked. Monica nodded and left the room. Jason hesitated and stood at the end of the nurse's bed, his hands in his pockets. "I...wanted to tell you thank you."

Nadine shrugged. "Not a problem. She's my friend, too. The first one I've made here, so—"

"I *know* you did it for her," Jason cut in. "But..." He swallowed hard. "If anything had happened to her, to the baby..." He shook his head, not knowing exactly what to say. "I'm glad you weren't hurt more seriously."

"Me, too." Nadine sighed. "If I'd had time, I would have gone for the fire extinguisher. One good whack of that and he'd be knocked out, we'd have him and you guys would know what he was up to. But, no, I just had a stupid clipboard." She closed her eyes. "My head is on fire, though."

"I'll leave you alone, then, but..." Jason paused. "If there's anything you need, you just let me know." He nodded at Elizabeth's friend again and then made his way across the hall.

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

Emily watched as Patrick stepped into the hub and slid a chart into the holder. "Hey...Elizabeth and Nadine are okay?"

"As okay as two assault victims can be," Patrick muttered, reaching for another chart. "What kind of *insane* person comes into a hospital and tries to kidnap a pregnant woman? How many types of dumb do you have to be?" He hesitated. "I've only lived in Port Charles for five minutes, but even *I've* heard the rumors about Jason Morgan and his pregnant girlfriend. Who tries to kidnap *his* girlfriend?"

"Someone with a death wish," Kelly mused. "He looked pretty torn up about it. Guess I was wrong about him not giving a damn." When Patrick just frowned at her, Kelly shrugged. "He's never at the appointments. Number one indicator of uninvolved daddy."

"But doesn't she have guards?" Patrick asked. "I saw that one guy by the elevator."

"She has two, usually," Emily murmured. "They cover the exits between Kelly's office and the elevator so no one gets near her..." She hesitated.

*So there's no way I could get near her to apologize.*

"Em?" Kelly tapped her on the arm. "You okay? I know you and Elizabeth used to be pretty close until you guys were fighting last spring." She clucked her tongue. "Must have been difficult to see her going through that."

“Yeah...” Emily cleared her throat. “You guys talked to the cops yet?”

“Yeah, some annoying bastard named Taggart grabbed me after I came out of Nadine’s room,” Patrick reached for a new chart. “Wanted me to tell him everything I know about Sonny Corinthos and Jason Morgan. I told him I met the babydaddy for about five seconds. Long enough to tell him the condition of the patient and then I left. I didn’t even really see the incident.”

*Maybe I could get near her at the hospital...they don’t always follow her around.*

“Quartermaine!”

Emily blinked and looked at the charge nurse for the floor, Epiphany Johnson, as the heavy set woman tapped her finger. “Yeah?”

“You got rounds or you gonna stand there all day?”

“Dude, aren’t you a nurse?” Patrick asked, irritated. “Do you even *get* to bother the med students?” When Epiphany turned a glare on him, he closed his mouth, grabbed a chart and disappeared.

“I’m going,” Emily promised.

*I’m not going to sit around and wallow anymore. I’m going to start being true to myself again.*

She left the hub, and shook the thoughts from her brain. It was just a coincidence, she was sure of it. Courtney was doing so well, had even started dating again. There was no way she’d had any involvement in this.

No way at all.

## **General Hospital: Elizabeth’s Room**

Blearily, Elizabeth pushed her eyes open and blinked. Where...

When she realized she was in the hospital, she jerked fully awake, and stiffened, raising herself up partially on her elbow. “What’s going on?”

“Whoa...” Jason stood up from his chair and pushed her hair off her forehead. “Hey, hey. Take it easy.”

“Jason...” Elizabeth pressed a hand to her abdomen and breathed easier when she felt Cady pushing back against her. “Cady’s okay? She’s okay, right? I woke up, and I thought...” She closed her eyes. “What...what happened?”

“Just...relax for a second.” He pushed her shoulders back gently and then reached for the control on her bed to bring the top part up. “Patrick and Kelly want you to take it easy. You’re staying here tonight.”

“Jason, Cady’s okay?” She reached out and wrapped her fingers around his wrist. “I can *feel* her kicking, but...I just...she’s okay?”

“She’s perfect,” he promised her, and she saw no tension in his shoulders as he said the words. Only concern. “Kelly did an ultrasound, they ran some tests. Cady is as healthy as she was before you left her office earlier.”

Everything else could wait a moment as Elizabeth closed her eyes and nodded. “Okay. Okay. I was going to the elevator with Nadine. We were talking. I—I don’t really remember anything else...” She paused. “Someone...came out of the stairwell...?”

“What we know is that Dominic should have been at the stairs,” Jason told her. “We found him a few flights down with a head wound. The cameras were off in that stairwell, but someone hacked into the feed and looped in an older tape, showing no movement. Cody chased the guy, but he got away before Alan could lock the place down.” He took her hand in his. “He tried to disorient you with chloroform, so that you’d be dizzy and wouldn’t fight him, but he didn’t...” And she was surprised to see a slight smile on Jason’s face. “They didn’t factor in your friend Nadine.”

“What did she do? Is she okay?” Elizabeth clenched his hand. “Where is she?”

“She’s across the hall. She hit him with her clipboard, and the guy let you go. You hit your head as you feel. When he went for you again, Nadine jumped on his back, tried to choke him with one hand and kept hitting him with the other. Emily told me she heard Nadine’s screams and the cavalry came running.”

“Emily...” Elizabeth blinked. “She was here?”

“She was worried for you,” Jason admitted. “She and another resident got you to a room. Nadine has a concussion and she bruised her back, from where the guy threw her and she hit the wall.”

“Oh, my God.” Elizabeth brought her free hand to her mouth. “But she’s okay?”

“She’s okay. She’s being kept overnight like you, and is chafing at the bit about it.” Jason sighed and looked down at their joined hands. “I...I’m *so* sorry. I don’t know how this happened. We should have had more guards, should have had people watching the security footage.” He closed his eyes. “I should have been here. I wanted to be, you might not believe that—”

“I do believe that,” Elizabeth murmured. “Jason, you told me that *any* attempt to get to me here would be *desperate*. I tried to vary my appointments so they couldn’t predict which day I’d be here. I had guards stationed on the exits. And you might think you failed today...”

“I *did* fail,” Jason said firmly. “You’re in a hospital bed—”

“I am *fine*.” Elizabeth sighed. “Jason, the security precautions aren’t just to keep danger from coming *near* me, they’re to keep danger from *hurting* me. We know that Ric and Faith are desperate, they’d have to be. And they found a loophole—that I was alone. But they didn’t count on Nadine, or that Cody was less than fifty feet away, or that we’re surrounded by people. You didn’t fail because they

never came close to taking me.”

“I...” Jason paused and frowned at her. “Elizabeth—”

“Did you think they wouldn’t try again?” Elizabeth asked. “They did. They failed. Again. And it took them months to figure out how to get to me. If they’re desperate, they’re going to start making mistakes.”

“I know everything you’re saying is right,” Jason said after a long moment. “But I didn’t want this to touch you. To hurt you.”

“At the end of the day, no one can promise that.” Elizabeth sighed and closed her eyes. “You’re sure Kelly said everything was fine?”

“I promise.” He sighed. “Your grandmother is coming by later. She was here while you were out, too. And Mac or Taggart will be here tomorrow to question you. Alan had to report it to them.”

“What do you want me to say?” Elizabeth asked. “I don’t know that much.”

“Tell them the truth,” Jason told her. “They’re not likely to find the guy, and you can tell them you think Ric took the news badly, that he threatened you back then.”

“Okay.” She opened her eyes and looked at him. “Do...you have somewhere to be...or can you stay here? I—I don’t really want to be alone tonight.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Jason told her.



# Chapter Seventeen

*There were those empty threats and hollow lies  
And whenever you tried to hurt me  
I just hurt you even worse  
And so much deeper  
There were hours that just went on for days  
When alone at last we'd count up all the chances  
That were lost to us forever*  
- It's All Coming Back to Me Now, Celine Dion

*Tuesday, November 4, 2003*

## **General Hospital: Carly's Room**

Every single inch of Carly's body hurt. It ached. It screamed with pain. And yet...

She looked down into the face of her newborn son and couldn't think of a moment in her life when she'd been happier. "Look at him," she murmured to no one in particular. "He's so perfect."

She felt Sonny's soft lips against her forehead and she almost closed her eyes to savor the sensation, but if she closed her eyes, she'd miss this moment. Morgan Stone Corinthos was twenty minutes old and he was the most perfect baby on Earth.

"I missed so much of this with Michael," Carly said softly. "I was coming out of surgery...then I had post-partum. I left him, Sonny. And even when I could finally hold him, he was kidnapped and I was in Ferncliffe for all those months. He was almost a year old before I could even be his mother."

"That won't happen with Morgan, Carly." She looked up, and his eyes were glossy. "It's going to be better this time."

The door opened slightly, and a nurse smiled brightly. "Hey! I have some visitors for mama and son." She stepped aside and Elizabeth stepped in, Jason just behind her. Carly grinned.

"Hey, Muffin. Come see what you get to look forward to."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and came to the side of the bed opposite of Sonny, Jason on her heels. "Oh, just look at him, Carly." She reached out with her finger to touch Morgan's soft cheek. "How beautiful he is..."

"I know. It's a good thing you're having a girl, because I think my baby is the most beautiful baby boy and I'd hate for us to fight over that title." She grinned and saw Jason looking at his feet. No. Not today. This wasn't about him today.

This was about her second chance at being a good mother from day one. "Jase, you wanna hold your namesake?"

Jason hesitated and then nodded. Elizabeth moved out of the way, so he could come closer and take Morgan from Carly. He lifted the little boy in his arms, and smiled down at him. “He looks so different from Michael,” he said after a moment.

“Yeah?” Carly said, leaning back and letting her exhausted body relax. She reached over and took Sonny’s hand in hers, clutching it to her chest. “How so? I mean, I have the pictures...but...” She bit her lip. “Not from the day he was born.”

“He was too sick for pictures,” Jason said quietly. “And there...wasn’t anyone there really. I didn’t...” He cleared his throat. “I *should* have.” He hesitated. “Michael had lighter coloring, I think.”

“You can already tell Morgan’s going to take after Sonny,” Elizabeth volunteered, leaning up to peer at the baby. “His hair is already dark.”

“It might change,” Jason told her, glancing at her. “Michael had dark hair at first, but then it lightened to red.”

Carly saw Elizabeth’s face dim slightly as she watched Jason talk about Michael’s first days with a smile on his face, recalling his first moments as Michael’s father, and she knew what the other woman was thinking. Where was this love and affection for *her* child? Carly cleared her throat, and forced a smile. “Jason, let the Muffin have him for a minute. Let her get some practice.”

And it was sad how awkward the moment was as Jason gently laid Morgan in Elizabeth’s arms, and waited for her to support his head before letting his hands fall away. “I have to say,” Carly said, ignoring the tension in the air, “I’m annoyed that you’re starting your ninth month and you still aren’t as large as I was. It’s appalling.”

“Liz is...” Sonny coughed delicately. “Well, she’s shorter than you. You know.” Carly narrowed her eyes at him, and he smiled innocently. She knew what the bastard was saying. Elizabeth was a petite little angel, and Carly was a svelte cow. He’d pay for that later.

“He’s so light,” Elizabeth murmured, staring down at Morgan. “I haven’t really held that many babies, but I guess I thought he’d weigh more.” She looked up at Carly. “He’s so beautiful.”

Sonny nudged her and Carly remembered what they’d talked about. “Oh...uh, Sonny and I discussed it and we thought...um...” She cleared her throat. “I’d like it if you were Morgan’s godparents.” She flicked her eyes between them. “Both of you.”

Elizabeth blinked, clearly stunned. “Carly....I don’t know what to say.”

“Believe me, Muffin, this isn’t exactly what *I* thought would happen when I got pregnant,” Carly said dryly. “But we are where we are in life. Morgan is going to be Cady’s cousin. I don’t want you to ever think that just because...” She cast a glance at Jason, whose face was set in a mask. Frick it. “I don’t want you to ever think that because Ric is biologically her father that it matters to me or to Sonny. All we’re going to see is our niece. Morgan and Michael’s cousin. A little girl we’re going to

love to pieces. Whether *you* like it or not.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them, they were shining with tears and even a little anguish. “Thank you, Carly. I can’t speak for Jason, but it would be an honor to be Morgan’s godmother.”

“Jase?” Carly asked, looking at him. “Will you be his godfather?”

“Yeah.” Jason cleared his throat. “Yeah, Carly. I will. Thank you.”

“Good. Gimme my baby.” Carly held out her arms, and Jason engineered the exchange as Elizabeth couldn’t lean in towards Carly very far.

“I already asked Sonny to be Cady’s godfather,” Elizabeth said hesitantly, looking at Carly’s husband, who was smiling. “Because I...feel the way you do. That Sonny is her uncle, and that he’d love her anyway. But I hadn’t...really decided about a godmother.” She paused. “I think I hoped Emily and I would be speaking by then, and I thought maybe Nadine...but it’s clear to me that it should be you, Carly.”

Oh, hell. She *was* going to cry now. “Oh...I...” she cleared her throat.

“It surprised the crap out of me,” Elizabeth continued with a shaky laugh, “but you’ve been my rock during this, and I can’t think of anyone who’d love her more.”

“Well, frick, Muffin...” Carly sniffled. Damn these hormones. “This is an odd turn of events.”

“You’re telling me.” Elizabeth wiped at her tears. “I guess I always figured there was a reason Jason kept you around, but it wasn’t until this summer that I actually understood it.”

Carly glanced at her best friend, and sighed when she saw the discomfort on his face. “What is this magical reason? Maybe Jason wants to enlighten me.”

“Because it’s easier to be your friend than to kick you out?” Jason offered with a hesitant smile. Carly scowled. “No...Elizabeth is right.” He wrapped an arm around Elizabeth’s shoulders and looked at Carly. “Even when you annoy me, I know you...mean well.”

“Hmm...” She’d take what she’d get. “So it’s settled. Let’s stop this sappy crap about us, and let’s concentrate on my beautiful perfect son.”

“Yours?” Sonny lifted his eyebrows.

“Listen, pal, I just shoved this kid out of my body. Damn right, *mine*.”

*Saturday, November 9, 2003*

**Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

“Let me just grab this one thing,” Elizabeth said, standing at the doorway to the penthouse and smiling over her shoulder at Nadine. “It’s a present for Morgan, and then we’ll head over to Carly’s so you can meet him.”

Nadine grinned. “I’m going to go meet the local godfather’s new son. It’s a crazy life I lead, Liz. I’m telling you.” She examined her hands. “Can I use the bathroom at your place? I’m not sure I got all the sauce off my hands from Eli’s.”

“Sure.” Elizabeth flashed a smile at Francis, who stood by the door, and then pushed her door open.

“Surprise!”

Elizabeth blinked at the room she’d left only two hours ago to see it covered in decorations and filled with women. “Oh...my God.” She pressed a hand to her mouth. Her grandmother stood by the sofa with a beaming smile, while Carly and Morgan were seated. Bobbie, Monica, Penny, Kelly and several of her grandmother’s friends—her eyes watered when she saw Gail Baldwin, her old counselor, standing near the windows.

“Surprised?” Nadine said from behind her. She stepped inside and reached over to the desk to grab a few things. She placed a sash over Elizabeth’s chest, proclaiming her to be Queen for the Day, and then a plastic tiara on her head.

“I am...” Elizabeth shook her head. “Beyond words.”

Audrey strode forward and took her granddaughter’s hands in her own. “I’m so glad, Darling. We hoped we could surprise you.” She pulled her over to a rocking chair decorated with streamers and balloons at the base of the stairs. “Do you recognize this?”

“Gramps’ chair,” Elizabeth murmured, running her hand across the back. A tear slid down her cheek. “Gram...”

“Sit, sit.” Audrey held the chair still while Nadine held Elizabeth’s hand as she lowered herself into the chair. “So, just to make sure credit is given where it’s due...Nadine was obviously in charge of keeping you occupied and supplied refreshments, I gathered the guests, while Carly handled the decorations.”

Elizabeth found Carly’s annoyed look, recognizing it as one she often had herself, when she realized that somewhere along the way she and Carly had gone from being enemies to uneasy allies to family. “Five minutes out of the hospital?” she arched an eyebrow.

“Ha. I got this stuff together weeks ago,” Carly said. “And then I made Jason, Sonny and Max hang it. It’s my revenge for nine months of health food.” She snorted.

“Thank you.” Elizabeth looked around at the room and refused to be sad that Emily wasn’t there. Though she knew Emily had been around in the days after her botched kidnapping, she hadn’t spoken to her. “Thank you all for coming.”

“I know people generally do games and whatnot,” Nadine said. “And I thought about it, but I figured it wasn’t *your* type of thing, so we set up a buffet for snacks and drinks and you get to open some gifts.”

“I like gifts,” Elizabeth said with a bright smile. “Do I get to start now?”

“Absolutely!” Audrey reached for a large box, and Monica stood.

“That’s from myself and Lila, sweetheart,” she said. “Lila wanted to be here, but with the weather...”

“Oh, it’s not even a problem.” Elizabeth hesitated, feeling uncomfortable with Monica’s obvious excitement, but she pushed it away. She carefully unwrapped the beautifully wrapped gift. Tossing the paper aside, she waited while Nadine stabilized the box on her lap so she could pull off the top.

Inside was a beautiful white dress made from lace and silk, with a matching bonnet. She looked up at Monica, who smiled. “It was Lila’s christening gown. Her mother wore it as well, so it’s quite old. I believe it was handmade in 1887, in London where Lila’s family is from. So Lila wore it, then Tracy.” She hesitated. “And Tracy was the last Quartermaine girl to be born in to the family. I know...” She shifted slightly. “I know that your daughter is going to be a Morgan, but in Lila’s heart...”

“Monica...” Elizabeth pressed a hand to her mouth, wishing that she was worthy of such a gift. She cleared her throat. “I know...I know Jason would agree with me, that any daughter of *his* is part of Lila’s family, so of course...” She pressed her eyes closed, but a few tears slid down her cheeks. “This is...so beautiful. I promise to take very good care of it, so the next Quartermaine girl can enjoy it.”

“And there’s something else in the box, from me.” Monica nodded.

Elizabeth set the dress back inside and found a velvet case underneath some tissue paper. She handed the box to Nadine who set it on the desk to keep it safe. Elizabeth opened the case to find a single strand of pearls. “I...” She looked up at her friend’s mother with trepidation. “These are beautiful...”

“It’s another tradition from Edward’s side of the family,” Monica said. “When Lila had Alan, Edward’s mother gave her a strand of pearls and told her that they ought to be passed down to the mother of Lila’s first born grandchild.” She took a deep breath. “So Lila gave these to me after AJ was born. I’m not sure why she didn’t give them to Tracy.” She slid a glance at Carly who only lifted an eyebrow. “I...considered giving these to Carly,” she admitted, looking at the blonde, “but it never felt right.”

“It’s fine,” Carly shrugged.

Satisfied, Monica turned back to Elizabeth. “But when Jason came to tell me personally that you two were having a child, I...it felt *right* to finally pass these on.”

Elizabeth looked down at the pearls and touched them gingerly with her fingers.

She was *such* a fraud.

## Morgan Penthouse: Nursery

Jason only sighed when he entered the penthouse that night, spying drooping decorations as evidence of Elizabeth's baby shower from earlier that day. Carly had made him hang them, so he was sure it was going to be his job to take them down, as well. He hoped Elizabeth had a good time, was relieved that so many people had wanted to celebrate this with her.

He started up the stairs and stopped at the door to the nursery. He had not been back in this room since the day he and Elizabeth had taken measurements. Since then, he knew it had been painted and furniture had been moved in. He pushed the door open to find Elizabeth sitting in the corner of the room, between an oak crib and the window, slowly rocking in a wooden chair, her hands over her belly.

"Hey." He leaned against the door jamb and took in the room in the dying sunlight. She'd gone with soft peaches and cream colors in this room, and he saw that over the crib, Cadence Audrey had been painted in swirling pink letters, accented by stars and moons. "It looks like you guys had a good time."

"We did," Elizabeth said, looking at him with a soft smile, her eyes tired. "Carly told me you helped with the decorations. Thanks."

"She threatened to do them herself," Jason said. "Which was just a ploy, but Sonny didn't trust her to stay off a ladder." He shifted and looked around the room, finding a few gift boxes and some bags. "Were you surprised?"

"Astounded." Elizabeth sighed, and smoothed her hand down the arm of her chair. "This was one of my grandmother's gifts, you know. It was my grandfather's. It sat in the room that Sarah and I shared at her house from the time we were babies until we moved here and it ended up being Sarah's." Her eyes dipped down to look at the wood. "I remember being three or four, and he would rock me in this. I'd sit on his lap and he'd read to me. Usually from a medical journal, but I never cared. I just liked the sound of his voice."

"Then it's good to have it here," Jason said after a moment, not really sure what to say. "So you can...do the same with your daughter."

"Yeah..." Elizabeth closed her eyes. "With *my* daughter." Without looking at him, she continued. "Do you see that box on the changing table?"

Jason stepped into the room and saw a large open box with a white dress and a velvet case sitting next to it. "Yeah. Who's that from?"

"Your mother." Elizabeth opened her eyes and met his. "It's your grandmother's christening gown, handmade by *her* grandmother in London in 1887. Lila's mother wore it, Lila wore it, Tracy wore it, but no one else since." He watched her mouth twist into a grimaced smile. "She was worried you might not want to use it since it's a Quartermaine heirloom."

“I...” Jason swallowed and looked back at the dress again. He cleared his throat. “Maybe I wouldn’t have once, but...it’s from Lila’s side of the family.”

“That’s what I told her.” Elizabeth rocked for a moment. “There are pearls in that case, from Edward’s mother. She gave them to Lila when Alan was born, and told her to pass them down to the mother of her first grandchild. But for some reason, Lila gave them to Monica rather than Tracy. Maybe she felt they should go to a woman coming into the family, that there were other pieces for daughters.” She shrugged, and he frowned at her, confused by her mood. “Anyway, Monica told me that it never felt right to give them to Carly, but with me...” She exhaled slowly. “For some reason, she feels right giving them to me.”

“Elizabeth...”

“I didn’t know what to say to her, to this woman who’s been so supportive of me these last few months, who just wants to be a part of your life. She was so grateful to be included today, so *sure* that she was always going to be on the outside looking in when it came to you. She handed me these beautiful gifts, cherished mementos of your family...and I cried.”

He swallowed hard. “I—”

“Because I don’t deserve them.” She met his eyes, and he saw such bleakness in them. “I’m a fraud, Jason. When we started this, maybe I thought like you did, that it would be a matter of weeks, but as it became clear I was going to spend months pretending to be the mother of your child, I began to understand how difficult this was going to be. I tried to explain it to you once, but I know you didn’t get it. Do you...do you understand now?”

“I...” Jason gripped the wooden changing table, and took a deep breath. “Because you and I know the truth.”

“No.” Elizabeth shook her head, that same small smile on her face. “You told me once that we had to figure out how to do this without complicating things, and I know you feel the same way now as you did then, even though I thought...we might have a chance. I thought...after spending all these months together, that you might...see the future the way I want to...that you would see us as a family.”

“I do,” Jason said, but his words were hollow because he knew it was too late for her to believe them. He hadn’t done enough to convince her, and now he didn’t think *anything* would. “I *do*,” he repeated. “I just...”

“You didn’t want to complicate things,” Elizabeth repeated, as if he hadn’t spoken. “Because you didn’t want to be her father, and even now, you don’t.”

“No...” Jason shook his head. “I *never* said that—”

“You didn’t have to.” Elizabeth met his eyes, and he froze at the finality in her gaze. “I got the point. Because every time we took a step forward, *I* took it and *you* just followed. I wanted to fix our friendship, I wanted to make things work between us. And you let me believe we could.”

“We still can,” Jason said roughly, trying to think of the words that would stop this from happening.

“Nadine told me months ago that I needed to be brave, that I need to ask you about tomorrow.” She sighed wistfully and looked out the window, as the sun dipped below the horizon and the room slowly slid into shadows. “I was scared to do it, scared to ask you what you wanted from me, what you saw for us, because I always knew the answer.”

“You don’t...” Jason stopped and took a deep breath. “I know I’ve messed things up, but if you just let me explain—”

“I sit here, and I think back over these last few months, and really...” Elizabeth paused. “They’ve been good ones. Even with the tension and the danger, there were moments I spent with you that were happier than any in years. I wanted our friendship back, Jason, and in some ways, I got it.”

“I wanted it, too.” He just wanted her to stop talking, to stop saying things in that tone of voice that sounded like she was building up to something he didn’t want to hear. How could he make her stop?

“But in the most important ways...I failed.” She exhaled, the breath almost shaky. “I spent years in a relationship where I stuck my head in the sand and ignored the reality. Ignored the way my head screamed every time Lucky made me unhappy, because I was so sure we could get those moments back, that we could be who we used to be before the fire. I can’t do it again, Jason. I can’t spend another day with you, pretending that our friendship is what it used to be.”

“So it changed,” Jason said. “It’s different. That’s fine. Things don’t have to stay the same—”

“So, after Cady is born, I think it’s best if I go back to my own room,” Elizabeth said as if he hadn’t spoken. “We haven’t made love in almost a month anyway, since I’ve been uncomfortable. And then, when this is over, when Ric and Faith aren’t threats, we’ll talk about how to end the rest of this.”

“Elizabeth, I know I’ve made mistakes. I just...I didn’t...” He couldn’t find the words. “I don’t want you to leave.”

“And you still haven’t give me a reason to stay,” Elizabeth murmured. “So it appears we’re exactly where we were all those months ago.”

His chest was tight, and for some reason, he wished Carly were here, because *she’d* know the words he needed to say to make Elizabeth understand. Carly always knew about words. Jason had never been good with them, had always relied on actions.

But it was his actions that had doomed him in this, so it was going to *have* to be words. He cleared his throat. “Elizabeth,” he began. “We’re not the same people we were last year, or even this summer, when you moved back in. I *know* I haven’t made it easy on you, that I’ve made you feel like I think you were a burden, that your child was an obligation, or even worse, a mistake, but—”

“You still...*don’t* get it.” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “My child. You say it all the time. *My* child. *My* baby. *My* daughter.”



He drew his brows together and shook his head. “Elizabeth, she is—”

“I’m tired,” she murmured. “I think I want to be alone for a while.”

“But you have to let me fix this—”

“Jason...” She looked at him again, her eyes shining in the darkness with her tears. “I can’t...*do* this anymore. I don’t want there to be bitterness. Not now. You’ve kept me safe, made it possible for me to be a mother without fear. I want to remember these months with a smile, and if you *keep* trying to explain or fix something that cannot be fixed, then I won’t be able to. I’ll only remember how painful it was at the end.”

He dipped his head and took a deep breath. “All right.” He nodded. “Okay.” He stepped out of the room and leaned against the wall.

Carly had warned him for months that if he kept protecting himself, kept his distance, he’d drive Elizabeth away. He’d always seen her point, but he realized now that a part of him had hoped that it *wouldn’t* come to this, that somehow they’d find a way to make this right or that he’d wake up one morning without his belief that this situation was temporary, that this idea of family in front him wasn’t ephemeral.

It had never happened, and instead, the day he’d been expecting arrived anyway. Elizabeth was going to leave and take her daughter, leaving him alone.

And it was no one’s fault but his own.

*Thursday, November 20, 2003*

### **Corinthos & Morgan Coffee Warehouse: Sonny’s Office**

Sonny wondered if he took the rubber band he was playing with and shot it straight at Damien Spinelli’s forehead, if it’d be as entertaining as he thought it might be. Again, the computer tech was speaking in babble, tossing out Jackal, assassins, awesomes, and other words that made Sonny feel homicidal.

He looked at Jason, who was staring out the window, looking as exhausted as Sonny felt. He wondered what *Jason* had to be exhausted about, seeing as Sonny was the one with an infant at home who never slept. Something had changed after Elizabeth’s baby shower a few weeks ago. Jason was withdrawn, even sullen.

“Listen,” Sonny said suddenly, causing Spinelli to drop off in the middle of his spiel. “I want you to tell me what you found in English. I don’t wanna have this conversation *every* damn time you come in this office, you know. I want plain English. I pay you well enough.”

“Yes, Mr. Sir. I am endeavoring to correct some of my annoying nervous eccentricities,” Spinelli nodded. “I spoke to...” He hesitated, “*Stan...*” as if the name was unfamiliar and he had to remind

himself not use some ridiculous nickname. “And we were working on a solution to the problems in the casino that have cropped up.”

“I thought you were still working on the shell companies,” Jason said roughly

“I am,” Spinelli said, “I am, Stone Cold, sir, but it is quite difficult as none of the attached accounts are currently being withdrawn upon, so I am unable to trace that which does not exist. That being said...*Stan*...believes that the problems in the casino indicate that the person causing them is on-site.”

Sonny straightened. “Why?” he demanded quickly. “Why would he think that?”

“The nature of these particular problems,” Spinelli remarked. “There are dealers at the tables who show up one night, and then quit. Customers who bring in almost nothing to start playing, win big and then never return. Money is being siphoned again, but in smaller amounts. The problems are diverse, which cannot be set by a remote computer as was the case with the problems in August.”

“So you’re saying that things are so screwed up,” Sonny said, pissed, “that it can only mean the bastard is pulling the strings from the casino itself.”

“Or he’s turned someone close to us. Carlos, or Tommy,” Jason pointed out, rubbing his forehead. “He could be in contact with one of them, and *they* could cause trouble. But...he’d have to be in contact to keep this up.”

“Yes, sir,” Spinelli bobbed his head. “There’s no set pattern to the types of problems — they could happen in any casino where management is badly handled. I am working on new arrivals to the area, but it’s a large search area and maybe useless.”

“We need someone on-site to look at it in depth,” Sonny said, wishing he could just sink the damn island into the ocean. “Who the hell are we going to send? I can’t leave Carly and Morgan, not unless I want Carly to set me on fire. Johnny and Tommy aren’t really equipped—”

“I’ll go,” Jason said quietly.

Sonny just blinked at him and then looked at Spinelli. “Be ready to go to Puerto Rico by tomorrow morning,” he told the tech. “I’ll call you later and let you know what’s going on.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Sir.” Spinelli left the room.

“*You* can’t go,” Sonny said firmly. “Elizabeth may not be due for another two weeks, but due dates are really just guesses. She could probably go into labor at any point—”

“She needs this to be over,” Jason said. He leaned forward, his knees parted, his hands clasped between them. “She *needs* to be free of Ric Lansing. You and Carly are here, her grandmother and Nadine. She doesn’t—”

“That is goddamn *bullshit*,” Sonny growled. “You want to run out on her before she has the baby.

You could miss it.” He shook his head and sat back in his chair. “I don’t get you, Jase. I *really* don’t. I got Carly worried all summer that you’re messing this up, and *I* keep telling her that maybe you’re not as smooth as she’d like, but you and Elizabeth still stumble through this. You got this far. But you’re sitting there, telling me you’ll go to Puerto Rico mere *days* before your girlfriend has—” He hesitated. “Before she has the baby, and you think you can tell me she’s got enough people here that she doesn’t need *you*?” He shook his head. “Bullshit, Jason. At least have the guts to tell me the truth.”

“I don’t owe you an explanations,” Jason said stiffly. “One of us has to go to Puerto Rico. You went the last time, I’m going.”

Sonny got to his feet. “*Don’t* fucking me tell me you don’t owe me any explanations. I supported you in this asinine plan from the beginning. I told you we could protect her, even if you *hadn’t* claimed the baby. *You* put Elizabeth in the position of pretending to be the mother of your child, and you’ve resented it from goddamn day one and I’ll be *damned* if I understand why. This was *your* bright idea and you’re a goddamn piece of shit if you run out on her now—”

Jason lunged to his feet, his face tight with anger. “You don’t know what you’re talking about—”

“Carly keeps feeding me some bullshit about how you’re so broken up over losing Michael, but *I* don’t buy it.” Sonny dragged his hands through his hair, thinking for the first time in their friendship he might actually lunge over this desk and punch his best friend. “At least man up and say it straight out. You don’t want to raise Ric Lansing’s child.”

Jason’s hands fisted at his sides, and he thought Jason might be close to landing a punch as well. “Fuck off, Sonny. I don’t give a damn about *that*.”

“No?” Sonny shrugged. “Could have fooled me. You’ve been pining after Elizabeth Webber for years, long before either one of you saw it, *I* did.” He pressed a hand to his chest. “I saw it that winter, the way you two talked about one another. You’ve spent so many years *wanting* to be with her, that now that you’re *with* her, you don’t know *what* the hell to do with it.”

“Drop it, Sonny—”

Sonny dropped into his chair and just stared at his friend. “I honestly don’t get it.” His tone was quiet now, perplexed. “I *know* how much you love her. I knew why you claimed the baby all those months ago, and I didn’t say anything then. I thought you guys were working things out, but you never saw it lasting beyond the end of this fiasco. You *always* saw it with expiration date.”

“Sonny, I’m *going* to Puerto Rico.”

“Whatever.” Sonny shook his head. “You’ve been walking away from Elizabeth since the day you met her. I don’t know why I’m so surprised you’re doing it again.” He reached for his phone, to call the airfield. “This time, Jason, you walk away, she’s *not* going to come back—”

“She *didn’t* come back to me this time,” Jason growled. “Did she? Don’t accuse me of walking away

from her—she walked first.”

“The *hell* she did.” Sonny slapped his hand against the desk. “You did it. You walked away that first time, because your feelings were changing, and you lost the best chance you had, because she got sucked into the Lucky Spencer debacle for years. And you walked away from her *again* for a year when she was still figuring out what it meant to love two people at once. And maybe she left the penthouse last fall, but *you* walked away first.”

“She left me because of you,” Jason retorted. “Isn’t that what you’ve been saying? That it was your fault—”

“It was,” Sonny nodded. “Because when you asked to tell her, I should have agreed, but I’ll be damned if you don’t take responsibility for *your* part. You could have told me to go to hell, that you loved her as much as I loved Carly and you were going to tell her whether I liked it or not. You didn’t fight for her. And *you* didn’t exactly go back to her this time, either. You two just ended up in the same situation. So you’re both cowards, but at least *she* had the guts to try.”

He saw Jason bow his head and take a deep breath. “She’s already planning to leave,” his friend said in a much softer tone. “She told me after her baby shower. And there was nothing I could say to make her stay. She begged for me not to argue with her, because she didn’t want to remember us ending in anger. Not like last time.”

“And she’s walking because you’ve never let her back in again.” Sonny sighed. “Well, I can’t blame her. Can you?” He picked up his phone and dialed the number of the airfield. “Run to Puerto Rico, Jason. Take the easy way out. But *you’re* the one that’s telling her you’re leaving.”

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Jason paused outside the door to the penthouse, and took a deep breath. He had driven around for nearly an hour after storming out of Sonny’s office at the warehouse, wanting to be calm when he came home to tell Elizabeth he’d be leaving town.

He knew Sonny was right, it only made what he was doing worse. But after that conversation in the nursery, Jason didn’t *know* how to make this better. All his efforts to stay distanced from the baby, to be with Elizabeth and *not* think about the future...they’d been in vain. He lay next to her at night and he could feel the baby kicking against his side when Elizabeth was curled up on her side at night.

He knew he loved this child, because it was part of Elizabeth, and she was going to be such an amazing mother. He should have embraced the idea months ago, shouldn’t have allowed whatever was in his head to affect the way he treated Elizabeth.

But he hadn’t. He’d thought he could hold her at arm’s length, have these moments and then not lose himself when she walked away. Even now, after he knew it was a certainty that she’d leave, after he knew how he felt about Cady, he was *still* trying to protect himself.

If he did miss the birth, if he wasn’t in the room when Cady was born, if he could get rid of Ric

before that moment, then maybe he could spare himself. To watch Michael from afar, to never be his father...he couldn't put himself through that again. After all these years, he still saw the little boy and his heart would swell, remembering what it had been like during that first year when he'd been a father. He knew Michael didn't think of him that way, that Sonny was his father in every way that mattered.

To Jason, Michael would *always* be his son. He didn't know how to turn that off.

"Everything okay, Jason?" Cody asked, and Jason looked at him. "You're...just..." He hesitated. "Standing there."

Jason sighed, and pushed the door open. Elizabeth sat on the sofa, her legs up, her back against the armrest. They had spent the last two weeks in a great deal of silence, sharing most meals and still residing in the same bedroom. She'd told him that to move her things back to the guest room at this point just felt like a waste of energy, and she'd deal with it when she wasn't pregnant anymore.

"Hey." He closed the door and dropped his keys on the desk.

She glanced up from her sketchpad, "Hey," she said absently. "Are you going to be home for dinner?"

"Uh...yeah." He sat in the arm chair and stared at the wooden coffee table. "I...wanted...I have to go out of town."

Her pencil stilled, but she didn't look up. "Oh?"

"There's more problems in the casinos in Puerto Ric," Jason told her. "Spinelli—the tech guy—thinks whoever is doing it is actually down there pulling the strings."

"So you think Ric is in Puerto Rico." Elizabeth nodded and looked up, her gaze unreadable. "And you're going down to check it out."

"Yeah. It's...the closest we've come to a lead on him since he split town all those months ago." Jason shifted. "I don't...know how long it will take."

The knuckles on the hand holding the sketchpad were nearly white, but her voice was even when she spoke again. "I suppose it will take as long as it takes."

"I..." Jason hesitated. "I'm sorry. It's just...it *has* to be me or Sonny, and Sonny can't—"

"He just had a baby," Elizabeth murmured, her pencil moving again, but he thought she was only pretending now and not actually sketching. "He'd never hear the end of it from Carly."

"That's...what he said." He exhaled in a short quick breath. "Elizabeth, I'm—"

"Don't apologize." Her eyes flicked to meet his and he still couldn't see what she was thinking, feeling. "Jason, you're doing exactly what you promised me you do all those months ago. You told me that you were going to get Ric out of my life to keep me and my daughter safe. You've *never* promised

me more than that. So...go do what you have to do.”

“Okay.” She wasn’t angry, but he wanted her to be. At least when they argued, she was *in* the conversation. This...tense, cold acceptance of the situation was discomfoting. “I don’t have to leave until tomorrow morning—”

“Oh, good.” Elizabeth glanced towards the kitchen. “I’ll heat up the lasagna Sonny brought us the other day.”

“I’ll do it,” Jason told her, getting to his feet. “You don’t need to be...on your feet.”

Elizabeth shrugged and returned to her sketchbook. He headed for the kitchen, still tense and waiting for the second shoe to drop.

### **Morgan Penthouse: Bedroom**

It dropped the next morning, when he slipped out of bed to dress. They’d shared another quiet dinner and then later, they’d gone up to bed. For the first time in over a month, she’d reached for him, and though it hadn’t been easy, they’d made love, and he knew she intended it to be the last time.

They’d fallen asleep in each other’s arms, and then he’d woken up, and dressed. He leaned over the bed to brush a kiss to her forehead. “I’ll see you later,” he murmured.

He was almost out the door before he heard her soft answer. “Goodbye.”



# **Part III: I've Been Hoping For A Happy Ending**



# Chapter Eighteen

*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 (I wake up, I wake up)  
Let me be*

- Afraid, The Neighbourhood

*Tuesday, December 2, 2003*

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

“All right, baby watch, Day Three,” Carly said as Francis pushed the door open and she bustled in, pushing Morgan’s portable bassinet. “Let’s pop this sucker out today, what do you say?”

Elizabeth smiled, but just leaned her head back against the arm of the sofa. “From your mouth to God’s ears. Ugh.” Since Kelly had told her at her doctor’s appointment three days earlier that she was two centimeters dilated and that it could be any day now, Carly and Sonny had decided she should ever *ever* be alone.

Ever. Ever. Carly still remembered her difficult delivery of Michael, and Sonny...well, he was just a control freak. So they both alternated in the penthouse during the day, with the help of Audrey and Nadine, and Marco and Ricky, her evening guards, alternated spending the night in one of the guest rooms while the other sat on the door.

She hadn’t had a moment’s peace in three days, but she wouldn’t know what to do with that peace anyway. Strange that the penthouse seemed more quiet without Jason since he wasn’t much of a talker, but well...such was life. He’d made the choice to leave and his missing the birth of her child told her everything she needed to know about how he felt about her daughter.

“Morgan’s taking his nap, so let’s just hope he stays down for a few hours.” Carly grinned down at him and then at Elizabeth. “I’m getting good at this mom thing. Michael’s a breeze, always was. By the time I came home from the nuthouse, Jason had him on such a schedule that I barely had to do any work—” She coughed. “Not that we’re talking about it.”

“It’s fine, Carly.” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “Just because Jason and I aren’t going to work out—” She paused when she heard Carly muttering under her breath across the room. “What was that?”

“You’re both dumb bastards,” Carly said, her hands on her hips. “I bet you didn’t even let him get a word in edgewise while you broke his heart, and then he’s dumb enough to let you get away with it. *This* is what happens when I don’t take a hands on role in helping.”

“What exactly would you have done differently?” Elizabeth demanded. “I gave him *months* to step up, to talk about the future. I asked him dozens of times—”

“Ah, can it, Muffin. You and I both know you did *not* ask him straight out.” Carly waved her hand. “I don’t blame you, because *I* told Jason what you were thinking because a blind man could have seen it, but he wasn’t going to ask straight out either, because you were both so damn *sure* of the answers.”

“Ugh. Carly—”

“Nope. You didn’t say to his face: Jason, I love you. I want to be a family. Do you want to be a family with me with Cady? Do you want her to be your daughter?” Carly huffed. “I *told* him that’s what you were freaking out about, but does anyone *ever* listen to Carly? Nope. And he never said to your face: Muffin, I love you—”

“—he wouldn’t call me Muffin, for one—”

“I want Cady to be mine, blah, blah. Cowards.” Carly tucked Morgan in more tightly. “But I guess I figure it’s what he didn’t say that matters.”

“Carly.” Elizabeth looked at her. “Is that why you were nice to me? And asked me to be Morgan’s godmother? Because you were pushing me and Jason together? Because if that’s the only reason, then let me know right now so I can be prepared for things to go back to the way they used to be.”

“Oh...” Carly sighed. “You mean, like Courtney said that day at Kelly’s, that you were only family until Jason dropped you, like she was. Hey, I *was* only nice to her because I thought she’d be good for Jason. That wasn’t true. You...” She eyed Elizabeth. “You’re different. Sonny’s *not* going to let me get rid of you as easily.”

“Would you if you could?”

“It’s usually a reflex,” Carly admitted. “I think Jason learned it from me. You push people away before they can leave you. You test them. And if they go, they failed.” She sighed. “You know what’s what he’s been doing to you. He thought you were going to leave anyway.”

“And he did nothing to stop me, like always.” Elizabeth closed her eyes and winced as Cady whacked her in the ribs. “If it were just me, Carly, I’d stay, but—”

“It’ll never be just you again, so you’ve got to plan accordingly.” Carly shrugged. “We are where we are. *I’m* not giving up.” She frowned. “Muffin, you’re making that face again.”

“I think Cady’s trying to move into my bladder or...something.” Elizabeth shifted and started to sit up. “Crap. Can you help?”

Carly came forward and helped Elizabeth into a sitting position. “You sure that’s all it is?”

“Don’t get too excited—” Elizabeth broke off, as everything inside her clenched at once and she lost her breath. “Oh, son of a *bitch*.”

“Contraction?” Carly demanded. “Or the Braxton-Hicks like they were last month? Tell me, Muffin —”

“Remember...my grandmother told me that I’d know the difference between false and real contractions?” Elizabeth asked. “Um...I do. Get the clock out. Start timing these.”

“Yeah, yeah...” Carly grabbed the stopwatch from the table, and then headed for the door. “Francis!” she yelped, pulling it open. “I’m gonna need Sonny here stat. And get Leticia so she can take Morgan home and pick Michael up. We got a baby coming!”

She turned back to Elizabeth and sat next to her on the couch, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Muffin...you’re crying—”

“I thought I could do this,” Elizabeth whispered, her fists clenched. “I thought I was okay with Jason missing her birth, but I love him *so* much, I really do and I just don’t understand why he doesn’t love me, *why* he doesn’t love her?”

“Oh...” Carly hesitated and then glanced around as Sonny came through door. “Hey. Get her bag out of the closet. She just had her first noticeable contraction, so we’re waiting for the next one to time it.”

“Got it. I’ll call ahead at the hospital,” Sonny said. He opened the closet and pulled out a duffle bag that had been prepared a few weeks earlier. “You want me to call your grandmother? Nadine?”

“Um...” Elizabeth gasped and blindly reached out for something to hold. Carly offered her hand and Elizabeth clutched it. “My gram...yes, but um...Nadine had to go to New York to see her sister. Some sort of emergency, how long was that, Carly?”

“Seven minutes between contractions.” Carly narrowed her eyes. “Unless your water breaks, we’re supposed to wait, right?”

“Um...” Elizabeth hesitated. “I may... have been having some odd twinges all day. I thought...” She closed her eyes. “Carly, *don’t* let him call Jason,” she whispered. “I don’t want him to feel like he has to hurry back—”

“Muffin...” Carly glanced at her husband but Sonny had stepped into the hallway to make some phone calls. “I know you’re angry at him—”

“Please. I don’t want Jason there. He doesn’t want to be there, so I don’t want him there.” Another sharp wave of pain. “Oh, man, Carly...that was one was faster—”

“We’re down to five minutes. Sonny!” Carly called.

### **Harborview Towers: Hallway**

Sonny punched Jason’s speed dial and was relieved when his friend didn’t ignore the call. “Jase, how far away are you?”

*“Two hours out of Port Charles,” Jason said. “What’s going on?”*

“Elizabeth’s in labor. We’re not leaving for the hospital yet, it just really kind of started...” He glanced back towards the door where Francis was standing, alert. He hadn’t told Carly or Elizabeth Jason was on his way home, because he intended to have it out with the bastard as soon as he stepped off the plane. “Call when you land, and I’ll let you know if we’ve gone to the hospital.”

*“All...all right. Is...she in a lot of pain?”*

“Do you really give a damn?” Sonny snarled. “Because if you did, *I’d* be on that plane and *you’d* be standing here making phone calls and you’d be holding her hand instead of Carly. For once, Jason, we’re cleaning up your mess. But you’re coming to the damn hospital if I have to drag you kicking and screaming.” He slammed his phone shut.

Francis raised his eyebrows. “If Miss Webber doesn’t want him there—”

“Oh, don’t start with me, Francis,” Sonny said, dragging his hands through his hair. “They’re going to work this out, eventually. Even if I have to lock them in a room until they do. And when they do, he’ll kick himself for missing it.”

“I see Mrs. C is rubbing off on you.”

“Sonny!” Carly called from inside. She stepped up to the door. “What did Kelly say?”

“Bring her in when the contractions are four minutes apart,” Sonny said. “And Jason was flying back today anyway, he’ll land in two hours.”

“Oh, frick. You called him? She doesn’t want him there.”

“Well...” Sonny scowled. “She’ll have to suck it up. I got a call from Vega last night wondering what the hell we were doing up here with the father of this supposedly in danger child off gallivanting out of the country. I can’t have *them* on my ass right now.”

“Fine.” Carly folded her arms across her chest and nodded toward the inside of the penthouse. “*You* go tell the woman in labor she’ll have to suck it up. Go right ahead.”

“I hate everyone in this world right now,” Sonny said fervently.

### **General Hospital: Maternity Ward**

The elevator doors slid open and Jason started for the nurse’s station to ask which room Elizabeth was in. He had prolonged his trip in Puerto Rico as long as possible, but he couldn’t put it off coming home any longer. Ric, if he’d been there, was now long gone and he worried that the problems down there had been a distraction, to divide their resources.

Before he reached the hub, he heard Sonny call his name. He turned to find Carly and Sonny standing in the waiting room. “Hey. I got here as soon as I could—”

“Audrey’s in with Muffin right now,” Carly said briskly. “She wanted a little alone time with her

grandmother. Her contractions slowed down once we got here, but her water broke about ten minutes ago. She's dilated six centimeters."

"Is she in pain?" Jason asked, feeling completely useless and ignoring the heat of Sonny's glare. "How is she?"

"Well, bastard, you can go in and find out for *yourself*," Carly hissed. "If you even give a damn, because I'm the one who was there when this happened and she asked me not to tell you."

Jason's hands had been in fists at his side, but at that, they loosened and he swallowed hard. "She doesn't want me in there, does she?"

"I don't know, but I know that Sonny keeps telling me we don't have a choice. You at least have to make this look good." Carly jabbed him in the chest. "You listen to me, you dumb son of a bitch, you're going to go in there and you're going to be the best father you know how to be. I know you're amazing at it, I know you want this baby. I know you want the Muffin, so what the *hell* is your goddamn problem?"

"Carly." Sonny took her by the shoulders and pulled her back. She turned on him, her voice raw with anger and pain.

"No, Sonny, he's wrecking *everything* and he doesn't even see it—"

"Carly, it's not the time or place," Sonny told her quietly. He looked at Jason. "Vega's suspicious, and if he is, he'd be talking to Ruiz. Hector Ruiz is *not* a man you want looking twice at your personal affairs, so whatever your issues with Elizabeth are, you need to at least go in there and make an appearance."

### **General Hospital: Elizabeth's Room**

Elizabeth was floating a little from the drugs, but her head hurt and her eyes were tired. She just wanted to have her daughter. She wanted her to be here, so she could start the next part of her life.

"Darling, just breathe," Audrey murmured. "I don't understand why Jason had to go out of town so close to the due date—"

"Unavoidable, Gram," Elizabeth murmured. She saw the door push open, and then Jason was there, standing hesitantly just inside. "What..." She remembered her grandmother at her side. "You're here."

"I was flying back today..." Jason stepped forward and cleared his throat. "Sonny called me, so I came straight here. How...are you doing?"

Elizabeth glanced at her grandmother, who was beaming. "Gram, can...Jason and I have a moment?"

"Of course, darling." Audrey kissed her forehead and squeezed Jason's arm as she passed out of the room. When the door closed behind her, Elizabeth let her head fall to the pillows.

“What are you doing here?” she asked flatly. “Making it look good for everyone else?”

“Elizabeth, I wanted to be here,” Jason said. “I just...didn’t know how to tell you what I was thinking —”

“Well, that’s too bad for you, because now I no longer care—” She gasped, as one of her contractions appeared to break through the haze of the drugs and steal her breath. Jason was at her side, and she found herself clutching him, trying to get through the pain.

“I know I made you think I didn’t want Cady—”

“You don’t, you *don’t*...” Elizabeth closed her eyes, and felt the tears slide down her cheeks. “And I can’t...you can’t be in here. I don’t want you in here. I...spent my whole *life* not mattering to my parents, not having my father love me the way I wanted him to. My daughter is *never* going to know that. Not for one minute, one second am I going to let you make her think there’s something wrong with her—”

“There’s *nothing* wrong with her,” Jason cut in, his voice rough. “Or you. I do want her—”

“No, you don’t.” Her chest was heaving now from the force of her sobs. “Just go. I don’t want you. Go. I want...” She gasped. “I want Carly. Tell Carly I want her. Not you. I want you to go.”

“Elizabeth—”

“Just go. Go!” she repeated when he didn’t move. “You’ve walked away from me so many times, Jason. One more isn’t going to change things.”

### **General Hospital: Maternity Ward Waiting Room**

Sonny leapt up from his chair, Audrey and Carly at his side when Jason stepped out, his face ashen. “What’s going on?” Sonny demanded.

“She...” Jason took a deep breath and looked at Carly. “She wants you in there, Not me.”

“Me...but...” Carly hesitated, looking at Audrey for a moment, before looking back her best friend. “Jase...you should be in there. I know...she’s angry with you, but—”

“It’s fine.” Jason swallowed hard. “Mrs. Hardy, I know Elizabeth wants you back in there.”

“I’ll try to talk to her, Jason,” Audrey promised him. “Sometimes mothers in labor are a little unpredictable, and I know Elizabeth wasn’t happy about you taking that trip.” Her lips thinned. “None of us were, but that’s water under the bridge. I’ll talk to her—you *should* be in there with her.” Audrey disappeared into the room.

Carly narrowed her eyes. “What did you say that makes Elizabeth want me and not you in the room? Because, I assure you, you said *something*.”

“It’s all the things I didn’t say,” Jason said finally. He cleared his throat. “She’s asking for you, Carly. Would you please, for me, go make sure she has everything she needs?”

“You see what happens when you’re a good person, Sonny?” Carly growled. “Nothing good.” She followed Audrey in the room.

Sonny wiped his mouth and sat back in his chair. “I don’t get you, Jason. I really don’t. All these months, you’ve gone through this charade to protect her and I know...you tried to say it was because you owed her, but I always knew the reasons even if you didn’t want to verbalize it. I thought you two were going to get it together this time, that you were going to be a family.”

“I wanted that,” Jason admitted. “But I didn’t know how to make it happen. I told you, Sonny. Elizabeth never stays. She keeps telling me I don’t give her a reason to, but I don’t *know* what she’s looking for.”

Sonny exhaled slowly and leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes. Sometimes he forgot that Jason Morgan had not existed for more than eight years, and maybe he really just *didn’t* get it, that sometimes words were important, that sometimes reassurances mattered. “Jason, do you love her?”

“Sonny—”

“Just answer me.”

Jason was quiet for a moment. “Yes. I love her. I have for...a long time now. But—”

“When she moved in this summer, when you two started working things out, did you happen to tell her that?”

“I...” Jason hesitated. “No.”

“Did you ever sit down and discuss what would happen after Cady was born? What role you would play in her life if we tied up all this other crap? What it would mean for the two of you to be seeing each other at the same time the world believes Cady to be your daughter?”

“We...didn’t.” Jason leaned forward, dipping his head down. “She thinks it’s because of Ric. *You* think that, too.”

“I’m at a loss, honestly, Jase.” Sonny shrugged. “Because if it was just about not wanting to get attached to a child who could walk away, there were things we could have done. We could have quietly signed adoption papers and then had them sealed so no one would see them. You could have asked Elizabeth to marry you, to make a commitment to her.” He looked at his best friend. “But maybe you don’t think those things would have worked. That Elizabeth still would have taken her and walked away.”

“*Michael* was my son. I had papers saying I could have visitation, but I had to give him up. It was for the best. But...Robin and Carly...*they* took him away.”

Tricky territory here, because now Sonny was raising the little boy. “Robin made her choice, she had her reasons and Carly was scared—”

“But they knew what they were doing,” Jason said thickly. “Robin wanted to protect me from Carly, so she told AJ the truth. How she thought I’d be better off that way, I still don’t understand. And Carly never even gave me a chance to fix it, she just ran to the Quartermaines and told them I made her to do it. I know...she was scared, but it doesn’t change anything.”

And here was the truth that Sonny had ignored all along. Jason had loved two women before Elizabeth and they’d *both* betrayed him. He’d had one another best friend, and God knew that Sonny had betrayed him by sleeping with Carly. Somewhere along the line, between the three of them, they’d taught Jason that to trust someone all but ensured betrayal.

“You had months to talk to Elizabeth about all of this,” Sonny said finally. “I get it, I do. But she shouldn’t pay for Robin and Carly. For the things that they did, that I did. Elizabeth would have understood...after what you went through with Michael. She was there for the aftermath, wasn’t she?”

“She was one of the few people I talked to about it.” Jason hesitated. “The only one. It’s...how we met. She went to Jake’s, wanting something to replace the emptiness she felt after Lucky died, and she asked me if I knew what nothing felt like.”

“God, the two of you are going to give me a headache.” Sonny put his head in his hands. “You’re so perfect for each other that it’s almost nauseating and yet you two can’t get out of your own way long enough to *get* it. Jason, she spent years trying to make herself the woman she’d been before that fire. Trying to be good enough so that Lucky would love her again, and how did he repay her? He got her involved in a ridiculous scheme where she faked her death and she had to come to me for help. And then he almost married her out of pity when he didn’t remember loving her. She turned herself inside out for that man, and she got *nothing* in return for years. You’ve got baggage, but so does she, and instead of dealing with it, you both made it so much worse.”

“Carly told me for months I was pushing her away,” Jason admitted. “But I just...thought if I didn’t talk about it—”

“You know better than that, Jase.” Sonny leaned forward. “Listen to me. I don’t know if it’s too late to fix this, I really don’t. She *wants* a reason to stay, Jason. And she wants *you* give it to her. She wanted you to love her daughter the way you love Michael. Effortlessly. If you really don’t think you can figure out a way to trust her to stay, then fine. Make it amicable. We’ll figure out a way to extricate you from this situation after Ric is dealt with.”

He put a hand on Jason’s shoulder. “But I think you and I *both* know that you can trust her. That she knows better than anyone how it felt for you to lose Michael. And if I know you at all, you already love that little girl. So when Carly comes out here to bring us back, I want you to remember that. You never used to live in the past, Jason. Don’t start now.”

**General Hospital: Elizabeth’s Room**



Barely a year ago, Carly was shoving Elizabeth Webber out of Jason's life and ushering Courtney in. She would have told most people that Elizabeth was nothing more than a little girl with an infatuation who couldn't handle what it meant to be in Jason's life. Her best friend deserved better.

Today, as she stood by Elizabeth's side, clutching her hand as Kelly Lee told Elizabeth she was finally dilated to ten and could start pushing with the next contraction, Carly couldn't really pinpoint when she'd shifted that thought. Had it been the first time Elizabeth offered her ice cream? Or played blackjack with her while cooped up in the penthouse?

Or had it started further back than that, when Elizabeth had cleaned up the penthouse and comforted Carly after believing Sonny to be dead. How she had stopped by just to check on her, and to hesitantly ask after Jason.

"This hurts so much, Gram. *Why* did the pain meds stop working?" Elizabeth sobbed. "Make it stop." Six hours of labor had left her exhausted.

"The baby is crowning, Liz!" Kelly called. "Just a little longer!"

"I can't—"

"Oh, suck it up, Muffin," Carly snapped and Elizabeth glared at her. "You damn well can do this. Anyone who can..." She glanced at Audrey and decided to just shrug it off. "Anyone who can put up with the crap *you* have can do this."

"Carly—"

"You stood up to me when most people in this town just ignored me," Carly continued. "You told me you'd protect Jason from me until he was well enough to deal with me. I told you I'd gotten rid of one little angel, and I was going to drop you kick you so fast into next year, you wouldn't see it coming."

Elizabeth bit out a pained laugh. "How'd that work for you?"

"Exactly my point, Muffin. Anyone who can stand up to me and actually win can do something measly like give birth. Hell, *I* did it just last month and did I whine nearly as much?"

Kelly popped up from the end of the bed. "Actually—"

"Quiet, you." Carly jabbed a finger in her direction. "Concentrate on that...down there."

"All right, Elizabeth...here comes a contraction. Push!"

With a grunt, Elizabeth bore down, panting. "Come on, *come* on."

"You can do this, Elizabeth," Audrey said, wrapping an arm around her granddaughter's shoulders. "I know it!"

"The head is out, Elizabeth!" Kelly told her. "Let's get the shoulders and I can just pull her out—"

“Get out, get out, *get out!*” Elizabeth screeched.

And then there was a cry.

Kelly rose to her feet, her eyes bright and shining, with a messy baby in her arms. “And here we go!” She leaned forward to lay the newborn on Elizabeth’s stomach.

Carly pressed her free hand to her mouth, watching Elizabeth’s entire countenance shift immediately from pain to joy. “Oh...” Elizabeth broke off and took a deep, shaky breath. “Oh, she’s so perfect.”

“Oh, my darling...” Audrey kissed Elizabeth’s forehead.

“Who’s cutting the cord?” Kelly asked. She looked at Carly. “Godmama?”

“Um...” Carly looked at Elizabeth who was focused on her daughter. “Sure.” She reached for the scissors and gingerly snipped it, shuddering a bit. The things she did for family.

“Let’s clean her up,” Kelly said, with a smile, reaching for Cady. Elizabeth protested, but Kelly shrugged. “I’ll give her right back.”

“Oh, Gram...” Elizabeth leaned back against the pillows as some of the nurses came forward to help her clean up herself. “She’s here.”

“And she’s beautiful,” Audrey murmured. “Absolutely beautiful.” She paused. “I told Monica I’d come get her as soon as she was born. Would you mind?”

“No...” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “No. You can get her.”

Audrey smiled again and disappeared out the room. Carly took a deep breath. “Well, Muffin, you did it. Cadence Audrey Morgan is now in the world.”

“Cadence Audrey Caroline,” Elizabeth corrected. She opened her eyes and Carly saw the tears, the joy, the bliss. “She’d never be here if not for you, for Sonny. For Jason. So if you don’t mind...”

“Oh...Muffin...” Damn it. Carly swiped at her eye. “I never mind knowing there are more Carolines in this world.”

“Speaking of which...” Kelly stepped away from the nurses with Cady in her arms, now swaddled in a hospital blanket. “How about we let Godmama hand the baby over.”

Carly stepped towards Kelly and accepted the baby in her arms. She looked down at this little scrap of humanity and just...

This baby was the reason for all of this, for the love, the arguments, the fear, the extra security, for the pain. For the bliss. Here was the center of it all, and she looked so incredibly innocent.

“She’s just...so perfect,” Carly murmured. She looked at Elizabeth. “I can’t even describe it.” She

stepped forward and set her gently into Elizabeth's arms. "There's my niece."

"I thought about this moment, I've imagined it a thousand times over the last eight months," Elizabeth murmured, her hand smoothing over Cady's cheek, "but this is so much better. She wasn't here five minutes ago, and now..."

"Do you think you've punished Daddy long enough?" Kelly asked, with a good-natured smile. "All her tests are perfect. She's completely healthy, so maybe she should meet him."

Elizabeth hesitated and then looked at Carly, looking a little lost. "Is he angry with me? Because I didn't...Because I wanted you."

"No, no." Carly shook her head. "He understood. He's angrier with himself for making this happen, for making you think you weren't important, that he didn't love you."

"I'll be back in to check on you guys in a bit." Kelly squeezed Elizabeth's arm. "Congrats, Liz. I can say without bias she is the prettiest little girl I've ever delivered." With a wave, Kelly and the other nurse left the room.

"Bring him in," Elizabeth said after a moment. "And Sonny, too. I want them to meet her."

"I'll be right back."

### **General Hospital: Maternity Ward Waiting Room**

Jason and Sonny were already on their feet, having been told briefly by Audrey that the baby had arrived and she was on her way to get Monica. A few minutes later, Carly exited the room, and Jason was relieved to see her smiling. "Hey, is she okay? Is Cady okay?"

"She's perfect. She wants to see both of you."

Jason hesitated. "Does she? I don't want her to do anything—"

"Jason, look at me." Carly grasped his chin in her hand and forced him to make eye contact with her. "You've messed this up pretty badly, but at the end of the day, it's not lost. You can make this better. Maybe you didn't make Elizabeth feel like you loved her or Cady before, but from the moment you step in there, it's different. I know you love her already."

"Carly—"

"No, just..." Carly took a deep breath. "I didn't always get it, I didn't always like it, and maybe I made it more difficult for you, so if that's true I'm sorry. But I *want* you to be happy. So I am telling you right now, if you go in there and you show Elizabeth how much you love her and how much you love that little girl, it *can* be better. Just...try."

### **General Hospital: Elizabeth's Room**

Jason stepped in to find Sonny already holding the baby. He was grinning at the pink bundle. “I’m an uncle, Jase!” he proclaimed proudly. “Can you believe it?”

Carly came in behind him and went to stand by Elizabeth’s bed. “He’ll never stop this now. She’ll be spoiled ridiculously. Ponies. Castles. He doesn’t do things in half measures.”

Sonny just shrugged and then looked at Jason. “You want her?”

Jason took a deep breath. “Yeah.” He stepped over to his friend, prepared to take Carly’s advice for once. As Sonny gently laid her in his arms, Jason remembered the moment he’d held Michael in his arms, and though he loved Michael still...this moment was it in a class of its own.

This was the little girl who he had felt kick, who he had watched grow, who he had tried desperately not to love and failed. For the first time since this began, he admitted to himself that he’d always wanted her to be his.

“She’s...” He faltered, and cleared his throat. “I can’t...find the words, Elizabeth.” He looked up, to find her eyes glossy with tears. “There aren’t any.”

“That is *exactly* how I feel,” Elizabeth murmured.

Carly wiped her eyes with a tissue. “This is just too damn sappy for me,” she muttered. “Tell them, Muffin. Tell them what you’re naming her.”

Jason frowned and exchanged a look with Sonny. “It’s Cady, isn’t it?” Jason asked. “Cadence Audrey.”

“I’m changing it a little.” Elizabeth hesitated and looked at Carly, with a smile. “Cadence Audrey Caroline.”

“That’s right.” Carly nodded. “I want *all* of Port Charles to know that someone actually named their kid for me. They’ll never believe it.”

“I *barely* believe it,” Sonny returned, but he looked at Elizabeth. “We’re never going to hear the end of this, Liz.”

Elizabeth laughed, as the door opened and Audrey stepped in, followed by a hesitant Monica. “Is there room for a couple of grandmothers?”

“Of course,” Carly said. “Jase, you might have to give the kid over.”

Here was his chance to show Elizabeth it could be different. That *he* could be different. He stepped forward, towards his mother. “Mon—” He hesitated. “Mom. This is our daughter, Cadence Audrey Caroline Morgan.” And with those words, he set Cady in his mother’s arms. He was facing away from Elizabeth, so he couldn’t see her face, but he hoped she believed them.

“Oh, Jason...” Monica’s lips trembled as she looked down at the baby. “Oh, she’s just too precious.”

She blinked and looked up. “Caroline?”

“That’s right. Named for me,” Carly pointed out, looking satisfied. “Suck it, Port Charles.”

“Carly,” Elizabeth said, swatting her. “Knock it off, or I’ll change it to...Robin.”

Carly gasped. “Oh, you better not even *joke* about that, you brat.”

“Audrey, have you had her?” Monica asked. “If you don’t take her from me, I’m liable to keep her forever.” When Audrey held out her arms, Monica handed her over and then turned to Jason. Without another word, she embraced him.

His first instinct was to stiffen, but he knew Monica had been a source of support for Elizabeth during all of this, that despite the past, she did love him for who he was, even if she didn’t always accept his choices. So he gingerly hugged her back and looked at Elizabeth over Monica’s shoulders. She looked...contemplative.

He only hoped he still had time to make this right.

# Chapter Nineteen

*She, She is the words that I can't find  
How can the only thing that's killing me make me feel so alive  
And I couldn't speak  
I couldn't breathe to save my life  
All of my chances swim like sinking ships  
This time it's it  
I'll drown or make her mine  
- She (For Liz), Parachute*

*Early Wednesday, December 4, 2003*

## Harborview Towers: Penthouse Hallway

It was not long after one in the morning when Sonny and Carly exited the elevator and turned the corner to find Max waiting for them. “Hey, Max. Leticia and the boys doing all right?”

“Yes, sir, Boss. Been quiet since about ten.” Max nodded, moving to open the door. “How’s Miss Webber and the baby?”

“Perfect.” Carly stepped inside the penthouse, and then leaned against the doorjamb. “Six pounds, eleven ounces. She was born at 7:05 PM, so if I remember correctly...Dominic won the pool.”

Max huffed. “If the kid could have just waited three more hours, I’d have had some good money.” He cleared his throat. “Jason make it to the hospital?”

“Yep,” Sonny nodded with a half-smile. “I think he’s hanging at the hospital tonight. Not really interested in letting either of them out of his sight, so...” he shrugged and looked at Carly. “Go ahead, and tell him, you *know* you want to.”

“Bite me, Sonny.” Carly lifted her chin. “She named her after me.”

Max frowned. “But we painted the damn wall—”

“She added Carly’s name to the end of her already chosen name,” Sonny clarified, rolling his eyes. “Cadence Audrey Caroline Morgan. I figure I’ll have to follow Carly around for a few days to make sure people don’t think there are going to be two Carlys running around.”

“The absolute horror,” Max agreed.

Carly stuck her tongue out of him and went inside the penthouse, collapsing on the couch while Sonny gave Max a few instructions and then closed the door. “I have a namesake, Sonny. You can’t take that from me. I watched Elizabeth and Jason sign the papers for her birth certificate. It’s *official*.”

“And a year ago, you’d have been horrified at the thought of Muffin Webber naming her kid for you.”

Sonny joined her on the couch and just grinned at her. “*My*, how the world has changed.”

“Ah...” Carly closed her eyes. “Screw you.” She opened them again and looked at her husband. “They’re going to be okay, aren’t they? I saw Jason’s face when he held Cady for the first time, and it was everything I think Elizabeth wanted. He looked...”

“He looked like a father,” Sonny murmured. “And I think it was a good first step. But it’s not enough to just look at her with love. He’s going to have to step up.”

“Yeah...but...” Carly sighed and turned her face into the cushions, exhausted. “I also saw *her* face when he held the baby, and Elizabeth looked relieved, like she’d been trying not to hope for it...and then when Jason gave Cady to Monica, introducing her with his last name...Maybe he did that for appearances, but he didn’t have to. No one would have said anything if he’d just said, here’s Cady. But he didn’t.”

“It’s a good first step,” Sonny repeated. He hesitated. “You were right a few weeks ago, when you said that if you could make Jason happy, it would mean you hadn’t broken him. Maybe I wanted to believe we were past all of that, that things had changed...but...” He leaned his head back against the sofa and looked out into the room. “We did break him. You, me, Robin, maybe even Elizabeth a little. He never trusted easily to begin with, you know? And Robin shattered him. Before he could recover from that, *you* drop-kicked him, and then *I* pushed him over a cliff.” He let out a little bitter laugh. “Hell, Elizabeth only broke his heart. Almost nothing compared to the three of us combined, because he broke hers too.”

“Sonny...”

“Okay, maybe we didn’t break him, but we did...we did chip away at his ability to believe in people, even if he’d never admit it. He told me he couldn’t believe Elizabeth would stay. She never had before, and it wasn’t like people didn’t lie. Robin had promised to keep the secret, but she’d blindsided him. You asked him to be Michael’s father...and I taught him about honor and loyalty. And look at what *we* did to him.”

“I thought he’d forgiven us,” Carly murmured. She leaned into Sonny’s side, her cheek against his shoulder. “And I think he did. But he never forgot. So you kicked some sense into him?”

“I hope so,” he sighed. “Because I’m beginning to see your point. If he can be happy, if he can build a life with Elizabeth and Cady, then maybe we don’t have to feel guilty anymore.” He kissed the top of her head. “I love you, Carly, but I wish like hell we could have figured it out *without* betraying him.”

“I know.” Carly closed her eyes, and remembered the look on his face when he’d seen her on the steps that terrible night. To know he’d been standing there, with a gunshot wound. Maybe Jason had forgiven them, but she had never quite been able to forgive herself. Not all the way. Not until she knew he would be okay.

**General Hospital: Elizabeth’s Room**

Elizabeth yawned and hastily covered her mouth, with a sheepish smile. “Sorry, Gram,” she said to her grandmother, who was rocking Cady across the room. “I just...haven’t been able to sleep much. These hospital beds aren’t nearly as nice as mine at home.”

Audrey laughed and laid Cady back in her bassinet. “Well, you’ll be out of here tomorrow. I know you’re eager to get home and settle Cady in her nursery.” She perched on the edge of Elizabeth’s bed. “Are you and Jason all right, darling? After you kicked him out of the delivery room—”

“I was...” Elizabeth sighed and closed her eyes. “I was angry at him, Gram. I know the trip was important, and I’m not just saying that. I know he had to go, but it didn’t change how I felt about it. I just...” She hesitated. “I love him. You were right about that, and we’ve been trying really hard to make it better, to make a family, but...”

“You know that your grandfather was the love of my life,” Audrey said softly, brushing Elizabeth’s hair off her forehead. “But he and I spent *years* fighting it, because there were days when it was just too difficult. We made mistakes, we said and did things that hurt one another terribly. We both tried to move on with other people, but there came a day, when we realized that no matter what we’d done to try and destroy our love, it *still* beat within our hearts.” She took Elizabeth’s hand in hers and laced their fingers together. “Falling in love is the easy part, Elizabeth. It’s everything that comes *after* it that’s difficult...and it’s what makes it worthwhile.”

“I know that...” Elizabeth paused. “We just...started this all wrong. Backwards. I wasn’t sure if he could look at Cady without thinking of how she came to be, how many people we hurt, and the mistakes—”

“Elizabeth, did you not *see* that man holding your daughter?” Audrey interrupted. “The look on his face when he handed his daughter to his mother for the first time...that is not a man who sees an obligation, and you know Monica is going to live on that moment for months.”

And Audrey was right, because she *had* seen Jason holding Cady, and she’d seen the love in his eyes, the way his face had lit up. And when he’d given her to Monica, calling her *our daughter*, and adding his last name...it was everything she wanted that moment to be.

Which meant that Jason had been hiding that love for months. No matter how much she had begged for honesty, he’d kept that locked away.

“I do believe differently now. I know he loves her. I just...want to make sure I do everything I can to give Cady a good life. With parents who love her always...” She cleared her throat. “But Nadine told me all summer to just talk to him. Carly told me to talk to him. And I never did. I let the way *I* thought he felt color my emotions, and I told him that he hadn’t...given me a reason to stay...except I know he wants me to.”

“So maybe, my darling, the next time you talk to him, you actually listen.” Audrey leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “You’ve been through so much, Elizabeth. But you know, if it led you to this point, to that beautiful little girl, then perhaps...it was worth the journey.”



“Now, that I believe,” Elizabeth laughed, squeezing her grandmother’s hand. “I can’t believe you’re on Jason’s side, Gram. You realize how impossible that sounds to me.”

“Well, I could have fought you tooth and nail, but you made it abundantly clear years ago you would do as you like.” Audrey smiled. “I learned that for sure the day you ran away with Lucky Spencer, and if that hadn’t gotten through my skull, the moment you told me you were moving out because I trying to send Jason away.”

“You know...Gram...” Elizabeth winced. “Nothing happened that winter. I know what people were saying, but...it wasn’t like that. Jason needed a place to stay, and I was just helping him—”

“Well...” Audrey leaned back. “I can’t say I’m not relieved. You were a little young, but...” she sighed. “He was always so good to you. And even now, I see the way he looks at you, how he treats you. I will never understand his lifestyle, but it is not for *me* to accept.” She touched Elizabeth’s chin. “All I want is for you to light up again, and you did that last night when you brought that angel into this world, and when you saw Jason hold her, that light was burning brightly. Hold on to *that* feeling, and I’ll be satisfied.”

The door opened and Elizabeth’s eyes widened when she saw Emily step in, hesitantly. “Hey...do you...can I come in?”

Elizabeth felt her grandmother tense at her side, so she patted her grandmother’s shoulder. “It’s all right, Gram. Can you give us some time?” She smiled. “Maybe go develop your film and show off to the rest of the staff.”

“That is an excellent suggestion.” Audrey kissed Elizabeth’s forehead, kissed Cady goodbye before pausing next to Emily. “She’s just had a baby, so I hope you’re planning on being civil.”

With that, she left the room, leaving the former best friends alone. Emily shifted uncomfortably and looked toward the bassinet. “The...hospital gossip is that you named her Cadence.”

“I did.” Elizabeth nodded. “Cadence Audrey Caroline Morgan.” She took a sip of water her grandmother had left at her bedside. “I didn’t get the chance to thank you after...the attack in October \_\_\_”

“No, no.” Emily held up her hand. “You have *nothing* to thank me for.” She sighed. “God, this is so much harder than I thought it would be, because I had planned it all out in my head—what I would say to you, and then what I would say to Jason, but it’s all gone now. I...I’ve been a bitch.”

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow. “No arguments here.”

Emily smiled then, somewhat sheepishly. “And you didn’t deserve it. I can...see it now. After your botched kidnapping, I felt so guilty. And even before that, I was trying to understand why I was so angry, when you were right all along — I *had* broken up with Zander over a year earlier.”

“Em...”

“And I never once asked you to explain,” Emily hurried to continue. “I did what I *always* do with you. I looked at the situation and judged without context. Like I did with Jason that winter. I assumed you were sleeping with him, even though you would have told me something like that, and then you rightfully refused to tell me anything substantial when I was such a brat. I always do that to you, Liz. I’m sorry.”

“Emily...that was *years* ago—”

“But it starts back there,” Emily said, stepping towards her. “I was so angry when Lucky came home, because he *didn’t* come home. Not all the way. We all knew it. And I was so angry with you—”

“Me?” Elizabeth repeated. “Why?”

“Because you were Lucky’s girlfriend. You loved him, and he loved you, and you were always so perfect together. And I thought if you’d stop...” She huffed, rolling her eyes. “It sounds so stupid when I say it out loud, but I thought if you’d stop worrying about Jason, and just concentrated on Lucky, he would come back all the way. Except he never did. Even now, when he’s mostly okay, he’s still not Lucky.”

“Oh...Emily...”

“So I was angry about that, even though it was my fault, too. We *all* refused to see Lucky wasn’t the same. We ignored all the signs, blamed you for them. And he spent so much longer under Helena’s control. If we could have seen it earlier...so I blamed you even more, because you knew him better than anyone else, so if *you* didn’t see the signs, it was your fault. You weren’t looking hard enough.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes and tried not to be annoyed, tried to remember Emily was a year younger than her, that they had all handled Lucky’s problems in their own ways. “So this anger fed into your reaction over Zander.”

“That’s what Lainey, my therapist says,” Emily said. “I started seeing her after your kidnapping attempt. And it’s why I came home, and immediately befriended my brother’s girlfriend, even though I knew he’d broken up with you and started seeing her right away. I let what Courtney tell me color our conversations, because I was always looking for reasons why everything was your fault.” She took a deep breath. “But it wasn’t. I’m just sorry I had to sacrifice our friendship, my relationship with my brother...” And now she cast her eyes towards the bassinet. “And chances of knowing my niece.”

Because Emily did look upset, did appear regretful, Elizabeth just sighed. “I want to say that we can forgive each other. Because we’ve gone through so much, but I just...I don’t know, Em. I really needed you last spring, and you couldn’t hear me.”

“I know.” Emily swiped at her eyes. “And I made the situation so much worse when I hinted to Ric. I would take that back a thousand times if I could, Elizabeth. I promise you that. I wish I could make it better, that I could make it so it never happened—”

“But it’s not like I’ve never made a mistake.” Elizabeth said. She bit her lip. “We may never be that

close again, I don't know. But at the end of the day, we go back a long way. And you are Jason's sister. He loves you. So..." She shrugged. "Go pick up your niece."

Emily's eyes brightened. "Really?"

"Yes. I know you'll love her as much as we do," Elizabeth said, believing that for the first time. "So...what are you waiting for?"

Emily scooted over and lifted the newborn into her arms. "Oh, she's so gorgeous. You're calling her Cady for short? I just love that. It's original, and it's all her own." She made a cooing noise. "Oh, she is going to have Jason wrapped around her finger, I can just see it now."

Elizabeth smiled faintly. She was hoping that was true, but it was nice to hear others say the same.

The door to the room opened and Jason stepped in with a brown bag from Kelly's. His eyes zeroed in on his sister, and Elizabeth saw him tense. "Emily."

"Jason..." Emily took a deep breath. "I just...came to clear the air with Elizabeth. To meet my niece." She looked down at Cady. "Elizabeth...said I could hold her."

Jason glanced at her, and she was grateful for that—for him to look to her for confirmation, because she knew the distance between them had been a result of his protection of her, of her health. "Elizabeth?"

"Jason, relax." Elizabeth shifted in her bed. "Tell me that's Ruby's chili, or at least as good as Don can make it."

"It is." Jason set the bag on her table that hung partially over the bed and stripped off his leather jacket. He looked at Emily. "So...things are good?"

"They're better," Emily clarified. She stepped towards them and handed Cady over to him. "I...have a lot to make up for. To both of you. I've been...working some things out, and I just..." She took a deep breath, and smiled even though her eyes were miserable. Jason wasn't giving her much to work with. "I have to get back to work, anyway. My break's over. I'll...call you, Liz."

When she was gone, Jason adjusted Cady a little higher in his arms, but Elizabeth was pleased to see he made no move to hand her over or put her back in the bassinet. "It was really okay?"

"Yeah. We cleared the air. We're not back to where we were, but..." Elizabeth hesitated. "We were honest with each other, and that's...important."

"Yeah." Jason took a deep breath. "I shouldn't have gone to Puerto Rico. I knew it even when I decided to go, and Sonny warned me, but I thought...with what you'd said after the baby shower, it would be..."

"Jason, the day is going to come when you and I are going to sit down and we're going to be honest with each other again. Like that day we sat in your penthouse after I moved in, and cleared most of the

air.” Elizabeth reached out for his hand. “Because if this is *ever* going to work, we’re both going to have to stop protecting ourselves. I don’t want to live half a life when I think that I...and my daughter...that we’d be so much happier with you.”

“I want you both to be happy with me, too,” Jason admitted.

“But that day is not this day,” Elizabeth said. “Not when I’m less than twenty-four hours out of labor, and I can smell that chili. Now gimme.”

*Thursday, December 5, 2003*

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Jason waited for Francis to push open the door before he stepped inside, Cady’s baby carrier in his one hand and Elizabeth’s duffel bag over his shoulder. He stepped aside to watch as Elizabeth gingerly stepped over the threshold. Behind her, Cody and Marco had flowers, stuffed animals and other various presents Elizabeth had received while in the hospital. “Do you want that stuff in the nursery?”

“Um...” Elizabeth paused by the desk and considered. Jason set Cady on top of the desk and the bag next to her. “Yes. But...just put it in the empty corner, because I don’t know how I’m going to arrange any of it yet.”

“Sure thing, Miss Webber.” Cody nodded, and he squared his shoulders, probably trying to look as tough and professional as always, but it was difficult while he was carrying the giant teddy bear Nikolas Cassadine had had delivered. He and Marco started up the stairs.

“Do you want to sit?” Jason asked. “Carly set up the portable crib down here if you don’t want to take Cady upstairs just yet—”

“Jason...” She put a hand on his arm. “Relax. I’m tired, and I’m sore. But I’m fine. I’ve been sitting for the last week, too uncomfortable to move.” She leaned over Cady’s carrier and smoothed the baby’s almost non-existent fluff of dark hair. “I’m nervous,” she confessed. She smiled as the two guards, finished with their duty, headed out of the penthouse.

Jason frowned. “Why? We have everything—”

“I’ve never been a mother before,” Elizabeth explained. “It’s easy right now, because she’s so good. She sleeps, but...” She huffed. “She’s *going* to cry, and what if I don’t know what kind of cry it is? How do I know if she’s hungry, or scared or lonely?”

“It’s not easy.” Jason lifted the carrier in his hand and led her over to the sofa, where he put Cady on the coffee table, knowing Elizabeth would sit. “I didn’t know with Michael, but I figured...if he was hungry, he’d eat. So I’d give him a bottle, and if he didn’t want that, then if I held him, he wouldn’t be scared or lonely. And eventually, he was on a routine with his feedings, and you know...their crying is different. It’s not always the same for every emotion.”

Elizabeth froze, her hand halfway in the air before turning back to him. “Jason...”

He didn’t meet her eyes, just stared at the baby, hoping she would wake up, stop this conversation. He wasn’t ready for it. To admit to Elizabeth that he hadn’t trusted her. Not all the way.

“I never...” Elizabeth cleared her throat. “I *should* have thought about it. About Michael. And...” She twisted on the sofa, and he only sighed when he saw her wince. “But I guess...I just didn’t. I...” Her shoulders slumped. “Did you think I would take her away?”

“I...” And of course, *now* that she was looking at him, asking him this question, he realized just what an idiot he’d been, because of course she wouldn’t take Cady away. “No. But—”

“I guess you didn’t think Robin or Carly would either,” Elizabeth said, but he saw the hurt in her eyes, in the way her mouth was set in a line.

“Elizabeth—” But he had no defense. None at all. “It’s not that I...”

“No, I guess...” Elizabeth sighed, her fingers feathering over her daughter’s cheek. “I guess I even understand it. You loved Robin, and for God knows what reason, you trusted Carly. And it’s not... like I haven’t given you reason to distrust me—”

He was not going to let her blame herself for his idiocy. “Elizabeth, it’s not...” He took a deep breath. “I didn’t...consciously think you would let me fall in love with your daughter and then take her away. I never thought you’d do what Robin did. And I know you’re not insane enough to do what *Carly* did. But...”

“You’ve been telling me all along in your own way.” Elizabeth tucked her hair behind her ears. “I just didn’t hear what you trying to tell me. I never stay.” She shrugged. “Not news. But Jason...*you* never stay either.”

“I—” And he couldn’t deny that. He *had* walked away first, that winter before Lucky was back. And he’d left town after she walked away in the park. And maybe she had physically left the penthouse the year before, but he’d pushed her out, he could see that now. “I know that.”

“So what are we left with?” she murmured. “Two people who don’t trust the other to stay. Can...can we even get past that?”

“If we want to.” Jason reached for her hand. “We used to trust one another. To take what the other said for face value.”

“When we were just friends,” Elizabeth replied with a smile. “But you started trying to protect me that winter, in my studio. Started trying to make decisions for me, when I told you I wanted you around. Trying to protect to me. It’s...when our feelings started to change, at least for me, I started... to become guarded because I was...” She laughed, an almost exasperated sound. “I was so afraid you’d see how I felt on my face, and I wasn’t ready to deal with how *I* felt, much less to have you let me down gently.”

“Why would I have done that?” Jason frowned. “You knew...how I felt about you.”

“Not...entirely.” Elizabeth pursed her lips, trying to explain. “I thought I’d see you look at me, particularly that second time you stayed in the studio, when I was seeing Lucky. And I...I guess...I had mostly assumed that the way I’d felt the year before, had faded. I mean, you were this gorgeous guy with a great smile who spent half the time living with me with your shirt open because I was changing your wound.” Her cheeks flushed and he grinned. “And you were this great listener.” She wrinkled her nose. “I saw you looking at me, sometimes then. But I didn’t...say anything then, because...” she shrugged.

“I’m not sure what would have happened if either of us had given in to how we felt then,” Jason said quietly. He looked at their fingers laced together. “I thought maybe you were too young. And you were starting to get past Lucky, but you weren’t there yet. I was...dealing with my own stuff. But...that last day, when I tried to say goodbye.”

“I wanted you to kiss me,” Elizabeth confessed, with a guilty smile. “When you leaned in toward me, I thought...just for a second, you might.”

“I considered it, but it wouldn’t have been fair.” Jason exhaled slowly. “So you’re right. I was already making decisions for you because of how I felt. I should have kissed you any of the dozen times I thought about it. Every time you hugged me, or kissed me on the cheek. How many times we came close that last time I was home...I kept waiting for you to make the decision, because it was *your* life that would change. You were the one who had to make the choice.”

“We’ve wasted a lot of time, Jason,” she said softly. “Are we going to keep wasting it? Or are we going to stop looking for reasons to walk away. It’d be easy. It’d be safer, maybe. But I...” She closed her eyes and seemed to come to some sort of inner decision. “I’ve loved you since I was eighteen years old, and maybe I’ve even been in love with you for as long. But I don’t want to be in love by myself anymore. It’s too hard. It’s lonely.”

“You’re not.” Jason reached out, and feathered the back of his hand down her cheek. “You’re not alone. I...I love you, too. And I don’t want to waste another minute.”

And apparently, neither did Cady, because the newborn’s eyes fluttered, she hiccupped, and then she wailed, and their conversation was over for the moment.

# Chapter Twenty

*And I would let you know  
You cannot walk away  
Cause there are things to say  
And I know that you might  
Not see this tonight  
But there are things to say  
We have life to make*  
- Things to Say, SafetySuit

*Friday, January 9, 2004*

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

“Every time I see her,” Emily said, smiling even as she changed Cady’s diaper, “her face is changing. She looks so much like you.” She smiled at her friend, relieved to be in the same room as Elizabeth and Nadine.

“Thank you!” Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “I asked Jason if he thought she had my eyes and you know what he said to me?”

“She has her own eyes?” Emily suggested, and three of them laughed, because even Nadine knew how literal Jason could be by this point. “Yeah, he’s annoying like that.” She looked down at the eyes in question and smiled. “I was hoping she might have Jason’s eye color, but I think they’re going to be more like yours, Elizabeth.” She handed over the infant.

Elizabeth hesitated and frowned at her. “Why do you think that?”

“Yeah, I read that baby’s eye colors change constantly over their first year.” Nadine leaned over to peer at them. “They’re like...grayish.”

Elizabeth sniffed. “They’re *slate-blue*,” she said, and Emily rolled her eyes. Trust Elizabeth to be picky over color.

“I say *that*,” Emily said, “because I don’t know much about genetics, but Jason’s eyes are really light, so if they were going to be that color, they would be already. Eyes change color because of pigment, and it goes without saying that light blue eyes don’t need a lot of pigment.”

“Fair point,” Nadine nodded.

Emily frowned when Elizabeth looked uncomfortable with the turn in conversation. She thought it would be great if Cady had her father’s eyes, because they were Lila’s eyes, but Elizabeth’s were nice, too. At least she knew they were going to be blue...

And then looked at Cady again. At her eyes. Which had been light blue when she’d been born, and

now they were darkening.

She cleared her throat. “So, how is it being new parents? Are you and Jason...adjusting well?” When Elizabeth hesitated, Emily sighed, because even though they’d been trying, she knew Elizabeth was apprehensive about sharing anything personal with her. Not that Emily could blame her, since she’d royally screwed up the *last* time her friend had confided in her. But she had worked through her anger—had even had a long web chat with Lucky to clear the air.

“You don’t have to answer that.” Emily forced a smile on her face. “How long before she rolls over? Or sits up?”

“I...” Elizabeth wrinkled her nose and leaned over to place Cady in her bouncing seat on top of the coffee table. She flicked it on, and the baby began to lightly bounce. “No, it’s okay, Em. If we’re going to be friends again, really friends, we have to start somewhere.”

“Great, because I have been dying to ask.” Nadine popped a handful of popcorn in her mouth. “I’ve been so busy with my sister and then Christmas at the hospital that I haven’t been able to bug you. Last I heard, you kicked Jason out of the delivery room.”

“Yeah, I heard about that through the hospital grapevine, but you know, you’re not the *only* mom to do that, according to Kelly.” Emily shrugged.

“Well, to be honest, Em...Jason and I had a lot of rough patches,” Elizabeth said slowly. “When this started, it was just...it was a mess. I mean...” She shifted and cast her eyes away. “You know we hurt a lot of people with how it started.”

“Because of me,” Emily said. “You don’t have to sugarcoat it.”

“I was hoping we wouldn’t,” Nadine murmured and Emily shot her a look. “What? Hey, I’m glad you guys are okay now, which means hopefully you’ll stop shooting me dirty looks in the hallway, but I’m a straight shooter. You were a turd.”

“Don’t...” Elizabeth sighed. “Don’t start. Emily, Nadine has been there for me when you just... wouldn’t be. So she’s annoyed on my behalf, because she was also my OB nurse, and so she knows about my blood pressure problems, which was...part of the reason I moved in with Jason in the first place.” She cast her eyes to Nadine, and Emily nodded. Smack her down, too. “And Nadine, I appreciate it, but Emily and I *are* doing better.”

“Fair enough.” Nadine sipped her soda.

“Understood,” Emily said.

“Now...like I said, I didn’t move in with Jason for romantic reasons. They were purely practical. He was concerned...about my health. And...we were still tiptoeing around each other. We made things...more difficult than they had to be. So, I made him talk to me about some of the things that went wrong. We started to clear the air. And then...” Her face flushed and she looked away. “We... started to...get closer.”



Emily grimaced. “Got it. Sexy sexy good times with my brother. You can save *those* details for Nadine.”

“Because how else shall I live vicariously through her?” Nadine sighed, dreamily. “They’re good details, though, Em. You might want to try sitting through them. There’s a great pool table story—”

“*Anyway.*” Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “We weren’t talking about what was next. How we were going to deal with Cady...he was always so uncomfortable when we talked about her. I just...thought he might not love her as much as he could because of how it started.”

Emily opened her mouth, because really what *nonsense*, and then she closed it. Because she got it. She understood it all. Cady’s eyes were darkening, would probably end up being brown by the end of the year. And Elizabeth had quit her job and moved in with Jason for safety reasons.

And then someone had tried to kidnap her.

She squared her shoulders. “Well, I guess you’ve worked it out mostly, then.”

“It was touch and go for a while, and I think Jason thought I was going to leave him after she was born. So he took a trip to Puerto Rico right before she was due.” Elizabeth changed the speed on the seat from fast to slow. “I *knew* he had to go, that it had to be Sonny or Jason, and Carly would have *cut* Sonny if he’d disappeared five seconds after Morgan was born when he’d been gone for weeks last summer.”

“Still,” Emily said, “it must have hurt for you to think he would miss his daughter’s birth.”

“And that’s why I threw him out of the delivery room. But I guess the way I did it, or whatever Carly babbled at him afterwards, did the trick. We’re not perfect yet,” Elizabeth added. “But it’s been great this last month. You know what a wonderful father he was to Michael, Em.”

“I do. And any thoughts Jason might have had about how Cady got here, it’s clear he doesn’t see her that way now.” Emily tucked her hair behind her ears. “Right?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth confirmed. “I mean...there’s still some things up in the air. We both still have trust issues, but we’re making a conscious effort to talk about them now, and *not* just assume.” This last part she addressed to Nadine, and Emily tried not to feel left out as it was clear that she was receiving the glossed over version and Nadine had been privy to the details.

She could *not* be angry that Elizabeth had found someone she was close to, someone to take on the role of best friend and confidant. As Jason’s sister and Elizabeth’s best friend, it should have been her. And it was her own fault it hadn’t been.

“Well, hello, it’s all I’ve been saying since day one.” Nadine looked to Emily. “Months, I tell you. *Months*, I spent telling her just to talk to him. I almost talked to him myself.”

“Ha, *that* I would have liked to see.” Emily smiled, and reminded herself again, she had no one to

blame but herself for being on the outside looking in. She looked at Elizabeth. “So you’re going to be okay?”

“All things considered...” Elizabeth’s mouth curved into a smile as she looked at her daughter. “I’m going to be great.”

The door opened then, and Jason entered. He stopped, seeing the living room full of women. “Ah...” He cleared his throat. “I can come back.”

Elizabeth laughed and rolled her eyes. “Like you don’t live here. Nadine has a shift in a half hour anyway, and it’s time for Cady to go down for a nap.” She unstrapped her daughter from the seat. She and Nadine said their goodbyes, and with minutes, Emily was alone with her brother.

Elizabeth had forgiven her much more easily than her brother, and with what Emily had realized during this visit, she wasn’t sure why *either* of them were even speaking to her. It was clear that Cady was not Jason’s biological daughter, which meant *she* had set Ric on Elizabeth all those months ago, when she’d been trying to prove something to herself. She had put Elizabeth and her child in danger, and Jason had spent months cleaning up the mess.

Sure, it had worked out in some ways. Even she could see that Jason was happier with Elizabeth than he’d been with Courtney—she couldn’t understand why she’d ever felt differently. And Elizabeth was certainly happier. Cady couldn’t do better for a father.

But at the end of the day, Emily had been the reason for it. Emily was the reason her best friend and her child were probably *still* in danger.

She hesitated and looked at Jason. “You know that I love you, right?”

Jason sighed and lowered himself onto the sofa. “Yeah. I know that.”

“And...I know what I did...all the things I did, but especially telling Ric Elizabeth was pregnant was wrong. I mean, I only hinted to him, but I made it clear. And I know...that made *everything* so much more difficult.”

Even if she’d only doubted before, the way Jason’s eyes snapped to hers told her everything she needed to know. And she was heartbroken because it was clear that it was probably something Elizabeth would have told her, if they’d been friends.

“Emily—”

“Because you and Elizabeth didn’t get to handle this the way you wanted to,” Emily cut in swiftly. “I mean, you guys probably had a plan how to break the news, and I just...ruined it. And then I treated Liz like crap for weeks. I didn’t even think about what it might be doing to her health until you...until that day at Kelly’s. And I felt so stupid, because I’m a med student. I *should* have. I made everything worse.”

“It’s over now, Emily.” Jason shrugged. “It was up to Elizabeth to forgive you—”

“And for some reason, she has, but I know...*you* haven’t.” Jason didn’t look at her, and she sighed. “It’s okay. You shouldn’t. I know now how ridiculous I was, how stupid I was to assume I knew better than you what *you* needed. I look at you now, with Elizabeth and with Cady, and I see the way it should have been ages ago. Would have been if I’d been a better friend and stopped pressuring her to fix Lucky and follow her heart. So, you have my promise now, Jason. I have learned my lesson. From now on, you have my unwavering support.”

She stood and leaned over to kiss his cheek. “You are my brother, and I just want you to be happy. And Elizabeth is my oldest friend, so that’s what I want for her. Lucky for me, I don’t have to worry anymore, because you going to make each other happy.” She drew on her jacket and wrapped her scarf around her. “Let Liz know I had to go—”

Jason got to his feet and wrapped her in a tight hug. “I love you, too, Em.” He drew back and with a half-smile that she knew meant she was forgiven. “Just...don’t do it again.”

### **Morgan Penthouse: Nursery**

Elizabeth was standing over Cady’s crib when she felt Jason standing in the doorway. She glanced at him. “Did you and Em talk? I tried not to make it obvious.”

“I figured when Nadine looked surprised to learn she was leaving.” But he didn’t look annoyed, only...contemplative. He joined her, and they watched their daughter sleep.

“Emily knows.”

Elizabeth’s hand froze as she leaned down to stroke Cady’s back. She raised her eyes to Jason. “W-What?”

“I don’t...know *how* she guessed it,” Jason continued. “But the way she was talking...about having created this mess. If she believed the lie, she wouldn’t have been so forceful about it. She kept saying she’d made it worse.”

She sighed. “I thought she might have suspected. Nadine and I haven’t really had a chance to get together since she came back from New York, with Cady and Christmas, so she asked me how you and I were doing. She’d heard the rumors about the delivery room.” She looked at him, her heart aching. “I am so sorry I did that to you. For one thing, you missed her being born. And secondly, I know if too many people talked, it might have created problems.”

“I don’t...I don’t care about any of that.” Jason shook his head. “You...did what you had to do get through that moment, and you and I were...not talking. We were both protecting ourselves.”

Still. “Anyway,” Elizabeth continued. “I tried to give Em the cliff notes version on why that happened, how us not talking snowballed until I kicked you out. But while *Nadine* could swallow a story about me not thinking you were interested in your own child, Emily actually *knows* us. Which means she knows how you felt about Michael, and she also knows that I know it, too. So...she just looked at me.”

“I don’t think she’ll say anything,” he said after a moment. “Because she was there when you were almost kidnapped. And it looks like you guys cleared the air as to why you were fighting in the first place. Honestly...I don’t think Emily would have said anything all summer, even when you weren’t talking. There’d be no point.”

“I don’t think she’ll say anything, either.” Elizabeth rested her head against his shoulder. “I shouldn’t stand in here while she’s sleeping. I know it might wake her up.”

“And yet you do it *all* the time,” he said, voice teasing.

“I just...don’t like her being out of my sight,” she sighed. “I can see for myself that she’s safe.”

He wrapped an arm around her waist and tucked her into her side. “I know you’re still scared.”

“But it’s so much *worse* now, Jason,” she confessed. “Before, I carried her inside of me. I could protect her. And now, she’s her own person. If they got past me—”

“They’re not going to—”

“But they *could*. I’m not saying it wouldn’t take a catastrophe. I know if they got to me, it’s because they’ve gone around you *and* Sonny...which is no minor feat...” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “But I find myself and looking at her and imagining the worst case scenarios. I just want to protect her.”

“I know. We’re doing everything we can—”

“What is he *waiting* for?” The words burst out of her in a harsh whisper, and Jason led her away from the crib and into the hallway. She kept herself together until they were in their bedroom and then she just couldn’t. “Why doesn’t he just come for her? Why doesn’t he go after you? Or Sonny? What is the point of all this, Jason? What is he doing? It’s been almost a *year*!”

He dipped his head and drew in a deep breath. “I know. I *want* him to come at me, so I can end this, and it makes Sonny nervous that Ric’s just...circling. He didn’t show this level of patience last year.” He drew her close and she pressed her face into the warmth and comfort of his shirt. “We think he just can’t get to you. You rarely leave the penthouse, especially not since Cady was born. I’m always with you when you do. When you *do* go out without me, you take two guards for you and one for Cady.”

She huffed. “So you’ve done such a good job of protecting us that we’ve drawn it out this long.” She tilted her head back and smiled wryly at him. “It sounds insane. But...no, I guess you’re right. I don’t go anywhere alone, which I used to find restricting, but after I woke up in the hospital, Nadine across the hall from me recuperating from a bruised back...I don’t care if I ever leave this penthouse if it means our daughter is safe.”

“He’s been more patient than I would have thought possible.” His hand smoothed up and down her back. “Especially working with Faith Roscoe. She’s more hotheaded than that, or so we thought. But I’m getting tired of it, too, Elizabeth. I don’t want you to live like this. I don’t want Cady’s first months to be like this. I mean, it’s winter now and it’s not like she’d be out much anyway.”

“But I want to take her for walks in the spring,” Elizabeth murmured. “I want us to have a normal life. Well...as normal as it can get anyway. With just one guard.”

“I know.”

She drew back again, letting some space fill in between their bodies. “I’m *not* blaming you for not finding him. You know that, right?”

He rubbed the edge of his eyebrow. “I’m blaming me for letting him walk away that day on the docks. For not realizing Sonny would eventually overlook the brother thing. I had my hands wrapped around his neck...” He trailed off. “I shouldn’t...talk like that in front of you.”

“Oh...for...” Elizabeth sighed and rolled her eyes. “Jason, do you *honestly* think I’m unaware of what you do for a living? Or do you prefer to think I am?”

“I...” He hesitated. “I don’t know the answer to that.”

She pulled away from him and sat on the edge of the bed. “I mean, it’s not like I want specifics or...” She waved her hand. “*Itineraries* of your daily activities, but please give me some credit.”

Jason just stood in front of her, blinking at her. Well, maybe they *did* need to have this conversation. “You remember when you said you didn’t want my face to change?”

He exhaled slowly, and looked away but offered a short nod.

“Well, all summer, you and Sonny have hunted down Ric and Faith. You toss around words like *deal with* and *handle*, but Carly and I both know what they mean. And the reasons I walked away from you that October?” She shrugged. “Those were about trust. About the way you treated me. Made me feel like I didn’t matter. Not because of your job.”

“Elizabeth—”

“Maybe you *would* prefer it if I pretended I didn’t know better.” Elizabeth tilted her head to the side. “Would it make you feel better if I thought you imported coffee beans?”

He sat next to her on the bed, and shook his head. “No. But that’s not same thing as wanting you to know what I am.”

“*What* you are?” she echoed. “Jason, in a perfect mafia world, you wouldn’t have to...” She shrugged. “*Enforce* anything. You and Sonny could just break all the gaming and smuggling laws you want. Or whatever laws get broke when you do what you do. I’ve never really thought about it, honestly.”

“A perfect mafia world?” And she was surprised to see a smile ghost across his lips. “Elizabeth.”

“Jason, I know why Sonny got in this business. He didn’t have power growing up, so he went out and

took it. You...didn't have a future. Direction. Nothing else really to live for. So Sonny gave you something. He gave you a code, maybe. Or..." She reached into his lap and took his hand in hers. "It's not as if either of you sat down and decided to enjoy a life of violence. It's a byproduct of the other stuff, and it's not something either of you relish."

"And that makes it okay for you?" Jason asked. "How—"

"It doesn't need to be okay for *me*. I don't have to go out and do what you do." She leaned her head against his shoulder. "Jason, at the end of the day, I love you. And I'll tell you that as often as you need to hear it until *you* believe that I see who you are. The good, the bad. I know your virtues and I know your flaws. And the only thing that I don't like..." He raised his head at that and met hers. "I don't like that sometimes you think it's more important for the other person to be happy than it is for you. You don't reach out for what you want enough."

"It's not always there for me to have," he said quietly. "So reaching out for nothing..."

"But if you don't reach out, it *won't* be there." She sighed. "Jason, I was making plans to move out while you were in Puerto Rico. I hadn't spoken to Sonny, but I thought...there must be another apartment in this building that we could make as secure as the penthouse. Because you just...wouldn't look me in the eye and tell me that you were unsure of your role in my daughter's life. Instead, you spent months avoiding the question, to the point that I thought you *couldn't* love her because her Ric's blood ran through her veins."

"I *never* cared about that." He shook his head. "But...I knew you were thinking it. Even before you said it that day in the nursery. Carly warned me for months. Sonny did, too. But I just didn't...I don't know. I would tell myself to stop it, to go to your appointments and be involved, but I just couldn't...do it."

"I don't want you to think this was all *your* fault, though." Elizabeth nudged his side. "Because it's not like I spoke up either. We'd spent months avoiding each other's existence, trying to pretend we could move on. I hated every minute you were with Courtney, but I kept telling myself that maybe she gave you what you needed. Maybe she could make you happier than I could, and I really thought....that would be enough for me."

"With Courtney...it was just..." He took a deep breath and looked at her. "I cared about her. I won't lie and say I didn't. But I didn't at first. And never the way she needed me to. At first, it was just...you were gone, and she was there. I kept...hearing your words about being Sonny's enforcer and that was all...I wanted to make that go away..."

"I am *so* sorry I said those things to you," she murmured. "I...lash out when I'm angry, but I shouldn't have done that. And I shouldn't have frozen you out when you came to see me the next day."

"Knowing what I know now...and even what I knew then, I knew how upset you were. But it just...kept spiraling out of control. Because Alcazar was still out there, and Sonny was still...insisting I guard Courtney, and I didn't want to rock the boat with him, because he was still in difficult place. And then you went off with Lucky."

She wrinkled her nose. “Yeah. It was just to get my mind off things. I thought I’d head out of town for a while, figure things out. Get my head clear, get away and maybe I’d be less upset when I came home.” Elizabeth sighed. “But when I came back...you were married to Brenda. And I just...I felt like I didn’t even know you anymore. And I was...almost sure something was happening with Courtney. So...I was angry. And then...” She looked away, looked at their joined hands. “Ric was there.”

“Because of me,” he said tightly, but she shook her head.

“He approached me because of you, but I was lonely. A-and I wasn’t feeling particularly good about myself. You know...maybe if Courtney had just...been a brunette.” She huffed. “Another dumb blonde. Story of my life.”

He frowned, shaking his head. “What?”

“All my life, guys went for Sarah first,” Elizabeth clarified. “Even when I moved to town, *Lucky* wanted Sarah. He got over her, and we connected. But you know, in the end...he slept with her. And then you and Courtney, and Ric and Faith.” She grimaced. “Why can’t there be more redheads? Anyway. So, there I was, in my eyes, left for *another* blonde, feeling like I could never quite measure up, and Ric...had apparently done some *really* good research.” She rolled her eyes, feeling stupid all over again.

“Elizabeth, he was a con artist,” Jason told her. “He snowed Carly. He snowed Hector Ruiz and Daniel Vega, and without going into details, to say that they’re not exactly gullible would be an understatement. It was *my* fault Ric went after you, and it was *my* fault you were in a position to feel vulnerable.”

“Jason, you do not get take responsibility for *everything*. Let me own up to my own mistakes. There were signs Ric wasn’t telling the truth. I would catch him in lies. He could never explain why he *had* to work for Sonny. But...h-he was charming. And he made time for me. And he told me how much he cared about me. He gave me all the words that I wanted from you and never got. But that’s my fault. For thinking that *words* matter more than *actions*.” She shook her head. “Anyway. None of this is really the point. What I was trying to say before we got...off on the topic of...well...I was trying to say that you don’t reach out for what you want, but *I’m* afraid to rock the boat.”

“So...when you were talking about how we were only living in the moment,” Jason said, slowly, “you didn’t see it...us...as temporary. But that we were just...ignoring the next step.”

“Yeah. I mean, we were *just*...working things out. Jason, we’ve barely dated. In fact...” She laughed slightly. “We dated more *before* we were involved, so I guess if we count all those rides and the pool playing, and the hot chocolate on the docks...anyway, we skipped all the stuff in between. We’d barely been together and I was living with you. I was afraid that if we talked about Cady in anything other than an abstract concept that needed to be protected from Ric, you would...look at me like I was insane for suggesting that five minutes after we’re together, I’d like you to help raise my daughter. Be her father.”

"I...wanted her to be mine," Jason admitted. "And maybe that *was* part of the problem. I didn't care that Ric was her biological father. I still don't. He and Sonny share the same blood, and it doesn't bother me. I just..." He paused. "I would think about her, and know that it was *my* fault she wasn't. That if I had just...shown you how much I loved you. If I had told you the truth, or...just shipped Zander off to a damn safe house with a guard...that she *could* have been mine. And maybe that bothered me more than I'd like."

"Well, that's natural." When he just sighed, she nudged him again with her shoulder. "It *is*. I don't regret having her. I love her exactly as she is, but I'd be a liar if I didn't wish she were yours. I know you don't like to do that, the what-ifs, but I can't stop sometimes. So, Jason, she's not your blood. But you know how it is with Sonny and Carly? *Blood* doesn't make a family. They're your family, it's why Carly decided to..." She raised her eyebrows. "I don't know...look after me. Sometimes, you get to choose your family. And I want to choose mine. I want to choose *you* for me *and* for Cady."

"And I want that," Jason said, his voice low but fervent. "I want to choose you and Cady to be *my* family. I love you, Elizabeth. I can't...take back all those times I should have said it and didn't, but I *can* say it from now on."

"I love you, too." She leaned forward and kissed him with all the love and passion inside her, wrapping her arms around his neck. He deepened the kiss, nipping at her lower lip so she parted them.

He pressed her back into the mattress and she started to lose herself in the moment, before remembering that, unfortunately...she'd given birth the month before. "Jason," she murmured as his lips trailed down her throat. "As much as I'd *like* to see this happen..."

His breath was hot on her neck, and he drew back slightly. "You can't, though."

"Nope." She grinned, dancing her fingers up his chest. "At least two more weeks. I go back and see Kelly, then. Maybe she'll give me the green light."

He dropped his head against her chest, and she giggled a little, knowing exactly how he felt. She wanted to be close to him, to feel him inside her, knowing that for the first time in *years*, they had no secrets. No fears. They had done what seemed all those months ago to be *impossible*...they'd been honest and now they couldn't even celebrate.

"I should go talk to Sonny." He rose to his feet, and drew her up with him. "Because you're right. We need to figure out what Ric's plan is. I don't want to put our lives on hold anymore." He kissed her again, and she almost forgot her doctor's medical advice.

"I love you," she murmured against his lips. "And I love that I can say that to you. I never thought we'd get back here. I thought we'd missed our chance."

Cady's cry came over the monitor and broke their kiss. She sighed and wiggled her shoulders. "Well, then I guess it's a good thing we couldn't do more, because it sounds like Cady's ready to be fed." She brushed another kiss against his lips. "*You* go talk to Sonny, and find something for dinner. I'll go



feed our daughter.”

She glanced over her shoulder to find him smiling at her, and was ridiculously relieved that Carly had talked her out of moving out while he was in Puerto Rico. She might have missed this moment, and she was done wasting time.

# Chapter Twenty-One

*Is this a natural feeling or is it just me bleeding  
All my thoughts and dreams in hope that you will be with me or  
Is this a moment to remember or just a cold day in December, I wonder  
If maybe, maybe I could be all you ever dreamed cause you are  
- Anywhere But Here, SafetySuit*

*Tuesday, February 3, 2004*

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

"So, you told us you had something to announce." Nadine dumped sugar in her coffee. "I've waited long enough, and I'm not waiting any longer."

"Yes...well..." Elizabeth shifted in her seat and smiled at her grandmother. "I've been talking about it with Jason, and he...has told me a few times that I don't need to go back to work if I don't want to, and part of me..." She paused. "Part of me just wants to sit at home and watch her change."

"You'll go nuts in five days," Emily predicted. "So, you'd go back to Kelly's?"

"No." Elizabeth cast her eyes around the diner that had been a second home to her since she'd moved to town, had once actually been her home. "No, I think...I'm ready to move on. It's something I've been thinking about almost since I got pregnant, before Jason and I worked things out. I thought about getting my certification to teach, but I also..." She met her grandmother's eyes. "I thought about going into the family business. Webbers usually end up as doctors, but...I decided to enroll in the nurse's program."

"Yes!" Nadine's fist shot in the eye. "I was hoping that one would win."

Emily wrinkled her nose. "You used to hate blood." And then she tilted her head. "But, now that I think of it, that's not been true for a while."

"Yeah, well, I guess it's something I grew out of." Hard to be nervous at the sight of blood when she'd had to change Jason's bandage once a day and he'd opened his wound more than once trying to recover to fast. "I've...had some experience in helping someone who was sick. I think I'd be good at it."

"Well, *I* am certainly pleased," Audrey said. "As long as you're sure it's what *you* want."

"Well, like I said, Jason and I talked about it. I'm going to enroll now, but I'm too late for this starting class—which is fine with me since I want to stay home with Cady for at least six months, but Bobbie said I could start this summer, maybe. Or even the fall. I don't have to commit right away, but I wanted to get the paperwork started."

"It'll be great working together," Emily said, with a bright smile. She flashed another at Nadine—the

two were still not all that friendly, but Elizabeth had hopes they'd warm up to one another.

Courtney approached them then, with her usual annoyed expression. Elizabeth thought she might be more annoyed that now she and Emily were friends again, the blonde's casual friendship with Emily had faded. Another thing Courtney would probably claim Elizabeth had *stolen* from her.

"Are you guys done yet? I'd like a table who might leave me a decent tip."

Elizabeth lifted her eyebrows at this, and opened her mouth to respond, but Audrey caught her first. "You know, Courtney, the service I have received the last few times I have been here has been *appalling*. I will be speaking to Bobbie about this."

Courtney narrowed her eyes, slapped their check on the table and stalked away.

"Honestly." Nadine rolled her eyes. "It's been like...a year hasn't it? I mean, is he *that* good in bed?" She flushed. "Sorry, Mrs. Hardy." The older woman just smiled.

"She was doing better for a while," Emily said hesitantly. "Or I *thought* she was."

Later, as Nadine and Audrey had moved on to their cars, Emily followed Elizabeth to the SUV where Cody and Dominic were holding the door open

"I...think you should be careful around Courtney."

Elizabeth blinked at her. "Why? She can't be like this forever, you know. And I barely even see her most of the time. Em, she's just bitter. I have Jason and she doesn't. She thinks I stole him, that I stole Carly and Sonny, and probably you, but—"

"I know you didn't." Emily hesitated. "I don't know. I just...it's been ten months since she found out. She and Jason were only together a few months, barely that long in public. It's just...not right for her still to be this angry. She seemed like she was coming to terms with it for a while, and now it's like it's happening all *over* again. I don't want her to make trouble for you."

"I appreciate it, but I just..." Elizabeth lifted her shoulders. "I just don't know *what* trouble she could cause, honestly. Jason and I are better than we've ever been. We went through a lot of rough patches getting it right, but we have. I know he loves me, he knows I love him. We have our daughter. Life is practically perfect. I can't think of *anything* Courtney could do to make that go away."

"I guess you're right." Emily bit her lip. "I just...I worry. Maybe I'm overcompensating for what a bitch I was all of last year."

"You don't have to do that," Elizabeth said softly. "You and I are going to be fine. We're family, Emily. We always were, but even more so now." She embraced her friend in a tight hug. "But thanks for looking out for me."

**Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Jason pulled open the door at the knock, and frowned when he saw Carly. “Hey. Elizabeth is out—”

“Hey, do *not* assume I’m here to see the Muffin.” Carly jabbed at his chest. “I am *your* best friend. I merely tolerate her, you know. I can come see *you*.”

“Okay.” Jason waited. “Are you?”

She scowled. “No.” Then she lifted her chin and sniffed. “I’m here to see my goddaughter and niece.” She pushed past him and grinned when she saw the play mat set up on the floor, and Cady waving her hands at the dangling toys hanging over her. “Hey. You’re with Cady.”

“You know, we haven’t had the christening yet. She’s only your niece until then.” Jason shut the door.

“Semantics.” Carly waved her hand and leaned against the desk, watching Cady. “She’s trying to roll over.”

“Yeah. She’s been doing that for about a week.” They both watched the infant struggle to do so, and her face wrinkling up when she just couldn’t make it happen. “Elizabeth swears she’ll do it every day we set her up on this, but I keep telling her it’s probably going to be another month.”

“All mothers think their babies are the smartest.” Carly raised her eyebrows. “Morgan rolled over at two months, three weeks and five days. So, you know. He wins so far.”

Jason just shook his head. Trust Carly to make it a competition. “So...you came to see Cady.”

“I did.” Carly fidgeted. “And *maybe*...I came to see the Muffin. But I can ask you the same question that Sonny forbid me to ask either of you.”

Well, that couldn’t be anything good. He sighed and folded his arms across his chest. “Carly—”

“I just...I haven’t nagged you since you went to Puerto Rico, I figure I didn’t need to.” She shrugged and wandered over towards the sofa, her fingers trailing over the back. “After seeing you in the hospital room...”

“Carly.” Jason sighed. He hated when she brought this stuff up. Even though things were good now—even great—it didn’t mean he wanted to *talk* about it. So he just offered his stock answer that had worked in the past. “We’re...you know, working on it.”

Her head snapped up at that, and she narrowed her eyes. “What the hell does that *mean*?” she demanded.

“Carly, don’t use that tone—Cady can *hear* you—”

And then Jason found himself actually ducking the pillow she threw at him. “*Carly*—”

“What is wrong with the two of you?” she continued, almost hissing the words. “What’s left to work out? You bastards are ridiculous for each other, you’ve got this gorgeous baby, and you’re *working*

on it? It's been months—”

“Carly, I hate when you push.” Jason moved to pick Cady up and hold her while Carly delivered her tantrum.

“I don't get it.” She shoved her hair out of her face, trying to keep her voice level. “I see you with Cady, I see you with Elizabeth, and it just looks right, so how can you *keep* messing this up?”

He grimaced. “We're—”

And then he realized she was *crying*. He stopped talking.

“I just want you to be happy!” she sobbed. “I broke you, and I just want to make it better. This is *all* my fault, you know. I did this. I *ruined* you.”

“I...” He blinked and shook his head. “Carly—”

“If I hadn't given you Michael, if I hadn't made you take him while I ran off to find myself or ended up in the nuthouse, you wouldn't have told Robin the truth, and she wouldn't have been able to hurt you. And then she took him away, and I took him away all over again.” Her chest was heaving. “I gave you this little boy to love and then I made sure you could *never* keep him when I gave him the Quartermaines—”

“Carly,” Jason began, bracing his hand on Cady's back. “It wasn't—”

“You have been the best friend I've ever had and I've done nothing but take and take and take!” She jabbed a finger at him. “I cause you *nothing* but pain. I slept with your best friend. I called you a kidnapper. I gave your son to AJ, to Sonny. And now this is all my fault, because you can't trust Elizabeth to stay, and it's because I *broke* you.”

“You didn't break me,” Jason said, feeling uncomfortable, because he could have avoided this scene if he'd just...told her the truth about his relationship with Elizabeth. He was beginning to see a pattern here—he would refuse to open up, and therefore the women in his life would draw their *own* conclusions.

“I *did*!” Carly nodded, swiping at her eyes. “Look what you've done for me, Jase! I have my beautiful boys, my beautiful home, I have Sonny. And you're losing your chance at being a family because of me!”

“I...” He drew in a deep breath. “Carly, Elizabeth and I are going to be fine. I didn't...want to get into this, but it's going to be fine.”

Her breath shaky, Carly shook her head. “I thought that was true, but how can you still be working on it—”

“When I say that,” Jason said slowly, hoping to keep her calm because so far Cady was holding her own, but he didn't want *her* upset. “I mean that we've talked about a lot of things. She knows why I

was pulling away, and I know why she wasn't pushing."

"O-Okay." Carly hesitated. "But—"

"I'm not saying we're not both still..." Jason looked away, discomforted. "Apprehensive about if we can really make it work on an everyday basis, but we're both in this now. I told her I loved her, she said it back. We've talked about Cady, and how we want to raise her together. Carly, I'm sorry. I should have—I should have been clearer."

Her mouth was pressed in a thin line, and she fisted a hand on her hip. "*Why* do you do this, Jase? Why can't..." She huffed. "We're supposed to be friends. But you never...tell me anything. You keep it all locked in, as if no one can help you. And *then* I go insane, because I just want to be *there* for you, and I apparently have to lose my damn mind for you to let me."

"You're right." Jason nodded, accepting that as a truth. "And to make it up to you, I'll tell you...*just* this once...that you were right. If I had listened to you months ago, if I had talked to you or to Sonny about what was going wrong, I could have made it easier for Elizabeth to talk to me. And we would have been in this place months ago."

Carly blinked and held up a finger. "Um. You need to tell me that again. That part about me being right. And I'm going to need you to make a recording of that. Because Sonny *isn't* going to believe me."

"Carly—"

"And I want it on a T-shirt."

"You're pushing it now."

## **Morgan Penthouse: Bedroom**

Around two in the morning, Elizabeth rolled her and her hand found empty space. She pried her eyes open and found that Jason's side of the bed was still warm, but empty nonetheless. He'd come in from the warehouse after she'd already fallen asleep for the night.

She sighed, but then heard rustling on the baby monitor. Cady was doing all right with sleeping through the night—Elizabeth fed her about midnight and then at five in the morning, but occasionally, she woke up anyway. Elizabeth slid out of bed and padded down the hall to the nursery where Jason was standing over Cady's crib.

"Hey...is she awake?" Elizabeth rested her head against the doorframe.

"She was," he replied softly. "But I just put her back in bed." He stepped back from the crib and looked at her. "How was lunch?"

"Fine." Elizabeth shrugged. "Emily and Nadine are still pretty frosty with one another, but I guess it's too much to hope for that they would both get along right away. Nadine was around for too much of

what happened.” She smiled. “Gram is over the moon about me and the nursing program.” She eyed him. “I told them I have some brief experience in caring for someone.”

“This is true.” She watched him adjust Cady’s blanket once more before joining her at the door. He gently pulled the nursery door closed, leaving them shrouded in the darkness of the hall. “And I managed to survive it, so I guess you’ll be fine.”

She laughed and punched him in the shoulder. “Cady was already with Carly when I got home. Was she good for you today? Did she roll over?”

“She was fine,” Jason said. “And no.” She could sense his hesitation. “Carly...had a weird meltdown today.”

“A meltdown?” Elizabeth blinked. She started for their bedroom and he followed her. “Is she okay?” She slid back under the comforter and waited for him to join her so she could curl up into his side. “What happened?”

“I don’t...I mean, yeah, I *know* what started it, but I guess I didn’t think...” She felt his chest rise rapidly as he drew in a deep breath. “She came over to nag you about...us, but decided I would do instead.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth rested her chin on his chest so she could peer into his eyes. “And you gave her some noncommittal answer that did nothing to tell her of any progress we’ve made since Cady was born, so therefore, she finally hit her limit.”

“Yeah.” His fingers trailed up down her back, sending tingles through the thin camisole she wore. “She...I didn’t know she thought...” He was quiet for a moment. “She thought she broke me.”

“*Broke*...you?” Elizabeth repeated. She sat up, confused. “Why? How?”

“Because...of Michael,” Jason said, his hand at her hip. “Because she gave him to me, which created the situation with Robin, then she went to the Quartermaines and she ended up with Sonny. I...I didn’t know she had that much guilt in her.”

“But still...” Elizabeth shook her head. “I mean, I get it, but you weren’t broken. You just...I hurt you so much, you know. And we didn’t trust each other. It had very little to do with Carly.”

“Well, not all of it,” Jason admitted. He cast his eyes away, and she knew how he hated to open up like this. “But maybe there’s an element of truth. It was harder for me to think you’d stay. Robin...said she could accept my job, but...”

“I remember you told me once that you never grew up in Robin’s eyes, but that you had in Sonny’s.” Elizabeth lowered herself back down next to him. “Well, I hope I’ve convinced you that all the reasons I didn’t stay before aren’t a factor now. I accept your job, I’m not trying to make things work with Lucky...and most important, I love you.” She sighed. “So what did you tell Carly?”

“I told her the truth. That you and I had talked. A lot. That we’re going to raise Cady, that we love

each other. I thought...she deserved that after I made her cry.”

“Oh, good grief. Carly *cried*? I can’t even imagine that.”

“So I told her she was right—that if I had talked to you months ago, things would have been better. *That* cheered her up.”

Elizabeth giggled, appreciating the image of a dumbfounded Carly being told by Jason that she was right about a piece of advice. “I’m surprised she didn’t want that recorded.”

“I didn’t know she was holding that kind of guilt about...everything,” Jason confessed. “I wouldn’t... have let her think that if I knew. I...wish she and Sonny could have found each other any other way than trying to prove a point I didn’t need to know about the both of them, but...” he hesitated.

“But what?” Elizabeth pressed. She raised her head once more to find his eyes in the darkness.

“It hurt at first. I mean, it was painful and I didn’t want to see either of them. But I don’t know...by the time I left town, I had mostly let go of it.” His fingers slid through her hair. “I didn’t see it then, but I was already in love with you, and the rest of it didn’t matter anymore.”

Elizabeth grinned and stretched up to kiss him. “By the way,” she murmured. “Do you know what today is?”

“February 4,” he mumbled against her lips. Then he stopped and pulled away from her a bit. “Two months.”

“To the day.” She grinned. “And you know what Kelly said when I saw her two weeks ago.” She slid her hand down his chest and beneath the waist of his sweat pants. “So what do you say we finally celebrate everything good in our lives?”

*Wednesday, February 4, 2004*

### **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose as she stepped off the bottom stair with Cady in her hands. “They’re going to give her *more* needles today, Jason. I can’t stand it—”

“They’re for her own good,” Jason said simply. He lifted the baby carrier onto the desk. “And you know she won’t remember it. If you don’t believe me, you can ask Michael when he comes home from school.”

She huffed and bounced Cady a little in her arms. “Tell Daddy to stop mocking me.”

“She can’t roll over yet, so I doubt she’s telling me anything.”

Elizabeth sniffed. “Fine then.” She handed their daughter to him and then watched as he effortlessly slid her into the straps and then attached them. “How do you always do that without her crying? It’s



because you're taller and I'm a midget, isn't? Somehow that's how this works out."

Jason just grinned and shook his head. "Where's the diaper bag?"

"By the sofa." Elizabeth reached inside her tote bag to make sure her first year baby journal was inside and the page on the two month doctor's checkup was bookmarked. She didn't want to miss a thing. "You cleared the entire day, didn't you?"

"Unless there's an emergency." She glanced over to find him returning, Cady's cotton candy pink diaper bag over his shoulder. Somehow, he made *that* work. "Why? Are we doing something later?"

"Yep. I'm going to let Carly spoil Cady for a few hours tonight." Elizabeth put her journal away and set her purse down. "And then, you, Jason Morgan, are going to take *me* out."

He hesitated, but couldn't find the flaw in her argument—she was allowed to leave the penthouse with just him if they didn't have Cady. With the baby, the guards went as well. "Okay. Did..." He shifted uncomfortably. "What, like the Grille?"

She burst into laughter, and shook her head. "God, *no*. You'd gnaw off your own foot in about five minutes. I'll let Sonny and Carly guilt you into those dinners." She poked him in the chest. "We're having Eli's here at the penthouse—without a baby to watch. And then, you're taking me for a ride on the cliff road."

"It's amazing how often you manage to bring the bike back into it."

There was a knock on the door, and Francis pushed it open. "Hey. I just wanted to bring up the mail. It's been swept and everything." He held out a small stack of envelopes. Elizabeth took it and started to go through with it. Credit card offers, mostly—a utility bill. She wrinkled her nose at her own credit card bill. She couldn't wait to go back to work and have money of her own.

"Huh." She picked out the manila envelope at the bottom of the table. "This...it's from Lucky."

Jason frowned. "He writes you a lot?"

"No..." She set the other envelopes on the desk, and turned it over in her hands. "We just had a web chat yesterday so he, Nikolas and Lulu could see Cady. He didn't say anything..." Elizabeth peered at the handwriting. "It's not his writing."

Jason took the envelope from her, and examined it for himself. In her car seat, Cady fussed a little. "Do...you want to open it?"

"I mean...we might as well." She watched him pull out two pieces of paper. "What is it?" she asked softly, when she saw the way he tensed. "Jason, what *is* it?"

He looked at the second sheet of paper, and his face darkened. Without a word, he handed her both papers. With shaking hands, she read the first one.

*Nice try, Morgan, but blood is always thicker. Tell my daughter Daddy's coming for her soon.* Her mind blanked, and she swayed. Jason reached out, and steadied her. "Elizabeth..."

She shook her head and tossed the note on the table, revealing the second part of the threat. It was Cady's birth certificate which declared that at 7:05 PM on December 3, 2003, Cadence Audrey Caroline Morgan had been born to Elizabeth Webber and Jason Morgan. Cady and Jason's names had lines drawn through them, and next to those spaces, someone had scrawled in replacements. Adela Grace Lansing and Richard Lansing.

"Jason..." She raised her eyes to him. "What...what does this *mean*? Is it...just a taunt? A direct threat? I don't understand. It's not as though he can show up to file for custody." Her blood froze. "Jason..."

Jason exhaled slowly. "It's not...out of the realm of possibility," he admitted. "Ric...was never convicted of a crime. And right now, no one in law enforcement is looking for him. If he *were* to... file, it would be too high profile to do anything to him. Suspicion would be immediate."

"No, no." The birth certificate slipped from her numb fingers. "Jason..."

"Hey..." Jason reached out and placed his hands on her shoulders. "First of all, I *don't*...think that's his plan. It's too straightforward. Second, blood tests can be faked. Even court-ordered ones. And if that didn't work, Elizabeth, I would put you and Cady on a plane to the nearest country without extradition laws."

"Without you?" she demanded. "We won't go without *you*."

He hesitated. "We'll deal with it if we have to, but I really don't think we have to worry—"

"No." Elizabeth shook her head. "*Promise* me you won't send us away when we wouldn't be able to come back without you." She watched him dip his head and take a deep breath. "Jason. We promised each other we'd stay. Remember? So that means you can't—" She was abruptly cut off when he drew to him and kissed her. Her lips were trembling, and she was sure he could taste the fear running through her at that moment, but when he pulled back, she felt a little better. "Jason."

"I don't know how I would make it work with Sonny," he said after a moment, "but you're right. You and Cady are my family. Where you go, I go. But I still don't think he'll go for that. It's more likely he just wants us to know that he never believed any differently. That he's *always* known I'm not the biological father." He rested his forehead against her. "Sonny and I thought that might be the case, but now we know it's true. So it means he has an endgame."

"Then what is it?" she whispered. She looked at their daughter, still fussing in her car seat. "*What* is he planning?"

She could see the bewilderment in his eyes. "We...just...we don't know."

Elizabeth closed her eyes. "Cady's going to be late for her appointment, and she needs her shots. So do you want me to go with the guards while—"

“No,” Jason said firmly. “We’ll go to her appointment. I’ll give these to Francis, and he’ll deliver them. Sonny and I can take care of it when we get back. I don’t want you taking the baby out without me.”

She nodded. “Okay. You’ve kept us safe so far, Jason, so I can’t doubt you.” She looked again at Cady who chose that moment to open her tiny mouth and wail at the injustice of being in the seat and not being able to do anything else. “It’s just...we have so much to lose...and I’m terrified.”

# Chapter Twenty-Two

*I never thought I'd end up here  
Never thought I'd be standing where I am  
I guess I kinda thought it would be easier than this  
I guess I was wrong now one more time*  
- Sick, Cycle Carousel, Lifehouse

*Thursday, February 5, 2004*

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Later, Jason would recognize that the general feeling of discomfort and wrongness felt different than the tension that had existed for the last ten months. But until Carly knocked on the door just past five, he didn't associate the prickling in the back of his brain with anything serious.

After all, the threat was to Cady, and now that she'd been born, they reasoned Elizabeth herself was relatively safe with the usual cadre of double guards. So she had left that morning with Francis and Oliver, her morning guards, to sign some paperwork for the nursing program, see her grandmother and bring new photos of Cady to Monica. Her plans for the rest of the day were relatively loose, but he knew she was planning to grab coffee with Carly at some point before coming home to dinner with him and Cady.

And Cady was snug and safe in the penthouse, sleeping in the bassinet beside the desk where he looked through Spinelli's newest reports on the casinos in Puerto Rico, the background checks for the guards working in the warehouse when the shipments were going wrong, and other security matters. There was nothing new from Ric, other than the Port Charles postmarked envelope from the day before, but Sonny had put all their men back into the search, confident that any business troubles were coming from Ric and Faith.

It was a day like many that had passed in the last two months, but later, Jason would blame himself for underestimating Ric Lansing.

Carly knocked and pushed open the door with a frown. "Jase, where's Cody?" She stepped inside and glanced around.

Jason glanced up and returned her frown with one of her own. "He's...with Elizabeth. She..." He pushed back from the desk and stood, instinctively checking on Cady before looking back at his best friend. "She was meeting you for coffee at Kelly's."

"Yeah." Carly nodded. "And I waited at Kelly's for a half hour. We were supposed to meet at four-thirty, after she had lunch with Audrey and Monica and finished her paperwork. I think there was even going to be a tour of the hospital or something. But...she never showed. I called her cell phone, but she didn't answer. I called Nadine at the hospital—she left there around one-thirty." She hesitated. "Jason...I would have called her guards, but..." she trailed off as Jason reached for his own phone.

Neither Cody nor Dominic answered their phones, and their shift ran from two until ten, at which point Marco and Ricky usually took over. The penthouse itself was guarded twenty-four hours a day. He remained calm because a hundred things could have happened that weren't serious, but he could not think of one that would entail Elizabeth and her guards not showing up where they were supposed to while not answering their phones.

Next, he called Francis, who had responsibility for Elizabeth from six in the morning until two in the afternoon. Francis picked up on the first ring.

"Francis, do you and Oliver have Elizabeth?"

*"Ah...no, Jase. We brought her to the Towers around two. She finished lunch. We met Cody and Dom in the parking garage. She was going to come upstairs, spend some time with Cady before meeting Carly." Francis paused. "She should have been home hours ago."*

"I've been here all day. She never came in. I need..." Jason closed his eyes and forced himself to sound calmer than he felt. "I need you to get...everyone. Find her." He set his phone on the desk, leaned against it and took a quick bracing breath.

"Jason..." Carly touched his shoulder. "You'll find her. Maybe their car—"

"She came to the building three hours ago, Carly. She never made it up from the parking garage." He straightened and reached for his phone, dialing Spinelli's number.

"Spinelli, don't talk, I don't have time. I need you and Stan to get to the security room of the Towers. I want all the footage for the parking garage, the lobby and the penthouse elevators for the entire day, anything else you might think is relevant. Bring it to Sonny's. And I need it immediately." He hit end on that call and placed another one to the security room to let them know the techs were on their way.

"Carly, I need you to go to the kitchen, get the bottles Elizabeth prepared and then get whatever you think Cady need for a few hours. I need..." Focus. He just...he *had* to focus. "I need you to take her to your place, upstairs, with Morgan and Michael."

"Right." Carly nodded. "He took Elizabeth so he could draw your focus from Cady."

"That's probably the plan." Jason nodded. "So I'm *not* letting it happen. I'm putting my daughter in the safest place in the building, and giving her care to you, because I know you'll protect her."

"Absolutely. Go to Sonny's, Jason. I'll pack Cady up and bring her over here. Rocco's right outside, he won't let anyone come near the penthouse until we get there."

Jason nodded and numbly moved towards the door. He'd thought Elizabeth was safe now that she had delivered the baby—safe enough. They had all shifted their focus to protecting Cady.

And even though Elizabeth had had two guards at all times, had been in the building...she hadn't been safe from the traitor in their organization—one of the men who had been protecting her for almost a year.

When he discovered who had taken her from her daughter, from him, there would be nowhere for the bastard to hide.

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

Emily glanced up from a chart to find Nadine staring into space, her phone in her hand. “Hey...” She cleared her throat, as the two of them were struggling to get along for Elizabeth’s sake. She liked the other woman, she did—but it was just difficult to see past everything that had happened. “You look... upset.”

“I...” Nadine hesitated. “Carly called me a little while ago. She and Elizabeth were supposed to meet for coffee.”

And Emily froze, because she somehow knew what was coming next. “She’s missing, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.” Nadine swallowed. “At first, I just...I thought their wires got crossed. You know, Liz thought she’d be at the hospital longer today, but she finished everything this morning, and you know, she had lunch, so she went home to be with the baby and Jason. Maybe she just forgot about Carly. But I’ve been calling her. And calling her. And calling her. There’s no answer.”

Accustomed to the ramblings by this point, Emily waited for her to finish. “M-Maybe she...forgot her phone somewhere.” They shared a look, because neither of them thought was a logical possibility. Elizabeth was married to her cell phone, for security reasons and for her daughter.

“I just...” Nadine closed her eyes. “I called Jason, finally. Elizabeth gave me his number after... October, after the kidnapping, because she wanted me to get in touch with him if I thought...anyone was going to come after me for helping. So I called him.” The pupils of the nurse’s eyes were so dilated with fear that the blue had been nearly eclipsed by the black. “And Jason told me that she’s been missing since two. He hung up because...he’s doing other things.”

Emily closed her eyes and took a step back. After October, and the kidnapping, she had put all thoughts of Courtney out of her head. Courtney had been normal then, they’d shared meals and coffee and the blonde seemed to be slowly recovering. Until Cady was born. And the anger had seeped back in.

Had Courtney been angry because she’d thought she’d never have to see the baby? See Elizabeth again after that day?

*I’m not going to sit around and wallow anymore. I’m going to start being true to myself again.*

Had Emily read her words wrong? What did Courtney mean by being true to herself? Had...she meant something more? Had...she lured Emily into discussing Elizabeth, latching on a way to expose Elizabeth to danger?

“Emily...” Nadine leaned forward. “Do...do you know something?”

"I don't want to," Emily admitted. "I...think Jason's ex-girlfriend...might have been involved with the kidnapping in October. Because...she and I had had a conversation several weeks earlier. I...was telling her I wanted to fix things, that I wanted to apologize, but with her health, I couldn't...just go see her. And...I told her..." Her breathing became more rapid. "Nadine, I *told* Courtney that Elizabeth didn't always have guards in the hospital. That they were on the exits near Kelly's office, but not *with* her. Nadine, I didn't...think..."

"Why would you?" Nadine said softly. "She was Elizabeth's friend once. She was *your* friend. She's Sonny's sister, Carly's friend. Why would you ever suspect her of doing something that might put Elizabeth in danger? I was with Elizabeth some of the times Courtney was nasty. I just thought she was bitter." She took a deep breath. "But, yeah, Em, it sounds like she might...have maybe told someone else. I mean, who else would know that information except people who worked here? And who was paying attention to Elizabeth?"

"Except me, because I..." Emily felt dizzy. She'd done it *again*. She'd exposed her best friend in the world to danger. The love of her brother's life was missing and it was Emily's fault. "I did it again. Oh, my God. Nadine, I did it again."

Nadine came out from behind the desk and gently led Emily over to the waiting area. "Sit for a second. We just...need to figure this out. What did you do again?"

"I told Ric Lansing Elizabeth was pregnant. I mean...not straight out, but I was hinting it pretty heavily." Emily grabbed Nadine's forearm. "*Not* to be vindictive. I thought...he was the father, and she didn't tell me the things he'd done. I just...I wanted to help her. I thought...I knew better. I wanted to help her, Nadine. And instead, she couldn't hide it from him. She had to..." And then Emily closed her mouth. Because she'd almost let the secret out.

Nadine smiled wryly. "She had to accept Jason's help. Because Jason claiming the baby seemed like good sense at the time, but Ric told everyone and blew the situation up." She placed her opposite hand on Emily's and squeezed it. "Em, Elizabeth glossed over a lot of details this summer, and I figured it wouldn't do her any good that I knew, but I...did. Of course, I did. It's okay. I even believe you honestly thought you were helping."

"I..." Emily swallowed. "I *never* would have put her in danger. Not for a second. No matter how angry I was, I loved her. And then I told Courtney how to get to her in the hospital."

"Jason and his partner need to know if she had anything to do with it," Nadine pointed out. "It may have been a coincidence but if it wasn't, then they need to know. They're looking for a traitor, that much was clear from things I overheard this summer. I'll tell your resident that you had to go home, that you were ill. You need to go help find Elizabeth."

"You're right." Emily nodded. "And...I'm glad Elizabeth had you. That she still has you. She really needed you, you know, because I was a selfish bitch." She rose to her feet and Nadine followed suit.

"You were," Nadine acknowledged. "But you're not now. Go before someone catches you not being sick."

## Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

The situation didn't get better once they had the security footage. Stan and Spinelli had worked together to find the events as fast as possible—so within twenty minutes, they knew how someone had grabbed Elizabeth.

Jason watched as Francis, Oliver and Elizabeth greeted Cody and Dominic. There was some small talk, and then Francis and Oliver walked away, heading to the room they kept for shift changes for their guards to check out.

He watched Cody and Dominic escort Elizabeth to the elevator from the parking garage to the lobby, where they then transferred her to the lobby to get the second, private elevator that connected to the penthouse levels.

On the elevator footage, he watched as Dominic pressed the button, and Cody asked Elizabeth something. She laughed, but there was no audio. And then she and Cody frowned when the elevator stopped, because it took longer to rise all fifteen floors to the penthouse level, and it had been less than a minute.

Jason watched Cody say something, and then start to follow Dominic out into the hallway. Elizabeth hesitated inside the elevator, glanced at the buttons and he wished she had followed her instinct, had pressed the button for the penthouse.

Instead, she followed her guards. Cody had been her guard since April, had been her guard initially the September she lived with him. Dominic had guarded her since June, when they had doubled her guards. Both of the men had been there with her through her doctor's appointments, through the kidnapping attempt, and with her when she brought Cady home from the hospital.

He did not blame her for thinking that these men who had already protected her through attempted kidnappings wouldn't betray her now. Cody had been with her that night at Kelly's, had looked Jason in the eye and offered him the gun if Jason wanted to end him for not protecting her better. Dominic had had a head wound that day at the hospital.

"Put in the hallway footage," Jason said tightly. "Was it both of them? Just one?"

Spinelli clicked something on his computer, for once realizing that this was not the time to speak. Sonny stood next to Jason, his hand over his mouth.

They watched Elizabeth step out of the elevator, the doors sliding closed. Jason recognized the hallway as the fourth floor, one they kept empty for security reasons. She was frowning, asking something. Maybe if there was a security issue. Cody stood in front of her, separating her from Dominic. And Jason saw the way the man was tensed, his hand braced.

And he knew then that *Dominic* was the traitor.

Dominic was a shade quicker than Cody. He drew his gun, with its attached silencer, and shot the man



twice, a bullet hitting the wall just inches from Elizabeth's head. She screamed, and he watched as she hesitated. Had probably thought of going to Cody. But then she turned and moved towards the stairwell. Dominic caught her before she got there, and then he placed a hand over her mouth.

He watched the woman he loved, his daughter's mother, struggle and kick against a man Jason told her was safe. But Dominic was holding something over her mouth. Chloroform again, maybe.

And for five excruciating minutes, he watched as Elizabeth's struggles lessened, and when she slumped in Dominic's arms, he pushed open the stairwell.

"How..." Sonny cleared his throat. "How did they get her out of the building?"

"He carried her down the stairs," Stan reported. "And to a waiting car just outside the building. We're tracing it now, but the car was reported stolen a few hours ago."

"Cody." Jason swallowed. "Did you get to Cody? Was he..."

Spinelli shook his head. "He was still alive." For once the colorful tech was subdued. "He was crawling towards the elevators, we think, but passed out. We called to Doc Lowenstein, who took him to the clinic. We haven't heard anything else. He lost a lot of blood."

"What do we know so far?" Sonny demanded. "The men know that Dominic is to be brought to us alive, as soon as possible. Do we know *anything* else?"

Stan nodded and looked to Benny who had joined them. "Dominic's cousin is Freddy DiGarno in the warehouse. He's one of the men who's been on several of the shipments that have gone missing. Not all of them, but enough. We haven't found any concrete money trails yet, but Spinelli thought he might have a lead on some numbered accounts."

He wanted to rip apart the town, search every building, alley, street...but he knew that they had to be smart about this. Had to be systematic. He only had *one* chance to get this right. Elizabeth would not have a second chance.

"Any unusual movements around town?" Jason asked. "Men being places they're not usually at. Warehouses in use that weren't before?"

"We try to keep a handle on that in general," Benny offered. "We haven't heard anything, but with the circumstances, we've spread the word. Anyone seen with Dominic or Freddy who don't report it back to us, will be dealt with. Swiftly."

Sonny nodded. "Get Zacchara on the phone. Tell him his lawyer's son has just kidnapped..." He hesitated. "Jason, I can't just tell them..."

"Tell them they've just kidnapped my fiancée," Jason said. "It's close enough." Girlfriends didn't rate, and that wasn't the right word for what Elizabeth was to him. She was *everything*, a concept someone as ruthless as Anthony Zacchara did not understand.

“And the other Families, make sure they’re aware of it. We...don’t appreciate the lack of cooperation we’ve had in this matter,” Sonny said. “And it’ll be duly noted the next time they want to use my precious shipping lanes.” He took a deep breath. “Okay. Keep the men on the streets, everyone. Nothing else goes through until Elizabeth is found. No shipments, no collections from the bookies. Vega’s scheduled to move something through the territory tomorrow, let him know that’s off.”

Benny nodded and moved aside to make his phone calls.

“If Cody can wake up, and tell us what was said in those last minutes, it might give us something.” Sonny rubbed his forehead. “Ah...Stan, Spinelli. Try...to figure out if you can trace the route of the car. They’ll have dumped it, but if you can... check any cameras on the streets that saw it. It turned left leaving the alley. Start there. Maybe there was a GPS or something.”

The techs nodded and they both started whispering furiously to each other, making notations on a sheet of paper.

“We...” Sonny approached Jason. “We’re doing everything we can think of Jase. I know you want to be out there...” He pressed hand to his chest. “I-I do, too. But right here, we get all the information as soon as we know it.”

“I know.” Jason nodded. “I know that this is where I need to be. Elizabeth would want me to sticking close to Cady until I had something concrete to follow. And I have nothing. She was gone for three hours before I ever knew she was in danger.” He closed his eyes. “*I* told her she could trust Dominic, Sonny. How could he guard her for all these months and turn on her? Was the head wound in October just a goddamn cover? To keep us from suspecting him if it didn’t work?”

“Could be.” Sonny nodded. “I just...can’t see how Ric thinks this is going to work. Does he think we’ll trade Cady for Elizabeth? Does he really think we’re not going to protect Cady as well as search for her mother?” He shook his head. “I don’t know, this is just...this is just *not* what I thought.”

“Maybe he thinks he can convince Elizabeth to come to him willingly,” Jason said. “To bring Cady to him. She’d give her life first, but maybe...maybe he doesn’t know that.” He hesitated. “She was... different last year, Sonny. When they were seeing each other. She was vulnerable, almost meek. It took her months to get herself back. Does he think *that’s* who she is? Someone can be manipulated?”

“Maybe.” Sonny rubbed his chin. “Maybe he thinks *you* manipulated her. After all, *you* were the one who approached him on the docks, you came up with the lie. And the letter you got...it wasn’t addressed to her. It was addressed to *you*.” He frowned and reached for doctored certificate. “He didn’t cross Elizabeth’s name off.”

Jason hesitated. “You think...he wants her, too.”

“It’s interesting,” Sonny said. “He didn’t want to be separated from his child, but...you know...” He furrowed his brow. “He didn’t make an attempt to break things off with Elizabeth. Even after it was clear she wasn’t going to be useful. He kept her around. Even with Faith on the side, making threats.

And after you and I found out about him, he *still* tried to keep her with him.”

“He might think he’s in love with her,” Jason forced out. “Which is why the attempts haven’t been more forceful. He never put the baby or Elizabeth in serious danger.”

“Nope.” Sonny tapped his finger on the desk. “So that’s his endgame. He thinks the woman he met last year is the real Elizabeth Webber, a woman who was hurt, maybe a little more gullible than she would normally be. A little too trusting. She probably swallowed some lies.”

“She...told me,” Jason said slowly, feeling uncomfortable, “that she overlooked some of the outright lies because he told her he cared about her, that he made time for her...” He looked away. “All the things I didn’t.”

“Exactly. But you and I know that Elizabeth Webber, when she’s got her sense of self about her, she’s a fighter. She doesn’t take any bullshit. She doesn’t swallow lines. But *he* doesn’t know that. He thinks this woman who had his child will come to him because he turns on the charm.” Sonny nodded. “It’s starting to come together. He knew what went wrong between the two of you.”

“So he came after the business,” Jason said. Because Sonny was right. Everything made sense now. The patience Ric had showed—wanting Cady to be born, because then he could be rougher with Elizabeth in the kidnapping, but not too rough. It would have been quicker to use physical force to knock her out, but they’d used a difficult chemical. “He came after the business hoping it would lead me to treat Elizabeth like I did the last time. Never coming home, never talking to her.”

“He’s not working with all the facts, only what he knows.” Sonny hesitated. “It makes sense for Ric. He’s going to try to charm her into being with him, into bringing Cady to him, because hey, what could you do if she wants to take her daughter and be with the biological father?” He shrugged. “But that doesn’t explain Faith.”

“Maybe Faith doesn’t know the plan. Or the motivations,” Jason pointed out. “She might be getting frustrated.”

“If she gets frustrated, I can’t decide if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. It’s her resources that Ric’s using. If she just decides to cut her losses and go...” Sonny shrugged. “He’s on his own. But if she decides to raze the people involved to the ground...”

Max pushed the door open. “Boss, Emily Quartermaine is here and she says she might know something about Elizabeth.”

Emily barely waited for him to finish speaking before she rushed into the room. “I’m sorry, but Nadine told me she’s missing and I can’t live with myself if I don’t tell you what I think happened.”

“What is it, Em?” Jason asked. “Did you see something at the hospital?”

“No, but I think I know what happened in October, and maybe it’s related to this,” Emily said. “I... was having a conversation with someone about trying to apologize to Elizabeth. And we were just... talking about why I was angry, and how I didn’t think the guards would let me near her.” She

swallowed. “So I said that I could probably do it at the hospital, because the guards are only the exits on the maternity floor. They don’t...follow her around.”

Jason stilled, because his sister looked so upset about this. He knew she wouldn’t have done it intentionally, but...he thought he might know *who* she had related this information to.

“Emily, who did you tell?” Sonny said, his voice so soft that Jason knew the other man was aware of what Emily would say before she could say it.

“Courtney,” Emily confessed. “And...that was the period when she seemed like she was getting over it. She seemed...to be moving on, but she told me something that maybe didn’t...mean what I thought I meant. She told me she wasn’t going to wallow it in it anymore. She was going to be true to herself. And then...she became angry again around the baby shower, but more so after Cady was born. And it’s worse than ever lately.” Her lip trembled, so she bit on it. “Jason, I am so *sorry*—”

“*You* have nothing to be sorry for,” Jason said. “It’s me. I set this in motion last year when I started dating Courtney, when I damn well knew I was still in love with Elizabeth. She was hurt, and vulnerable to Ric. None of this is your fault, Emily. It’s mine.” He looked to Sonny. “I...don’t know how it could have happened, how she could have given that information to anyone else, but it...”

“It fits,” Sonny said, with a deep sigh. He looked to Max. “Find my sister. Bring her to the penthouse whether she likes it or not.”

# Chapter Twenty-Three

*And the tears come streaming down your face  
When you lose something you can't replace  
When you love someone, but it goes to waste  
Could it be worse?*

- Fix You, Coldplay

*Thursday, February 5, 2004*

## Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

When Max told him Courtney was outside, Sonny sent Jason upstairs to sit with Cady. He thought Courtney might be more forthcoming without the glare of her ex-boyfriend.

In the hour between giving the order to have her brought here and her arrival, there was very little information. Freddy DiGarno had lit out of his apartment, probably having been warned by his cousin that his connection to the matter was going to be found. Dominic had disappeared. Stan and Spinelli had traced the SUV for half a mile before losing it.

And Elizabeth was now missing for almost five hours.

“Sonny?” Courtney entered the room, hesitantly. He looked at this woman whom genetics told him was his sister. He’d never felt particularly connected to her, but had done what he could to assist her as far as she would allow it. Duty and obligations told him that family should be cared for, but he’d never felt as though she were *really* part of his family.

And maybe she had sensed it, had sensed that Sonny felt far more fraternal towards the woman who had supplanted her. Elizabeth was now Carly’s closest confidante, though neither woman would have admitted that. Rather than becoming Morgan’s godmother as Carly and Courtney had once discussed, it was *Elizabeth* who would receive that honor. Emily had stopped talking to Courtney, turning back to Elizabeth. Even Jason had realized where his heart truly lay.

And Elizabeth had been more of a sister to him than the woman standing in front of him.

She looked at him, her eyes wide with confusion and apprehension. And he knew that Emily’s suspicions had been correct.

“Elizabeth was kidnapped a few hours ago,” Sonny said after a long moment.

Courtney blinked and stepped back. “But...why? Where’s the baby?” She looked around. “Is Jason’s daughter okay?”

“Why?” Sonny asked, wishing he could indulge in a Scotch or a bourbon. “Do you really care?”

“Of course...” Courtney swallowed. “Sonny, of course I care. We dated. He was good to me,

until..." She shrugged. "But it's water under the bridge. Why...why are you telling me this...?"

"You *didn't* harass Elizabeth at Kelly's earlier this week?" Sonny demanded. "You *haven't* been nasty to her every single time you came across her from the moment Ric Lansing told you she was having Jason's child?"

"I...tried to be okay with it," she said softly. "Elizabeth will tell you that I was the *only* person who didn't say anything to her. But..." She hesitated. "She started showing, you know. And I realized how true it all was. I think...maybe I could let myself forget. He wasn't around her, and I thought if I played it cool, he'd remember why he'd left her and come back to me."

"But it never happened." Sonny gave in and poured water, just to have the weight of the glass in his hand. He'd allow Courtney to explain herself, if only to make the point that her actions were inexcusable. "Did it?"

"No." Courtney looked at the floor. "She moved in with him. And I think they started seeing each other again, but I couldn't be sure. It just...got to be too much, Sonny. She had trapped him. She knew how he felt about children, and she got pregnant on purpose—"

"He loved her long before you came in the picture, Courtney," Sonny said, almost quietly, wishing he'd said something ages ago, hadn't ever asked Jason to look after his sister. "Whatever else, I *am* sorry I couldn't keep you from being hurt."

"Well..." She shifted, uncomfortably. "Why...are you even bringing this up? Shouldn't you be looking for her? Trying to figure out what happened?"

"And what," Sonny said, slowly approaching her, "do you think I'm doing?"

Courtney's eyes widened and she looked behind her, where Max was stationed almost as a sentinel. "S-Sonny, you can't think I..." Her eyes widened. "What do you think *I* did?"

"I think that you manipulated Emily Quartermaine into talking about Elizabeth, hoping to get something that could be of use," Sonny said. "And boy, you got something *good*. You found a hole in Elizabeth's security."

"No. I don't..." But her eyes darted away.

"And you told someone. Who tried to kidnap her, while she was seven months pregnant." He took another step towards her. "Who'd you tell, Courtney? Who did you tell?"

"Sonny, you just...you don't understand." Courtney licked her lips. "I just...I wanted her to go away. If she would go away, like she did after she left Jason—she left town for a few weeks, and Jason looked at me. He loved me. But she trapped him. I don't know how she did it, but she was going to *keep* trapping him. It wasn't even his kid, but she suckered him in. I had to stop it."

Sonny closed his eyes. Another person trying to protect Jason from Elizabeth had put her in danger. Emily had tried to protect him, and had set Ric loose. And now Courtney had done the same.

All these people who thought a woman who measured barely more than five feet three inches and a hundred pounds soaking wet represented something dangerous to a lethal mob enforcer. If it wasn't so horrible, it might almost be funny.

"You wanted her gone so Jason would look at you again," Sonny said, his voice flat. "Don't pretend anything else. You knew he loved her, and you could ignore it when he wasn't acting on it. But he let you walk away and stayed with her." He clenched his hand around the glass in his hand. "Who did you tell?"

"I didn't want Elizabeth to be hurt," Courtney said quickly. "But she was stealing my life, Sonny. She had Jason and Carly and she always had you. And then Emily, too. Even Bobbie keeps asking me to be a better waitress, to be more like Elizabeth." A tear slid down her cheek, and she pressed a hand to her chest, much the way he often did. "Don't you *see*, Sonny? *Everyone* had looked at me and found me wanting. I wasn't their perfect, precious Elizabeth."

"Such a shame," Sonny snarled. "*Who* did you tell, Courtney?"

"So...when I was walking home from work one night...in August..." Courtney cleared her throat. "A woman approached me. I didn't...recognize her at first, but I knew her voice. She stepped out from the shadows, and I saw it was Faith Roscoe." She was twisting her fingers together. "I was going to run, but she told me not to worry." And now her voice was bitter. "I wasn't *important* enough to go after. I didn't *matter* to anyone."

Faith Roscoe had seen the bitter wound in Courtney's soul and exploited it. Sonny closed his eyes, because he could have done more to avoid this. He knew that the fault ultimately lay with Courtney, but he could not ignore his role. "That wasn't true—"

"Don't *placate* me, Sonny," Courtney hissed. "She was right. She told me I didn't matter enough, that hurting me wouldn't make a point, except to say she could. So she asked me if I wanted to matter."

"And you did." Sonny walked away from his sister, then, because here was the proof that they were related. They may look as different as night and day, but under the surface, he and his sister were the same. They wanted to matter. They saw something they wanted and went after it, damn the consequences.

"She told me she could get Elizabeth out of Jason's life. That she knew the baby wasn't his, that Elizabeth was lying to Ric. I *knew* it. He was with her because he felt sorry for her," Courtney spat. "Because Ric went after her because of Jason. I knew he didn't love her. So I thought I could get Elizabeth and the baby away from him, that he'd see the truth. He'd know Elizabeth was trying to trap him."

He exhaled slowly and turned. "Courtney...he always knew Cady wasn't his biological daughter. It was Jason's idea to claim her, because he wanted to protect Elizabeth and the baby. Because he did love her."

"No, no..." Courtney shook her head. "If he was just trying to protect Elizabeth, he would have *told*

me. He wouldn't have let me think he cheated on me. He could have told me—"

"He didn't trust you," Sonny interrupted. "He didn't even tell Carly or me the truth right away. Only...you believed it. Because you knew, deep down, that he loved her. That he didn't love you. So you justified it by telling yourself Jason was the victim. You justified turning Elizabeth over to a man who you knew was dangerous because you wanted Jason for yourself."

"You're *not* understanding." Courtney took a step forward. "I told Faith I would help her, but I didn't want Elizabeth to be hurt. I just wanted her gone. And Faith said she didn't particularly care what happened to Elizabeth, but she doubted Ric would hurt her. Not until after the baby was here. And maybe not even then."

"Did she seem annoyed by that?" Sonny asked. "As if it was more his plan than hers?"

"I..." Courtney hesitated. "I guess. She didn't like Elizabeth, I don't think. But no, I didn't think she was happy about it. But it didn't matter. Elizabeth would be away from Jason. And...that was enough for me. So she gave me a number."

"Do you have it?"

"I..." Courtney nodded. "Yeah. It's in my phone." She lifted her purse and Max took it from her.

"And you called her about what Emily had told you." His sister reluctantly nodded. Sonny frowned. "Anything else?"

Courtney paused. "I told her about the guard shifts. Who was on them, who I had seen her around. I didn't remember everyone's names, but Dominic guarded me a little bit when Jason couldn't during the stalking. And I knew Francis, Marco. Cody."

"What else?" Sonny pressed.

"I...didn't know much else," she admitted. "Elizabeth and I weren't working together anymore. I said she was close with you and Carly. That she was on the outs with her best friend." She shrugged. "I don't know *anything* about this new kidnapping, Sonny. I mean, she contacted me around Christmas, and I told her the baby had been born, but I didn't know anything else. Emily wasn't talking to me, hadn't really been since the kidnapping..." She nodded. "Emily realized that I was involved."

"She protected you longer than she should have," Sonny said, his back to his sister, unable to look her in the face. "Because she didn't *want* to see it."

"Sonny, I—"

He turned to her. "I didn't want Jason here when we had this meeting because I wasn't sure what would happen if he looked at you and realized you were responsible for what happened to the woman he loved, for putting his daughter in danger—"

"She's not his daughter," Courtney snarled.



“She’s his daughter in every way that actually matters,” Sonny said, almost patiently. “You *know* what happened the last time I told Jason he couldn’t deal with one of my half-siblings the way he wanted to. Ten months later, we’re *still* trying to find the sick bastard. So...I wasn’t sure what would happen when he came face to face with *another* sibling of mine who had betrayed his family.”

And now, for the first time, Courtney looked nervous. Her fingers played the strap of the purse Max had returned to her after fishing out her phone and taking it to Jason’s penthouse where Stan, Spinelli and Benny were working.

“Sonny...I didn’t want her to be hurt—”

“I’m not sure that’s going to matter if Jason doesn’t find her.” Sonny set the water on the mini bar. “Do you think he’s going to care that this time, you weren’t personally involved? You know *who* kidnapped Elizabeth? Who shot her other guard, who pressed chloroform to her mouth until she passed out and then dragged her away?” He paused. “Dominic. One of the guards whose name *you* turned over. He turned on Elizabeth, after eight months of protecting her. So, what *do* you think I should do to you Courtney?”

“I’m your...I’m your sister,” Courtney said, her voice trembling. “It...you can’t.”

“Can’t I?”

“No, *you* can’t.”

They both turned to see Jason step around the corner, clearly having been standing there for some time. As he stepped down the stairs, Courtney backed up until she was practically against the closed penthouse door. “J-Jason.”

He stopped near the sofa and just stared at his ex-girlfriend. “I started this,” he said slowly. “Because I began a relationship with you when I knew I didn’t care about you the way you wanted me to. I continued to let you believe we had a future, when the truth was I didn’t give a damn about the future anymore.”

Sonny watched his sister swallow, because it was one thing for other people to tell her these things, but even he felt a little sorry for the harsh truths Jason wasn’t holding back.

“I was already trying to figure out how to break it off without making things worse for you, for me... for Sonny.” Jason cast a glance toward him, but Sonny just shrugged. “I don’t know if I thought I could have a chance with Elizabeth again, but being with you wasn’t helping. It wasn’t making me miss or love her less. So I was looking for a way out.”

“And you *found* it,” Courtney said tightly. “Sonny told me you always knew the baby wasn’t yours.”

“Because I didn’t sleep with Elizabeth.” Jason hesitated, and apparently deciding to channel the Jason of old, he continued, “but if I thought I had the chance to, I might have.”

Courtney’s mouth tightened. “I’m sorry, what’s the point of this?”

“I didn’t tell you the truth about the baby,” Jason said, as if she hadn’t spoken. “But you should know Elizabeth wanted me to tell you. She knew you would be angry about it, that you might not forgive a lie, but I didn’t care. Because I think, even then, I knew I couldn’t trust you. There was no way I was potentially placing Elizabeth’s life and her child’s in your hands.”

Courtney lifted her chin. “Then you should killed Ric when you had the chance and none of this would have happened.”

“I’m sorry for hurting you,” Jason said, again ignoring her. “But that’s where the guilt stops. Because I didn’t force you to continue holding onto the anger. I never gave you an indication once you broke up with me that I wanted to have anything to do with you. I didn’t lead you on after that. Elizabeth never did anything to you that you didn’t deserve. You crossed a line, Courtney, when you agreed to help Faith Roscoe. When you gave information that placed Elizabeth and my daughter in danger, when you turned over the names of the men guarding Elizabeth. If you were anyone else, I wouldn’t wait for Sonny to give me permission, you’d already be dead.”

The blonde swallowed. “S-Sonny...Mike would never forgive you.”

“Why should he have to know anything?” Sonny said, taunting her. “We can have you leave a message on his machine. You’re leaving town, you’ll be in touch. We can even send him letters that eventually fade away. You and Mike didn’t know each other for most of your life, who would be surprised if you fell out touch?”

A muscle leaped in Courtney’s throat and she swallowed. “I—”

“*You* wanted to play in this world, Courtney,” Jason said, his voice devoid of emotion. “You made that clear when you told Faith about the security hole, about Dominic.” His eyes hardened. “The birth of my daughter. You put yourself in this world, why are you surprised Sonny and I might treat you accordingly?”

And for a moment, Sonny believed Jason meant it. And if he did, then Sonny would let him. It was *his* fault this was happening. It was *his* family, *his* blood, that threatened everything that mattered the most to Jason.

“It’s up to you, Jase,” Sonny said. He looked at his friend, to make sure he understand that he really meant it. “It’s your family in danger. It’s your fiancée missing.”

“F-fiancée?” Courtney blinked. “I...” She squared her shoulders. “Emily knows I’m involved. If I disappear, she’ll know.”

“I don’t think she’d argue about it,” Sonny retorted. “She came to us. Not the police. She knew what we would do.”

“Ending your life won’t bring me Elizabeth,” Jason said after a long moment. “It won’t tell me where she is, if Ric is hurting her. It would just make me feel better, and it’s not enough right now. So I’m going to do what Elizabeth would want.”

Courtney blanched, probably because the bitch knew what *she* would do if the situations were reversed.

“I’m going to let you live, but you’re going to go away, Courtney.” Jason stepped towards her, his hands fisted at his sides. “I think sending you to live in Puerto Rico with constant guards is almost too kind, but it’s what I can live with. Maybe after five years of living under constant guard, of never having the freedom of movement, you might understand...just a little...the kind of stress Elizabeth lived under while she was pregnant.” He stepped back. “Is that acceptable to you, Sonny?”

“Little nicer than I had anticipated,” Sonny said after a moment, “but it’s something I can live with, too.” He nodded to Max. “Please take Ms. Matthews to the apartment directly under us. Keep her under guard until I say differently.”

## **Warehouse**

When Elizabeth finally opened her eyes, she tried to move. Her arms were twisted behind her, tied to a chair. She blinked, blearily, saw that her legs were also lashed to the bottom rungs. “W-What?”

“I’d like to untie you, Beautiful,” came the silky soft voice she’d only heard in her nightmares these last few months. Ric Lansing bled out of the shadows, stepping in front of her for the first time since that awful day on the docks when Jason had almost killed him.

“O-Okay...” Elizabeth cleared her throat, and coughed. It was too dry. “Why d-don’t you?”

He lifted a bottle of water from a nearby table and held it out to her. “You can see I haven’t removed the cap. It’s not drugged.” When she nodded, he twisted the cap off and then held it to her lips. At the brush of his skin against hers, she almost twisted away. Instead, she drank thirstily, wetting her throat.

“Why...”

“I can’t untie you,” he said. He stepped back and leaned against the table. “Because I’m not sure you won’t leave.”

She hesitated. “Why did you kidnap me?” she asked. “How...does this help you against Sonny?”

“I’m not as interested in Sonny anymore.” Ric shrugged. “Faith still wants to take him down, and I suppose if I can, I will. But you know...that’s all changed.” He stepped towards her, and she saw that smile on his face, the one that she’d once found so attractive.

She pressed her lips together, refusing to ask him why again.

“*You* changed it for me,” Ric told her. He crouched in front of her, and she felt nauseous at the soft look in his eyes. “When I found out you were pregnant...I was so angry that you were trying to take our child away from me. Like my father did with my mother. I scared you, and I shouldn’t have. I should have understood that you were upset, that you realized our relationship was less honest than you believed.”

“I just...I want to go home to my daughter,” Elizabeth said softly. “Let me go home to my daughter, Ric.”

“I never knew my mother,” Ric continued. “Because of Sonny. I wouldn’t take you away from our daughter, Elizabeth. I know what it’s like when a child grows up without both parents. I wouldn’t do that.”

Her chest was tight, because she was starting to understand. “Do you think...”

“It’s true that I initially targeted you because of Sonny and Jason,” Ric admitted, almost sheepishly. “And by now, you realize that I was having an affair with Faith while we were seeing one another.”

Her eyes were gritty and burning, but she couldn’t close them. Couldn’t let him think she was weak. That’s why he thought this would work. He believed her to be weak, that she might give in, let her daughter near him.

He could kill her for all she cared, her daughter was safe. Jason would raise her, he would protect her.

“I should have broken things off with you as soon as I realized Jason Morgan didn’t give a damn about you.” Ric stood and started to pace. “But I couldn’t. You...you’re so beautiful, Elizabeth. Inside and out. I wanted you to love me.”

“Sleeping with Faith Roscoe seems like an odd way to make that happen,” she bit out. “Or telling Jason and Sonny that screwing me was useless but oh, so much *fun*.”

“I...I *had* to keep face with them, Elizabeth. They couldn’t see what you mean to me.” He pressed a hand to his chest, and in her bleary vision, her exhaustion, she almost thought he looked like Sonny with the motion. “If they knew, they’d know they could use you against me.”

“Funny...” Her throat was thick. “You never thought *that* was Jason’s reason. You wanted me to believe he didn’t care about me then, and that he doesn’t care now.”

“He wanted our daughter, Elizabeth,” Ric said, still using that careful, charming tone. “I know how he feels about kids, and he saw you as a way to have a child. And bonus, he could get rid of me. Elizabeth, if he really loved you, he would have done something about it *before* you needed protection.”

“Do you think you can really convince me to leave Jason, to bring my daughter to you...so we can...” Elizabeth blinked, shook her head. “So we can raise her *together*? What...what can you possibly be thinking?”

“We could be a family. You, me...Adela.” Ric paused. “I want us to be a family.”

“Her name is not Adela. Her name is Cadence Audrey Caroline Morgan, and she is not *your* daughter. Not in any way that matters.” She struggled with the bonds around her wrists. “And I don’t care if you kill me, you will never come close to being in her life.”

His eyes narrowed, but he took a deep breath. “You’ve had a rough year, Elizabeth. I understand. That’s why we connected so well. I understood how hurt you were. I tried to show you that Jason won’t change. All those business problems, he was never home again. I know he never went to the doctor’s appointments, that he never took you out anywhere. He doesn’t love you the way I do. I would give you the finest things—”

“You don’t know a thing about me, Ric. You never did.” She shifted in her chair. “Jason will protect our daughter from you, and if you take him out, Sonny and Carly will protect her. And if by some impossible means you get past *all* of them, well then I hope you’re ready for Edward Quartermaine, because he’ll set the world on fire before he lets another great-grandchild out of his clutches. I will never let my child know you.”

“*Our* child,” Ric said, his teeth clenched. “She’s my daughter, Elizabeth. I named her for my mother —”

“We will *never* be a family,” Elizabeth snarled.

Faith Roscoe bled out of the shadows, a perturbed look on her face. “You know...I have had nearly enough of this.”

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

Seven hours.

Courtney had been taken to a secure location, but her information had offered them nothing substantial, only an explanation for October’s attempt. They’d lost the car with Elizabeth inside after almost a mile, but Jason knew Stan and Spinelli hadn’t given up on that angle. None of them knew anything about the location of Freddy or Dominic, no sign of Ric or Faith.

The only reason Jason hadn’t crawled completely out of his skin was that he now believed Elizabeth had been part of Ric’s plan all along. He thought...he might not hurt her. Not this soon. Maybe eventually after she made it clear his plans weren’t going to work. But not seven hours after finally getting his hands on her.

The door pushed open and Sonny strode in, Max dragging someone behind him. “Look who came straight to us,” his friend all but snarled. He yanked his coat off and tossed it on the sofa.

Jason shot to his feet. Freddy DiGarno, cousin to Dominic and the man on the inside at the warehouse. The man was short, stocky and brunette. His dark eyes were bulging as Max kept one clamped around his neck, never letting the man stand fully on his own weight.

“He came to us?” Jason said, his hands fisting at the sight of one of the men responsible for the last seven hours of his life. For the last ten months. “Is he stupid?”

“Not so much.” Sonny gave Max a signal, and the guard released Freddy. The other man collapsed to the ground, gasping for air. “He came to Benny. Hoping Benny might help him. Put in a good word.”

“Good word?” Jason growled. He strode forward, not entirely sure what he might do if he reached the piece of shit. “You worked with Faith Roscoe—”

“I just want to die quick!” Freddy scrambled to his feet and held his hands up in front of his face. “You was going to find me, I knew it. Dom left me high and dry. I don’t know *nothin’* about disappearin’ and I tried to get out of town, but I saw the men near the highway ramp and the docks, and the airports, the train station, the bus depot. There’s no way *out*.”

“You got that right.” Jason took another step, but Sonny held up his hand.

“All in good time. Freddy here knows about a warehouse. And more importantly, he knows why Dominic picked *today*.”

Jason huffed. “I don’t care why today—I want the warehouse.” He advanced again and Freddy actually *hid* behind Max for protection. How they had allowed this miscreant into their organization in the first place...

“It seems Spinelli *was* on the right track with those numbered accounts,” Sonny said, and Jason knew he was trying to keep them both calm. To keep this situation under control. They had their break, now they had to take advantage of everything this man knew so that Ric and Faith couldn’t catch them unaware. “He not only found Freddy’s account, but he was getting pretty close to Dominic’s. And once you found both of them, he knew he’d lose his chance to grab Elizabeth.”

“So he contacted Ric or Faith to tell them to move up their plan.” Jason’s eyes snapped back to the traitor. “What was the original timeline? How much longer were they gonna wait?”

“I d-don’t know for sure,” Freddy replied. “Maybe a few more weeks, but Faith Roscoe was gettin’ impatient. Talkin’ about cuttin’ her losses, you know. And how much she hated the...” He swallowed hard. “She’s not real fond of your...um...well...she’s not fond of her.”

They’d been right. Faith had been playing along with the plan, but it had been drawn out too long and it was clear now to Faith that Ric was using her to get Elizabeth as well. A pissed off Faith Roscoe was not something either of them should underestimate. “So your covers were almost blown.” Jason nodded. “I want the warehouse address. How many men?”

“Maybe half a dozen,” Freddy all but whimpered. “Faith don’t have the resources to keep anyone around for long, and Lansing kept refusing to use his own money, it would draw attention.” He reeled off an address. “I just...I don’t wanna suffer.”

Sonny raised his eyebrows and looked at Jason. “Well, Jase, it’s *your* woman he helped to kidnap. *Your* daughter he placed in danger. You get to decide what happens to him. I’ll get the men together in the garage and work up a plan.” He left the penthouse, leaving Freddy alone with Max and Jason.

Part of him wanted to snap this man’s neck like twig right here and now, but every *second* spent dealing with him was one more Elizabeth was alone with Ric. He looked at the little dirtbag. “If you were Dominic, the man I entrusted with her safety for eight months, depended on to keep her safe...if

you were the man who shot Cody, and drugged Elizabeth as she kicked and screamed to get away, *then* I'd make you suffer. Personally. For hours."

He stepped closer, saw the man's eyes nearly roll back in his head. "Maybe even days. But you're nothing to Dominic, Ric or Faith. They left you holding the bag, and for that, *I'm* not going to do a thing." He saw Max and Freddy jolt in surprise. He continued, "Not because you deserve mercy, but because I don't want to waste any more time."

He looked at Max. "Make him disappear. How and where is up to you."

When Max had dragged the traitor out, Jason started up the stairs to check on his daughter before joining Sonny in the garage.

## **Warehouse**

Ric stepped back and cleared his throat. "Faith...you were supposed to be arranging our exit."

Elizabeth's darted between the two co-conspirators, and her lips curved. "Oh, you mean Faith doesn't *know* your master plan? About dragging me here to convince me we should be a family." She clucked her tongue. "Not very up front of you, Ric, after *everything* Faith has done to help you."

Ric blanched, but Faith smirked and raised one slim brow. "I completely agree, Princess. Not sporting at all." Dismissing her then, Faith turned to look at her captor. "We had a plan once, Ric. You were going to go after the women. Gain their trust. You went after Morgan's waif, but he didn't seem to care. You got messy with Corinthos' wife and the Families, but you told me you had an endgame that they'd *never* see coming."

She picked her away across the room, her stiletto heels clicking across the cement floor as she drew closer to Ric. "You told me you wanted your child because it would screw with Corinthos and Morgan. Because they'd be distracted looking for the waif, and we could take them apart."

"Faith," Ric began, switching the charm to the blonde. Elizabeth rolled her eyes. He had just one shtick.

"But *every* time it didn't work that way, I questioned you." She planted her hands on her hips, the black coat, parting to reveal an equally black dress underneath. "I questioned whether you wanted to bring down Sonny, because all you could talk about was the little bastard you'd sired." From an inside pocket of her coat, she withdrew a gun.

Elizabeth straightened in her chair, and now even Ric looked wary. "Listen, I know we've had some setbacks—"

"You used me, Ric." Faith tilted her head to the side and pursed her lips. "And I don't *like* being used." She tapped the blood red tip of a nail against the silver metal of the gun. "What should I do about that?"

Elizabeth remained silent, understanding that her future rested on what Faith did next. She could

eliminate them both if she wanted to. Instead, Faith just smiled.

“I think...I’m going to take my men and leave,” she murmured. She stepped back but now trained the gun on Ric. “I’m going to leave you with your delicate little princess, because after all, you think you can convince her to leave that strapping Jason Morgan and bring her kid to you. Isn’t *that* why she’s here?” Faith’s eyes positively danced with amusement. “So you can use that legendary charm to sweep her off her feet again?”

Her eyes hardened. “You should know, Ric, your charm only works once. We believe you once. And then we *never* believe you again. Because once you see through that smile, you understand what’s beneath it...nothing at all.”

“Faith, you don’t understand what’s happening,” Ric began.

“I think it’s *you* who doesn’t understand. Goodbye, Ric.” Faith cast her eyes towards Elizabeth. “Good luck with your waif, but somehow, I just *don’t* see the two of you lasting.”

She waited one more second and then turned and left.

Ric turned his eyes back to Elizabeth, and in them, she saw the truth. Without Faith’s men to back him up, he didn’t have a prayer of going against Sonny and Jason.

Which meant she was a liability.

### **Corinthos Penthouse: Morgan’s Nursery**

Carly had set Cady up in a portable crib in a corner of Morgan’s room. Jason stepped through the doorway and gently lifted his sleeping daughter into his arms. She fussed and made a few sounds, but he arranged her against his chest and pressed his cheek to her head.

“Sorry, Cady,” he murmured. “I didn’t want to wake you, but I wasn’t sure...” He swallowed. “I’m going to get your mother, and I promise you, if it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to bring her home to you.”

Cady batted her fist against his t-shirt, and his chest tightened. “I might...not come home, though. But you should know that I love you. I loved you long before you were born, before I could admit it to anyone. You were *always* mine, no matter what anyone says.”

He breathed in her scent one last time, kissed her on the forehead and put her back in the crib.



# Chapter Twenty-Four

*And life is a road that I wanna keep going  
Love is a river, I wanna keep flowing  
Life is a road, now and forever, wonderful journey  
I'll be there when the world stops turning  
I'll be there when the storm is through  
In the end I wanna be standing  
At the beginning with you*  
- At the Beginning, Richard Marx, f. Donna Lewis

## Warehouse

They could hear muffled voices as Jason, Sonny and several of their men drew closer to the back room in the small warehouse on Van Ness Street. There had been no one guarding the exits, and Jason thought that Freddy had been jerking them around until they'd heard sounds from the back of the building.

"Johnny and Louie are on the back exits," Sonny murmured in his ear, his own gun drawn and pointed toward the ground. "Francis and Marco are covering the left side, Ricky and Oliver are on the other side. We're going in from the front. We've got it as covered as it's going to get."

"I don't like it, Sonny." He shook his head. "It's *too* quiet."

He slowly eased the door open and stepped gingerly towards the back room. He watched as the men they'd stationed on either side crept towards them. They met in the middle of the room.

"It's Elizabeth's voice I hear," Jason almost breathed. "But where are Faith and her men?"

"Cut her losses maybe," Francis replied. "Makes life easier if she just abandoned them."

Maybe, but he wasn't counting her out.

As they drew closer to the room, the voices became more distinct and he knew how that Elizabeth was in there, with Ric. They stopped just before the closed door, Jason motioning them to hold their positions.

"I don't care what you do to *me*," Elizabeth's low voice floated through. "You'll never get near my daughter, so you can kill me—"

"Stop *saying* that," Ric growled. "I would never hurt you, Elizabeth. I love you."

"Well, I *never* loved you. You were just a way to pass the time."

Jason closed his eyes and muttered under his breath. Why Elizabeth was *taunting* the psychopath, he couldn't imagine.

“That’s *not* how it was between us and you know it. You loved me, Elizabeth. Now, *Jason* made you forget that. He talked you out of it, made you feel guilty for moving on—”

Elizabeth’s laughter cut Ric’s words off. “You need to believe that, don’t you? Is that what you’ve been telling yourself all these months I lied to everyone I know and love, telling them Jason and I slept together? I mean, you understand that I blew up my life with that lie and I would do it again if it meant I could have *him* and *you’d* be gone. I never loved you, Ric. Not even for a *minute*.”

Sonny rolled his eyes. “This would be funny if it weren’t so serious,” he breathed.

“That was his idea and I know it,” Ric snarled. “I saw your face, Elizabeth. You were just as surprised as I was. You were faithful to me—”

“Faithful.” She snorted. “That’s a funny word. Because you certainly weren’t. But that’s fair, Ric, because I emotionally cheated on you every time I saw Jason and wished *you* were anywhere else.”

“Damn it, Elizabeth—”

They heard Ric’s footsteps moving further into the room. Jason nodded to the four other men. “Now.”

Jason kicked open the door, the first to move in, and before Ric knew what was happening, the eight of them had he and Elizabeth surrounded, Johnny and Louie having burst in from the back.

Ric had drawn his gun as soon as the door came down, but rather than training it on Elizabeth they’d expected, he’d pointed it right at Jason. The two men stood there in a silent stand-off.

Sonny and Marco quickly loosened Elizabeth’s knots and she stood, almost swaying from the hours of being tied down. “Francis, take her—”

“No,” Elizabeth shook her head. “Not without—”

“Elizabeth, go with Sonny,” Jason said without sparing her a look. His finger was on the trigger and he was going to pull it as soon as she was in the clear. She might accept what he did for a living, but he wasn’t going to make her *see* it. “Please. He’ll take you home to Cady.”

“You think you’ve got me, don’t you?” Ric hissed. “You think you’ve got me right where you want me. You may have my daughter, Morgan, but I’m *not* letting you have Elizabeth.”

“Look around you, *Ric*,” Jason jeered. “I don’t see *you* with the upper hand.”

And he saw in Ric’s eyes that the other man *did* know it. That he was not leaving this room alive.

Which made him dangerous.

“Elizabeth,” Jason began. “I need you to go. Please.”

And this time, she started for the door.

“I love her,” Ric said quietly. “More than you *ever* will. You didn’t love her enough to go after her. She had to come to you. Do you think she doesn’t know that? That she doesn’t know she was the default, the second choice? She’ll realize it one day, Morgan, and when she knows that you never loved her the way she loves you, it’ll break her heart.”

And then Ric’s eyes shifted past Jason and he knew Elizabeth and Francis were near.

“I’m going to save her from that,” Ric said, his eyes bright and wild. “If *I* can’t have her, *no* one will.”

And then he moved and changed his target.

The room exploded in gunfire.

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

Carly Corinthos was going to come out of her skin. Two hours since Jason and Sonny had left the penthouse with a cadre of guards, leaving her here with Max and Rocco on the door.

The kids were asleep and it was past midnight, but Carly hadn’t even bothered trying to lay her head on the pillow.

She would not sleep until her husband, her best friend and...well...damn it, her *Muffin* were back in this building safe and sound. It was the only outcome she was going to accept and she would be damned if anything would come between her and her family.

“If they have so much as a *scratch* on them,” Carly muttered, turning back from the door to pace towards the mantel, “I will...well, I’ll do *something*. I’ll figure out something and I will do it, and the world will be *sorry* they messed with me and mine.”

The door creaked open.

Carly whirled and saw the exhausted form of her husband come through the door first. “S-Sonny...”

And then the Muffin, who was hobbling a little on Jason’s arm.

“Oh, thank *God*.” She flew at them, hugging and kissing Sonny before moving to Jason and then she threw her arms around Elizabeth.

“What happened?” she demanded, drawing back from the uncomfortable experience of hugging Elizabeth Webber. “You can’t call me, tell me you’re alive? Where is everyone else? What the *hell*—”

“Carly.” Sonny held up a hand, and watched as Jason helped Elizabeth to the sofa. “We...had to get back in case the cops showed up. There...was some gunfire and we didn’t want to be on the scene too long once we cleaned it up.”

“Where’s Cady?” Elizabeth demanded. Her eyes were bleary, her shoulders slumped. “Is she okay?”

“Fine,” Carly nodded. “I haven’t let her out of my sight all day. Well, out of mine, Michael or Leticia’s sight. And you know Michael takes cousin duties very seriously. We haven’t left this penthouse since we realized you were missing.”

And then Elizabeth straightened and turned to Jason, her fingers clutching at his shirt. “Cody. He was shot when Dominic grabbed me. Is she...”

“He was alive when we found him,” Sonny said. “Harry got him to the private clinic, and the report we got before we left for the warehouse was that he was expected to recover.”

She closed her eyes. “Okay. Okay. He was...he knew something was up when the elevator stopped, but Dominic said there was a security issue, and I followed him because I was scared someone had gotten to the penthouse, but Cody...Cody wanted me to stay back. I thought about just going by myself, but what if I was wrong...and someone *was* up here.”

“We haven’t found Dominic yet,” Sonny bit out. “But we will.” He rubbed his eyes and headed for a bourbon. “And Faith was gone by the time we got to the warehouse.”

“She was angry,” Elizabeth murmured. “She came into the room as Ric was explaining to me that we should be a family, that he loved me.”

Carly snorted. “After he used her for a year, I’m sure Faith *loved* that. I’m surprised she didn’t shoot him.” Then she frowned. “But she probably would have shot you, too.” She hesitated. “Did...where is Ric?”

“He tried to kill me,” Elizabeth said softly, and Carly pressed her fist to her mouth. “He was surrounded, and he knew...he knew he wouldn’t make it out alive. I thought...” She closed her eyes and Jason gripped her knee, as if to remind her it was over. “I thought he was going to shoot Jason.”

“But if he was going to die, he wasn’t going to let anyone else have you.” Carly nodded. “What a prince. Was anyone hurt?”

“Francis took the shot for Elizabeth,” Sonny muttered, tossing back the entire tumbler of liquor, “but it only got him in the shoulder.” She saw him stare into the empty glass. “If it weren’t for him...”

“He was aiming for my face.” Elizabeth pressed her fingers to her cheek. “I taunted him. I shouldn’t have, but I thought he was going to kill me anyway with Faith gone. I wasn’t going to beg for my life.”

“I hope he’s rotting somewhere,” Carly snarled. “You know what? Rotting is too good for him. We’ll come up with something else. Maybe we can blow up what’s left—”

“Carly.” Sonny touched her shoulder and she sighed.

“Right. I’m sorry.” She cleared her throat. “Cady’s asleep, and I have enough bottles to get me through tomorrow morning. Why don’t you guys go home and get some rest?”

And as Jason led Elizabeth out the door and across the hall, she realized Jason hadn't said a word the entire time.

Carly looked at Sonny and frowned. "Is he okay?"

"He made the kill shot," Sonny said quietly. "And he did it in front of Elizabeth. I think...he just needs to come to terms with the fact that unlike Robin or Courtney, Elizabeth knows exactly what he does as an enforcer, and...she loves him anyway."

"I should think so, since he was *rescuing* her." Carly eyed Sonny, stepping towards him. "You okay? I know...today was difficult for you. You...lost both your siblings." Her skin crawled knowing what Courtney had done, how she had brought danger into all their lives. If Carly *ever* saw the bitch again, she would beat her death with a shoe.

A stiletto, even.

"No, I didn't." Sonny rubbed his face. "I lost two people who were genetically related to me. Courtney's gone. Or she will be once I've made the arrangements for her house arrest in Puerto Rico. Ric's already buried." He narrowed his eyes. "You didn't hear that from me."

She raised her hands as if to say she understood. "Still, Sonny..."

"I think it's more that..." He hesitated. "Jason is like a brother to me. I picked him for my family, like I picked Stone once. And you know, I've always had a soft spot for Elizabeth. Since she...dropped to the ground the night Lucky Spencer was in that fire. I caught her, and I..." He looked up and swallowed hard. "I held her as she absorbed the news, I sat next to her until we could get someone to take her home. And then...she came to apologize to me."

Carly tilted her head to the side. "Sonny..."

"Luke and Laura were blaming me and Jason...which they had a right to, honestly. It was an obvious leap, but Elizabeth had heard the arson report. The fire was caused by candles, and she'd talked to him on the phone, you know. Asked him to light one for her. So it was her fault, really, not mine, she said. And she was sorry people were blaming me." He paused. "And you know what she did for Jason that winter. She saved his life, and if not for her, if not for the way he felt about her, Carly, he could have held on to the anger and betrayal for much longer."

"Yeah," Carly muttered. She folded her arms and looked away. "That's why I hated her for so long, because I knew I had ruined everything, and there she was, practically *perfect* for him." She snorted. "Wench."

"She was there the night we lost our son, and she sat with me while I grieved. So when I say I didn't lose anyone important today, Carly, that's *exactly* what I mean. Jason has been my brother for so long, and Elizabeth has always felt like family. So, today, Carly, I saved the people who mattered." He flicked his hand. "And discarded the ones who don't."

"I thought I should feel more upset about Courtney," Carly said slowly. "Because at one point, I

thought of her as my best friend, but you know what?" She shook her head. "I forgot what it meant to have a best friend. I hadn't had one since Carly Roberts in Florida, you know. I wanted you to have your sister in your life, so I forced her to fit. I told myself she was my friend and that she was perfect for Jason, that we could all be one happy family. But she *never* fit." She wrinkled her nose. "But Elizabeth did. And does. So I'm with you, Sonny. The people who mattered came home tonight."

And now Sonny grinned. "And you called her Elizabeth."

"Don't push it. I'll never call her that to her face. Never. She's the Muffin. Forever. Because she has a muffin face." Carly sniffed. "Bite me, Sonny."

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Jason said nothing when he sat on the sofa and Elizabeth climbed into his lap, curling up into his embrace. They sat there, listening to each other breathe, her cheek against his chest, listening to his heartbeat.

"I told you could trust your guards," Jason said finally. "And one of them betrayed you."

She sighed, her eyes still closed. "He betrayed you, too. There was no way we could have known. He was friendly with me, not like Cody, Francis or Marco, but I never expected him to be. The other three guarded me before, and they talked to me." Her throat was thick. "Cody was my friend, you know. He was the first person to see Cady's sonogram, and he tried so *hard* to protect me when he thought you were hurting me."

"He'll be all right." Jason's hand stroked her back. "He was lucky."

"I wanted to help him, but I knew what he would want me to do. He'd want me to run, you'd want me to run, so I tried, but maybe I hesitated too long—"

"He would have caught you regardless." Jason exhaled slowly. "I didn't...I didn't see what Ric was doing until it was too late, until he went for you. I always thought the threat was to Cady—"

"Why *would* we think otherwise?" Elizabeth raised her head and looked. "Jason, he told me he didn't want to be separated from his child. And I didn't think he was all that attached to me. I heard him with you and Sonny, with Faith. The way he talked about our relationship. I saw his face that first time on the docks when he realized I knew the truth—"

"But we should have realized something was up—he didn't try that hard to get to you before Cady was born. We thought it was because you were so well-protected, but...he didn't want to hurt you or the baby. He didn't take *any* chances until after Cady was born."

"Jason." Elizabeth cradled his face in her hands. "It *doesn't* matter anymore. He's dead. And if you think I give a *damn* that you were the one that killed him, you're still not giving me any credit. If I'd had a gun, I would have shot him myself. Jason..." When he looked away, she gripped his chin and turned him back towards her. "He tried to *kill* me. He aimed the gun at my face and I would be dead

right now if not for you and Francis. As long as Ric was on this planet, he was a threat to me, to you, to our daughter. This is the world we live in, and I accept that.”

“I just...” He tilted his head back and looked at the ceiling. “I never wanted you to see me like that.”

“I’ve *always* known who you were, Jason.” She hesitated. “The first time I saw you, it was at Brenda and Sonny’s non-wedding. I had to steal an invitation to get in, and Lucky *still* had to vouch for me because a man with a gun thought I might be a threat at the age of fifteen. I was in the club the night Nikolas was shot because he was standing next you. I remember how scared I was, because Lucky made me and Emily duck.”

He sighed but she wasn’t through. “Lucky worked as a courier for you until you quit. And I saw *you* twist Sorel’s arm behind him like it was nothing, because he *talked* to me. Jason, I have no illusions about you or your job.”

When his shoulders slumped, she thought he might finally have understood that there had never been a moment in their relationship, even when they’d been nothing more than people with mutual acquaintances, that she hadn’t known exactly who he was.

She slid her arms around his neck, letting her fingers play with the hair at his nape. “You know, Jason, I think I have a resolution for this problem we keep having.”

He frowned and looked at her, loosely wrapping his own arms around her waist. “What?”

“I think...” she began slowly, “we ought to sign some sort of contract that stipulates some sort of... punishment for breaking the terms.” She smiled, a little hesitantly. “Like...a prenuptial agreement.”

His fingers tightened at her hips for a second, and she saw in his eyes that he understood exactly what she was asking. “So...we’d agree on a certain amount of years,” he replied, his voice soft. “And if either of us reneged, there’d be...what...damages?”

“The *worst* kind,” she murmured, pressing a kiss to the corner of his jaw. “If I left, I’d forfeit something I can’t live without. And if you left, you’d forfeit something *you* can’t live without.” She swallowed hard. “Like...each other.”

“Hmmm...” His hands slid up from her waist to her torso, his long fingers wrapping around her back, his thumbs brushing under her breasts. “How many years would we...stipulate?”

“Oh...” She could feel tears clinging to her lashes, but these were not the kind of tears she’d cried over him once.

These were tears of joy, tears of disbelief.

“I thought we’d start with fifty years and include an option for more.” She brushed her lips over his, nibbling at his bottom lip until he opened his mouth, letting her control the kiss.

When she drew back, she rested her forehead against his. “Will you marry me, Elizabeth?” he asked.

Her lips curved into a smile. “I thought you’d never ask.”

*Sunday, March 7 2004*

## **Morgan Penthouse: Living Room**

Elizabeth stepped off the bottom stair, fastening her earring. “Jason’s meeting us at the church. He and Sonny wanted to go over the security one last time with Father Coates.”

Carly wrinkled her nose and peered at the boxes on the table. “How many of these are from the Quartermaines?”

“Only *half* of them.” Elizabeth smoothed her strapless white dress and then reached for the soft blue cardigan she was going to wear over it. “You know, Jason told me again last night he could pull some strings and get a marriage license for today. I told him no, because this is Morgan and Cady’s day, I wanted it be about their christening. It’s the third time he’s tried that.”

The blonde snorted as she peered at notes on the beautifully wrapped christening gifts. “Yeah, he’s worried I’m going to plan something ostentatious and completely against his style.”

Elizabeth frowned, stepping into the low kitten heels by the desk. “Jason doesn’t *have* a style.”

“Exactly.” Carly lifted a box and shook it a little. “And it’s not like you’d let me get away with anything he’d hate.” She set the box down and pointed at her. “It can be a small ceremony and reception, but damn it, you’re *having* a wedding where people are actually invited. I may not be the maid of honor—”

“Well, no,” Elizabeth allowed, but she arched an eyebrow. “Seeing as how you’re married, so you’d have to be the *matron* of honor.”

Carly paused and looked at her suspiciously. “Is this a trick? You’re friends with Emily again. There’s that nurse at the hospital. Why would you pick me?”

“Because,” Elizabeth said, joining her in the perusal of the gifts on the table. “I want someone to stand up with me who knows me and Jason, who supported us from the beginning and didn’t let us screw it up. *That* would be you, Carly.”

She scowled. “How is this our life, Muffin? A year ago, I would have cheerfully set you on fire, and now we’re decorating nurseries, being the godmother to each other’s kids, and now you want me be to be your matron of honor...” Her scowl deepened. “And *I’m* excited to say yes, I mean what the frick happened to me? I used to be hell on wheels, and now I’m this sappy bitch who...” She waved her hand. “*Likes* people.”

Elizabeth snorted, and examined a gift which had no note. “Calm down, Carly. I’m not particularly thrilled either, but you know, as you always tell me, we are where we are. Might as well suck it up and enjoy.” She grinned. “And you know it’ll drive Sonny and Jason crazy if we *keep* getting along. They’re both waiting for you to change your mind.”



“There is that,” Carly mused. “It keeps them on their toes. We have to stage some fights though. I don’t want them thinking we’re predictable.”

“*That* would take the spice out of life.” They both laughed as Elizabeth lifted the rather large box up.

“Who’s that from?”

“It’s not marked, but...” she frowned. “Francis said they swept all the gifts. No explosives or anything.” She hesitantly set it back on the table and began to unwrap it. When the paper was gone, there sat a large white box. She lifted the top and removed a bottle of champagne.

“Hey, that’s an expensive label.” Carly reached for the bottle, and Elizabeth handed it to her as she reached for a beautifully knitted white blanket. A note fell from the folds. Elizabeth leaned it down to pick it up and read the blood red words out loud.

*Congratulations on the baby, Princess. I’m sure you and your fiancé are simply thrilled. Have a drink on me and don’t worry—I’ll see you soon.*

*Love,  
Faith*

**THE END**

# Author's Note

If you're reading this, chances are you completed my entire novel. Wow! I hope you enjoyed it. But hey, how can I end it there? Simple! I'm planning a sequel, *Burn in Heaven*, so head over to my site to find out when I might post it:

<http://cg.dearisobel.org>

*A Few Words* is a rewrite of a story I did early in my fanfiction writing career, back in 2003, when we first found out Elizabeth would become pregnant with Ric's baby. The original story was all right, but I never quite liked it. There were plot points that felt odd to me, the characters never felt that deep and it just became dissatisfying the longer I looked at it, so this year when I went back to fanfiction after six years, I decided to do something about it.

To finish it feels bittersweet. This was the story, more than anything else, that convinced me I could still write for this couple, for these characters, despite the traumatic experience of being both a Jason/Elizabeth fan and being an Elizabeth fan first, particularly in the last five years.

Thanks for reading, and if you enjoyed it, consider stopping by my site to let me know or dropping me a line at: [melissasuemchugh@gmail.com](mailto:melissasuemchugh@gmail.com)

I love every one of you guys who are as crazy in love with this show and these characters.

<3

Melissa McHugh