

Prologue

*Closing time, one last call for alcohol
So, finish your whiskey or beer
Closing time, you don't have to go home
But you can't stay here
Closing time, every new beginning
Comes from some other beginning's end*
- Closing Time, Semisonic

Wednesday, September 24, 1997

Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

Jason Morgan's head was bowed as he came down the stairs, fumbling with the cuff links on his tuxedo. He wasn't looking forward to spending the next several hours in the outfit with the stiff shirt and high collar, but it was important. Standing up beside his best friend, his family, was the last task that Sonny Corinthos would ask of him and Jason was determined to do it right.

If not for the cuff links and their refusal to stay attached to the ends of his sleeves, Jason was sure he would have noticed the change in the air since he'd gone upstairs less than ten minutes earlier. He'd left a nervous, but eager groom in the living room; the anxiety mixed with happiness was a strange look on the mobster but was a welcome one all the same.

When he reached the final step, he found Sonny sitting on the sofa, his head bowed, staring at his hands. The room felt smaller somehow, the walls closing in on them. Jason cleared his throat. "Sonny."

"Everything..." the older man swallowed hard. "Everything I touch..." His voice was soft, broken. On the table in front of him sat a single white flower, its petals wilted. Jason recognized it as one Brenda had worn the night before. Sonny turned his face slightly, his dark eyes burning like coal pits in the middle of his face. "I keep seeing that day."

After all this time, Jason didn't have to ask which day. There was only one that would put that look into his eyes. He closed the distance between them, perched on the edge of the loveseat next to the sofa.

"The day I lost Lily," Sonny continued. "Do you believe in signs?" He cleared his throat, but his voice still sounded broken. Hoarse. "The universe telling you to stop. To think again—" He closed his eyes. "Worst day of my life."

"I know you're worried," Jason said, his own voice not sounding right to his ears. "But you'll get out of town without anyone finding you—"

"That's *today*," Sonny bit out. He lurched to his feet, swaying slightly. He crossed to the fireplace, placing his hand on the edge as he looked for balance. "What about tomorrow? You heard that son of a bitch David Reece. There's a hit out on me—"

"You'll be gone—"

"They'll find me." Sonny shook his head. "They'll find her. One woman's blood on my hands is enough."

Jason didn't know what to say. How to fix it. How to make Sonny go to the church — was the plan off? Was Sonny staying?

"How long would it take you?" Sonny demanded, whirling around to jab a finger at Jason. "If I send you after someone. If I told you to eliminate him and the witnesses. That's how it'll be. They'll show up one day, and it won't matter if they kill me first. They'll kill her last." His face twisted. "And don't give me that crap about life being too short—" Sonny looked away. "Tell that to the son I never had."

Jason closed his mouth because he'd been about to say that. That Sonny had had this conversation before, that he and Brenda had figured all that already. That she'd agreed to the risk, but he didn't have a defense to those last words. To the reminder that Sonny had not only lost a wife that day in May, but a child.

"All right." Jason nodded, started towards the phone. "I'll call the church. It'll be off—"

"No. No—" Sonny stepped forward and Jason turned back, drawing his brows together. "No."

"Then you're still marrying Brenda," Jason said hesitantly. Maybe he meant they weren't leaving.

"No, but I can't go to the church." Sonny dragged a hand down his face. "She won't—I won't be able to do it. To make it true. She'll talk me out of it. She always does." He heaved a heavy sigh. "You have to do it. Or she'll stay in danger. I have to make her irrelevant."

"Irrelevant," Jason echoed. He did not like the sound of that. He didn't like any of this. What a goddamn disaster—

"She needs to think I left her. Okay? She needs to believe she's nothing to me—"

"That's—" Jason nearly laughed. "That's impossible—"

"If you go to the church, if I never show up—" Sonny squeezed his eyes closed, forced the words out. "If I humiliate her," he said softly, "then she'll believe it."

A silence hung between them as the words soaked in. As Sonny's plan became clear. "You want me to tell her you don't love her," Jason said slowly. "I don't think that's possible—she won't believe—"

"She has to stop loving me, okay? It's the only way—"

"That's not how it works," Jason bit out. Didn't he know that? "You can't just leave her and think that'll be enough." Robin was gone. It was over, and he'd set her free. He'd had to do that. But it had broken him all the same to know it was never going to be different. That there was no tomorrow with Robin. "Love doesn't get that you're alone. She's not going to just stop loving you—and you love her too much to do this to her." And Sonny was doing exactly what they'd expected — panicking. Acting rashly. "Let's just postpone the wedding. Let's figure this out—"

"No! No, there's no way around it." Sonny shook his head. "You have to help her hate me, okay?"

Jason fisted his hands at his side. Sonny wanted Jason to go to a church full of people who loved Brenda — and some people that Jason himself cared about and respected and do what? Humiliate Brenda? Break her heart in front of everyone? "Can you not ask me to do that?" he asked almost desperately. "Sonny—"

"I'd do this for you," Sonny said quickly. "If it was about Robin, you know I would—"

Sonny wasn't going to the church. The truth of that began to settle in, and Jason realized that despite the appearance of choice, there wasn't any. He could sit at home while Sonny disappeared and Brenda waited in the church in vain. She'd tear the world apart to find Sonny, to track him down for answers — and bring the men David Reece had warned them about straight to Sonny.

The only way to keep Sonny—and Brenda—safe was to do what Sonny was asking. And to give Brenda a target for her anger. Jason swallowed hard. "What do I tell her?"

Sonny's skin had leached of all its color and his eyes resembled those of a dead man. "Tell whatever you think you need to tell her." He closed his eyes. "Tell her it was a great ride."

Harborview Towers: Studio 2A

While Jason contemplated the grim future of the day, Elizabeth Webber checked her watch for the tenth time in the last twenty minutes. "I am definitely breaking up with that idiot today," she muttered as she marched over to snatch the cordless phone from its base. She jabbed in the number, the tip of her finger sore by the time she touched the final digit.

The damned answering machine again. "Lucky Spencer," she said, her teeth gritted, "you were supposed to pick me up twenty minutes ago. I'm not waiting anymore. I'm going to the church." She slammed the phone down and grabbed the clutch purse from the sofa where she'd dropped it, then stormed out of her apartment and down the hall to the elevator.

She hit the button to go down and glared up at the numbers over the door watching as the car came down from the—from the fifteen floor, she realized with a start. When the elevator never stopped and continued down to the basement, Elizabeth exhaled slowly. It wasn't the first time the occupants of the top floor had used their special access key to bypass any waiting passengers—she was just surprised anyone on that floor was still in the building with the ceremony due to start in a half hour.

Everyone knew who Sonny Corinthos was and what he did for a living. Officially, he owned a group of nightclubs scattered around the city, including partial ownership in Luke's, a blues club near the waterfront. Unofficially, he controlled all the gambling and smuggling in the region — he was the local mafia boss though Elizabeth never understood much about what the mob actually did. *The Godfather* movies never made it all that clear. What did men like Sonny Corinthos *do* all day long?

When Elizabeth had moved to Port Charles that June to begin the nursing program at General Hospital, her family had been horrified to learn she'd had snagged a studio apartment on the lower levels of Harborview Towers. Her uptight and prissy sister still complained about how it reflected badly on the family when Elizabeth saw Sarah at work. The rent was reasonable and the location was near the hospital. The alternative might have been to continue living with her grandmother and sister.

To hell with that.

Elizabeth didn't see the notorious Sonny Corinthos around that much, but she knew the lawyer who lived across the hall — Justus Ward was also the cousin to the only friend Elizabeth had made in Port Charles — Emily Bowen-Quartermaine. She'd seen the friendly attorney several times around town and on the elevators here. Sonny, however, always bypassed other passengers.

She snorted as the elevator began to climb again. Apparently, her boyfriend wasn't the only one who'd be late to the wedding of the century. The groom had only just left.

Then the elevator went past her floor climbing straight to the fifteenth floor—*again*. Elizabeth scowled. What the hell—people had places to be! She hissed and jabbed the button again—

A minute or so later, the elevator finally stopped on her floor and the doors slid open. Elizabeth had already stepped across the threshold when she recognized the other occupant — another relative of Emily's — her brother, Jason. He looked just as startled to see her — he'd obviously forgotten to use the access key for the descent as the surprise in his eyes faded into irritation.

Elizabeth clutched her purse more tightly, swallowing hard as she stepped inside the elevator next to him. Jason Morgan was not only the brother to Emily, but the rumored right-hand man for Sonny — and the mobster's best man.

She flicked her eyes to the man next to her, his short blond hair worn in spikes, his cheekbones sharp and chiseled and his eyes as blue as the ocean—and as cold as an iceberg. She jumped when those eyes suddenly met hers and she looked away. Elizabeth stared straight ahead, sure that her cheeks were flushing brightly. It didn't matter how well Jason Morgan filled out that tuxedo — she didn't want to get on his bad side.

The elevator sank to the basement parking garage and Elizabeth scurried out, eager to get to her car—wondering if she'd reach the church before the groom and his best man—and if there was some nefarious reason for their separate—and horribly delayed—exits from Harborview Towers.

Harborview Towers: Parking Garage

The slender brunette practically lunged out of the elevator the moment the doors opened, her red heels clicking rapidly, eating up the distance to a row of cars. Jason wasn't really sure why she was hurrying away so fast — he hadn't even spoken to her but maybe his irritation at sharing the car had shown on his face. He was usually better at the blank expression with strangers, but he hadn't expected the elevator to stop on the second floor —

And then there had been that sharp, uncomfortable jab in his lower abdomen when the doors opened and their eyes had met — a sensation he remembered all too well from the previous year when he'd met Carly Roberts at Jake's and followed his urges and instincts to the room above the dive bar. No matter how good it had felt

in the moment, it had taken ages to shake Carly loose again and hurt Robin. Jason knew better now.

The woman had worn her deep chestnut hair piled on her head with ringlets sliding down, as if it had been mussed by someone's hands, her lips painted a scarlet red that drew the eye directly to them. She'd barely reached his shoulder as she stood next to him, her eyes directly ahead, her petite body wrapped in a short dark red dress that did something when the light hit it —

And then he'd caught her looking at him just before the doors opened, and her pale skin had flushed a hue that matched her dress — did she look like that all over—

The unwelcome burst of lust vanished as she nearly flew out of the car, clearly eager to be away from him, and Jason shoved it out of his head. A random woman in an elevator was the last thing he should be thinking about right now.

"Mr. Morgan?"

Jason blinked, dragging his eyes away from the little four door sedan—red naturally—as it backed out of a parking spot and left the garage, driving just a little too fast. He met the eyes of the guard who would be shadowing him from now on — Reinaldo. "Yeah. Let's go to the church."

Time to get this over with, though he didn't know what the hell he was going to say to convince Brenda Barrett that after all this time, after everything she and Sonny had been through, Sonny wasn't going to show up. That he didn't love her. That he was abandoning her.

Jason slid into the back of the car, the cool leather brushing against the back of his neck as he considered what he was being asked to do — Sonny had given him a direct order, hadn't he? He'd phrased it like a request, but Jason knew when he was being told to do something. He exhaled slowly, glanced out the window as the scenery went from parking garage to city street.

He had ten, maybe fifteen minutes, to figure out what he was going to say. He had to jilt her, yes, but did he *have* to break her heart? Humiliate her? Brenda meant the world to Robin — what would she think when this news made it back to her? Could he just tell Brenda it was complicated, to wait it out, and Sonny would contact her when he could?

No. No, Brenda wouldn't listen. She never listened. The night before Sonny had sent her upstairs before the meeting with David Reece, and she'd come downstairs anyway, impatient with how long it was taking for Sonny to join her. Brenda didn't take any of this seriously, didn't think the rules applied to her — it was why Sonny

had planned to walk away in the first place. He wanted Brenda more than the power, he'd told Jason. But he couldn't have both.

Brenda would smile and nod at Jason, and then run off her own—pointing anyone interested in fulfilling Hector Rivera's contract right at Sonny. And Sonny would be dead, but they'd probably kill Brenda in front of him—and Sonny would die knowing Jason hadn't listened to him—

Sonny knew Brenda better than Jason did. So it had to be Sonny's way. Jason swallowed hard as the limo began to slow.

No choice. Once Sonny gave an order, it had to be done. This was the very last order he'd given — and Jason knew he had to honor it.

St. Timothy's Church: Chapel

Lucky Spencer's blue eyes were glaring with irritation as Elizabeth slid into the last pew in the church. "Where the hell have you been?" he hissed. "The ceremony is supposed to start in five minutes—"

"Where have I been?" Elizabeth retorted, pitching her voice low, though Lucky's tone had drawn the attention of a few people sitting around them. "Where were *you*? You were supposed to pick me up! You had the invitation! I couldn't get it in without showing like eight forms of identification—"

Lucky rolled his eyes. "Unbelievable," he muttered, turning his face forward, glaring at the front of the church where his father, Luke Spencer, and the groom's father, Mike Corbin, stood, both clad in elegant, black tuxedos. "You never listen. This is the problem—"

"I—" Elizabeth growled. "You said you'd be there—"

"I said I had to come with my dad," Lucky bit back. "I left your name at the door—"

"No, you said you had to be here early with your dad, and that's why you were picking me up early—" She broke off with a shake of her head. "Never mind. I'm not going to fight with you." No, she was just going to get through this dumb wedding and dump him at the reception. Two months of dating an asshole who never listened and somehow always turned her into the bad guy was too long. He wasn't nearly good enough in bed to put up with this bullshit.

The music began, a beautiful, lilting string piece, but Elizabeth frowned, peeked around someone taller in front of her for a better view of the altar where Mike and Luke were still waiting, still frowning and whispering to one another. "Wait. Are

they starting? How?"

His irritation slid into confusion as Lucky twisted in his seat to look at the double doors, connecting the chapel to the anteroom outside. They had been thrown open and a very nervous Emily Bowen-Quartermaine stood there, her slender body encased in a cotton candy pink dress, a bouquet of tulips in her hands. Her eyes were wide and her skin pale.

"I don't understand," Lucky muttered. "How can they start without the groom—"

"Maybe he's being escorted down..." Elizabeth's voice faded as she thought again about the strange events that morning — of two separate trips of an elevator from the fifteenth floor — and a limo still parked just by the elevators when she'd left. Had Sonny Corinthos been waiting in that limo? Had he and the best man had an argument?

Emily started down the aisle, trying to avoid the confused and bewildered expressions of the people around her — beginning a wedding ceremony before the groom and his best man was in place had everyone twisting and turning in their seat.

Just behind Emily, Lucy Coe began her trip down the aisle, her smile stretched so thin and wide Elizabeth thought it might crack. What the hell—

The string music became the wedding march. Brenda Barrett, the gorgeous Face of Deception, stood at the doors, her sun kissed skin glowing in a stark white dress held up by a pair of thin straps with a white shawl hanging from her elbows to the floor. Her silky dark hair shining, and this smile — this was a real, genuine smile. Happiness radiating from every pore, just as it had the night before at the party.

Brenda began a slow walk down the aisle towards a nervous wedding party, and behind her the doors were pulled shut. Was it some sort of show? Was Sonny Corinthos going to walk down the aisle, too? But whatever was happening, Brenda showed no signs of unease, her steps smooth and even. She reached the end of the aisle, and the music faded into silence.

The crowd was quiet as well — and then the whispers began. Brenda's slender shoulders trembled slightly — Elizabeth could see them from the last row —

The doors creaked, and then they opened —

Brenda turned, her smile glorious and bright, filled with expectations — the same as all those present. Surely this was Sonny Corinthos — had he just been late?

But it wasn't Sonny Corinthos. Elizabeth's breath caught as Jason Morgan stepped in, sweeping his eyes around the crowd, lingering briefly on his sister—and then on Elizabeth for a second that felt just a little too long—before he looked back at Brenda, his face unsmiling, his expression blank.

And Brenda's smile faded.

Chapter 1

*And you know you're never sure
But you're sure you could be right
If you held yourself up to the light
And the embers never fade
In your city by the lake
The place where you were born
- Tonight, Tonight, Smashing Pumpkins*

Friday, December 5, 1997

Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

Nothing had changed inside the penthouse since the terrible day Sonny had walked away — every stick of furniture was in the same place, and the minibar remained stocked with Sonny's liquors of choice, bourbon and whiskey, though Jason preferred tequila. He kept his bottle in the kitchen.

The master bedroom upstairs had not been used since that last morning — Jason had moved in, just like Sonny had wanted him to, but he'd opted for the smallest bedroom on the first floor — what had been meant for a live-in maid — and rarely used any of the rooms on the second though he had a cleaning service in regularly. If—and when—Sonny returned, his home would be waiting for him.

And so would his business — just the way he'd left it. Even if it killed him.

"It's a bullshit deal, and you know it."

"It's disrespectful, that's what it is—"

Jason Morgan ignored both scowling men standing by the mini bar and went to the window. His former boss had picked this penthouse, this side of the building because he liked to stare out over the skyline of Port Charles, to imagine his power growing until he controlled everything he saw.

All this view did was remind Jason that it was *his* problem for now, and he was irritated with people who kept pushing him to do things he'd already refused—

He turned back to Johnny O'Brien and Benny Abrams, his mouth set. "I didn't say I'd take the deal. I just said we're not gonna do what Johnny wants."

Anthony Moreno was more than just a goddamn thorn in his side, more than a little

bastard trying to edge in on Sonny's nightclubs and gambling operations, though Jason didn't intend for everyone to know it. There were only a handful people in the world who knew why Sonny had really left Port Charles, and Jason wanted to keep it that way. Better for everyone to think this was a territory dispute.

When Jason finally struck at Moreno, it would be a permanent ending — an act of justice for the role Moreno had played in the contract that sent Sonny fleeing from Port Charles, the pieces of Brenda's broken heart and dignity shattered behind him. Hector Rivera had reached from beyond the grave to haunt his former son-in-law, and as long as that contract was active, Sonny could never come back.

And Moreno was part of it. He'd arranged the meeting with David Reece, a representative of an international cartel who had been sent to warn Sonny — expecting him to panic. Which Sonny had done, of course, but he'd still managed to disappear successfully, and Jason hadn't heard from him since the day he'd left.

Eventually, Moreno was going to slip up and Jason would learn the connection between him and the cartel in charge of the contract — but until then, everyone had to think it was just business. That it was ordinary territory bullshit. Including the men who worked for him. Moreno had to stay alive and in power long enough for Jason to get answers.

"Give me one good reason why we don't grind that little bitch beneath our feet," Johnny demanded, and beside him, Benny sighed.

"We can't just let Anthony Moreno push us around—"

"Who said that's what I'm doing?" Jason demanded, cutting Johnny off. He thrust his arms out, fed up with the constant arguing. "We're not giving him one damn inch—every time he's reached out for a deal, I've told him to go fuck himself—"

"And no one is happier than I am," Benny said patiently, adopting the conciliatory tone that told Jason the two of them had put their heads together and decided to pull a good cop/bad cop routine on him. Like he was an idiot who didn't know what he was doing—just like everyone else who thought he'd crumble under the weight—

"You need to send a message that *you're* the one in charge," Johnny said. "No more pussyfooting around, Morgan. Let me take out his second-in-command or burn down one of his damn strip clubs—"

"I said no," Jason repeated. "If you got a problem taking orders from me, Johnny, maybe you need to tell me now." He strode towards the other man, stopping only a few inches from him. He glared at him, hard—and Johnny broke first, dipping his eyes to the ground. Good. Johnny was a few years older than Jason, and he'd been

in the business longer, but he was a stubborn hothead. Jason had wondered if he'd be able to accept Sonny leaving the business to someone else.

Time would tell, but at least today — Johnny was backing down.

"You send Moreno my answer the way I told you to, and if he pushes it — if he doesn't accept that this is the way things are, then we can talk about going further." You didn't escalate confrontations to an eleven until you had to, Jason thought. You didn't act when you were angry. He'd learned that over the last two years. It might feel good in the moment to act on that heat, to lash out—

But it was always more satisfying to keep it cool. To watch others squirm and flip out. He'd frustrated more than one person with a blank stare. Keep them guessing. Doubting you.

"Tonight, at Luke's," Benny said, "you'll put in an appearance? To establish an alibi?"

"Yeah, yeah," Jason muttered already irritated at the idea of heading to the club and attending a private party with a dress code. He liked Luke's, but he hated suits. "I'll be there."

Benny took Johnny's arm and the two filed out, nodding to Reinaldo, the guard on the door. The door closed behind him, and Jason exhaled in relief.

He straightened the desk — Benny had set down his briefcase and pushed a set of folders to the side. Jason lined them back up and set the chair back in place, the way it had been before the adviser had come in. The way Sonny always kept it.

He grabbed his leather jacket laying across the back of the sofa, shrugged into it, and left. He had things to do before the party.

General Hospital: Cafeteria

"There is nothing in this world you can say to make me go to that party."

With that pronouncement, Elizabeth set her lunch tray down on the table with a hard thud and sat down. "I mean it. Don't even bother."

"I have to. It's a matter of life or death." Emily took a seat across from her, her dark eyes imploring. "If you don't go, do you know what happens?"

"I suffer through a family dinner with the reward of a quiet, pleasant evening in my crappy studio apartment," Elizabeth said. She twisted the cap off her water bottle.

"And I don't make small talk with people who hate me."

"Nikolas doesn't hate you," Emily pointed out.

"His girlfriend does," Elizabeth muttered. She sipped her water, letting her eyes drift around the cafeteria, catching the irritated gaze of the girlfriend in question, otherwise known as her sister, the ever perfect Sarah Webber. "I'd rather ingest rat poison."

"Yes, and you know I agree with you on this," Emily said. She leaned forward. "But I *have* to go. It's a fundraiser for the hospital, and my grandfather is insisting the family attend—" She frowned. "Wait. Your grandparents practically built this place. How come Audrey isn't forcing you?"

"Fortunately for me," Elizabeth said sweetly, "there's a better, more successful product of the Hardy/Webber line to represent the family tonight. Gram doesn't care what I do as long it doesn't embarrass her." She sipped her water. "Go. Have a great time. Call me when you get home."

"Please." Emily folded her hands in a praying gesture. "I beseech you not to abandon me to hang out with them. Don't abandon me in my time of need—"

Elizabeth scowled. "You understand what you're asking me, don't you? Because I will remember this. And I will use it against you."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you." Emily beamed. Then her smile turned sheepish. "Since you already agreed to come with me, I should warn you practically every doctor not on duty will be there, which means—"

Elizabeth closed her eyes. "Dr. Jones and the shrew. Oh, man. You are going to owe me *so* big for this."

Luke's: Back Office

"Word on the street is you've had an offer from Moreno."

Jason dumped the ledger back on the desk and leveled a glare at Luke Spencer, who was one of the few people in the world unaffected by it. The club owner just leaned back in his gaudy chair—which matched the decoration of the entire club—and puffed on a cigar. "For someone who says they're not in the business, you always seem to know what's going on."

"Pays to keep a toe in." Luke shrugged. "And I run a business on the border between you and Moreno. He's sniffing at me, just like everyone else, kid." He leaned

forward. "So he did offer a deal."

"Yeah." Jason rubbed his face. He considered confiding in Luke, but discarded it. Luke was useful in his own way, but selfish when it counted. He had no interest in being part of the business, so Jason would keep him out. "To buy out Sonny's interests. He wants to make sure there's nothing for Sonny to come back to—"

"Or," Luke said, "he's testing you. It's a bullshit deal—"

"That's what Johnny said—"

"And it's a sign of disrespect—"

Jason pushed the chair back, got to his feet. "And that's what Benny said. The three of you get together on this?"

"No. I'm just trying to keep my little slice of heaven out of the crossfire. But they're not wrong. Let me guess—" Luke stubbed out his cigar and stood. "You'll say no, and maybe you're going to send the messenger back in a body bag." When Jason said nothing, the older man nodded. "Moreno wants to see what you're made of, Jason, and right now, it's not much—"

"Don't—" Jason bristled. "I'm doing fine—"

"Because you're good under pressure. You don't panic. Sonny leaves you holding the bag for everything, personally and professionally, and you don't sink in the first two months. But that was the easy part—"

"*Easy*—"

"Yeah. Sonny handed you the keys to the kingdom, but that don't mean you get to keep them without a fight." Luke put his hands on the desk, leaned forward. "You think you don't got guys working under you that are wondering if you have what it takes? You send a weak response to a guy like Moreno—"

"You keep saying it's weak—" Jason scowled. "But it's supposed to be, okay? How come I'm the only one who sees it? I need Moreno to come after me. To go too hard. Which is what he's going to do when I tell him no. He wants to put Sonny out of business. It's an insult to even ask. So he gets an insult back. It wasn't a serious question. He just wanted to see if I was gonna cut and run."

Luke considered this, then nodded. "Okay. So you're thinking few moves ahead, and I don't mind it. But Moreno goes after you, Jason, where's he gonna go? How hard? You're not just taking orders anymore. You gotta do the big picture."

"I am—"

"You're not," Luke said firmly. "Moreno isn't going to come after *you*. That's not how this works. He's going to come after me. Or Tommy down at the Blue Moon. Or maybe Dougie, down on Courtland Street. He's going to take out someone who works *for* you."

Jason stared at Luke, then nodded. "Maybe. But he was going to do that anyway. All I did was buy some time to figure out where."

"You need to be thinking about how you're going to respond—"

"The Oasis," Jason said. "Makes Moreno a lot of money — not just the girls. He gambles in the back room and two of his best dealers work the floor. I'm not an idiot, Luke. He takes a shot at me, and the Oasis burns." He shoved the ledger book across the desk. "But he needs to fire the first shot."

"Right." Luke tipped his head. "It's one way to deal with it, I guess. But I think you're going to regret not being more proactive."

"Yeah, well—" Jason jerked a shoulder. "We'll see."

Luke went to the coat rack next to the door and tossed Jason's jacket at him. "You need to head home to change. Dress code and all."

Jason made a face. "I hate suits," he muttered. He pulled the jacket on. "I appreciate the advice," he said after a moment. "I know you don't have to give it."

"And you don't have to take it. But it's there." Luke hesitated, then opened the door for Jason. "Just one more thing—"

"What?"

"Moreno's not trying to put Sonny out of business. Sonny ain't here. He's trying to bury *you*. It's yours now. Sonny liked to react," Luke continued as Jason stared at him. "And you learned it from him, so I get it. But you're not that guy. I know that because you already know your target. You gotta figure out if you wanna be your own man or a Sonny clone. And do it fast."

Hardy House: Dining Room

"There's no reason for you to go."

Elizabeth set down the bowl of mashed potatoes with a clink of porcelain pottery against the hardwood dining table and leveled an irritated look at her older sister. "It's a fundraiser for the hospital—"

"I'll be there to represent the family." Sarah sniffed, pushing her peas around the plate with the tines of her fork. "It'll be crowded, loud—you hate these parties—"

"I didn't know you cared," Elizabeth said sweetly. She held out the wicker basket. "Biscuit?"

Sarah ignored the offering. "I don't care. I just don't want to hear you whining all night. Nikolas and I will be working the crowd. We need funds for the pediatric wing—"

"If you don't want to listen to my whining," Elizabeth said, "then don't come over to bother me. We can just ignore each other like we have for the last six months—"

"How can I ignore you when you're determined to make a mockery of me and everything Gram and Gramps stand for?" Sarah demanded. "You barely made it out of nursing school back home, and you're just going to keep embarrassing us—"

"Gram—" Elizabeth turned her attention to her grandmother. "Can you please remind Sarah that I'm a capable nurse—"

"I really don't want to get involved," Audrey Hardy said finally. "I wish the two of you would stop squabbling. Elizabeth, you're an adult now. There's no reason to continue agitating your sister—"

Elizabeth clenched her fingers around the spoon in her hand, reminded herself to count to five, then spoke. "I'm not agitating, Sarah, Gram. All I did was mention that Emily asked me to go to Luke's tonight, and suddenly, we're talking about the shame I bring to the family name—"

"Well, you insist on living in that criminal's building," Sarah retorted. "And you never work a single extra shift — you do the bare minimum. It's embarrassing to have a sister with a terrible work ethic. What would Gramps think?"

"Gramps died of a heart attack on the floor of his office," Elizabeth shot back. "I hope he'd be proud of me for setting a better work and life balance—"

"That's enough," Audrey said, her fork clattering to her plate. Her cheeks flushed a cherry red. "Don't you dare speak about your grandfather that way, Elizabeth. He was dedicated to the hospital—"

Elizabeth winced. "I know—"

"And Sarah is quite right. You have no problem supporting the hospital when alcohol is involved," Audrey continued, "but you've not offered to work a single double since you started. You leave as soon as your shift is over, and you rarely take an interest in your patients—"

"I take interest in my patients," Elizabeth bit out. "I just clock out when they stop paying me. They cut back on overtime, Gram—"

"I hardly see how that should signify—"

"If they don't pay me, why would I work? So, yes, I show up at the start of my shift and I leave when it's over. But I don't have a single—" Elizabeth shook her head and dumped the napkin on the plate. "I don't have to defend myself to either of you. In fact—" She shoved her chair back and rose. "I'm done. This is the last time I'll be coming to dinner. If I'm such an embarrassment to you both, then I'll spare you the horror of eating a meal with me."

Audrey followed Elizabeth from the dining room into the living room. "Don't be so melodramatic, Elizabeth—"

"I'm not the one who turned a simple comment about attending a fundraiser into a debate about my career and work ethic—" Elizabeth buttoned her coat and wound her scarf around her neck. "I'm going home to get ready. And by the way—" Her eyes stung. "Gramps wouldn't be ashamed of me, and you know it. He loved me just the way I am."

"I love you, too—"

"You have a hell of a way of showing it. Good night."

Tony & Carly's Apartment: Bedroom

Carly Roberts slid the bright red lipstick across her lips, then pressed them together to even out the color. Over her shoulder, she watched as Tony flicked through his collection of ties. He'd been quiet since coming home from work, and nothing she'd tried had broken through the melancholy.

The baby kicked against her ribs hard, and Carly winced. She pressed a hand against her belly. "Cool it, kid."

She joined Tony at the closet, pasting on a smile. "I like this one," she said, fingering a green paisley patterned tie. "It looks good with your eyes."

Tony smiled thinly at the compliment. "You said the same thing a few weeks ago," he said, but he took it off the tie rack and wound it around his neck. He went over to the mirror to knot it.

A few weeks ago. She'd picked out that tie for the wedding that hadn't happened. AJ had foiled everything—she clenched her jaw. Everything was going wrong and kept going wrong. It was so damned frustrating—AJ knew he might be the baby's father, Lorraine was hanging around with that stupid smile, and Tony had found the fake sonogram Carly had tried to pawn off on him a few months ago—

Carly exhaled in a huff. A few more weeks and the baby would be here. She'd find a way to throw AJ off the scent or trick him into thinking the baby was Tony's — and Tony would marry her, and the baby would have a father. Everything would be okay. She'd be safe.

But if everything went to hell—Carly slid her hand in her pocket, fingering the strip of paper inside — the cell phone number Jason handed her, making her promise to use it if she had an emergency.

It was good for a girl to have a backup plan.

Luke's: Main Floor

"I'm going to get another drink," Elizabeth called to Emily as her best friend let her cousin, Justus Ward, twirl her out on to the dance floor.

"Get me another glass—" Emily replied, then giggled as Justus dipped her down, then whirled her into the crowd.

Elizabeth weaved in and out of that same crowd as she edged her way from the tables by the stage towards the bar at the back of the main room. She loved Luke's most of the time — it had the best music, cheap drinks, and the food didn't make you vomit the next morning, but man, she hated when it was so loud you couldn't even hear yourself think.

She saw a familiar blonde a few feet away, and Elizabeth immediately turned and made a beeline for the opposite direction. The absolute last thing she wanted was to run directly into Carly Roberts. She'd had quite enough of her at the hospital—

But unfortunately, in her quest to avoid blondes—she forgot the other person she was avoiding—and crashed right into him. "Ooof—" She grunted. "Sorry—"

"No problem—" Lucky Spencer's eyes lit up. "Liz. Hey. I was hoping Em would

convince you to come tonight."

"Oh." If Emily thought she was doing her a favor—Elizabeth crossed her arms, covering the deep neckline of her sapphire dress. The last time she'd spoken to Lucky, both of them had been wearing a lot less—and she was still pissed he'd forced her to break up with him half-naked.

If he'd just waited to ask stupid questions until the next day—

"You haven't returned my calls—"

"No, I haven't." She pursed her lips. "I'm just going to go—" She tried to edge around him, but Lucky snagged her elbow "Lucky, come on—"

"No, you come on—what kind of girl does that? Three months, and you act like I don't exist—"

"We dated for nine weeks," Elizabeth said, resisting the urge to stomp her foot. "Almost entirely during the summer. It's literally an entire season later, Lucky. Go find someone else."

"But you—"

"But I said no, and then I ignored you. I don't know what other hint you need—" She put her hands up when he tried to reach for her again. "We had a little fun and it fizzled out, okay?"

"Not for me—"

"Well, it did for me, and that's all that matters. I don't have an obligation to date you until we're *both* not interested."

"You won't even tell me why—"

"Jesus, Lucky. What do you want me to say?" She threw up her hands. "I'm supposed to give you an itemized list?"

"No, but—" He clenched his jaw. "You could have at least told me we were done—"

"I did. You keep choosing not to believe me—and I am done having this conversation with you right now." She saw a break in the crowd and took advantage, and slipped between two different groups.

That was the last time she ever did a favor for Emily. If that little brat thought she

was helping—

Elizabeth spied the front door and breathed a sigh of relief. Air. She just wanted a little bit of air. And maybe to make a run for it. She had her purse. Her jacket was somewhere—but the purse was all that mattered.

Her mind made up, Elizabeth headed for the entrance.

Luke's: Entrance

"Fashionably late," Luke said as Jason made his way to the entrance, Reinaldo trailing behind him. "Didn't think you were coming."

"Had to wait for the right time," Jason grunted, looking out over the parking lot. For a few weeks, he'd parked cars out here. And now he owned shares in the club. No, Sonny owned them, he thought. Jason was just looking after them for a while.

"You, ah, send that message we talked about?" Luke asked. "Because I got a call from one of my old friends down on Courtland. There's some chatter Moreno's planning something big."

Jason furrowed his brow. "No, that's—" That's why he was here now. So he'd have an alibi when the body of the messenger showed up at the Oasis tonight. He clenched his jaw, swept his eyes over the parking lot again. He saw Luke's stepson, Nikolas Cassadine, about twenty feet away by a gray Jaguar. But no one else.

"First you're hearing about it?" Luke asked, drawing Jason's attention back to him. "That's not good."

"No, it's not. Your guy, will he talk to—"

Behind them, the front door to the club lurched open and a brunette emerged, almost at a sprint. She leaned against the closed door, closing her eyes. "Never again."

"Lizzie?" Luke said, arching his brows. "You okay, kid?"

The woman—Lizzie—straightened, the strap of her black purse falling down her shoulder—her bare shoulder, Jason noticed. No coat covering the dress, which only fell to mid-thigh. Her brown hair looked as if she'd been running, half of it sliding down her neck. That — and the punch to the gut — reminded him of when he'd seen her before.

The morning of the wedding in the elevator. And then again, in the chapel, sitting

next to Luke's son.

"Oh. No. Yes, I mean." She made a face. "And I hate that name, you know that, Luke."

Luke grinned. "Sorry, Elizabeth. Old habit. Still wish you and Cowboy could have—" His smile faded. "You're missing a coat. What happened?"

"Private parties," Elizabeth bit out. "You'd think they'd cap the guest list. You can't breathe in there—" She flicked her eyes to Jason, seeming to notice him for the first time. "Oh, you're—I'm interrupting something."

"Listen—" Luke started to take off his jacket, but he stopped, turning back to the parking lot, his eyes suddenly alert. "Did you hear—"

Jason heard it just a moment before the Cadillac swung into the parking lot, and the window rolled down. The first gun shots rang out as Jason grabbed Elizabeth by the arm and shoved her to the ground, covering her body as bullets pierced the side of the building just centimeters from where she'd been standing.

Chapter 2

*Love and hate, get it wrong
She cut me right back down to size
Sleep the day, let it fade
Who was there, take your place
No one knows, never will
Mostly me, but mostly you
What do you say, do you do
When it all comes down?
- Comedown, Bush*

Friday, December 5, 1997

Luke's: Parking Lot

The club had a thin sheet of metal on the outside of the building with a haphazard portico roof over the entrance. Between the door and the parking lot, there was a strip of white picket fence that had always struck Elizabeth as amusing — Lucky had told her that his father had chosen the fence as a middle finger to anyone in Port Charles trying to domesticate him just because he'd once accidentally been elected mayor.

A car had turned into the parking lot, its bright headlights temporarily blinding Elizabeth. She'd thrown her hands up in front of her face, and then she'd heard the first crack—

A hand fisted around her upper arm and threw her down hard, her knees and palms hitting the asphalt, scraping both. Elizabeth started to move, but then a heavy weight covered her, flattening her against the ground, almost suffocating—

"Stay down—" came the hiss in her ear, heavy breathing against her throat.

She heard it now — rapid gunfire just like the movies — a string of shots exploding quickly in a succession peppering that thin sheet of metal, then a louder explosion followed by a cascade of sparks filtering down from the top of the building, out of the corner of Elizabeth's eye.

"What—" Instinctively, she tried to raise her head, but something stopped her, almost pressing her cheek against the ground.

"Stay down—" the order came again, and this time she recognized the voice — Jason Morgan. He was covering her body, the slick fabric of his tuxedo sliding

across the skin left bare by her dress.

The rapid gunfire stopped first, abruptly as brakes squealed. There were a few more of those louder shots, but not as many as before and there was more time in between. Then there was nothing, just the sound of her light, quick, and shallow breathing and the heavier, though no less rapid, breathing of the man on top of her. He'd shoved her out of the way of the gunfire, she realized belatedly, shielding her from harm.

Jason rolled off her, one hand holding her down by the shoulder and the other reaching under his tux jacket—then a cool flash of metal in his hand—she swallowed hard, realizing he had a revolver in his hand. This was real—this was happening—

"Don't move," he growled, then darted out from behind the fence. Elizabeth drew her knees tight against her body, wrapping her arms around them, her heart thudding in her ear, the pulse at her wrist racing so fast it was throbbing—

But the gunfire had faded and had been replaced by an eerie silence. Elizabeth raised her head, looked around, and saw someone a few feet away. A man, dressed in a similar tuxedo as Jason, lay on his back, blood soaking his white shirt. She stared at him, the horror giving way to something else. A calm, cold resolve.

She planted her hands on the gravel and crawled towards the man, picking up his hand when she reached his side. She recognized him, Elizabeth realized with a start. He worked at the Towers — one of the many men in suits who came and went from the fifteenth floor.

His eyes were unfocused, and he was gasping—Elizabeth pressed two fingers against the pulse at his neck and with the other hand, she investigated the wound beneath the blood-soaked shirt.

The pulse was thin and thready—and from the blood rapidly spurting, an artery had been hit. She met the man's eyes, saw the knowledge reflected back. "You're not alone," she promised him. She picked up his hand again. "I'm right here."

She wouldn't let this man die alone.

As the car had squealed out of the parking lot, Jason had darted after, racing to the edge of the parking lot to see the direction it went, to make sure one of his guys was able to follow. He wanted to fly into the car with Paulie or Big Nate — a few months ago, he would have been riding shotgun—

But he couldn't go—couldn't be part of everything the way he had been once. Jason had to remain behind, to draw the PCPD's focus to himself, and to mop up the damage. He watched as the Cadillac with his men turned a corner after the shooter, then shoved the gun back into the holster at his waist.

Jason turned back, sweeping his eyes across the parking lot — Luke was getting to his feet by the entrance, and the woman—what had Luke called her? Lizzie? No, Elizabeth—

She was no longer tucked safely out of sight. She sat next to a man—next to Reinaldo, Jason realized with a start as he hurried over, dropping to his knees next to him. "Reinaldo—" But it was too late. Reinaldo's dark eyes stared up at the night sky, but there was nothing behind them.

Elizabeth carefully closed his eyes, then looked around the parking lot. She froze for a moment before stumbling to her feet and was already taking off before Jason could register her movement —

Idiot woman—what if the shooter doubled back? She was a damned sitting duck—But only after Jason had started after her, after he saw Luke trying to shove the curious onlookers back inside, only then did he realize she was running towards another victim — another man laying in the middle of the parking lot, clutching his throat, and kicking wildly with his feet, blood staining his fingers.

Elizabeth didn't even feel the gravel and rocks tearing into her legs as she slid next to Nikolas. "Hey, hey—" She tried to look at the wound, but Nikolas was clutching his neck tightly, gagging and gasping—her mind raced, trying to think, trying to remember all the procedures she'd observed, that she'd read about —

The rocks and gravel kicked up again as Jason skidded to a stop, dropping down on the other side of Nikolas. He shoved Nikolas's hand aside for a moment, then hissed. "Press down hard—" he told Elizabeth, grabbing her hand and placing it over the bullet wound in Nikolas's throat.

Oh, God. "He can't breathe," Elizabeth realized. "It must have lodged in his trachea—" They had to get him oxygen—access to it — or Nikolas would suffocate before they could even get him any help. "We need—we need a knife—and—and—"

"A pen," Jason finished. He met Luke's alarmed expression. "A hollow one," he told the club owner. "Quickly."

"What about a knife—" Elizabeth closed her mouth as Jason retrieved a switchblade from inside his jacket. The metal flashed in the lights of the parking lot. "That'll work—" She met Nikolas's eyes. "We're going to get you air, okay? Just hold on—hold on—"

"Got it," Luke said, skidding back to them. Behind him, various partygoers were filtering out, and she could hear screams and crying. Someone cried out for Nikolas—

"Luke, hold down his legs—" Jason nodded to the older man and Luke shifted down. "Hold him still—" He nodded to Elizabeth. "When I'm ready, move your hand—"

Just as Jason was about to slice into Nikolas's neck, Elizabeth's hand slipped away and blood began to spurt again—Jason jerked his eyes up, ready to shout at her only to find Elizabeth being dragged backwards — a screaming blonde had grabbed her upper arm with both hands and Elizabeth was grappling with her, trying to break free.

"Get away!" the blonde screamed. "You're killing him! You're killing him—"

"Goddamn it—" Jason's hand slapped on top of the wound to stop the blood. "I need some help here—"

"Sarah—" A sharp, familiar voice came rang out and Lucky Spencer pulled the women apart. "What the hell—"

Elizabeth ignored the two of them and dropped back to her knees, pushing Jason's hand aside. "Sorry," she said, breathlessly—their eyes locking for just a moment before Jason turned his attention back to Nikolas and his injury.

Elizabeth's throat tightened as she watched Jason Morgan, the local mobster, expertly slice a thin opening in Nikolas's throat, and carefully slide the hollow pen body into the opening—Nikolas's body began to relax, and the horrible choking and gasping finally stopped.

Dimly she was aware of sirens behind her, the whine of the ambulance as it raced down the street.

"Let me in—" Tony Jones muscled Jason aside with a sharp, irritated look. "You could have done some serious damage—"

Elizabeth opened her mouth to protest because where the hell had the good doctor been three minutes earlier when Nikolas had been choking to death on his own blood, but thought better of it. Jason ignored Tony and took the hand Luke offered to pull him to his feet. He dusted off his tuxedo jacket, frowning at the minuscule spots of blood against the snowy white shirt.

Elizabeth swallowed hard, remaining on her hands and knees near Nikolas's head as Tony continued to fuss over him. She looked at the prone body of the other man — the one who hadn't been lucky enough to survive. No emergency tracheotomy could have made a difference for the man Jason Morgan had called Reinaldo.

"You did a good job, Elizabeth." Luke took a step towards her, likely to offer her the same hand he'd given to Jason. But Jason was there first, extending his hand. She took it, his fingers wrapping around hers, warm and solid. Then he put his other hand around her arm, nearly lifting her to her feet. His fingertips slid across her skin, and his expression darkened as he saw the blood streaks on her bare arms.

"You didn't get hit anywhere, did you?" he asked roughly, checking her hands and her arms. "There's blood—"

"It's not mine." She swallowed hard. "It's Nikolas's. And—"

Jason looked where her gaze had gone — there was an EMT standing over the man's body, and his face clenched. Without giving it much thought, Elizabeth touched him — the tense, hard muscle of his forearm bunching underneath the suit jacket. He dropped his eyes towards hers —

She knew the color of them, had been up close and personal with him in the elevator the morning of the wedding. They were a light blue that she'd remembered being as a cold and hard as ice — she couldn't see the color now, but there was no mistaking the mixture of fury and grief in them—he'd lost someone that mattered to him.

—

Reinaldo was dead. The information was seeping in now, registering for the first time, and Jason's mind started to spin. The guard had been inherited from Sonny, one of his most trusted and loyal, and he'd taken the brunt of the gunfire when Jason had ducked away from the the gun fire to protect Elizabeth.

He tore his gaze from the sympathy in her dark blue eyes, dropping down again to the hand resting against his suit jacket, the fingers small and delicate and streaked with blood. Not hers, as he'd thought with a quick slice of fear, but the blood of the men she'd tried to save tonight.

Her cheek throbbing, Elizabeth opened her mouth to defend herself, to comfort Sarah — to do something. But the words simply refused to leave her mouth.

"I just live in the same building," Sarah bit out, the words sang in a mocking tone. "Sure, tell me that again! You're out here with *him*—" She jabbed a finger in Jason's direction, "—and he gets shot at! And Nikolas is the one that pays the price! It should have been you!"

"I was—" Elizabeth swallowed hard. "I was just standing here—"

"Sure you were," Sarah growled. "We both know what you were doing out here—" She flicked her hot gaze to Jason, standing between them with a stony expression, then back at her sister. "At least standing next to him, you'll get what you deserve eventually." Lucky tried to take her by the shoulder, but Sarah jerked away and stalked off.

Lucky threw Elizabeth an apologetic look, then went after her.

"Lizzie," Luke said, touching her shoulder. "You need a ride—"

"I hate that name," she said absently, her hand finally falling to the side. She finally noticed Emily. "Em—" Her voice faltered.

"I'll go find our coats," Emily volunteered immediately. "We'll go home, and this will all be a bad dream—" She darted back into the club.

"Elizabeth," Luke said. "Let me take you inside—get a shot of whiskey—"

"I was just standing here," Elizabeth said. And then she looked down at her hands again, at the blood staining them. They were trembling. The shivers traveled from her hands to her shoulders and then she couldn't stop the shaking—

A jacket dropped on her shoulders, large and warm, engulfing her entire body. She turned, expecting to find Luke, but found Jason Morgan instead, clad now in just the blood-specked white shirt, the top buttons undone. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice lowered. "Elizabeth, right? That's your name?"

"Y-yes," she said, their eyes meeting again. "I'm fine." She drew in a sharp breath. Get it together. Get it together. "Just, um, making a note not to accept any more invitations from your sister for the rest of my life."

Jason's expression eased and then his lips tugged until a smile had formed, transforming the sharp angles and chiseled cheekbones into a warm, friendly face that made breathing just a bit harder for a moment. "Yeah, I wish I'd stayed home,

too."

"So does everyone else—"

They turned at the intrusion of the new voice—Jason's eyes blanking out and the smile disappearing so completely she thought she had imagined it. He stepped in front of her. The red and blue emergency lights swirled, temporarily blinding her as a taller man stepped forward. He was older than both of them, dark-skinned with a shaved head. He arched a brow. "You really know how to show a girl a good time, don't you Morgan?"

Jason said nothing, and Elizabeth wondered what to do. Everyone was getting the wrong idea—first Sarah, and now the cops. This was a bad thing, wasn't it? Surely someone would explain that she'd just been minding her own business— She looked around for Luke, but the cagey club owner had gone back to the entrance and was whispering fervently with Justus and Emily.

"Should have known, Morgan—" the cop gestured. "Blood on both," he told a nearby officer. "Cuff them."

Them? Elizabeth had barely absorbed that before the officer grabbed her arm roughly, Jason's jacket flying off her shoulders. "Hey—" She winced when the metal cuff slapped around her wrist. The cop shoved her against a nearby car, dragging her other arm behind her back.

"Hate to say it," the older cop said, where he still stood next to Jason also in cuffs, his eyes hard and angry now, "but I don't think there'll be a second date." He smirked. "You and Corinthos are hell on women, don't you know. Let's take them down to the station."

"But—" Elizabeth began to protest as the bald cop dragged Jason past her towards a patrol car.

"Don't say anything," Jason muttered. Startled, she looked at him, and she saw the briefest hint of apology in his eyes. Why was he sorry? It was the entire world that had gone insane—

The officer shoved her after Jason and into the car, her shoulder wrenching as she ended up falling into the patrol car, practically in Jason's lap. The door slammed behind her, and Elizabeth realized she was really being arrested for nothing more than standing in a parking lot when someone else had started shooting.

Chapter 3

*Too alarmin' now to talk about
Take your pictures down and shake it out
Truth or consequence, say it aloud
Use that evidence, race it around
There goes my hero
Watch him as he goes
There goes my hero
He's ordinary
- Hero, Foo Fighters*

Friday, December 5, 1997

Port Charles Police Department: Squad Room

Jason had lost count of how many times he'd been dragged through these doors, cuffs tight around his wrists. His first had been shortly after leaving the Quartermaines, arrested for train surfing. Since then, it happened maybe once or twice a month. He had learned early that the best way to handle it was to say nothing and wait for his lawyer.

On this night, watching as some officer manhandled Elizabeth, gripping her upper arm so tightly that it was likely to leave bruises, Jason could feel the familiar heating of the blood, the rise of the rage in his throat, and it took every ounce of his self-control to keep his mouth shut.

"Ow—" Elizabeth grunted as the officer jerked her to a stop, and a muscle in Jason's cheek twitched.

In the harsh light of the squad room, Elizabeth looked like she'd fought a bloody battle. Her chestnut hair, which had likely been carefully arranged into the same disheveled style he remembered from the wedding, had fallen completely out—one random pin holding a section of her hair to her scalp.

Her blue dress had once had two thin straps holing it up—one of them had ripped, and was dangling over the bodice. Her hands and knees were scraped, and there were bloodstains on her forearms, the dark red stark against her alabaster skin. The dress came to mid-thigh, and below it, her knee was cut and her stockings were in tatters — And one of the heels of the sandals she wore had broken off which explained the limp.

How much of that damage had he done, Jason wondered, when he'd thrown her on

the ground and pressed her against the asphalt, desperately trying to keep an innocent from being caught in the crossfire—and how much had been from the rough handling of the officer next to her—Jason's eyes narrowed when the man removed his hand from her arm finally, and her bicep remained a dark, angry pink.

"I know who Anger Boy is," Detective Marcus Taggert sneered, sauntering in behind them. He leaned against the desk, folded his arms. "Bonnie here is new to me. What's the name?"

Elizabeth's sapphire eyes were cool as she considered the question. "Elizabeth Webber," she said flatly.

"Webber," Taggert repeated. He sniffed, looked at Jason. "Fresh meat for you, I guess. She's not from around here—"

"That's not true." Mac Scorpio strode in from the hallway that led to his office. He dumped some folders onto a desk. "Your grandmother isn't going to be happy about this," he told Elizabeth who just sighed. To Taggert, he continued, "Miss Webber is General Hospital royalty," he said dryly. "Granddaughter of Steve Hardy. You're a nurse, aren't you?"

"I'm not answering without a lawyer," Elizabeth said, shifting to take weight from the foot wearing the broken shoe. She arched a slim eyebrow. "So I need a phone call."

"If you're not guilty of anything, why do you need a lawyer?" Taggert said pleasantly.

Elizabeth snorted, then took three steps toward the swinging gate that sectioned off the squad room from the public area. Taggert hissed and stepped in front of her. Her lips curved into a smirk. "I'm not free to leave, therefore I am being detained. According to the Sixth Amendment, that means I have the right to counsel. So either uncuff me and let me leave or give me a damned phone to call a lawyer."

It wasn't often that Jason was left speechless or surprised, but the woman calmly explaining constitutional law and asserting her rights was nothing like the shell-shocked woman who'd stood by while someone slapped her and wished they were dead—

"Not your first arrest, huh?" Taggert grinned. "Or does Morgan give legal lessons on the first date?"

"Lawyer," Elizabeth said, her tone unchanging. "I can say it in five languages or spell it if you're slow."

"Taggart," Mac said, and the detective looked back at the commissioner. "Just get her the damned phone—"

"Liz!" Breathless, Emily burst through the door, stopping just short at the gated entrance. Behind her, Jason was relieved to see Justus. "I brought you a lawyer—"

Taggart rolled his eyes. "Of course," he grunted. "Should have known the mob moll would share Anger Boy's representation—"

"What's he talking about?" Emily asked, confused. She looked at Justus, bewildered, then at her brother. "Justus doesn't work for you, does he?"

"Emily—" Justus gently took Jason's sister and moved her aside. "Why don't you take the car and head home? This might take a while."

"But—" Emily swallowed her protest when she met Jason's eyes. "Okay. Okay. Liz, call me okay?"

When she'd left, Justus looked at Mac, ignoring Taggart, a move calculated to piss him off. "I want to talk to my clients. Both of them."

"Is this the representation you want?" Mac asked Elizabeth. "He's Morgan's lawyer, too, which means he won't be looking out just for you. It's a conflict of interest—"

"Mac—" Justus began.

"There's only a conflict if our interests aren't the same," Elizabeth interrupted. "I can't speak for Jason, but my only interest is going home and soaking in a bubble bath." She flicked her eyes to Jason. "Do we have a conflict?"

Jason didn't think in pictures, but he didn't need to visualize Elizabeth Webber in a bathtub covered in nothing but bubbles to know the answer to that question. "No," he said, speaking for the first time. "I can honestly say we have the exact same goal."

Her lips quivered, nearly smiling before she looked back at Mac. "Any other dumbass questions or can we speak to our lawyer now?"

PCPD: Interrogation Room

As soon as the door had closed behind them, Elizabeth limped over to the rickety table and collapsed into one of the chairs, wincing when her knee protested. "Damn it—" She picked at the remains of her pantyhose, then unstrapped the broken

sandal from her foot. "I loved these shoes."

She glanced over to the corner where Justus Ward had dragged Jason. They spoke with hushed voices, each occasionally throwing a glance in her direction. She decided to ignore them for the moment and studied the broken shoe. She didn't even realize it had been broken until they'd arrived at the police station — adrenaline was no joke. When exactly had it snapped—

"Everything is under control. Johnny's handling it—"

That had been a bit louder, and Elizabeth turned to look. Justus was irritated and Jason's jaw was clenched. Who was Johnny? What was being handled? The shooter?

It was the first time since the shooting had begun that everything had slowed down enough for Elizabeth to think — to absorb and process. She knew what Jason Morgan did for a living — she'd known it months ago when she'd moved into Harborview Towers because her grandmother and sister never shut the hell up about it. And she'd read in the papers about another shooting involving Jason Morgan and Sonny Corinthos over the summer.

Which meant that tonight's gunfire had been meant for Jason Morgan. He was supposed to be dead right now, and anyone else standing near him. But he'd had her on the ground with the first shot still echoing in her ears —

Jason rolled his shoulders. "Look, it's fine. Just get us out of here," he told Justus, his voice back at a normal level. "I'll talk to Johnny in the morning."

"Sorry about that," Justus said, coming over to table. He winced at her wrists which were an angry slash of red. "The cuffs were tight, huh?"

"I've had worse," Elizabeth said, jerking a shoulder. "That cop out there is right. It's not my first time. I got arrested for protests back home in Colorado," she added when Justus lifted his brows. "I also *might* have a misdemeanor assault charge. It was supposed to be expunged, but you never know. I slugged a guy outside a Planned Parenthood clinic."

"That sounds like an interesting story." Justus put his hands at his waist. "All right, let me go work some magic. I'll be back." He disappeared into the squad room, leaving them alone.

"I'm sorry about this," Jason said with a heavy sigh. He paced the small confines of the interrogation room, then leaned against the window that looked out into the squad room. The blinds were pulled down, blocking the view. "They only arrested you because of me."

"Yeah, well, if I'd stayed where you told me to—" Elizabeth wiggled her fingers, seeing the blood again. "I wonder how Nikolas is," she said. She raised her gaze to meet his cool blue eyes. "Do you think he'll live?"

"I think he has a better shot now than he would have if we hadn't been there." Jason tipped his head. "So you've been arrested for assault?"

Elizabeth made a face. "He had it coming which is why the DA made a deal. I went with a friend to the clinic — she was getting an abortion. He got in her face calling her a whore and a babykiller." She rubbed her wrist. "He's lucky I can't punch harder or I didn't aim lower." She looked at him again. "Not your first rodeo either, is it?"

"No. Definitely not." Jason shifted again. "You shouldn't have any issues from this. Justus is a great attorney—"

A great attorney who hadn't told his family he had taken Jason as a client, but that was none of her business. "I know. I was actually going to call him. He's the only lawyer I know." She shivered and looked at the suit jacket Justus had dumped on the table. "I guess Emily couldn't find my coat—"

"Here." Jason dropped it over her shoulders, the way he had in the parking lot, and she smiled. "Luke will find it or—"

"It's fine—" Elizabeth bit her lip. This was such a trippy experience. She hadn't expected to be arrested tonight or to be tossed into an interrogation room with Jason Morgan. She drew the jacket around her more tightly, sliding her arms through the sleeves, then slid her shoe back on, adjusting the strap. "I'm...I'm sorry about your friend," she ventured hesitantly, and he looked at her sharply. "The man in the parking lot. Um, I tried to help him—" Her voice tightened and she looked at her hands again. At the blood under her fingernails. "But it was—there was nothing. All I could do was hold his hand so he wasn't alone."

His face was blank — a default expression for him, clearly—but a muscle in his throat jerked and he nodded in acknowledgment, but said nothing else.

PCPD: Squad Room

"There's nothing you can charge them with," Justus said, folding his arms. "You and I both know you only took the girl because you wanted to piss Jason off—"

"I arrested them because they had blood on them at the scene of a shooting," Taggart said coolly. "I can hold them for at least twenty-four hours—"

"Go ahead and try it," Justus dared, flicking his irritated gaze to Mac. "Hold Elizabeth Webber for twenty-four hours when she did nothing more than stand in a parking lot and then save someone's life. The granddaughter of Steve Hardy. The daughter of Jeff Webber — didn't he just win some big award for his humanitarian work? I thought I saw it in the paper."

"Fine," Mac said, holding up a hand when Taggart started to reply. "Let her go, but we *can* hold him—"

"And then I'll make sure the media knows that you're holding my client when you let Elizabeth go. They were both in the parking lot, and they worked together to give Nikolas Cassadine a fighting chance. So you let one go for the media blitz, and hold the other, I'll file a civil lawsuit—"

"Goddamn it—" Taggart leapt to his feet. "This is why she should have her own damn lawyer—"

"If the Cassadine kid lives, and the hospital says he probably will," Mac said, "we're going to take a beating. We gotta let them both go, Tag."

"This isn't over," Taggart called to Justus who was at the door to the interrogation room. "I'm not giving up."

"No, you'd never be that reasonable," he said dryly. "Always a pleasure."

PCPD: Interrogation Room

Jason checked the clock on the wall, muttering under his breath. The entire night had been a damned disaster — the messenger's body hadn't been found yet, which was probably a good thing. If Taggart got wind of that, then there was no way in hell he was getting out of here tonight. The shooter was in the wind — the car had been lost somewhere downtown — there was nothing for him to do and no one to punch.

He glanced over at Elizabeth Webber, thought about how she must feel tonight. The accusations thrown around by the crazy woman in the parking lot and being dragged down to the PCPD — there were too many people who now lumped them together and Jason knew that the truth didn't matter. No one would care that he'd only seen her a few times, hadn't known her name until tonight.

If Moreno found out that he'd been arrested with a woman, if that word got back to any of the men hoping to fulfill the contract on Sonny's life by forcing Jason to give up his former boss's location — they'd see the people around him as a target. Robin

was safe, he thought, in Paris. Contact cut off between them, though it hurt to remember that. She'd been gone long enough, Jason hoped, that no one saw her a way to hurt him.

Emily was always a possibility, but she was a high profile mark. Daughter of prominent family — no one wanted the smoke that came with going after a Quartermaine. The old man was ruthless and could bring down the Feds if he wanted should something happen to the beloved granddaughter—his favorite, Jason acknowledged.

But Elizabeth Webber—he swept his eyes over her again—was different. She might have connections to a respected family, but it stopped there. No, someone like her would be the perfect target for a weak cowards like Moreno and Reece who'd used Brenda like a hammer against Sonny until his friend had broken under the pressure and disappeared.

Jason wouldn't let that happen. It didn't matter if they were wrong about Elizabeth — if anyone made a threat against her — Jason would annihilate them—and he'd enjoy it. He was going to have to look out for her. Protect her, if she'd let him.

Justus opened the door. "You're free to go," he declared.

"Thank God." Elizabeth got to her feet, and raked her hands through her hair, snagging on that one remaining pin and removing it. "I need to get my car from Luke's—" She grimaced. "My purse. I dropped it in the parking lot—"

"I'll call Luke," Jason offered. "And I'll give you a ride—" He paused and she looked at him. "You were at the Towers a few months ago. Is—do you live there?"

"On the second floor." She brightened. "Yeah. You live there, don't you? Can I get a ride? I need to get the desk to let me in."

It was too easy, he thought. He'd wanted to take her home so he'd have a location for security. Now, if he could get inside the apartment to see how weak it was, he'd have everything he needed. "Let's go, then."

Harborview Towers: Parking Garage

Elizabeth winced as she stepped out of the limo, her weight landing awkwardly on the foot the broken heel. "I can't wait to kick these off," she said. "I need to go to the lobby to get someone to let me in—"

"I took care of it," Jason said, closing the limo door. "One of my guys is picking up your purse and car from Luke's, and —" He looked over as the security door

connecting the parking garage to the lobby opened, and yet another man with a dark suit stepped out. "Harry—"

"The spare key for Miss Webber's studio," the man said, holding out the slim silver key. "Wally at the front desk says to drop it off in the morning."

"Oh." Elizabeth blinked as the key was dropped into her palm. "Um, thanks, I guess. That..." Made her night easier. And meant she could sleep in before her shift started. If you could ignore the gunfire and arrest, hanging around Jason Morgan wasn't so bad. The whole night was starting to seem surreal and the clock had barely struck midnight.

Jason gestured towards the elevator and they boarded. When he pressed the button for the second floor, he used the access key that would by pass the other floor. Elizabeth smiled briefly. "You didn't have to do that. It's one floor—"

"I guess not," he admitted. "It's just a habit—except that one time—" he glanced at her, and their eyes held. "I forgot that day."

"There was a lot going on, I guess," Elizabeth said, biting her lip. "I was so mad," she admitted. "I was waiting on the elevator, and someone used the code from the fifteenth floor — I was already late for the church."

The doors slid closed and the elevator started to lift. "Yeah, Sonny went ahead of me," Jason said. "I saw you at the church."

Elizabeth arched a brow. "You really notice everything, huh? I wouldn't have thought you'd have room for anything other than what was going on." She itched to ask him about it — what kind of friendship would explain sending your best man to jilt your bride? Why had Sonny Corinthos asked it—and why had Jason agreed?

But it was none of her business.

"I noticed you," he said, his voice dropping a bit, and she flicked her eyes back at him, startled to find him watching her. "You were with Luke's kid."

Elizabeth made a face and stepped off the elevator when the doors opened on her floor. "Yeah. We broke up a few days after that. He's a nice guy, but—" She shrugged a shoulder and stopped in front of her door. "We just didn't mesh."

She unlocked her door, and pushed it open, then looked back at Jason. Here it was. The end of the insanity, the busting of this bubble. Time for the surreal dream to end, and real life to come back. She'd go inside, and Jason would travel another thirteen floors to his place.

I noticed you.

She licked her lips, nervously, and his eyes dropped down for a split second before lifting again to meet hers. All the nerve endings tingled. "Did you—I couldn't sleep if I wanted to, so maybe—um, I have coffee," she said finally.

"Coffee would be good," Jason said, and followed her inside.

Harborview Towers: Elizabeth's Studio

The studio apartment was completely different than two story penthouse he lived in. In one corner, there was a double bed with a white metal frame jammed against the wall. It was paired with a side table and a taller dresser. At the foot of the bed, there was a long closet, with clothes spilling out of it. In the corner closer to the door, there was a plush sofa, an ancient white coffee table with knicks and scratches in the wood, both arranged in front of a television perched on a rickety bookshelf filled with a mixture of books and VHS tapes. The kitchen was opposite the bed, separated from the living area by a high counter. Between the kitchen and the bedroom, there was a door that probably led to a bathroom. Tucked in the fourth remaining corner was a pair of easels and a shelf filled with other art supplies.

Elizabeth immediately kicked off the broken shoes she'd been limping around in and stripped off the jacket he'd given her back in the squad room, dumping it on the sofa. She headed for the sink behind the kitchen counter and switched on the water.

"It's not much, sorry," she said with a wince as he joined her and washed her scrub her hands, the streaks of blood disappearing into the sink. "Definitely not the fifteenth floor."

"It's—" He looked around again — it wasn't messy, but cluttered. Definitely lived in, he thought. It was better than upstairs, Jason thought. You couldn't hear your own voice echoing. "It's fine."

She offered him a smile, a curve of her lips that made her eyes sparkle. "You don't have to say that—"

"I used to live in a room over Jake's bar," Jason told her. "And an abandoned boxcar in the woods. This is a palace compared to those." And the penthouse upstairs wasn't even his.

"Well, I guess it's better than the woods." Elizabeth wiped her hands, then went to fill the coffee carafe with water. "I only have instant. I don't drink it much, but—"

"It's fine." Jason glanced around the studio again, looking for weak entry points. The security for this floor wasn't as good as his own, but the Towers still had security in the lobby, and the locks on the door had looked okay. There were only two windows in here — both of them large picture windows that took up most of the wall. He didn't like that all, he decided. Second floor — too easy to smash and get inside. Maybe he could find a way to upgrade them into bullet proof when she was at work and add some security on them—

"You draw?" he said finally, realizing he'd been quiet too long.

"When I can." Elizabeth dumped coffee into the filter, then switched on the pot. "It's why I picked this apartment — the windows—" She nodded at them. "Great light."

He didn't know why that mattered, but she'd seemed certain so he nodded. "But you're a nurse."

"Gotta pay the bills," she sighed. She absently picked at the torn strap of her dress, then ripped it off. "Maybe I can make it a strapless—" Elizabeth dumped the strap in the trash and went to her cabinets for some mugs.

"The woman in the parking lot," Jason said, and Elizabeth stilled, her fingers wrapped around the handles of two cups. She looked at him, her eyes wary. "Who was she?"

"Sarah. My sister." She carried them over to the coffee pot. "She, uh, isn't a big fan of me. I apparently ruined everything by moving here after college." She jerked a shoulder, but he'd seen the misery flash over her face. "She's been angry at me since I signed the lease — apparently just living in this building is a stain on the family—"

Jason scowled. "There's over three hundred people who live in the Towers—"

"I know. But—" Elizabeth sighed, staring at the pot, waiting for it to finish. "I never really fit in with my family. My brother and my parents — they're not as open about it as Sarah, but I've been disappointing them since birth. And I got arrested a few times in college — mostly protesting — but the thing at the clinic — it didn't matter that I was right. It was just so embarrassing." Her lips thinned. "Nothing I do is ever good enough for them."

"I know what that's like," Jason said without thinking and she looked at him again, handing him a mug of black coffee. "You know my sister. Did she tell you about the accident?"

"She mentioned it. And you pick up things." Elizabeth wandered past him over to

the sofa, picking up discarded pieces of clothing she did so. "You lost your memory."

"More than that, but yeah. And it was made clear to me over and over again that who I woke up to be isn't what the Quartermaines wanted." The coffee was weak and poorly made — she wasn't kidding about never drinking it. He set it aside on the coffee table. "I just ignored them and did what I wanted."

Elizabeth smiled then, her expression cleared. "That's all you can do, really. I like my job, and I like my apartment. I like my friends. I'm not changing any of it for my family." She leaned against the arm of the sofa. "Maybe it would be easier if I didn't remember them," she wondered. "Because I can ignore them and tell myself I'm not trying to get their approval—I did that tonight, at dinner. And then three hours later—" She shook her head, looked away. "I don't know. Maybe it'd be easier to give up if I didn't remember how much I wanted them to accept me."

"It doesn't make it easier," Jason said, and then closed his mouth, not sure where that came from.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't—" Elizabeth rose. "I didn't mean what happened to you was a good thing—"

"I was confused and angry all the time," Jason told her, and she fell silent. "And I knew I was hurting people — I scared Emily a few times, and I was rude to my grandmother. I didn't know who they were, but that didn't mean I couldn't see how much I hurt them by not being Jason Quartermaine." He exhaled slowly. He hadn't really admitted that to himself before, and wasn't really sure why he was doing it now. "I had to leave if I was going to make a life for myself. So I went out on my own. And then I met Sonny."

She tipped her head, and there was something in her eyes, in her expression, that made him keep talking, that made him feel safe enough to say anything. "Sonny gave me a chance to be somebody, and that was all I needed. That's all you need — just someone who accepts who you are."

"I have that," Elizabeth said softly. "I have Emily. She's been a great friend. But it doesn't always stop you from wishing things were different — that the people who are supposed to love you no matter what could see you. Accept you. Family isn't supposed to hurt you."

"Then you make your own family," Jason told her. "Sonny's my family, and when he comes back—" he closed his mouth abruptly, confused at how far down the path he'd gone. No one was supposed to know about his mission, about his plan to fix everything so Sonny could come home, and he'd just blurted it out to this stranger—

"He'll see that you held things together," Elizabeth finished, and he just stared at her. "You took over for him. Emily told me. I don't know what that means," she added with a curve of her lips, "but I understand the big picture. He had to leave, didn't he? That's why you went to the church separately. He couldn't go, so he sent you instead. I wondered what kind of friend you'd ask to do that for you, but it's not just friends. It's family. And you do whatever family needs you to."

The clarity of that statement stunned him, and he swallowed hard. He'd thought of Sonny's request as an order because orders were meant to be followed, not questioned or ignored. But she'd articulated exactly why he'd carried it out — Sonny was his family, and there wasn't anything Jason wouldn't do for him.

"Yeah," Jason said finally. He cleared his throat. He should go. Should have gone a long time ago — he'd only wanted to see the inside of the apartment for security—why had he asked her about the crazy blonde—

He stepped back, opened his mouth to make his excuses, but Elizabeth surprised him as she'd done all evening. She slid off the arm of the sofa and touched him—his shirt, he corrected quickly, deftly buttoning one that had come undone at some point, her fingers sliding over his chest. He caught her hand before she could take it away, held it against his heart which was beating faster for some reason.

"You must really miss him," Elizabeth continued in that quiet, soft tone that made his throat burn. Her eyes were deep, fathomless oceans of blue holding his own gaze hostage—he couldn't take his eyes off her, couldn't understand how she'd known him for the span of a few hours and seemed to know him better than he knew himself.

"I do," Jason murmured, and then she smiled again, and he lost his damn mind. It was the only explanation. He kissed her, dragging her against him hard, one hand in her hair, and the other at the small of her back, holding her in place, stopping her from pulling back—

But she didn't. She dove in as if she'd been waiting for this moment all her life, raking her nails down his chest, then in his hair. The button she'd just fixed went flying as she tore at his shirt, little plastic discs hitting the ground. He tasted her throat, the hollow at her collar bone, his hands digging under the short skirt of the dress, dragging down her pantyhose, already in tatters.

"This is insane," she breathed, stripping the shirt from his shoulders, then fumbling with belt buckle. She struggled to get her other arm out of the remaining strap on the bodice, and Jason finally just tore it, shoving it down towards her waist, arching her back over the arm of the sofa.

"Should I stop?" he murmured, nipping at the soft skin of her chest, grinning when her fingers tightened in his hair. He licked her nipple, then blew on it gently, and she gasped, sitting up like a woman coming up for air.

"You stop and I'll kill you," Elizabeth growled, bring his mouth to hers again, wrapping her legs around his waist. He lifted her in the air and stumbled the short distance to the bed, dropping her down and climbing on top, kicking off his pants and shoes. She wiggled, helping him peel the dress from her body. He tossed it to the side, then lowered down to kiss her again, her soft skin pressed against all the hard angles of his body.

The whole night had happened in slow motion, and now it was in hyper drive. He couldn't have stopped to think if even he'd wanted to. His blood and brain were screaming the same thing to keep touching and tasting because she might change her mind at any moment and he'd didn't want to see the truth in her expression when she realized how much danger he could and would bring her to life—

It was faster and rougher than he'd wanted, but she urged him on with her breathless whispers and gasps. Every place on his body that she touched was on fire, the blaze racing through them both. He blindly reached for his pants. "I need, wait, we need—"

Elizabeth rolled over to her nightstand and jerked open the drawer so hard it came out of the table. She grabbed something from the floor and turned back to him, the little foil packet grasped in her fingers, her smile wicked. "Let me help with you that."

She pushed at his shoulders and climbed over him, straddling as she ripped open the condom and rolled it over him, slowly, her fingers lingering. He growled and tried to sit up, to roll them back over, but surprisingly strong, Elizabeth pushed him back down, leaning down to kiss him, the soft curls he'd wanted to touch all night brushing against his skin.

This time when he rolled them back, Elizabeth allowed it, wrapping her legs around his waist again. "Now, now," she demanded.

If he'd been able to breathe or think, he might have made her wait longer, to hear her beg, but he was beyond that. He lifted his hips and with one slow thrust, sank inside of her. She tilted her head up, and he pressed his mouth against her throat, nipping as they raced again, the heat building to an inferno—

And then Elizabeth's hands scraped his back, and her body tightened until they both exploded. He collapsed next to her, their chests heaving, the only sound in the room was their shallow breathing.

Chapter 4

*Maybe it's intuition
But some things you just don't question
Like in your eyes, I see my future in an instant
And there it goes
I think I found my best friend
I know that it might sound
More than a little crazy but I believe
- I Knew I Loved You, Savage Garden*

Saturday, December 6, 1997

Harborview Towers: Elizabeth's Studio

Elizabeth stretched her arms over her head and closed her eyes, waiting for her heart to stop thudding. What the hell had just happened?

She turned her head, seeking out the clock on the nightstand, stunned to see the red digital numbers stating that it was a few minutes shy of twelve-thirty. They'd only been in her studio for a half hour which included the terrible coffee, deep conversation, and best sex of her life.

"It's actually pretty efficient," Elizabeth said, then started to giggle, ridiculously giddy and floating on air.

"Efficient?" Jason propped himself on his elbow, looming over her with a bewildered expression, his chest glistening with a sheen of perspiration. "Is that a compliment?"

She bit her lip, dragging her eyes from his body to his face to see him smirking. "Definitely. If you knew how long it usually took me to, uh, finish, it's absolutely a compliment."

"Well, glad to have been of service," he murmured, leaning down to capture her mouth in a slow, drugging kiss. She sank into him, sliding her fingers into his hair, and hooking her leg over his hip.

She was really in bed with Jason Morgan, naked as the day they'd been born, and from the way he felt against her, halfway to a second round which couldn't possibly be as good as the first—

If someone asked her to explain how the chain of events had gone from a crowded

miserable party to this moment, Elizabeth really wouldn't be able to connect the dots. Better just to stay in the moment and enjoy it for however long it lasted.

In a few hours the sun would rise in the sky, and it would be different in the daylight. She'd remember that he wasn't just a sexy, gorgeous man of mystery who lived in her building, but her best friend's beloved older brother and the head of the Port Charles mob, and she was the screw up black sheep of a well-respected family.

No, it was definitely better to live in the moment.

Jason woke from the light doze he'd slipped into after they'd finished a second time—or maybe it was the third, he thought, resting one hand behind his head and looking up at the ceiling. Depended on how you counted, he thought, and maybe it was better not to.

It was closer to two in the morning if the clock on her night table was to be trusted, and he should really slip out now. Find his clothes and go back up to the empty, cavernous penthouse where he only occupied a handful of rooms.

In a few hours, when the sun was up, he'd have to find someone else to put on the door — someone else to be the head of his security team and personal bodyguard. He hated it—had never wanted someone to put their life on the line to save him, but it was part of the role Sonny wanted him to play. All the more reason to keep his head on straight and work hard to get Sonny back so Jason didn't have to bury another Reinaldo.

"You're thinking too loud."

Jason turned his head at the mumbled words, saw Elizabeth curled on her side next to him, one hand underneath the pillow, the other balled in a fist near her face. Her eyes were still closed, but her breathing had changed.

"Sorry," he apologized, a bit uncertain now. It had all seemed so clear a few hours ago when the lights in the studio had been switched on and the adrenaline and lust had been calling the shots. Now, it was just the two of them in the dark and reason, rationale was slipping back in.

"S'okay..." Her eyelids fluttered and she rolled onto her back, stretching her arms over her head, the sheet sliding down her chest just enough for Jason's interest to stir again. "Not really sleeping."

"Doing a good impression of it," he replied, and she smiled.

"Just resting my eyes." Those eyes were open now, and she was looking at him, fully awake. "A long night, and it's—" She winced. "It's only two. Man. Feels like I've lived a decade since I left for that party."

Jason exhaled. "Yeah." He sat up, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the shadowed room wondering where exactly the various pieces of his clothing had ended up. "I should probably go," he said because it felt like what he was supposed to say.

"You could." She sat up, too, her warm body resting against his, her cheek on his shoulder. "Do you want to?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "No," he admitted. "I don't want to go upstairs."

Elizabeth was quiet for a moment, then surprised him by hearing what he hadn't said. "You really don't like the penthouse, do you?"

"No." He laid back, taking her with him, his hand in hers so that her arm was draped across his chest and she was tucked tightly against his side. "I don't. There's too many rooms." He was quiet for a moment. "Reinaldo was Sonny's guard first. On the door. Went with him everywhere. He won't be there tomorrow."

"I'm sorry."

He stroked her back, his fingertips gliding up and down her spine. Why had he told her that? Or any of the things he'd said to her tonight? Why did it feel safe to say anything to her?

"Stay," Elizabeth said, tilting her face up so that their eyes could meet. "No point in dragging yourself upstairs when you don't want to be there anyway." Her lips curved. "You know, for a small studio apartment, my shower's pretty big. I bet both of us could fit. And you can make your own coffee in the morning since mine is so terrible."

He grinned, the melancholy fading. He kissed her again, pulling her over him. "That's the best offer I've had in weeks."

Morning came far too soon, Elizabeth thought, though she'd been right about the shower — it really was large enough for them both. If the night could have lasted forever, she'd have felt pretty good about it. But time stopped for no man—or woman—and she found herself standing in her small kitchen area, sipping her hot

chocolate and watching Jason start the coffee pot.

"Oh, I thought a half a scoop would be enough for one cup," Elizabeth said. She leaned against the opposite counter.

"It would, but you put too much water in the pot. It diluted the taste. Three cups per scoop." He tapped the side of the carafe to show her. Jason had put back on the remains of his tux from the night before, but there were no buttons left on the shirt so it hung open. She congratulated herself on a job well done — it was a great view to start the day. He caught her staring and grinned when she flushed. "You're the one that said we had to get out of the shower."

"We did," Elizabeth said, but made a face all the same. "I have work at noon, and I'm sure—" She pursed her lips. "Well, I'm sure there are things you need to do." She was sorry she'd brought up the outside world when his smile faded. "Anyway, we were turning into prunes."

"Fair enough." He switched it on, and they watched the coffee drip in silence for a moment. "You're right, though. I have things I have to do."

He didn't look so happy about those things, Elizabeth thought, but stopped herself from wondering too much about what his day would encompass. She had to go to the hospital and was likely to run into Sarah—and oh, man, what would she say when she saw Emily? She was supposed to have called her the night before—

Was she obligated to tell Emily where her brother had spent the night? She furrowed her brow, sipped her hot chocolate again. Maybe you were supposed to ask permission or something first — or maybe it was just a warning. Or a blessing. Approval. What if Emily got angry? What if Elizabeth said nothing and it got out anyway —

"You okay?"

Elizabeth jerked herself back to the moment, and saw Jason staring at her, a cup of coffee halfway to his mouth. "What? Yeah. Just thinking about work."

"You're a nurse, right? That's what they said last night at the station." Jason leaned back, looking way too relaxed and *right* in her kitchen. He shouldn't look so good, she thought darkly, with his tousled damp hair, rumpled pants, and that shirt hanging open—no one had the right to look that good in the morning without product—

"Yeah. I work mostly in maternity and pediatrics, but I'm training for the NICU. Where babies go when they're born too early or need surgery," Elizabeth explained.

"Or have medical issues. Neonatal ICU—"

"Ah." Jason nodded. "You like to work with kids?"

"Kids are the only people I understand." She shrugged and set her empty hot cup in the sink. "They say what they're thinking, and it's not too complicated. If something hurts, they don't lie about it. Adult patients think too much." Elizabeth went over to her bedroom area and released the clip in her hair, letting the damp locks hang down to her shoulders. She ran her fingers through the mess, then went to work on taming it into something that would look presentable.

Jason came up behind her, appearing in the mirror that hung over the dresser. "I should get going," he said, but he didn't move towards the door. Instead, he put his hands on her shoulders, and brushed his lips against her throat. She closed her eyes and leaned back against him. When he eventually left, it would burst the bubble and this would be over.

She really didn't want this to be over.

"We could both quit and run away," Elizabeth said, sighing when he wrapped his arms around her waist, his lips nibbling at her ear. "Some place warmer than Port Charles."

"I don't really feel the cold, but if it meant you'd wear a bikini, I could be interested."

Elizabeth smiled, then her eyes opened open. "Wait, you don't feel the cold? Why?"

"Something about the nerve receptors after the accident." Jason stepped back and she turned to face him. "I can get cold or hot. I just don't always know it."

"Oh." She touched his shirt, her fingers lingering on the piece of thread left from one of the buttons that had been ripped off the night before. "Sorry about that—are they all gone?"

"Most of them." Jason kissed her again, and she tightened her hands in his shirt, then slid down to play with the buckle at his waist. He caught them and broke the kiss, stepping back. "Don't start something you can't finish," he warned her.

"Hey, we proved last night we could be very efficient," Elizabeth reminded him, but put some more space between them. "But you get me back in that bed before my hair dries, and it'll be impossible to fix before work, so you just keep that mouth over there, and I'll keep my hands to myself."

"I'll go," Jason said, but he still didn't release her hands, and it made her feel all tingly and giddy that he didn't want to leave anymore than she wanted him to go. Maybe for him it was a little bit about going home to somewhere that he didn't like, but it was also about her. And them. And all the hours since midnight.

"I want to see you again," she blurted out, then snapped her mouth shut because what an incredibly insane thing to say first. But just when she'd convinced herself it was the most humiliating moment of her life, his lips curved into a smile.

"Me, too. When do you get done work?"

Harborview Towers: Hallway

Jason stepped off the elevator and paused for just an extra second at the blank space in front of the door. Until Sonny had left in September, there had always been a guard stationed there, rotating in three eight-hour shifts. After Jason took over, he'd eliminated two of those shifts, only keeping Reinaldo on to keep up appearances and because Sonny had asked him to.

Jason had always understood the purpose of that bodyguard — of any bodyguard — to step between danger and the target, to keep Sonny safe. He'd been dedicated to that purpose, determined to keep his mentor and friend alive at all costs, even if the price meant his own life. But he didn't much like the thought of being the reason Reinaldo was dead. He hadn't wanted anyone on the door, but now the lack of protection struck Jason as wrong.

He exhaled slowly, then unlocked the door, pushing it out of his mind. He went inside the penthouse, already struck by how empty and open it was. If he raised his voice too loud, it would echo off the walls. And to admit the truth—that he hated living here—felt like a betrayal to Sonny who had given him so many opportunities. It felt ungrateful.

He stripped off the tuxedo, making a note to trash it. The shirt, even before the buttons had been lost, had had some blood spots. He'd have to replace it. He'd only just changed into a pair of dark pants and a long-sleeved gray shirt when there was a knock at the door.

"We're gonna need someone on that door immediately," Johnny declared when he strode through a moment later, not waiting for Jason to answer it. Benny and Justus followed behind them. "I've been calling you," Johnny continued. "Where have you been?"

Jason glanced down at his cell phone and shrugged. "I forgot to charge it after the station. Was there a problem you couldn't handle?"

Johnny clenched his jaw. "No, but that's fucking irresponsible, don't you think?"

"So is missing the whispers about Moreno planning something big — Luke picked up on them, why didn't we?"

"Are you blaming me—"

"Gentlemen—" Benny stepped between the two men, his hands outstretched. "The shooter is in the wind," he told Jason. "Moreno says he's not responsible, and it's not retaliation for the messenger — that package didn't land on the Oasis's doors until dawn."

Jason nodded, folded his arms. "He's lying. No one else would have done something so stupid—" He looked at Johnny. "Take out one of the clubs. The Oasis would have been my first pick, but with the message we sent, it might be better to go after one of the others —"

"Yeah, I'll take care of it. The Star Lounge is a good second choice. I'll wait another day because they'll expect it today." He paused. "Charge your damn phone." And then he left, the door slamming behind him.

Jason rolled his shoulders. It had been stupid, he realized now, to stay out all night, to leave himself without a connection to anyone in the organization. No one had known where he was — except maybe Justus. He should be irritated with himself for the rookie mistake, but he couldn't quite find any regret or shame in how he'd spent the night before.

Benny cleared his throat. "We need to take another look at your personal security," he told Jason. "You want me to ask around?"

"Yeah. Find someone to take Reinaldo's shift, and—" Jason hesitated. "Last night, the PCPD arrested Elizabeth Webber — her name has been linked with mine, I'm sure, in the papers this morning—" He looked at Justus who nodded. "So she needs some protection. I don't know if Moreno would be stupid enough to think of her as a target, but I don't want to take any chances."

"All right. What are you thinking about? A guard—"

"No, not—" He'd almost said not yet, but a guard was incredibly premature. They'd spent one night together. He hadn't even really thought about it beyond wanting to do it again. A guard would put a target on her back even more prominently than what already existed. "No. But no packages or visitors to her floor without verification. And replace her windows with whatever we have here."

"I'll take care of it."

When Benny had gone, Justus came forward and set the papers on the desk. "You're right about the link being made in the papers, including an interview on WKPC with Elizabeth's sister Sarah, blaming her sister's relationship with you for Nikolas's shooting." Jason winced, and Justus raised his brows. "I didn't get that impression last night — I thought Elizabeth was in the wrong place, wrong time."

"She was. She came out just before the shooting started. I didn't even—" Jason grimaced. "I didn't know who she was."

"Yeah, well, her help has gotten her a lot of heat already. Our guy in the department says Taggert ran a background check on her and knows about her living in the building. I also got a request this morning for an interview after your package was found at the Oasis." Justus folded his arms. "Not to mention the dozen messages from the family who know I work for you now."

"Sorry about that," Jason said, though he really wasn't. "I warned you."

"You did. The PCPD wants to know if you have an alibi for last night after leaving the station," Justus continued. "Time of death on the Oasis delivery was around one in the morning. Do I stonewall them or give them information?"

The right answer would be to ignore it. They had nothing connecting Jason to the messenger which was the point of giving the job to someone else. But that was before last night. Before the cops had someone they could hassle. If he said nothing, they'd go straight for Elizabeth. Which definitely wasn't the way he wanted her to be introduced to that part of his life. He exhaled slowly. "Yeah, I have an alibi for last night. Let me talk—" He looked at Justus. "Let me talk to her first. Can you stall them until tomorrow?"

"I can. Your, uh, alibi—you're sure it holds for that time period? We got back to the Towers at midnight or just before—there's evidence of that in the parking garage."

"Yeah." Jason picked up the papers, skimmed the article which noted that Elizabeth Webber, nurse at General Hospital and granddaughter of Steve and Audrey Hardy, had been arrested at the scene for obstruction of justice and later released. "Pull those tapes and the ones for the second floor elevator for last night and this morning. Time stamps around midnight and—" He glanced at the clock, did some calculations. "Seven-thirty."

"Ah. Fair enough. I'll take care of it, and you let me know when you want me to communicate that information to the PCPD so they can bother someone else."

General Hospital: Nurse's Station

"You certainly had an exciting evening last night." Bobbie Jones stepped up inside the hub, a copy of the *Port Charles Herald* tucked under her arm. "I didn't expect you to come in today."

"They let me go around midnight." Elizabeth flipped through a chart and made another note. "And I wasn't even officially arrested. They just cuffed us and shoved us into a room until Justus threatened to make a big deal about it." She rolled her eyes. "Of course, it was already too late for my reputation. Sarah gave that stupid interview to the news and all the papers—"

She glanced at the paper Bobbie tossed into the trash. It was infuriating to know there was nothing she could do about the rumors flying around — it wouldn't matter to anyone that before last night, she and Jason had never exchanged a single word. Now, she wouldn't be able to deny that they were strangers.

They still were, of course, except strangers probably didn't know about the mole on the inside of her thigh—or that Jason Morgan, despite appearances of being a stone-cold mob boss, was lonely and a bit sad.

Strangers wasn't the right word, but there didn't seem to be a better one.

"The papers will print what they want," Bobbie said. "I'm sorry about your sister — it'll probably only get worse until Nikolas is in the clear. You saved his life, you know."

"Maybe." Or had just prolonged the inevitable. She'd heard through the hospital grapevine that Cassadine prince had suffered stroke in the early morning hours, and was still in critical condition. The odds weren't great, but she hoped he'd pull through. "Sarah will just keep blaming me for killing him, as if I'm the one who had the AK-47," she muttered. "And Gram will just give me that disappointed look —"

"It'll blow over eventually, sweetheart." Bobbie touched her shoulder. "And eventually, everyone will understand there's nothing between you and Jason. Anyone who knows him has probably already ignored the rumors. They know better."

Elizabeth set down her pen, peered at the older nurse curiously. "They do?"

"I guess you really wouldn't know — you'd only moved here a month before—" Bobbie began to sort through her own charts. "Jason was dating Robin Scorpio for over a year. They were madly in love — pretty much since he woke up. They were

really very sweet together, and he's been broken-hearted ever since she moved to Paris."

"Oh." Elizabeth bit her lip. "I did know about that — Emily mentioned it at the time. But didn't she leave in like August?" Four months was a long time, wasn't it? Suddenly she wasn't so sure. And now that she thought about it, she'd seen pictures of Robin. Hadn't she been a petite brunette, too?

"Robin will be graduating medical school this spring, and she'll be back to start her internship in the fall," Bobbie continued. "Everyone expects her to match here, of course. So you see, you just have to deal with the rumors for a few months, and people will move on—" She patted Elizabeth's arm, reassuringly.

The elevator doors opened, and Carly Roberts stepped out, one hand braced at her back and the other over her bulging belly. She leveled a malevolent glare at the pair before disappearing down the hall to an appointment.

"She's a nightmare," Elizabeth muttered, returning to her work. She'd had a few run-ins with the acerbic blonde over the summer when Carly had wanted to schedule appointments and tests and Elizabeth hadn't been able to pull strings to help her. Carly had filed a complaint against her that went nowhere, but it had still stung. The last thing Elizabeth needed was for Sarah or her grandmother to have any ammunition against her.

"Well, hopefully, she'll have the baby soon and stop plaguing us at the hospital," Bobbie murmured. "I used to think Tony deserved whatever he got when it came to her, but I'm not so sure these days." She looked at Elizabeth. "What kind of mother do you think she'll make?"

"I am not getting anywhere near that disaster." Elizabeth scooped up her charts. "I have rounds."

Recovery Room: Bar

Jason was relieved to see the inside of the bar relatively empty, with a few patrons sitting at a corner table. Behind the bar, Mike Corbin, Sonny's father and the owner, was looking over his books, scribbling with a pencil. Mike was probably the only person in Port Charles that missed Sonny as much as Jason did, and it was comforting sometimes to talk to him. It almost felt like having Sonny back.

"I was hoping you'd stop by before I had to track you down," Mike said with a wide smile. "You want a beer?"

It was barely two in the afternoon, but Jason's day hadn't gone any better after the

meeting at the penthouse that morning, so he nodded and Mike went to pour a draft. "I guess you heard about last night."

"I read the papers and watched the news." Mike slid the pencil behind his ear. "Nikolas Cassadine is still in critical condition."

"I saw." Jason exhaled slowly. "He's friends with Emily, so I hope he recovers."

"I read about Reinaldo. I'm sorry, Jason. He was a good kid. Michael depended on him," Mike said, and Jason smiled at that. Mike was also the only person who refused to use his son's nickname — the only person alive that still called Sonny Michael. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah." He cleared his throat. "I mean, trying to, anyway. I just—" He paused. "If you read the papers and watched the news, you know I was hauled into the PCPD last night."

"Are you asking if I heard the rumors about the woman the PCPD dragged in with you?" Mike wanted to know. "Elizabeth Webber, wasn't it?" He tipped his head. "Are they rumors?"

"Depends on what you heard."

"That you and her had something going and that's why she was out there. I figure that's a bit of crap — you'd have said something, I think." Mike paused. "Or maybe I would have seen something. You've been a bit..." He considered his words. "I don't know. A bit off, maybe. A woman in your life would have changed things. So, no, I don't believe the rumors." He quirked a brow. "Should I?"

"I—I didn't know her name before last night," Jason said slowly. "But I know her now. And..." Now was the moment to put into words the insanity of last night — how he'd had a one night stand with a woman he was attracted to, just like Carly Roberts over a year ago. But last night had been nothing like the scatter of nights he'd spent with Carly, and it felt wrong to even think about them in the same category. "You ever have a conversation with someone and it feels like they know you? Even though they shouldn't?"

Mike folded his arms on the bar. "Hasn't everyone?"

"I haven't. Not like this." He paused. "I hate the penthouse. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't." Mike tipped his head. "But she did?"

"Yeah." Jason picked up his beer. "Her coffee is terrible."

Mike grinned. "Well, then, that's a deal breaker. You'll have to throw this one back. Better luck next time."

"I can make my own coffee," Jason found himself saying, then sipped his beer. What would Elizabeth think about being his alibi? Would she wonder if he planned it? Would she be angry? Maybe. But maybe not. She never did anything predictable, why would she start now?

"It's nice to see that."

Jason focused on Mike, frowned. "What?"

"The smile." The bartender gestured at him. "Haven't seen you do that in a while. Something sweet about a girl making you smile when you're just thinking about her. Maybe you keep her around for a while."

"Yeah, maybe." Maybe he would. He had a right to life, didn't he? Robin was gone, and she'd made her disapproval of his job and life clear. She wouldn't be any happier now that he was in charge this way —

Maybe he could have something that was just his again.