

**Part One: Elizabeth**

*Please picture me  
In the trees  
I hit my peak at seven  
Feet  
In the swing  
Over the creek  
I was too scared to jump in, but I, I was high  
In the sky  
With Pennsylvania under me  
Are there still beautiful things?*

*March 2002 in Harpswell, Maine*

Officially, the address of the house was 60 Interval Lane, but in all of Elizabeth Devane's ten years, no one had ever referred to the house that way. Any local mail was simply addressed to *Soltini House*. Letters from outside Harpswell were rarely received and only brought bad news.

Elizabeth sat on the top of step of the porch, her hair ruthlessly braided into twin chestnut braids dangling down her back. Her back was arch straight and her gray dress neatly pressed. Seated on the step beside her was her nine-year-old cousin, dressed in matching dress and braids though Nadine Devane's hair was the color of sunshine.

The wind swirling across Casco Bay bit through the thin fabric. This time of year, the cold seeped into every porous surface of the house, and the cousins were used to the chill. Today, it was even comforting. Feeling the bite of winter on her arms and legs meant Elizabeth was at least feeling something.

She'd been numb since her grandmother's nurse had stepped out of her room a week earlier and quietly told the girls that Filomena Soltini Devane had passed during the night. Lucille March would remain in residence until after the funeral and their aunt had come to collect them.

The word *collect* had hit her strangely and it had been hard for Elizabeth to digest it. You didn't collect people, she thought. You collected things. Like old man Collins in town. He had an extraordinary collection of cookie jars, even though Nonna Mena had said it was a dirty and useless habit, and that the man only gathered the large number by trash picking. He was a regular sort on the streets of downtown, fumbling through the dumpsters and trash cans, hoping to unearth a new treasure.

He'd created a collection from things that people didn't want anymore, so maybe that was the best word. Her aunt would *collect* Nadine and Elizabeth, remove them from the only home they'd ever known, and take them to New York to raise along side her own daughter. Elizabeth had heard Lucille telling nosy Amy Vining down the street that Elizabeth and Nadine were just lucky that someone wanted them. After all, their own fathers hadn't stayed long enough to even sign the birth certificates.

Elizabeth wasn't supposed to know that, but she heard a lot of things she wasn't supposed to know. She was a quiet child who crept around corners and listened at the keyholes. That was how she'd learned her mother had died the day Elizabeth was born. No one else was going to tell her about Maria Devane. Nadine could at least remember her mother — Grace — had died when Elizabeth was five and Nadine four. She'd smelled like cookies and cotton candy.

She'd loved Elizabeth, but Aunt Grace had been very sharp the day Elizabeth had called her Mama. She wasn't her mother, and Elizabeth should know better. Elizabeth had cried, and Nadine, only three, had crept into her bed and squeezed her hand. Nadine always knew how to cheer people up.

A blue car appeared over the horizon, winding down the long road. Elizabeth sat up, her mouth tight.

"Is that her?" Nadine asked.

"Maybe."

"Do you think she'll like us?" Nadine played with the hem of her dress, her bluebell eyes looking hopefully at her cousin.

"She'll like you," Elizabeth said, with a smile she didn't feel. "Everyone likes you."

"How come Aunt Anna never came to visit?" Nadine asked. "And Nona never went to see her? How come we have to live with a stranger? I wanna live with Mrs. Spencer. She's warm and gives hugs."

Because sweet Laura Spencer didn't want them. Or maybe it had never been an option. No one had asked Elizabeth where she wanted to live, if she wanted to leave everything she'd known her whole life. They had just told her this was going to happen. Lucille had tried to make it sound fun and Nonna's lawyer, old man Baldwin, had said that they were lucky because their grandmother's oldest daughter, Anna Devane-Scorpio, had a little girl just like them. Robin was almost twelve, so they wouldn't be alone. It was like getting another sister.

But it wouldn't be like that all. Nadine didn't remember, but Elizabeth did. Anna had come to visit only once in her whole life—she'd come with her daughter to bury Aunt Grace. She'd arrived in the middle of the night and left almost as soon as the coffin had been lowered into the ground. She had only the dimmest flash of a tall woman with little warmth.

And of the daughter, of Robin, Elizabeth had no memory at all.

Robin was going to be the oldest now, Elizabeth thought bleakly. She'd be in the middle. She'd seen what happened to middle kids. They were the lost ones, the forgotten ones. The oldest got all the responsibility, and the youngest all the love.

The middle was just there.

At least she'd been the oldest here. Nadine had a reason to look up to her, to want to be like her. What if Robin was prettier or nicer? She was almost twelve which meant she was starting to develop her powers. Elizabeth's eyes burned. She didn't even know what she was going to be yet, and by the time she did, Robin would already know everything. Nadine would think she was smarter.

Her little cousin, the only person who seemed like Elizabeth just the way she was, wouldn't need her anymore.

Nadine's small hand slid into Elizabeth's, and she looked down at her. Nadine had an eerie way of looking at you sometimes, like she could read your thoughts or your heart. She knew what you were feeling even before you did. Sometimes she liked it, but sometimes Elizabeth hated everything and she didn't want anyone to know.

"I'll always love you, Bits," Nadine said, smiling. She was still missing one of her bottom teeth, but the flash of it gave Elizabeth a boost. Even if she wasn't the oldest anymore, Nadine was too sweet to forget her.

"We'll stick together, Deenie," Elizabeth told her. The blue car was nearly at the front of the house now. "Forever."

"Forever," Nadine echoed.

The car pulled to a stop, and a tall, slender woman emerged from the driver's side. From the passenger seat, a girl with dark hair stepped out, casting her eyes over the house before focusing on the cousins.

Anna Devane-Scorpio and her daughter, Robin. A strange feeling slammed into Elizabeth's gut, and she blinked away tears. She didn't understand why she felt this way all of a sudden. It was like how she'd wanted to smack Lucky Spencer in the

playground last month, but this didn't feel like her.

It felt like someone else.

Elizabeth met her aunt's eyes, and the feeling intensified. It was someone else.

It was her aunt.

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Anna had never planned to return to Harpswell. She'd buried the last of her sisters long ago and had washed her hands of the place.

But she'd been left with little choice. The lawyer had made that clear. If Anna did not take in her sister's children, there was no one else. Perhaps there might be a family in town, but it was unlikely that a single family would take them both. They'd be split up, and Lee Baldwin had expressed some doubt that the elder of the girls would find someone. He couldn't understand why, but she seemed hard and brittle.

She'd barely knew Grace and Maria's daughters, and the guilt and shame of that twisted in Anna's gut as she pulled the key from the ignition. She'd nearly told Baldwin to find something else. Put them in the system if she had to. They would survive. Hadn't Anna managed to get by without her sisters?

If Anna could do it, then anyone could.

"Mom, are they my cousins?"

Eleven-year-old Robin Scorpio pressed her face against the window, peering intently at the two little girls sitting on the weathered steps. Anna sighed. "Yes. I suppose they are."

She stepped out of the car and was startled when the elder of the girls, the brunette, met her eyes directly. Her thin shoulders trembled, but then she raised her chin.

This was Elizabeth Imogene, the little girl that Maria had sacrificed everything for. She'd known the price of having a child, Anna thought, and she'd paid it. More dearly than Grace. Losing Maria had cut even more deeply than Grace—

After all, Maria had been her twin. The other half of her soul. Anna had always been cool, calm, and analytical. Maria had been brash, boisterous, and loving. She'd wanted a large family, but had sworn when they were teens that she'd never do it. Having children meant carrying on the curse. Only Anna, born three minutes

earlier, had been spared. All other Soltini daughters would inherit the cursed blood. Anna had made Maria swear an oath that she'd never do it, that she'd never leave Anna.

Maria had kept that promise until the day she'd been charmed by Jeff Webber's smile and handsome looks. He'd left town after the winter fishing season, abandoning Maria to her fate.

And now her daughter was looking at Anna like she could see her thoughts. Elizabeth rose to her feet, the blonde next to her following suit.

"Hello," Anna said cautiously. "I'm your aunt Anna." She put a hand on Robin's shoulder. "This is Robin."

"Hi," the younger girl—Nadine—said, her smile bright. "I'm Deenie and this is Bits—"

"Elizabeth." When Nadine frowned at her cousin, Elizabeth gentled her tone. "You call me Bits. That's ours."

"Oh." Nadine furrowed her tiny brow, trying to understand, then shrugged it off. "Okay. Why didn't you ever come before?"

"I—" Anna blinked at the directness of the child. She hadn't been ready for that question, had no idea how to answer it. They were still children after all, and Anna didn't even know how much they knew.

Did they know about the Soltini women? About the powers they'd inherit? Did they understand the sacrifice their mothers had made for them? How could Anna tell them she could barely stand to be in this place, to be near the house. She could almost see herself as a child, running across the front lawn, the echoes of her dead sisters' laughter.

Could you really tell children that you'd avoided your childhood home because even standing here felt like being stabbed over and over again with all the things that would never be?

Anna swallowed hard, then focused on her nieces. She had to stop looking at them as the reasons her sisters were gone. It couldn't be—wouldn't be—their faults. Grace and Maria would be horrified if they could hear the thoughts racing across Anna's mind—if they could sense the sharp and bitter pangs of resentment. These children were standing before her and her sisters were gone.

Would she never be able to forget? To look at them as only children, innocents who

had never asked for this?

She would have to.

Anna opened her mouth to answer the question, but then closed it as Elizabeth met her eyes again and in those burning sapphires, Anna felt a chill dance down her spine. The girls were not old enough to come into their powers, but she had a feeling she knew she was standing in front of an empath, someone who could not only feel the rush of emotions flooding through Anna but absorb them as her own.

And that meant Elizabeth already knew the dark and bitter secret that lurked in Anna's heart.

She hated these girls for all that they had stolen from her and she didn't know if she'd ever be able to unlock her own heart enough to love them.

*October 2004 in Port Charles, New York*

The house on Charles Street wasn't anything like Soltini House, but Elizabeth had to let it go. Her aunt had sold it and everything inside two years ago, and there was no chance that she could go back to the beaches and open water. At least not home.

She was stuck in the middle of the suburbs, on the side of town far away from the lake. There were some cliffs outside of town, but Elizabeth wasn't even twelve yet, so it wasn't like she was even allowed to leave the neighborhood.

Charles Street was quiet and lined with trees, all of the houses old and lovely. They lived in the part of the city that had been built when Port Charles had been a boom town, thanks to the Erie Canal connecting the Great Lakes to the rest of New York. There was a branch that connected Rochester to Lake Ontario. The richest families moved away from the dirt, grime, and muck of the harbor.

Anna had lived in the house since her marriage to Robin's father, Robert Scorpio. Technically Robert was Elizabeth's uncle, but she rarely saw him. He was kind and fair, and Elizabeth thought things might be better if he were around more. The house was his family's and had been theirs for generations. Even longer than Soltini House. A Scorpio had built it in the 1830s, Robin had told her cousins proudly the day Nadine and Elizabeth had arrived.

They shared a room for the first year, a large room in the back of the house under the eaves. A maple tree sat outside their window, and Elizabeth could climb out onto the branches. She'd take a sketch pad sometimes in the spring and the summer to escape the house. When Anna had suggested Elizabeth move into another room after she turned eleven, it felt like a personal attack. Anna had to know Elizabeth

loved her room and the tree—that it was the only piece of Port Charles that felt like home.

Nadine had gamely volunteered to move into the room herself, newly vacated after Robert's younger brother, Mac, married and moved out, but Anna had insisted. The room was larger, and Elizabeth was the eldest. Elizabeth had cried every night after that first week, even though Nadine had promised Elizabeth could use her window every day. It wasn't the same. It wasn't her tree anymore.

She'd known, even at the age of ten, that her aunt didn't like her. She hadn't liked Nadine much either, but Nadine was sweeter than Elizabeth. She had a sunny smile and bright eyes. No one could resist her for long, and Elizabeth felt the air around Anna change towards her cousin faster.

But Anna remained brittle and distant with Elizabeth. Uncle Robert brought so much joy and laughter to the house when he was there, but he traveled often for the shop he and Anna operated downtown in Port Charles. He went all over the world, looking for special trinkets and exotic ingredients for the potions and charms Anna made. That was Anna's talent, Robin had told them proudly. Her mother was gifted with charms and spellcasting, the most talented witch in generations. Everyone in their world came to Anna Devane when they needed something.

Elizabeth envied Robin as she spoke of her mother's talents and all the amazing things she'd done. No one ever talked to her about her mother or said what Maria Devane had been like. What kind of powers did she have? Had she been a nice woman? Had she wanted to be a mother?

She had a picture of her mother that Nona had given her, but Maria wasn't alone in the picture. She was maybe sixteen years old, sitting on one of the stone ledges that had dotted the Harpswell landscape. She'd had an arm slung around Anna's shoulders and they'd both beamed at the photographer. She knew her mother had been Anna's twin sister, and maybe that was why Anna didn't like her.

But it seemed strange to blame Elizabeth for Maria's death. She hadn't asked to be born. She hadn't asked for any of this.

One day, not long after Robin turned thirteen, but before Elizabeth's twelfth birthday, in that long interminable stretch between the beginning of the school year and Halloween, Elizabeth was walking down the hall towards her room, but something pulled at her. A feeling, a sensation in the air. It wrapped around her gut and sank into her bones.

Despair. Devastation. She could feel it surrounding her, chilling her skin and leaving her body feeling heavy and sluggish. Elizabeth stopped in front of Robin's

bedroom where it practically felt like someone was screaming even though the hallway was quiet. Anna was at the store, and Nadine was taking flute lessons.

Elizabeth knocked lightly on the door. "Robin?"

"Go away." Robin didn't sound angry or mean, like she could sometimes, but her words came out like a moan. Elizabeth paused, debated, but then pushed the already ajar door open even more.

Walking into the room, the devastation deepened until Elizabeth almost felt weak in the knees. What was this? Why could she feel things like this? Her eyes burned, and her throat was tight. She wrapped her arms around herself. "Should I call Aunt Anna?" she asked.

Robin sat up, her dark eyes lush with tears, her hair hanging limply around her shoulders. "N-No." She swiped a hand beneath her nose. "It's n-not f-fair, and Mom will just—" She sucked in a heaving gasp. "She'll tell me we get what we get and not to complain—"

Elizabeth fought back the strange feelings coursing through her body and crept closer. "You got your powers? More of them?"

Robin held out her hand and a book flew from her desk into her grasp. Elizabeth stared at it, her eyes wide. Six months earlier, Robin had begun to develop the ability to see deception in someone's aura. They would all gain passive powers, but the active gifts came later and deepened as they grew older.

From the moment Elizabeth had met Robin, she'd known her cousin wanted to be a doctor and she'd prayed desperately to become a healer. A friend of hers had died of cancer as a child, and she'd wanted to find a cure. She'd been *sure* she'd be a healer. She'd prayed so hard—

No wonder she was so upset, Elizabeth thought. Instead of healing, Robin had telekinesis. Elizabeth thought that was more useful than healing. If you could go around healing people all the time, how could you ever stop yourself? How would you know who to save or who not to? It seemed like too much work.

But she knew all about dreams and disappointment, so she perched on the edge of Robin's bed. "I'm sorry," she said. "You're right. It's not fair."

Robin peered at her with her wet eyes, grateful. "Thank you. For saying that. I feel stupid. Mom told me not to get my hopes up, but I wanted so much—" She closed her eyes. "I want to do so much good in the world. I want to help people."



"You will. You're so smart," Elizabeth told her. "You're going to be a great doctor, Robin. And you'll know when your patients are lying. That'll be good."

"Yeah." Robin sniffled again. "Yeah, I guess. And cleaning my room won't take so much time." She played with the hem of her shirt. "Mom told me that sometimes we get the powers that go with who we are."

Elizabeth furrowed her brow. "What does that mean?"

"She says everyone has a fatal flaw. Like the thing that makes them bad. Or—" Robin paused. "I don't know. Like a thing that makes them weak. Or something. That can hurt them."

"Oh. Okay. So you can move things around and see lies. What does that say about you?" Elizabeth asked.

"I don't know. Mom wanted to help people like I do, so she started to sell the charms." Robin drew up her legs against her chest and wrapped her arms around them. "She wanted to take care of people who were sick or wanted a better job or a way to be happy. She can make charms from nothing. That's what makes her special."

"Do—" Elizabeth's throat was tight again. "Do you know what my mom was?"

Robin blinked. "You don't?"

"N-No. Nona never talked about her, and neither does Aunt Anna."

"Oh. Mom said Aunt Maria was a dreamwalker. She could walk into people's dreams and read them. Aunt Maria was supposed to move to Port Charles with Mom so they could run the shop together. But—" Robin stopped.

"But she died and I was here," Elizabeth finished. A dreamwalker. "I don't understand how charms are part your mom's fatal flaw or whatever."

"Oh, well technically she's a conjurer," Robin clarified. "She can make things from nothing. She likes charms, but she can do lots of other things. Didn't Nona tell you all of this?"

"Nona didn't like..." Elizabeth shrugged. "She didn't practice much. Nadine's mother sometimes did kitchen charms."

"Yeah, Mom said Aunt Grace was an illusionist which means you're good at charms, too." Robin wrinkled her nose. "Anyway, Mom can make things out of nothing."

Because she likes to be in charge. That's what Dad always tells her."

"I wonder what powers I'll get." Elizabeth hesitated. "I think I'm getting some," she confessed in a small voice. "I can...I could feel how sad you were when I was walking by. Not like I *knew* you were sad, but I literally felt it, you know? Like I was sad, too."

Robin's eyes widened. "Whoa, really?"

"Do you know what means? Is that a power?"

"Yeah." Robin got off the bed and went over to her desk, flipping through a shelf. "I use my mom's library all the time, and I made a list of powers and stuff. I was hoping if my passive powers would be something cool and rare, you know? I wanted to be different." She found the page. "You might be an empath."

"Empath?" Elizabeth shook her head. "Like empathy? Those people feel sorry for everyone, don't they?"

"I mean, that's what it means to have empathy but it's not really about feeling sorry." Robin came back to the bed. "It means you can absorb people's emotions. I don't know much else. There's not a lot of them, and we've never had one in the Soltini family. Dad might have some on his side."

"I don't want to feel everything everyone else does," Elizabeth said. "That seems like it would hurt."

"Yeah, probably. You'll need to build a shield. Don't worry," Robin said confidently, flashing her a smile. "Mom will be here, and I will, too. We'll help you protect yourself."

Elizabeth returned the smile, feeling for the first time that maybe she could be at home here on Charles street.

*May 2005*

"But I don't want to." Nadine folded her arms on the table and glared at Anna. "And you can't make me."

"I absolutely can," Anna murmured absently as she reached for the newspaper and studied the headlines, not even bothering to make eye contact with her youngest niece. "I would think you'd be thrilled to be signed out school early—"

"Not for the dentist," Nadine muttered. She wrinkled her nose, then sat back. "How

come Elizabeth doesn't have to go?"

Anna frowned, looked up, then glanced at Elizabeth sitting next to her. Elizabeth could feel the confusion radiating from her aunt. Her empath powers were still a bit weak, but Robin had assured her that they would come full force after she'd developed whatever her active power would be. But sometimes—when the feeling was particularly strong or unexpected, Elizabeth could pick it up.

"Did you go to the dentist this year?" Anna asked her.

The answer was no, but Elizabeth shrugged. "I think I did. Maybe back in January or something. I had a cavity," she added helpfully even though she'd never had a cavity a day in her life.

"All right then. See?" Anna said, raising her eyebrows. "It's your turn." She returned her attention to the paper while Nadine studied Elizabeth with suspicious eyes. Elizabeth smiled brightly at her, but her cousin couldn't be fooled. Fortunately, she was also loyal and wouldn't snitch on her.

But Elizabeth was gonna pay for Nadine being stuck at the dentist while Elizabeth escaped. Sometimes it paid to be the unwanted and neglected kid.

She went over to the toaster to retrieve the bagel she'd made and set it down on a plate. She reached into the utensil drawer, intending to reach for a butter knife.

Then a hot wave of anger engulfed her, flooding her body with heat and goosebumps, sending a shiver up her spine, crawling up her neck. Elizabeth gasped and her fingers slipped—there was a sharp pain.

"Elizabeth?"

She turned away from the drawer, holding her hand, gushing blood. Robin had come into the kitchen—the source of the anger Elizabeth had sensed—but that anger was already sliding into fear as she rushed over to the counter to grab a paper towel. Anna had leapt to her feet, and Nadine was staring with her eyes wide.

"I'm so sorry! I was so mad I didn't even think about it," Robin babbled. "I forgot that you can feel me—Brenda was being dumb—" She reached for Elizabeth's hand, but then frowned at it.

"Where is the cut?" Anna demanded, grabbing the hand from Robin. "What—"

Elizabeth's hand was streaked blood and droplets had fallen to the floor. Yet, her skin was unbroken. She couldn't understand—she'd felt the blade of a steak knife

slice into her fingers, the spurt of blood—the throb—

And then she'd wrapped her other hand around the wound, putting pressure on the cut. There'd been a tingle, a chill of ice, and now—

"It's gone," Nadine said, stating the obvious as Anna was silent and Robin's face was pale. "What happened?"

"You healed it," Robin said, her voice almost strangled. "You healed your cut."

"Robin—" Anna began, putting her hand on her daughter's shoulder, but Robin shrugged it off, plastering a smile on her face.

"T-that makes sense—" Robin started, struggling to form the words, but her face was crumpling up. She knew there was no hiding how she truly felt—Elizabeth had always known how to read her cousin, and the anger had returned laced with deep shame and resentment. Robin didn't want to be angry at Elizabeth, but she couldn't stop it.

Because Elizabeth had developed the very powers Robin had craved her whole life. She could heal herself and others.

Elizabeth swallowed hard. "I'm sorry—"

"Don't be sorry—" Robin snapped, then closed her eyes. "It's fine. We can't control it. We can't stop it." She went to the sink and wet the paper towels she'd grabbed. "Let's clean up the floor."

"Robin—"

"Don't say anything!" Robin exploded, whirling around, and now the anger that had burned so hard was tipped with ice, like swords slicing through Elizabeth's gut and freezing her from the inside out. "Stop trying to make this okay! You can't! Just stop! I don't want you in my head anymore—"

"I'm not—" Elizabeth's lips trembled but the mixture of fury, misery, embarrassment, and shame was worrying with her own fear and humiliation. She'd dreamed for years of coming into her powers, praying for something that would make her valuable to her family. An illusionist or dreamwalker like her aunts. Maybe Anna would love her if she could be like her mother.

But she wasn't. She'd stolen the dream that belonged to her cousin. The tears slid down her cheeks and Elizabeth fled the room, unable to stand the emotions swirling in the room. Not just from Robin, but from Anna and Nadine. Her little cousin was

just scared and sad, but Anna—

Anna was disappointed, and some of Robin's resentment was mixed with her mother's. There was no redemption for Elizabeth. All the giggles and dreams and love she and Robin had shared had winked out like it had never existed.

She fled up the stairs, down the hall, and into Nadine's room where she crawled out the window to her tree, then curled up into a little ball, and started to sob.

*November 2006*

She hadn't intended to forget Elizabeth's birthday, she truly hadn't, Anna thought as she pulled the car into the garage and switched off the ignition. She knew that she hadn't done a stellar job of raising her twin's only child, but she'd tried very hard to keep that truth from Elizabeth.

Not that it had done any good, Anna thought bitterly, stepping out of the car. Of course she become an empath and Anna's emotions were laid bare to her. She should have seen it coming—Elizabeth had sensed Anna's distance from the start, and yes, her resentment.

Elizabeth's birthday was not just the day she'd been born. It was also the day Maria had died. The day that a piece of Anna's soul had shriveled up and died, twisted and choking. There was no bringing that back, and no matter what charm Anna had cast for herself during the last fourteen years, she'd never been able to put it away.

And things had only worsened since that terrible morning in the kitchen when Elizabeth's powers had fully bloomed. She was an empathic healer. A terrifying prospect. Anna had researched and sent Robert all over the world gathering all the information, and everything she learned told her that Elizabeth's life might be tragic and short if she couldn't control her powers.

But Elizabeth had struggled too hard and she couldn't quite focus enough during the training—

Anna pushed open the door to the kitchen, flashing her husband a guilty smile. "How late am I?" The room was empty, and the dishes were drying.

"Very," Robert said dryly. "The girls are already in their rooms." He turned to his wife. "We gave Elizabeth a pair of earrings in case you wanted to know—"

"Robert—"

"That girl did not kill your sister."

Anna closed hers. "If she hadn't been born—if Maria had kept her promise—"

"I've let this go quite long enough, Anna." Robert wiped his hands on a dish towel, then set it aside. "I've watched her crawl inside herself and wish her life was over. Because she has the twin tragedy of knowing exactly how everyone feels and unable to block it out. Do you know why you've been unable to train her?"

"Robert, I'm really not in the mood for another list of my failures," she retorted. "If that's all you have to offer—"

"Because training requires trust. And she doesn't trust you."

Anna exhaled slowly. "I've tried, Robert. I truly have. I know you don't believe me—don't you think I wish I could stop feeling like this?" she demanded. "Do you think I'm not haunted by my sister? Maria gave everything to bring Elizabeth into this world, to break the curse and give those girls a chance at life, and now the powers she's inherited—" Her throat tightened. "You've brought the research home. How many empathic healers have made it past twenty-five?"

"Not many." Robert leaned against the kitchen island. "Even those who develop the blocks still find it hard not to give too much of themselves when healing. And without support, with a care for themselves, it's too easy for them to give it all. But that's precisely why we have to do a better job reaching out to her—"

"I don't know how. I look at her and I think my sister should still be here. It's easier with Nadine. I adored Gracie, but—"

"But she wasn't the other half of your soul." Robert drew Anna against him and kissed her forehead. "I know, sweetheart. But you have to make peace with that."

*February 2007*

Elizabeth was exhausted and could barely think straight. She'd been trying for hours to implement the shielding charm her aunt had created for her, but she kept stumbling over the words or the magic just wasn't connecting—

When the third hour rolled around and the light outside the window in the library had faded into twilight, Elizabeth collapsed into the chair. "Why can't you just do it for me? You're supposed to be a conjurer—"

"Because it won't last!" Anna snapped, then took breath. "I'm sorry, but we've been over this. The shields are not permanent. At least not through the charms. And the only way for you to learn implement a firmer block would be to give yourself some

temporary protection. You need to learn this, Elizabeth. I won't be around forever."

"You're not even here now," Elizabeth muttered, then dragged herself to her feet as Anna glared at her. "Don't be mad at me. If you didn't hate me, I wouldn't be able to feel it—"

"I don't hate you," Anna said, but it was expressed with weariness. Elizabeth could hear her aunt's mixture of frustration and resentment. Robin had learned all of her spells and charms without even trying, Elizabeth thought bitterly, and Nadine had taken to it like a duck to swimming. Her little cousin was a dreamwalker. Why couldn't she have that power? Why couldn't she trade with Robin?

Robin would love her again, and maybe even her aunt would like her.

"Isn't there a way to get rid of the powers?" Elizabeth asked desperately. "Can't we bind them or just—"

"How many times have you asked me? No. It's too dangerous to bind your powers now that you've developed them. Those spells are tricky and can backfire. And we can't simply give them to Robin." Anna's eyes softened, and Elizabeth felt some sadness seeping into her aunt now. It washed over Elizabeth, almost cleansing in his softness. "I know it's been hard since you became a healer. I know Robin has struggled—"

Robin hated her. She didn't want to. Like her aunt, Robin felt bad about the way she felt. But it didn't change anything. They both hated her for things she couldn't change, and sometimes Elizabeth wished she could give them what she wanted. She wished she could just make it all go away.

"I didn't ask for any of this!" Elizabeth cut in sharply. "You know I didn't! I don't want it!"

"Like it or not, you have it!" Anna retorted. "And if you don't learn to control it, you'll ruin your life!"

"What do you care? You hate me anyway—"

"I don't—"

"I know you do! I've always felt it!" The sobs crawled up her throat and even as she tried to swallow them, they spilled out anyway. "I wish I were dead. I wish I hadn't been born—"

"So do I!" Anna shouted back, then stumbled back, horrified. "I didn't mean it—"

"Yes you did. You know you did! I'm sorry I'm not smart like Robin or sweet like Nadine! I'm sorry my mother died and she's gone! But I don't want any of this!"

Elizabeth rushed out of the room and went downstairs. She wanted to find her uncle. Robert was the only one who could tolerate her, and sometimes she almost thought he loved her. But his study was empty and she remembered now that he'd left for a trip to London that morning.

The room was dark and empty. Cold. But still the emotions rushed in—when Elizabeth was upset, it was so much harder to shut everything down. She could feel Nadine's sweet, lightness from her dreams upstairs, and Robin's bitter resentment that the boy she liked didn't like her back, and Anna's frustration that Elizabeth couldn't behave—

And the woman walking her dog out the window who was angry at her daughter, and the man driving by in the car who wanted to have sex with his son's babysitter even though the lustful guilt flashed through him—

It all swirled inside her, choking and flooding every piece of her soul until Elizabeth disappeared and she was just all those other people who didn't know her and she didn't know them, but how to make it stop—she just wanted it to go away—

She stumbled over to the desk, then blinked at the scissors on the desk. She didn't even realize she'd done it until the blade had sliced through her palm. The sharp pain followed by throbbing blinked everything else out.

Elizabeth watched in the dim shadows as blood trickled down her palm. She'd had blissful silence for a moment. Her mind was her own. She closed her eyes, then tightened her palm into a fist, feeling the blood drip down her wrist, to her arm.

Causing herself pain had stopped the voices. Were there other ways to black it out? Could she make it go away for good?

She looked around the office, then saw her uncle's liquor cabinet. Slowly, as if in a dream, Elizabeth went over and knelt down in the front of it. Robert had never locked it. It had never occurred to him. The girls knew better.

But Elizabeth had seen drunk people in restaurants and at parties, and on television. You could drink until you couldn't think anymore and surely that was safer than cutting yourself. She just wanted to be alone with her own thoughts.

Or better yet, she just wanted to make those stop, too.



She opened the cabinet and drew out the bottle of whiskey. She twisted off the top, took her first drink, then winced as the liquor burned down her throat. She hated this taste, oh God, but she had to keep going.

She had to see if it would work.

So she kept drinking, and within fifteen minutes, her mind began to float and she felt soft and dizzy. Five minutes later, she felt numb. Within a half hour, the bottle was half gone, and she curled up right there on the floor and went to sleep.

Her aunt found her the next morning there, and there was hell to pay but Elizabeth had finally learned how to make it all stop.

*November 2008*

Elizabeth's fingers kept slipping as she tried to fit the key into a lock, but she couldn't quite do it. She couldn't focus—everything was blurry and swirling and soft and dreamy, and she laughed, then smiled, then fell against the door as her balance slipped.

But her thoughts weren't invaded by the feelings of others. She'd learned how to drink enough to reach that state, but not to black out. It had taken nearly two years, but Elizabeth had managed to control her powers her own way.

The door opened then, and Elizabeth almost fell through. Nadine, now fifteen, caught her before Elizabeth hit the floor.

"Shhhhh...." Nadine pressed a finger to her lips. "They're asleep." Her eyes were dark and shadowed in the front hall. "Again."

"Deenie—" Elizabeth tried to focus, tried to find the energy to thank Nadine. Her baby cousin had learned how to control her powers so well, Elizabeth almost hated her. But Nadine protected her. On nights when Elizabeth stayed out—nearly all of them—Nadine kept the household asleep until she was in her own room. She could walk in dreams and make people feel better and go to sleep—

While Elizabeth just felt all of the things all day long until she could find a way to get alcohol. She'd just turned sixteen, so it wasn't always that easy. When she got really desperate, Elizabeth was known to do some terrible things.

But it was worth it. It was all worth it. She wanted it always go away. It had to go away. She couldn't function with all those thoughts and feelings around her, swallowing her up whole—she couldn't breathe—

"Come on," Nadine said, putting an arm around Elizabeth's waist and steering her towards the stairs. Her bare foot caught on the edge of a rug and Nadine went flying while Elizabeth tumbled to the floor. Nadine's head hit the edge of the banister, and she fell with a thud, landing on her hands and knees.

"Oh, no," Nadine muttered. She sat back against the stairs, pressing a hand to her head. "Bits, you have to hide—"

"Deenie, you okay?" Elizabeth crawled towards her.

"Bits—I lost the spell—" But Nadine's words were cut off by a flood of light from above. At the top of the stairs, Anna stood there. She slowly descended, her hand sliding down the wooden banister. When she reached the landing, she flipped on the front hall lights. Elizabeth hissed, pressing her hands to her face.

"How long?" Anna demanded. She glared not at Elizabeth, but at Nadine who was pale. The girl slowly climbed to her feet. "How long have you been breaking the laws?"

"Deenie—"

"I'm sorry, Aunt Anna," Nadine said, her eyes huge and terrified. "I didn't mean to—"

"You've been using your powers to put us to sleep. To keep us there. How long?" Anna demanded. "You know the rules—"

"Yes, but—"

"I've allowed you access to my shop, to my books, to everything I can give you, but you are not to use your powers against me," Anna snapped. "We have to trust each other, and one niece that I can't have faith in is quite enough—"

"Don't call me that," Elizabeth said, startling them both.

Anna turned to her with furious eyes. "Call you what?"

"Your niece." Elizabeth's tongue felt heavy in her mouth, but the dizziness was fading and with it, the protection. Anna's anger, her resentment—it was sliding through Elizabeth like a tidal wave, crashing against the shore, drawing out to the sea, then crashing in again. "You have never once treated me that way."

"That is not true—"

"It is true—"

"It is not!" Anna cut in sharply. "And I'm tired of watching you drink away your life because you're too lazy and weak to do the work to protect yourself?" She grabbed Elizabeth's arm and shook her. "You've thrown away everything my sister died for—"

"I don't care!" Elizabeth cried. "I don't care! I don't even know her! I don't owe her or you anything!"

"You owe her everything!"

"Aunt Anna—"

"Mom?" From the top of the stairs, Robin's voice drifted down. "What's wrong?"

"I can't do this anymore. I can't do this—" Elizabeth shoved Anna away from her, then whirled around, falling to her feet. She dragged herself up and to the door. "I can't—"

"I can't do it either," Anna said without an ounce of emotion. "So if you walk out that door, don't ever come back."

"Mom!"

"No! Bits, don't go—"

Elizabeth turned to look at her aunt, her mother's twin sister, and the woman who resented every breath she drew. Then opened the door and walked away.

## **Part Two: Jason**

*2005 in Port Charles, New York*

At the edge of the lake, several miles away from the dirty and grimy piers of the harbor, the wealthiest families had built their estates across sprawling pieces of land, with gardens, garages, tennis courts, elaborate drives, and ornate homes that might not have looked out of place in Newport, Rhode Island.

In fact, the earliest Quartermaine to build their home on this piece of the lake had fashioned the house after the Breakers. Louis Quartermaine had raged that no nouveau rich piece of trash like Cornelius Vanderbilt would have a larger estate.

He'd immediately left down Port Charles, bought out half the area round Lake Ontario in the northern part of the city, and built an estate of his own.

The pride in the Quartermaine estate had been passed down through the generations, and the story of how the land had survived Depressions, recessions, and wars, remaining in their possession was practically indoctrinated into Quartermaine children in the cradle.

Though the current patriarch, Edward, had his doubts about the family's ability to continue with the rich legacy. The current crop of grandchildren didn't seem that interested in the family business, ELQ, particularly the youngest, Jason, who kept talking about medical school. Just like his idiot father, Edward had raged over and over again to his son, Alan, the father in question. Jason wanted to be a doctor like his father.

Ned, the oldest grandchild, had some potential but Edward wasn't sure he could trust anyone who called Tracy Quartermaine mother (he often ignored that he had raised Tracy to be a ruthless, occasionally disloyal woman), but the true disappointment was Alan, Jr., who had taken up drinking when he was seventeen and become a general waste of space.

"He'll never amount to anything," Edward always told Monica who was particularly aggrieved since AJ was her biological son, and Jason was the adopted son of one of Alan's mistresses. She never treated Jason differently, of course, but everyone knew Jason had to work a little bit harder to be a Quartermaine. The scandal of his mother's murder had nearly brought the family, and the company, to its knees, and was the only reason Jason was being raised with the family. Otherwise, he'd still be Jason Moore, living in an apartment downtown.

A fact which AJ and Ned had gleefully told Jason as soon as the child was old enough to understand that Mama was not his mother, and that he was something of an embarrassment. Ned would eventually regret this decision, but AJ wouldn't. And Jason would never forget it.

Until that tragic day in December when Jason Quartermaine stopped remembering anything at all.

It had begun like any other day in the Quartermaine home. AJ hadn't come home yet, probably passed out after drinking until he blacked out, and his parents fretted over what to do with him since he'd been put on academic probation after the fall semester and was keeping company with the wrong kinds of people.

Jason hadn't paid much attention as he put together his breakfast and thought about going back to school in a week. The basketball season was underway, and

though Jason wasn't tall, he worked hard and he was a starter. He had a game the first day back, and he was hoping that pretty Karen Wexler would pay more attention to him than her current boyfriend.

"Father's not going to bail him out again," Alan warned Monica in a low voice, tossing a glance at Jason who seemed preoccupied with his food and reading the newspaper his grandfather had left behind. He'd discarded the business section and was poring over the box scores.

"What should we do?" Monica wanted to know. "We can't force him into rehab again, and if he's arrested—he's still underage—" She clenched her jaw. "Edward still has a few judges in his pocket. If he won't use it for his grandson, what is he saving it for?"

Probably for someone who deserved it, Jason thought idly, or maybe he wanted some return on the investment. Edward was ruthless and didn't believe in throwing away good money and time for nothing. So far all they'd done is throw things at AJ and nothing was working.

Best thing for AJ would be some consequences, but that wasn't something Jason was going to say out loud. He didn't want the crap he'd get from it.

He finished his orange juice, told his parents goodbye, and headed out to the basketball courts in the driveway to start practicing. He knew if he perfected his jump shot, Karen was going to notice him this time.

The winter air was just above freezing, but Jason didn't notice any of that. You worked through the pain, and as soon as he got going, his blood would warm up and he wouldn't even feel the cold.

He busied himself practicing layups, then the jump shots, before going into the foul shots. It was hard to practice solo, and it was times like this that Jason missed his cousins. Ned, once he'd grown up and stopped being an asshole, could be counted on for a pickup game. But he was off at Harvard, and AJ, before he'd really gone off the rails, was quick on his feet —

But it was just Jason practicing alone in the driveway, just off the main circular drive that led in from Harborview Road, curving around and leading back outside of the estate. Jason heard a car behind him, but that was nothing new. Cars came in and out all day long —

And by the time Jason realized that the car was heading right for him, it was too late.

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Nothing.

That was the first thing he noticed when he opened his eyes. Nothing. He could feel nothing. In his head, in his body —

It was all empty as if he'd never existed —

And who was he anyway? Where was he? What was going on—

"He's awake!" came a hushed whisper from around him and he turned his head towards the sound. He was in a room, in a bed — he knew what those things were, and relief flooded through him. He was in a hospital room. Okay. Okay. He had something to work with—

But he didn't recognize the face that floated towards him, his vision blurry. It was a woman, with blonde hair and worried eyes. "Can you hear me, sweetheart? Baby—"

"I—" He couldn't make words, so he nodded his head. He barely moved it, because now that nothing had been replaced with pain. It was everywhere at once.

"He can hear me—get Tony!" the woman barked. "Find Alan! Page him! Damn it—" Her voice broken. "Oh, God, he's awake—"

"Monica, shh—" A new voice joined the woman, a man. He didn't know this man either— "Jason needs a minute, okay? Jason, do you need a minute? We'll go get the doctor—"

Jason? Was he Jason? Maybe. That sounded right. But he didn't know anything else.

"Am—" He forced the words out, the sounds shoving through a throat that felt like it was full of jagged glass. "Am I Jason?"

The woman stared at him for a long moment, then burst into fresh sobs. The man next to her put an arm around her, his face grim. "Yes. You're Jason Quartermaine. This is your mother, Monica. I'm your cousin, Ned. And it's going to be okay. You're going to be just fine."

That was a lie of course, but later Jason wouldn't hold it against Ned. Jason hadn't been expected to wake up, his cousin told him later. There'd been an accident — he'd been hit by a car in the driveway when someone had mistook the gas pedal for the brakes. Jason had been thrown almost ten feet, hitting his head on a rock. They

thought he would die. A little memory loss — temporary, of course — well, they could handle that.

"You're awake," a man who called himself Jason's father said, "and that's all that matters. We can deal with anything else that follows."

That turned out to be a lie, too, but this was one Jason would hold against the people calling themselves his family. Families didn't do what these people did. They didn't lie and cheat and use information to hurt people.

And the more Jason saw these people for who they were, the more he wanted to be anywhere else.

The first lie came when Jason asked about the person who had hit him. Monica and Alan had been quick to assure him that AJ, Jason's brother, would never, ever do this on purpose, and that it was an accident. An accident, they'd said over and over again, and the local police had agreed. It was closed and forgotten before Jason ever woke up.

But then, a week after a bewildered, confused, and increasingly frustrated Jason was released from the hospital, that brother had gotten rip-roaringly drunk. He'd done something else stupid, he'd proudly told the family as they gathered around the table. He was going to be a father if the dumb bitch didn't get an abortion.

The room had exploded into chaos as the grandfather that Jason didn't really care for either, started yelling, and Monica was judging while Alan was trying to play mediator. Edward was sure this woman was only using AJ for his money, while Monica just wanted to know who this person was, and Alan kept trying to get AJ to put down the wine.

The woman turned out to be a girl still in high school, to horror of everyone. Jason knew her, he was assured, even though he'd tried to remind them over and over again he didn't know anyone—he barely knew these people. And she was *not* the right kind of people. Carly Benson from the wrong side of the tracks, was in her junior year of high school, and was refusing to have an abortion.

Edward was in a rage and it was during this that he said the truth. That he admitted what everyone else had already known —

The morning that AJ had mistaken the gas pedal for the brakes and nearly killed Jason, he'd been drunk. And not for the first time. Jason learned how the family had covered up this up — getting the idiot who'd impregnated a teenager off the hook. Another life ruined.

Not that the family saw it that way. Jason had been told he was sixteen which meant he was the same age as this girl. This girl who the family had decided was the wrong kind because she didn't have money and was only doing any of this (whatever *this* was) because of who AJ was.

That was about all the crap Jason was going to take from these people who had looked at him like he was the reason this was happening. As if he hadn't been trying to get his memories back — did they think he liked walking around with nothing inside of his head, always being asked with those hopeful eyes, do you remember yet?

He didn't remember anything and the more he learned, the less he wanted to know.

Right around the time Edward was proclaiming the teenager that none of them had ever met was a worthless tramp who could be bought off, Jason stood up.

"Oh, little brother has something to say," AJ slurred, weaving and shrugging off Alan's hands again. "Stop it! I'll do what I want—"

"You can all go fuck yourself," Jason said flatly. Then left the room. He went up to the room that was supposed to be his, packed a few things, and left the house.

He never went back.

*2007*

The girl, Carly Benson, didn't have much of a home life. Her mother had died a long time ago, and her father tried his best to get her to get the abortion. But Carly wanted her baby, and she also wanted a better life. So she stuck to her guns, and by the time Michael Alan Quartermaine was born, her father had signed permission forms and Caroline Benson became Caroline Quartermaine. She was married and a mother by her seventeenth birthday.

Jason heard about these things in passing. His grandmother, the sweet Lila who had always seemed different from the others, had called an old friend, Bernie Abrams, who owned a garage down town. Bernie gave Jason a job and a room above the garage without arguing. Though were battles to come — Edward and Alan threatened more than once to drag Jason back to the estate kicking and screaming since he was underage, Bernie always held his ground and helped Jason apply for emancipation.

By the time Jason turned seventeen, he was legally on his own and had dropped Quartermaine from his name, taking his middle name as his surname since it was Lila's maiden name. Jason Quartermaine had died that day in the driveway, but



Jason Morgan wasn't going to let it bother him anymore.

He had a new life and was approaching something close to happy as he turned eighteen. While it was strange not to have memories that were more than two years old, Jason didn't even notice anymore. He made time for his grandmother, and having learned that he was mostly an old family embarrassment, it was easier for all of them to drift apart.

Until the day Carly showed up in the waiting area of Bernie's garage, a crying baby in her arms. Her blonde hair hung limply around her face, and her eyes were bloodshot. Jason only recognized her from photos Lila had shown him.

"I'm s-sorry," Carly said, her voice thin and wavering. "I didn't know where else to go. I was scared—"

Jason almost told her to go away. To stay away because if he got involved, the Quartermaines might think he was interested in being part of the family. But the baby was crying, and Bernie was already reaching for him.

"Come in the back," Jason said, more of a mumble than a clear invitation. "Is that okay, Bernie?"

"Sure, sure. What's wrong with the little guy?" Bernie said. "Should I change him, feed him?"

Carly's eyes were wide as she stared at the older man. "Um, he's just—he's fussy. He likes to being walked, but I—"

"You wanna go for a walk while Mommy talks to Uncle Jason?" Bernie said to the baby. "Let's go see the guys and the cars." He headed out to the bay, and Jason led Carly into the back.

"I know we don't know each other, but I was afraid—" Carly bit her lip, then folded her arms. "Your family hates me."

"They don't like me much either," Jason said, though he'd nearly said they weren't his family. "Where's AJ?"

Carly sat down with a thump in one of the hard, plastic chairs, then looked down at her hands. "Don't know. A bar, the club, with another girl? Michael wouldn't stop crying, and I was crying because he cleared out the bank account and your grand—Edward—said he wouldn't give us more money."

Exhausted already, Jason pulled out a chair, sat. "Why? He likes family—"

"M-Michael's an embarrassment, and so I am. They think I'm trash, and I know they're right, but that's not Michael's fault. And—" A rush of air exploded out of her mouth. "I think they're waiting for me to do something wrong. So they can make AJ divorce me and take the baby. Edward keeps talking about how I'm on a thin rope or something. I'm trying," she told Jason, "but it's hard and I'm alone, and I can't get a job because I had to drop out because no one would watch the baby, but—" She squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm not going to make rent, and they're going to evict me. This is what they've been waiting for."

Carly bit her lip. "I love my baby. I don't want to lose him, and I don't think they should be able to take him because I don't have money. So, I thought, maybe I could borrow the money—"

"Borrow implies you can pay it back," Jason interrupted. "Can you?"

She bit her lip, then shook her head. "No," she said. "Probably not. I just—I don't have anywhere else to go," she repeated. "I'm sorry—"

Jason held out a hand as she started to get up. "They think you got pregnant to trap AJ and get money. That's why they're not helping."

Carly sat back, locked eyes on Jason, then nodded. "I know."

"Did you?"

"Did I get pregnant on purpose?" Carly asked. "Yes. I saw the life the Quartermaines had and I know how much money protects you. How much easier it makes things. I never thought they'd cut us off this way. But yes, they're right. I did it on purpose."

Jason nodded. He got to his feet and crossed over to the lockers. Carly frowned. "Are you going to help me?"

"Yeah. And you're going to help yourself, too." Jason came back with a checkbook. "I can help you with rent this month, but I don't make a lot either, and I have my own bills. So you need to get a job that pays for your bills. And you need a bank account that AJ can't touch."

"I can't—"

"The motel across the street is looking for a night clerk. It pays okay because they can't get anyone to stay. Bernie knows the manager, Tammy," Jason told her. "I'll talk to her. Maybe you can bring the kid with you. You're going to have to do the

work. The Quartermaines aren't going to rescue you, Carly. That's not who they are."

"No, I know. I—I was wrong, and I made a mistake. A lot of mistakes," she granted when Jason just arched a brow. "But if you can help me keep my home and get a job, I promise you I won't make those mistakes again."

He scribbled his name at the bottom, tore off the check. "Thank you. For not lying to me."

"That's why you're helping me?" Carly asked, surprised.

"I hate liars," Jason responded. "As long as you don't lie to me, Carly, we'll be fine."

*October 2009*

Carly was waiting for Jason when he emerged from the bay after working on a difficult transmission job, irritated at the interruption. Her sober brown eyes worried. "I did it."

"Okay," he said slowly, wiping his hands on a greasy towel. "You did what?"

"I filed for divorce." Carly folded her arms. "I had to," she continued. "I'm gonna make Tammy so much money and she's never going to regret helping me get my GED, and I've been taking those college classes—but I can't keep Michael in that apartment anymore, with AJ. Waiting for something that won't ever happen."

"Okay," he said with a short nod. "That sounds great. I know you tried, but AJ wasn't interested in being married or being a father. You'll both be better off."

"I know, but—" Carly nibbled on her bottom lip. "But if I'm divorced from your brother, will you—I mean, you helped me because I was his wife—but I won't be anymore. You're my best friend. That's not going to change, is it?"

"You think I'm going to pick AJ over you?" Jason said, and she laughed, some of the tension easing from her face.

"It sounds insane when you say it loud, I guess. I'm just—I came you, desperate, and now I'm not anymore. I feel like all you've done is help me and I don't do anything for you, so like, I don't even know if we're really friends or you just put up with me—"

"It's a little of both," Jason admitted, and Carly smacked him in the shoulder. "I helped you because the Quartermaines tried to do the same thing to me when I left

home. They wanted me to do things their way, but I didn't want to be controlled. I didn't do much, Carly. I gave you rent and a lead on a job. You did the rest—"

"You gave me a chance and believed in me," Carly said. "When everyone else saw the trash from the wrong neighborhood—" She took a deep breath. "That's what makes you special, Jason. You see people for who they are, not what everyone else sees. I just—I didn't—I want to make sure I don't lose that."

"You're not going to lose that." Jason paused. "Lila gave me a chance when I was rude and angry all the time. She pointed me in Bernie's direction, and he made it possible for me to be on my own and build my own life. I just wanted to pass it forward. But I like you — most of the time—and I love my nephew. I never gave a damn about you being my sister-in-law."

Carly beamed, then hugged him. "Thank you. You're never getting rid of me now." She kissed his cheek. "But don't get any ideas," she warned him. "You're basically a brother to me."

Jason wrinkled his nose. "Why did you have to make it weird?" he grumbled. "I need to go back to work. Go away."

"Going," Carly sang and started for the door, turning back as Jason disappeared in the garage bay. She smiled wistfully. Jason might have thought it was weird, but there were definitely times Carly thought life might be easier if she could have just picked Jason as the Quartermaine to go after. Instead—

Well, no use in dwelling on the past. Jason was her best friend and didn't plan on going away, and now he was more family to her than anyone who was related to her by law or blood. She just hoped one day he'd find someone who deserved him.

**Part Three:  
Jason & Elizabeth**

*I've had too much to drink tonight  
And I know it's sad but this is what I think about  
And I wake up in the middle of the night  
It's like I can feel time moving  
How can a person know everything at eighteen  
But nothing at twenty-two?  
And will you still want me when I'm nothing new?*

*February 2011*

Abrams & Brothers looked like it had sat on the corner of Delaware Avenue and Andrew Street for nearly a century. It was a large box of a building, with chipped paint on the sign, and a nearly invisible hand printed sign that read HELP WANTED in the corner of the front window.

It had sat there since Jason Morgan had begun working for Bernie his junior year of high school, and to the best of his recollection, no one had even applied for the front desk job that was being advertised. Likely because Bernie didn't believe in the internet. He'd run the same ad in the *Port Charles Herald* for almost ten years. Every Sunday like clock work.

And the job had never been filled. Mechanics came and went — Bernie hired those through word of mouth. Jason's grandmother had known Bernie, Max Giambetti and his little brother Milo had been dropped off by Bernie's poker buddy, Max, Sr., and Johnny O'Brien—well, no one knew where Johnny had come from, but he hadn't applied either.

After six years, Jason had risen to being the assistant manager which just meant he dealt with the computer and technology that Bernie couldn't be bothered with, and on bad days when the old man threatened to retire, he said this place would be Jason's problem one day. Jason didn't think Bernie would ever retire, but he made good money and enjoyed working on the cars and hanging out with the guys who worked there.

Most of the time. Today, Jason wanted to punch Milo Giambetti because he never knew when something stopped being funny — and joking about the time Robin Scorpio had dropped by the garage with her car, looking for Jason had stopped being funny three weeks earlier. Nothing was wrong with the pre-med's car, but she'd been using it as an excuse to come by for months.

At some point, he was going to have to tell the pretty brunette with the sour smile that he was flattered, but uninterested, but today—as Milo pretended to be Robin complaining about a strange clinking sound in her gas tank—the kid was riding his last nerve.

"You should just take the chick out for a ride," Johnny said with a wicked grin. He pressed a button, sending one of the cars up in the air. "Your sparkling personality should take care of it—"

"Haha," Jason muttered darkly, wondering if they'd be able to find Milo—or Johnny's body—if he used the acid from one of the barrels. "Why don't you—"

A bell in the customer waiting area dragged Jason's attention away and possibly

saved some lives. "I'll be back," he told the two of them. "Find some new material—"

"Every time we do, she just shows up again," Milo called after him.

Still grumbling at the morons, Jason almost yanked the door between the garage bay and the waiting area open. He caught himself, plastering on a half-friendly expression. "Can I—"

The woman standing at the desk turned, her own version of a customer service smile stretched across her face—it didn't reach her eyes or match the tense set of her shoulders. She was young, Jason realized, a few years younger than him, maybe. Petite—barely reaching his shoulders—

And pregnant. At least four or five months, if he could measure by his sister-in-law, who had just had her second son. The burgeoning curve of her belly was unmistakable. Her face, with its delicate features and nervous sapphire eyes, looked familiar. Their eyes met, and Jason lost his train of thought.

"I was hoping to apply for the job I saw in the window," the woman said, her fingers wrapped tightly around the strap of a purse on her shoulder. "Um, for the clerk? That's, like, paperwork, right?"

"Paperwork," Jason repeated, jerking himself back to attention. "Uh, yeah. Mostly. You just—you sit at the desk and deal with customers."

Her smile was a bit more genuine now, but still laced with nerves. "I wouldn't have to work on the cars?"

"No. No. We're, uh—" Jason shook his head, then cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. You're—the sign in the window has been up since Reagan was president—"

"Oh. You're not—" Her face fell and Jason felt like he'd been punched in the gut as she swallowed hard "You're not hiring then?"

"I mean, maybe—" Why had he said anything? He went over to the area behind the desk, jerking out a drawer. "Let me find an application or—"

"I just—"

"Jase, you finish looking at that Honda?" A man with a receding hairline and bushy eyebrows emerged from the back offices, his glasses in his hand. Bernie Abrams grinned at the woman. "Well, hello, sweetheart. Can we help you with something? Your car?"

"She's here about the sign," Jason said. When Bernie just stared at him, Jason clarified. "The Help Wanted—"

"The sign—" Bernie's eyes widened and he looked at the window. "Oh, I've almost entirely forgotten about that. I still pay for the ad every week, though," he told the woman proudly. "I support the local newspaper."

"So you are still looking?" she asked, brightening. "I—I don't have a lot of experience, but, um, I'm a fast learner."

"Of course, of course. Jason, my boy, find her an application, get her a pen." Bernie bustled around the desk, extending a hand. "Bernie Abrams. And you are?"

"Elizabeth Devane," she said. "You'll let me apply?"

"Well, you're here, aren't you? I'm advertising." Bernie beamed at her, still shaking the hand. "I'm surprised your husband is going to let you work so close to your due date."

Jason grimaced as Elizabeth's cheeks flushed and she pulled back her hand. "I'm—I'm not married," she admitted in a soft voice. "It's just me. And the baby." She touched her belly. "She's due in May."

Not at all fazed, Bernie shrugged it off. "Well, either way, babies are a blessing. Jason, did you find that application?"

"Uh, yeah—" Jason shoved the paper across the desk, along with a pen, trying not to let her words echo in his head but they did anyway. *I'm not married. Not married.* It didn't matter. He wasn't in the market for a woman with responsibilities—

"Um—" The tip of the pen hesitated over the application. "I didn't...I didn't graduate from high school. I mean, I'm nineteen," she added in a rush. "I just—I dropped out when I was junior. Does—some of the jobs I've applied for—"

"Oh, well, that's no matter," Bernie told her. "When I was your age, high school graduation was a bonus. My parents didn't even make it past eighth grade. Surprised a pretty thing like you didn't finish."

Elizabeth's fingers tightened around the pen as Jason glared at his manager. "Bernie," he hissed.

"It's all right," she said, even though it clearly wasn't. "My uncle died, and I just—couldn't do it. I was planning to go back, maybe for my GED, but—" Her smile was

thin and humorless. "Something came up."

"Ah." Bernie shrugged. "Well, you can always do that. Jason here—he's a whiz at math if you ever need any help. Go ahead and finish that application so we'll have it, but Jason, why don't get you get us some of that new hire paperwork?"

"New hire—" Elizabeth's eyes were wide, and even Jason was a bit confused. "But—you didn't even really interview me—"

"What do you think this was? Small talk?" Bernie patted her head. "No, I learned all I need to know from this conversation. You're tough, honest, and you don't back down. Everything else can be learned."

"I didn't—" Elizabeth cleared her throat. "Really?"

"It's a full-time job," Bernie continued, "and we pay—" he squinted at Jason. "What's a good wage for a young mother, you think?"

"You're asking me?" Jason said. "I don't know. I—" He glanced through the windows in the bay where he could see Johnny cackling at Milo. "We hired Milo six months ago and he makes twenty an hour—"

"And he's good with that?" Bernie asked, squinting. "Doesn't he live with Max?"

"He does, but—" Jason hoped he didn't have to tell the man that he couldn't give a new hire without experience the same or higher, but Bernie was always one step ahead of him.

"Why don't we start at eighteen?" Bernie suggested and the pen fell from Elizabeth's fingers. "We can revisit it in three months. Or when the baby comes. You'll get—" He pursed his lips. "Jason, what's paid leave these days?"

"Nonexistent," Jason said dryly. "But Carly complained that she had to go back in a month."

"Why don't we say two months when the baby comes," Bernie told Elizabeth who was just staring at him in disbelief. "Of course, there's medical and vision and all of that. We take good care of our boys here. It'll be good for us to have a pretty young woman around—"

"Bernie, you're not supposed to say things like that," Jason said, flashing an apologetic look at Elizabeth.

"I know, I know. I'll do better," Bernie promised Elizabeth. "You let me know if any



of my boys does anything I need to slap them around for—Jason, you'll take care of the paperwork? I need to tell the paper I don't need the ad anymore."

With a beaming grin, Bernie removed the sign from the window and tossed it in the trash. He turned back at the door, wagged a finger at Elizabeth who'd said nothing in nearly five minutes. "I have a good feeling about you, Elizabeth. I think you'll fit in nicely here."

He disappeared behind the door, and Jason looked back at Elizabeth. "He can be..." He tried to search for a way to explain the effusive, affectionate, harmless, and occasionally idiotic behavior of his boss. "He usually depends on first impressions to hire someone," he said finally. "He never interviews. I'm not sure he knows how."

"He has a good feeling about me," Elizabeth repeated. With a tremulous smile, she met Jason's eyes again. "That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

That didn't sound so good to Jason, but she looked happy and he liked the way her eyes had lit up when Bernie had said it, so he was willing to accept that. And he liked the young woman who hadn't blinked at any of Bernie's insane questions, but had unflinchingly told the truth even when it could have embarrassed her. Bernie was probably right about her.

"I better find that paperwork for you," Jason told her. "Are you done with the application? We need it for the file."

"Oh, right—" Elizabeth sighed her name at the bottom, then slid it across the counter. Their fingers brushed, and a jolt went down Jason's spine. She frowned, jerking her hand back. "Sorry, um, static maybe," she said, rubbing her fingers.

"Yeah." He cleared his throat again. "When you're done with the paperwork, I'll take you in to meet the guys."

"It's just—it's happening so fast. They won't think it's weird Bernie just hired me like this?"

"Around here, you'll be the normal one," Jason said, spying Johnny chase Milo around the bay. He winced. "I'll be right back. They'll be at this for hours if I don't stop them."

*March 2011*

Elizabeth's fingers shook slightly as she finished processing the credit card payment for the irritated blonde woman in front of her. The anger and frustration radiating from the customer felt like a wave crashing on the shore, receding only to return

larger and more hostile.

"All this money for this goddamn car, and they couldn't even fix it," the woman muttered, scrawling her name on the receipt and shoving it back to Elizabeth. "You tell that crook he'll be hearing from my lawyers."

Elizabeth's stomach rolled, nausea crawling up her throat. She didn't know how to deal with the upset customers—the garage had so few of them that she hadn't had to learn.

She was saved from having to figure it out when Jason Morgan stepped through the doorway separating the waiting area from the bay. "Ms. Vining," Jason said, directing the customer's attention from Elizabeth to himself. "I'm sorry we weren't able to fix the problem, but you agreed that replacing the transmission wasn't worth the cost—"

"Yeah, well, I still had to pay for the diagnostics, didn't I?" Amy Vining demanded. "And the labor—" She hissed, slapping her purse over her shoulder. "You can bet I won't be bringing my new car here."

She stalked out, the door swinging wildly in her wake. Elizabeth exhaled carefully, the sudden absence of all that toxic angry making her slightly dizzy. She was getting better at blocking the softer emotions, but it was still so hard when the emotions were overwhelming.

"Are you all right?"

Elizabeth looked at Jason, feeling her cheeks heat as their eyes met. She bit her lip, dropping her gaze back to her desk. "Yeah, um, sorry. I don't—I knew it was something like that, but I didn't know how to explain it." Her heart felt like it was beating harder than normal as he drifted closer to the desk.

No one else affected her this way at the garage, and they were all so friendly and warm that Elizabeth hadn't had much trouble keeping their emotions from infiltrating her own. She could read them—if she wanted to—but it was easier to control it around them, especially Milo who was more like a soft, sweet puppy.

With Jason—it was hard to understand. She couldn't read him, not even a little, but she'd seen from others that he was known for keeping himself bottled up. Or contained. That was probably better. He didn't wear his emotions on his sleeve so they didn't invade her own space.

But she also couldn't sense him when she tried. She'd tried a few times, but it was like he knew all about the box Anna had tried to teach her when she still lived in

home. He was a mystery, and maybe that was part of the reason he made her so nervous. She'd always been able to get a read on people, even before her powers had bloomed fully.

Or maybe it was because he was gorgeous, Elizabeth admitted to herself as he stopped in front of the counter. And either he didn't know the terrible reputation she'd developed in the last few years or he didn't care because he was kind to her. He wasn't the kind of guy she'd spent time with — definitely nothing like the guy she'd been sort of seeing when she'd gotten pregnant.

Jason Morgan wasn't like anyone else she'd met, and the only person who had been this kind to her without a reason had been her uncle Robert.

"You don't have to worry about telling customers anything about their cars," Jason was saying when Elizabeth tuned back in. "That's what we're for. You just process their payments and take the calls."

"I know that's what Bernie said, but I feel like I should know more," Elizabeth insisted. "I should be able to handle someone like Amy Vining or sum up their invoices." She wrinkled her nose, then put a hand on her belly as the baby kicked hard against her ribs. She winced.

"Are you okay?" Jason rounded the desk, concern etched into his blue eyes. "Do you need to sit?"

"N-No—" Elizabeth cleared her throat. "No, it's just a hard kick. She's doing that more, I guess, since I'm due in six weeks."

And wasn't that terrifying? In six weeks, she'd be a mother. She'd be entirely responsible for another human being. The fear of that swept through her, the hair on her arms standing up. What did she know about being a mother? Sometimes she thought Anna was right. She should think about adoption.

But what if everyone was wrong? What if the curse hadn't been broken? What if—

"Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth snapped back, forcing a smile. "Sorry. Sometimes it just hits me how close I am."

"Yeah, I bet. My sister-in-law just had a baby," he told her, stepping back around the desk. "Her second." He made a face. "She named him Morgan."

Elizabeth drew her brows together. "Wouldn't that make his name Morgan

Morgan?"

"Oh—" Jason shook his head. "I forget—you don't know about that. She's married to my half-brother. Well, divorced from," he added. "Her oldest, Michael, is my nephew. But I think I ended up with Carly in the divorce. And Michael is a Quartermaine."

Quartermaine. "As in..."

"As in ELQ and all that comes with it. I don't have much to do with any of that," Jason told her. "I was in a car accident when I was in high school, and I ended up taking my grandmother's last name." When she raised her brows, he shrugged. "Long story."

So she wasn't the only one with a turbulent past. "I bet."

"Have you, um, have you picked a name yet?" Jason asked. She looked at him in surprise. He rarely stayed out here this long. He was always warm and friendly, but he'd kept a bit of distance in the month or so, letting the other mechanics do most of the talking.

"Not yet, but I was thinking about Maria." Elizabeth played with a pen, twisting and rolling back and forth between her fingers. "That was my mother's name. She...died when I was born."

"I'm sorry—" Jason was taken aback. "I didn't really—I didn't think that happened anymore."

"Undiagnosed brain aneurysm," Elizabeth managed with a weak smile. At least that was the official diagnosis. She knew what had killed her mother. Her aunt had never let her forget it. "But yeah, maybe Maria. Or not. I don't know. I keep going back and forth." She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "I don't want to pick the wrong name."

"You won't," Jason told her, sounding strangely confident. She frowned. "I mean, it's a name, right? Your daughter will make it her own. That's what usually happens. And if she hates it, she'll change it."

"Like you did?"

Jason made a face. "Morgan was my middle name," he continued. "My parents and I—didn't really handle the accident well. I don't actually—" He paused. "I don't actually remember most of my life before I turned sixteen. I don't talk to them much anymore."

"I'm—" Elizabeth swallowed hard. "I'm sorry. That's—that's terrible."

"At first it was, but I don't think about it much anymore." He stepped back from the desk. "Listen, about the customers—if you want—after you come back from maternity leave, I'll help you out. Walk you through some of the basics with the routine stuff. Oil changes and all that." He paused at the door.

"That would be great. Thank you." Elizabeth beamed at him, and he smiled back, then turned—only to walk straight into the door as it didn't open when he pushed.

He narrowed his eyes, glaring at Johnny standing on the other side, holding it closed and grinning like a maniac. Elizabeth laughed as Johnny took off and Jason chased him.

She could really get used to this place.

*May 2011*

"I keep telling her to start the leave now," Bernie said. He rubbed his chin, pacing back and forth in front of the Honda Jason was inspecting. "And she said she wanted to make sure she had the whole two months when the baby comes—can you believe it? As if I'd take a day away from that—"

Jason ignored his boss—the older man had been fretting since Elizabeth's due date had come and gone the week before. The entire staff was tense as they awaited the birth of Elizabeth's baby. She looked tired and worn every morning she dragged herself in, but was determined to put in every single hour. She was every bit the harder worker she'd promised that first day.

"I think while she's out," Bernie continued, "we ought to see about setting up some sort of area for her so she can bring the baby to work."

At this, Jason turned. "What?"

"I heard her talking to baby sitters and daycares," Milo piped up from the next car over. His dark hair was barely visible through the windows of the gold Nissan Sentra whose oil he was changing. "She's worried about the money. Basically most of her salary will go to that, and she doesn't want to use the trust fund her grandmother left her."

Jason glared at him. "You heard her say all of that?"

"No, she told me about the daycare costs and the trust fund." Milo swaggered over.

"She tells me stuff," he boasted.

Jason gritted his teeth and turned his attention back to the Honda's air hose, ignoring the itch between his shoulders. Elizabeth was too friendly with other mechanics, he thought, then winced at the uncharitable thought. It wasn't like Milo was going to ask her out, he reminded himself. The dumbass would run as far as he could from a single mother.

"We're a family business," Bernie continued as if Milo hadn't said anything. "Why can't she take care of the baby here? Why pay good money when we'll help? I raised some nephews. Jason, you've changed diapers."

"Milo's still in them," Max said, clapping his little brother on the back. Milo glared at him, but Max was unfazed. "We should do it. If she ever has that baby. I got ten that we've got another week—"

Jason didn't think he'd make it another week, worrying about her going into labor at home alone. He knew she wasn't close to her family, and she'd never said a word about any friends. Or the baby's father, whoever the hell he was. What if she couldn't drive herself to the hospital? He should have given her his number or something—

Something shattered, and Jason shoved away from the car, looking around. When he couldn't find the source of the noise in the bay, he jogged towards the waiting area—picking up speed when he saw Elizabeth standing by the desk, her face pinched and red — a glass in shards at her feet.

"Elizabeth?" Jason shoved the partially open door all the way open. "Don't move—are you okay?"

"N-no—" She squeezed her eyes shut, wrapping her arms protectively around the belly that had doubled in size since she'd begun working at the garage. "I think—oh, God, I think I'm in labor—"

Jason, halfway to stooping down to gather up the glass, bounced back to his feet as Bernie and Max came in after him, followed by Milo, Johnny, and Francis. "What? Now?"

"Damn it, I lost fifty," Johnny muttered and Francis slapped him in the back of the head. Jason ignored them and went over to Elizabeth, wrapping an arm around her waist, steering her away from the glass. Elizabeth slumped against him, droplets of sweat at her temple.

"Who do I call?" Milo asked. "Doctor? Ambulance? Who's your birthing coach?"

"Birthing coach? What the hell have you been watching?" Johnny demanded.

Elizabeth said nothing, her entire body seeming to fold in on itself, everything clenched so tightly. Jason reached for her hand, squeezing it to encourage her to squeeze back. When the contraction finally passed, the tension in her body released, and she nearly fell. Jason hold on more tightly.

"How far apart?" he asked, helping her to sit down in the waiting area. He perched on the coffee table in front of her. "Was that first one?"

"Um, maybe. I think—" Elizabeth looked around now at the crowd, her face paling. "I'm sorry. I didn't meant to disrupt everything—"

"Cars can wait," Bernie said affably. "Babies can't. What's your doctor's name, sweetheart? I'll call."

"It's in my wallet on the desk." Elizabeth twisted slightly. "Dr. Lee. At General Hospital. Um, I think I'm supposed to go when the contractions are four minutes apart, last one minute, and um—" She grimaced. "Have been going for an hour."

"Okay, that was your first one?" Jason asked. She flushed. "Elizabeth."

"Well, I was feeling achy all day, and then there was some pain, but everything always hurts—but that was the first really bad one."

"Someone go get my phone," Jason said. He got to his feet and helped Elizabeth to stand. "We'll time them, and then I'll drive you to the hospital." He paused. "Unless there's...there's someone you want to call."

"N-No, but I can't ask you—you're working—"

"Johnny, take over the Honda," Jason said as the other man handed him the phone. "Come on, we'll go hang out in the break room until it's time. It's got a sofa and a television. We'll watch bad game shows and sitcom reruns."

Elizabeth bit her lip but allowed Jason to lead her into the back.

"Fifty bucks," Johnny said, "says that kid's calling Jason Daddy by the time it's two."

"You just wanna make your money back," Francis said sourly. "I'll see your fifty and raise you another twenty that it's sooner than that—eighteen months. At most."

"You're on."

"Morons," Bernie muttered as he dialed Elizabeth's doctor.

"I know," Max said with a shake of his head. "Milo said his first word when he was nine months old. It was pasta," he allowed, "but—yeah, no way it takes that long. Yo! Hundred bucks it's by Christmas!" he called, running after the others as they returned to work and waited for the call.

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Elizabeth opened her eyes, blearily focusing on the plastic incubator several feet from her bed, smiling faintly.

A boy. She'd had a little boy.

She'd never dreamed it would be a boy—Soltini women had had girls for as long as anyone could remember, part of the curse, Nonna had told her once. Even though Elizabeth had spent her life believing the curse to be broken, she hadn't been able to shake the conviction she'd have a girl. She hadn't even bothered with a sonogram to know for sure. Why spend the money if she didn't need to?

Her son. Elizabeth's eyes drifted closed again, then snapped open as she took in the blob next to the crib. The blob was slowly refining itself into Jason, dozing off in the chair next to the baby.

It started to slide back in bits and pieces. Waiting with Jason in the break room as her labor had advanced, watching mindless television, bracing herself through the worst of the contractions as Jason held her hand and counted them down using the timer on his phone.

When it had come time to bring her to the hospital, Bernie had insisted Jason go in the backseat with her, and Max had been elected to drive. He'd been so nervous, turning at every red light to beg her not to have the baby right now. He and Jason knew cars, not labor and delivery.

And then at the hospital, somehow Jason had been swept up in everything, and the next she knew she was in the delivery room and he was right there as she pushed and grunted to give birth.

He'd been there when Dr. Lee placed the baby on Elizabeth's chest and she'd looked at her precious baby for the first time, falling helplessly in love with the little scrap of humanity with his ugly red face and wildly, waving fists.



"You're awake—" Jason sat up, clearing his throat. "Hey."

"Hey. How—" Her own throat was dry, and Jason brought over a glass of water, a straw dangling. "How long did I sleep?"

"Just an hour or so." Jason put the cup back down. "Bernie and the guys came by for a minute to see the baby, but I told them I'd call when you were awake."

"You've—" She paused. "You were here the whole time?"

"I didn't want you to be alone," he said simply. He twisted as the baby fussed. "And you woke up just in time. Um, the nurse said you should—she said it was in your chart that you were going—"

The tips of his ears were turning red and, despite how exhausted she was, she giggled at his discomfort. "After sitting through childbirth, breastfeeding makes you nervous?" she teased.

Jason laughed then, shaking his head. "No, I guess not. Here—" He gathered the newborn in his arms and brought him over to her, gently laying him down against her. "Do you want me to get a nurse?"

"No, but you can turn your back if it makes you uncomfortable," Elizabeth said. And if she had more energy and space for it, she might feel more self-conscious but she just wanted to hold her precious son and feed him. Her body, which had never brought her anything but pain and misery, had kept him safe and healthy for all these months and would be responsible for feeding him. It was almost beautiful.

"I just want you to be okay—" Jason did turn away as Elizabeth took down her hospital gown and tried to get the baby to latch the way she'd seen in the pamphlets and videos. He did it immediately, and she beamed at Jason who was consciously *not* looking in their direction.

"It worked! On the first try! I thought it would be harder, but maybe he's so hungry—" Taking pity on the poor man who already been through too much, she gestured for the towel at the end of the bed. "Can you hand that to me?"

"Yeah, yeah—" Jason fumbled, and then she used her free hand to lightly drape herself. "Sorry, I'm—"

"You've already done more than enough. Thank you," Elizabeth told him. "I'm sorry you got stuck—you could have told them you weren't—" She bit her lip. "They must have thought—"

"Yeah, I guess so. It's okay." Jason sat back down, and they were quiet for a long minute. "Did you even pick out any boy names?"

"No, I didn't. I was so sure—" Elizabeth smiled down at her son. "But I know just what I want to name him. There was this lake near the house where I grew up in Maine. I mean, I grew up on Casco Bay, literally. The house was right on the water. But about a mile away, Lake Cameron. My grandparents used to take me and my cousin swimming there in the summers. And my aunt Grace." Her smile slipped slightly. One by one they'd all died. First her aunt. Then her grandfather, then finally, her grandmother.

And even Nadine had fallen out of touch after Elizabeth left home that night. She'd gone away to college in New York and rarely called home now. All that was left in Port Charles were Robin and Anna.

"Cameron," Jason repeated. "That's a good name."

A good name, tied back to her the happiest times of her life. Cameron Hardy, for Lake Cameron and Hardy Devane, the grandfather who was little more than a dim memory of a man with a booming laugh and kind eyes. Cameron Hardy Devane.

The first boy born to a Soltini woman in living memory, and he was all hers.

*May 2012*

When it came down to it, honestly, Elizabeth had no one to blame but herself. She was the one that had reserved the gazebo in the park instead of just having some cake at the garage. She was the one that had sent invitations to her cousins and aunt, hoping they would be interested in seeing how well she was doing. How beautiful and amazing her son was.

Her son. Even after a year, Elizabeth could scarcely believe that she was a mother to a little boy with his sparkling blue eyes and bright smiles. He'd called her mama a month earlier and he reached for her. Cameron was nothing but pure and good, and he was worth everything Elizabeth had been through.

"We're not allowed to kick their asses, are we?" Francis muttered to Johnny as they gathered up trash and packed up the tables and chairs.

"I wish," the other man said mournfully as he dumped a half-eaten piece of cake into the trash. "But they're women. So unless your sister wants to help—"

Across the gazebo, Elizabeth was studiously not listening to them and was instead organizing the small pile of presents from the guys at the garage while Jason

cleaned Cameron up from the cake. The newly christened toddler had dove into the cake hands first and now wore most of the bright blue icing.

Bernie had gone back to the garage with Max and Milo to open up for the afternoon, but he'd—he'd told Elizabeth not to come back in, to spend the day with her son.

And no one was commenting on the lack of Elizabeth's family—neither Robin nor Nadine had attended, and Anna had stopped by to drop off a card and make excuses about needing to be in the shop.

Bernie had closed the garage down to celebrate Cameron—the youngest member of the staff, he'd told a confused park employee with all the pride of a grandfather, but Elizabeth's own flesh and blood couldn't leave her shop in the hands of one of the workers for a few hours.

She wasn't thinking about it. She wasn't going to think about it. No matter what anyone said to her, she wasn't going to think about it. Anna had shown up, after all. That was something. But it was probably to check up on her, Elizabeth thought darkly. Did she expect Elizabeth to fail after all this time? How long was she going to have to pay for how terrible she'd behaved?

Four years of living in exile wasn't enough?

"I think he has icing in his ears," Jason said, a bit mystified as he lifted Cameron out of the high chair and bounced him. The baby giggled and waved his hands. "Under his fingernails, in his nose—"

"He probably breathed some of it in," Elizabeth said, turning to smile at them. At the sight they made. Cameron's birth was not the last time that Jason had been mistaken as his father. Cameron's hair had remained light and sunny as he'd reached his first year—he'd probably inherited his aunt Grace's coloring, Elizabeth thought as she looked Cameron again who was cuddled against Jason's chest like he belonged there.

Wistfully, Elizabeth wished he did. Or that she did. That they belonged anywhere. Cameron's blond hair and blue eyes made him look superficially related to Jason, and he had never been upset or irritated by anyone making the mistake. And sometimes, he didn't even correct it.

"He's probably ready for his nap," Elizabeth said, forcing out the melancholy thoughts. Jason had been an extraordinary friend to her over the last year, and it was hardly his fault she had insane fantasies about him or wished he was more than just the sweet guy at work who loved her son.

"Yeah." Jason rubbed Cameron's back. "You want a nap, buddy?" he asked him, and Cameron's eyes were wide. He shook his head. "No nap?"

"No! No nap!"

Elizabeth laughed as Jason blinked at the baby, then at her. "Yeah, he can say exactly three words. Mama, nap, and no. The nap always goes with no." She slid her hand down Cameron's back, standing close enough to Jason that their bodies brushed one another. She'd never learned to read Jason all that well, but that might have also been because she'd been working so hard to build up those walls Anna had tried to show her all those years ago.

She still had bad moments, when she'd be taken off guard by a rush of emotions—usually hostile ones—but it no longer swamped her and drowned out everything that made Elizabeth who she was. With the constant tension and fear Elizabeth lived under with her aunt, she'd hadn't felt the pressure as acutely.

Though sometimes she wished she could read Jason, if only to throw some cold water over her head and help these dreams fade away. If she just knew for sure—

She cleared her throat and turned back to the last of the gifts — Bernie had gone overboard, and even Max and Milo's mother had knitted Cameron a sweater for the winter. She'd nearly cried then at the loveliness of the thought—

Her hand brushed over the card that Anna had left, and without thinking about it too much, Elizabeth picked it up. Inside, she found a perfunctory message in the card from Anna to Cameron, wishing him a happy birthday. A fifty dollar savings bond in Cameron's name, to mature on his eighteenth birthday.

A savings bond. They couldn't be sold by anyone who wasn't the owner. Another sign that Elizabeth was not to be trusted.

"What's that?" Jason asked, glancing over. "I thought you were opening the cards at home—"

"I was going to—" Elizabeth sat down and stared at the card. At the message. Or lack of one. Anna might as well have been giving a message to a stranger, much less her grand-nephew. She squeezed her eyes shut. Oh, God. She hadn't realized how much she'd wanted something different until she hadn't received it.

"Elizabeth?" Jason sat next to her, settling Cameron in his lap. "Hey—"

"My aunt and my mother were twins," Elizabeth said softly. "And—" She cleared her throat. "I just—there's one left. My grandparents are gone. My uncle. My

mother, my aunt. It's just my aunt. And I thought—God, I dreamed that she might look at my son as her own grandson. He'll never have my mother. I don't know why I thought she'd love him—"

"Hey—"

"She never loved me, but I thought I knew why. I thought I understood it—" A tear slid down her cheek, burning hot against her skin. "But none of that is Cameron's fault, and I've worked so hard to be a better person." She looked up, focused on him. "You know who I was before, don't you? You never said—"

"I—" Jason winced, then nodded. "Yeah. I knew Robin in high school a little, and well, you know she used to come by the garage. Or did until she started dating that Leo guy."

"That Leo guy," Elizabeth murmured. She looked away, out over the park. "I didn't even know she was dating anyone. You're friends with her, aren't you?"

"Not—not really. I mean, we're friendly. And I see her at some of the same parties," Jason clarified. "But—"

"So you know who I was before Cameron." She swiped at her eyes. "Why my aunt kicked me out."

"Robin had mentioned a few times," Jason began painfully, "that she had another cousin. Not the youngest one, but one in the middle. That she'd started drinking when she was barely a teenager and was falling down drunk most of the time."

That was true, but it was the only way Elizabeth could drown out the voices and feelings—she needed to black out. Needed to make it stop.

"I was a bad influence on Robin and Nadine," Elizabeth said, "that's what my aunt said." But that wasn't why. It wasn't the only why. It was Nadine using her powers to cast spells to protect Elizabeth. To use her magic on Robin and Anna. Anna was afraid of what else Elizabeth might ask Nadine to do.

Elizabeth had never asked Nadine to cast the sleeping spells in the first place, but no one had cared about that. But she should have made her stop when she found out.

"I'm not proud of who I was before, but I'm not ashamed either. N-not really. I did what I thought I had to do. What I thought I needed to do." She squeezed her eyes shut again. Couldn't tell him everything. Shouldn't tell him anything, but she loved him so much and she just wanted him to understand.

She knew why Anna couldn't love her, but to ignore her son—the miracle boy born after all these generations—the proof that her mother's life hadn't been sacrificed in vain. That breaking the curse had brought them Cameron.

"You don't have to explain anything to me—"

"I was out of control, I know that now. I—I was drinking, and I—well, you know I was sleeping around. Not with everyone," she added hastily. "But I wasn't exactly known for my good judgment in anything. But then I found out I was pregnant and it all stopped. I promise you. I stopped immediately, and Cameron is perfect. He's perfect—"

"Hey. I know he is—" Jason braced Cameron with one arm and took Elizabeth's hand with the other. "Haven't I seen you nearly every day for over a year? I know who you are Elizabeth. And yeah, who you were matters because it's part of your story, but if that's all your aunt wants to know, it's her loss."

"I think she just never thought I was worth losing her sister," Elizabeth murmured. She looked back at the savings bond. She felt Jason stand and move away to put Cameron down in the portable playpen they'd brought. Then he came back and sat down.

"Your aunt—she's the one that pulled that crap after Cameron was born, wasn't she?" Jason said tightly. Her cheeks flaming, Elizabeth nodded. "She called Social Services and had you investigated."

"That's why I was so desperate to get a job. Why Bernie saved my life. I have a small trust fund from my grandmother and my mother. My uncle helped me until I was eighteen, but after that—I had money to live on. At least for a while. And I had a place to live." Not as nice as the house on Charles Street or Soltini House back home in Maine, but it was still home to her. "But my aunt said she didn't think I could keep it together. I never had before, and she had to think about the baby. She only cared about him when she thought she could control him." She took a deep breath. "If it wasn't for you and Bernie and everyone—I wouldn't be here. I don't know why any of you bother, but—"

For over a year, she'd been unable to read Jason. But today, as he tilted her chin up so that their eyes met, it was like a wall crumbled between them. It was like a soft wave washing over her, the warmth and lovely tingles—

"We bother because we're your family," Jason told her.

She licked her lips, and his eyes dropped to her mouth, before flicking back up to

hers. They were closer to one another—when had that happened? She could feel his breath warm on her face, then his mouth covered hers, and she knew now—

She knew that he loved her. Not just her son, but her.

*September 2013*

Bernie was beaming as he hung the newest staff photo behind the front desk. "You know, I think we have more customers since Cameron came along," he told Jason.

Jason rolled his eyes, setting the toddler on his feet. "Don't go through the door," he told the two year old.

Cameron eyed him suspiciously, looked over at the door, then at Jason again, then ambled over to the toy box in the corner of the waiting area. He'd been at the garage nearly every day of his life, but Jason still worried every time he was in the bay.

He looked back at Bernie, at the staff photo they had taken a few weeks earlier. The guys were gathered around Bernie who had an arm slung around Elizabeth's shoulder. On his other side, Jason held Cameron who was grinning brightly for the photographer.

Anyone who didn't know might think that Elizabeth was Bernie's daughter and that Cameron was Jason's son. It wasn't too far from the truth. Jason glanced over his shoulder but Cameron seemed absorbed by the toys he'd dragged out of the box.

"Are you going to ask before or after we make the announcement?" Bernie wanted to know.

Jason hesitated, shoving hands in his pockets. "I don't know," he admitted. He looked at his manager, more father to him now than his own. "I know we both—I know we both want the same things, and I know she'll say yes about adopting Cameron, but—" He shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe I shouldn't propose."

"If not now, then when?" Bernie asked. "And if she says no, at least you'll have something to start with. That girl—" He looked at the photo, uncharacteristically somber. "I've worried about her since the day she walked through the door. No regrets — she turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to this place, but she's got secrets."

"I know." He'd given up hoping she'd ever truly tell him everything. She'd give him bits and pieces, but there was so much locked up inside of her— "But I don't care about them—"

"You should. It's those secrets that have you hesitating when everyone in this garage has been taking bets on when you'll tie the knot. And that pool started almost day she arrived." Bernie made a face. "Maybe I shouldn't retire."

"I told you that you didn't have to," Jason reminded him. "I'll buy half interest and you can stay on. Nothing has to change, Bernie. Not here anymore. I'm just ready—" He looked at Cameron again. "He's been mine since he was born. Everyone knows it. I just want it to be true. And I want us to be a real family. Elizabeth won't move in with me. But if I push her, maybe—" Still, the doubt clawed at him. After over a year, Elizabeth had done nothing, said nothing, to indicate that she wanted things to change. That she wanted more.

She loved him, he knew that, but whenever he brought up the future, she'd just look so scared and change the subject, and he'd let her. He knew how much baggage she carried from a lifetime of being Anna Devane's niece. That relationship had thawed a bit, and Anna seemed to be coming around, at least with Cameron, but still—

"I just can't stand still anymore," he said finally. "I need more. What we have now—it's not enough."

"I know you'll do fine," Bernie said. "However it turns out—you'll make sure of it." The bell over the door jangled, and Elizabeth came in, laughing with a glum Milo following. "Oh, that face doesn't look good," the owner said. "What happened?"

"He shot his shot," Elizabeth said with a grin. "And then got shot down. Georgie wanted nothing to do with him. I told you so," she added with a shrug, then swept Cameron into her arms, and he giggled. Jason looked at the two of them, the center of his universe, and felt firmer in his decision. They were everything, and he wanted to build more. More children, more happiness. He had to believe she shared at least some of the same dreams.

And if she didn't—

Well, he needed to know that, too.

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With trembling fingers, Elizabeth carefully turned the keys in the ignition and switched off her engine. The night was slowly fading into dawn, the first streaks of pink stretching across the sky.

She stared at the bumper of the car in front of her, parked haphazardly on Kohler Street, its back end slightly pushed out into the street and the front passenger tire scraping against the curb. She took in the license plate and color, the sticker on the window that marked its owner as a student at Port Charles University and the



little blue cross from the medical school.

Robin was here.

Elizabeth turned her head towards the apartment complex and the door that led to her boyfriend's apartment, and nearly turned the car back on.

It was too late. Robin was already here. She'd already told—

A sob crawled up Elizabeth's throat and she forced it back down. She knew how to turn those emotions off. She knew how to make it go away. She'd worked so hard to shut everything out. To shut out the screams of everyone else—

She didn't want to feel.

Wasn't that why she had gone to the party in the first place?

But maybe he wouldn't believe Robin. He'd told her only hours ago he loved her. That he loved her son. That he wanted a future with her—

He'd know the truth. Even if Robin refused to open her eyes, refused to *see*, Elizabeth knew he would.

Somehow, she got out of the car and walked across the lawn, her knees shaky and her breath choppy—her lungs felt tight, her throat scratchy—she just wanted someone to hold her and tell her it was going to be okay—

That it wasn't her fault—

The door was slightly ajar, and Elizabeth could hear her cousin's voice as she gently pushed it open.

Robin hadn't changed after the party either—was still wearing the tight jeans and purple tube top, her dark eye makeup streaked across her face where the tears had tracked. She turned at the sound of the door, just as the man next her did.

And Elizabeth felt the hate, the disgust, the loathing wash over her so fiercely that she nearly stumbled. She reached out blindly to hold the doorway, to stop herself from losing consciousness.

Oh, God. He *believed* her.

Jason was disheveled, his dirty blonde hair tousled from sleep, clad in a t-shirt and a pair of gray shorts—his sandy brows furrowed and his eyes in a squint—

And Elizabeth pressed her fist to her heart, taking the hit as another wave of anger, bitterness, confusion, and more disgust—hit her like a freight train.

"Elizabeth," he began.

She just shook her head and started to back up.

"Don't bother," Robin said with that smug, dismissive voice that had haunted and tormented Elizabeth most of her life. "She's not worth it—"

Jason swung his head back to look at Robin, but Elizabeth couldn't stand it—couldn't wait for the next blow. She stumbled out and ran across the lawn.

"Wait—"

She heard him call after her, but Elizabeth couldn't stop—couldn't take another minute of it—he might feel bad about it, but he believed Robin who had *always* refused to see her, always refused to give Elizabeth the benefit of the doubt—

She hurled herself into the passenger side of her car, slithering into the driver's seat, starting the car, and peeling away from the curb — not even caring that she clipped her cousin's precious car.

She spared herself one last look at Jason who had reached the street just a moment too late. He stood in the middle of the road—growing smaller and smaller as she drove away, then disappeared when she turned the corner.

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Elizabeth had barely managed to get herself together when she jerked her car to a stop in front of the house on Charles Street. She should have. She should have showered, and slept. Or something.

But if Robin had gone to Jason—

Elizabeth started up the sidewalk to her aunt's front door only for it to swing open and Anna came into the doorway, her face set like stone.

Elizabeth's breath hitched. She knew. She knew. She knew and she believed Robin. Everyone believed Robin—

How could they not see—how could Robin have not *seen* the truth? It was supposed to be her gift, her power, to see deception—but she couldn't—

"I thought we were done with this," Anna snapped as Elizabeth stepped up. Couldn't run. Couldn't hide. She needed her son, she needed her precious baby. Everything would be all right if she could just hold him and feel the pure love that radiated.

He loved her. Above everything, she knew Cameron loved her.

"It's not what you think—"

"No?" Anna stepped back, her words snapping worse than any slap she could have leveled. "So you didn't break almost three years of sobriety last night because you had a fight with your boyfriend?"

"It wasn't a fight—" Her heart lurched. Couldn't fight if someone just cut and run. Jason had asked her and she'd run—

She'd give anything to take it back, anything to turn back time, but that wasn't her gift, wasn't her lot in life—

"Oh, so you don't even have that as excuse for what you did?" Anna demanded. "Robin told me, Elizabeth. She saw you at the party—you were drinking—"

"N-no, not then—" Bile rose in her throat. "And not at all. I promise—"

"I can smell it all over you—"

"But—" No one would believe her. Hadn't Leo said so? He'd laughed as he'd poured his beer over. Everyone knew who she was.

What she was.

Even Jason, who'd never judged her, knew. And believed.

No, no. It didn't matter if they believed. She knew the truth. She was the only one that mattered.

"I want my son," Elizabeth said. No point in trying to explain, in trying to make Anna change her mind. "Right now—"

"There's no way on this Earth you're getting that child. I did you a favor last night," Anna retorted. "Watching over the boy. You said you need some time alone, and what did you do? You went out and destroyed your life and what's more, you slapped out at Robin who has never done anything to you—"

"That is not true—"

"She's done nothing to you," Anna repeated harshly. "She's resented you, yes, but what did she do with that resentment? Nothing. She kept it locked inside of her—"

"Not tightly enough," Elizabeth cut in. "I felt it. You know I did. Do you think it makes it better that she felt bad about it? It doesn't matter. She hated me, and so did you. But none of that matters. Because I will have my son—"

"I am done letting you waste my sister's sacrifice," Anna bit out. "I did my best to take care of you, even though, yes, it was hard for me to look at you and see Maria—"  
" Her voice broke. "You were the very image of her, and it broke my heart to see you grow up, to grow into her face, and her eyes—I could hardly breathe—but you are throwing away her life, and I will not have it. I can't stop you from destroying your life, but you will not take Maria's grandson with you—"

Elizabeth fisted her hands at her side. "You have no right to keep me from my son. There is no active Social Services investigation, and if I were to call the police, they would make you give him to me. I am sober. I am of age, and I have a home that is clean and safe. Whatever you think you know about last night—"

"You might be able to take him today," Anna spat out, "but will you be able to keep him? Once they get involved this time, you won't shake them off as easily. Do you think Jason will have you back now? You've humiliated him, and that garage only keeps you around because of Jason."

That sound chills down Elizabeth's spine. She didn't have a choice now. There was no going back.

"Give me my son," Elizabeth said again, and this time Anna, with her lips pressed tightly together, went upstairs to get the toddler.

Elizabeth returned to her apartment and took only what she needed, packing up her second hand car—Bernie had bought it for her on her last birthday, and the guys had fixed it up for her.

And now it would take her away from all of them. Anna was right. No matter how much Bernie and the others cared for her, they were Jason's first. And if he believed what Robin had said, why would anyone take Elizabeth's side?

She packed everything in her car and left Port Charles.

If she'd been only ten minutes later, Jason would have found her and he could have

told her he didn't believe Robin and that he just wanted to understand what the hell was going on—

But he found an empty apartment. She'd left, taking his dreams with her. Cameron, the little boy he'd loved as his own, was gone, and the hopes he'd had of making a family were shattered.

**Part Four:  
Exile**

*I think I've seen this film before  
And I didn't like the ending  
I'm not your problem anymore  
So who am I offending now?  
You were my crown  
Now I'm in exile seein' you out  
I think I've seen this film before  
So I'm leavin' out the side door*

*July 2021 in Washington Heights, New York City*

"MOM! HE'S TOUCHING ME!"

Elizabeth Webber dragged her hands through her hair, then left her hands linked behind her neck as she walked out of her cramped ensuite bathroom to confront the screaming banshees masquerading as her children.

"Cameron."

Her oldest, ten-year-old Cameron, let go of his brother's neck and straightened with a bright smile. "I can explain."

"Uh huh." She wrinkled her nose, then looked at Jake. "What did you do to get the choke hold?"

Seven-year-old Jake gasped with righteous outrage. "Nothing!" he retorted, his body practically quivering with rage. He jabbed a finger at Cameron. "He looked at me! He made the *face!*"

"Oh, Cameron, not the face—" Elizabeth crossed their living room and went into the kitchen to open the freezer, letting the cool air waft over her face. "We talked about this. You know it makes him crazy—"

"Yeah, but it's also funny," Cameron told her matter of factly as if that was all the reason he needed. He climbed onto the stool on the other side of the counter. "Sorry, Mom. I know you're busy. Did you finish the book?"

"Almost, but I was ready for a break." Elizabeth "You wanna go to the park tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I guess." Cameron shrugged.

"It's hot," Jake complained as he slowly and carefully climbed onto the stool next to his brother. "Are they gonna fix the air?"

"Supposed to be tomorrow," Elizabeth muttered. Nothing like their air conditioner crapping out in the middle of a Washington Heights summer. Even the park would be boiling tomorrow, but at least it was near the water. She closed the freezer. "You wanna order pizza tonight?"

"Yeah, but I don't want none of that green stuff," Cameron said. "Jake and I talked it over. *You* can be healthy and live forever. We'll eat junk and enjoy life."

Next to him, as if Cameron hadn't just had him in a headlock, Jake nodded. "Yeah. That's right. So pizza. With lots of cheese."

"And pepperoni," Cameron added. Elizabeth snorted, then reached for her cell phone. He frowned. "Did you get a cut, Mom?"

Elizabeth blinked at him. "What?"

"Your hand." He nodded at the fingers wrapped around the phone. "There's a mark on your wrist. I never saw it before. Did you cut yourself while you were working?"

Elizabeth looked down at where he was pointing and her heart began to pound. Everything fell away—the apartment, her sons, the phone in her hand—

Everything disappeared except the small patch of pink just below her thumb, where her palm met her wrist. It was twisted into a pentagram.

"Mom? Mom!"

She shook her head, then focused on her son. "Oh. No. I don't—I don't know what it is. I'll—I'll put it a bandage on it—let me—" Elizabeth flicked her internal switch and shut it all down. "Let me order dinner," she told her boys with a smile.

With the pizza on its way and the boys settled on the sofa with a movie, Elizabeth went back into her bedroom, into the ensuite bathroom, and closed the door. She stared at her wrist, at the pentagram that had definitely not been there three weeks ago when she'd had a manicure.

At the pentagram that had definitely been on her mother's wrist before she'd died. It was the mark from which Maria and Grace Devane had sacrificed everything to save their daughters.

If you were born with the mark, you only had daughters, and you never lived to see them grow into women.

Elizabeth traced her fingers over the slightly raised flesh, then raised her eyes to stare at herself in the mirror. What did it mean for the mark to show up now, long after Elizabeth had had her children? After she'd given birth to boys and lived past their fifth birthday?

She didn't have the answers. She'd shut that part of her life out. She'd pushed it away, closed it off since she'd made that terrible dash away from Jason's apartment—since her aunt had threatened to take her son away—

Elizabeth left her bathroom and went over to her dresser, picking up the photo of Jake. Of the little boy with her smile and Jason's eyes. He'd believed Robin that terrible morning. Everyone had, including Anna. And then he'd refused to take her phone calls, had sent her letters back unread or maybe thrown them away.

"Mom?"

Elizabeth put the phone down and smiled at Cameron in her doorway. "The pizza's here?" When he nodded, she grabbed her wallet and followed him into the living room.

She couldn't think about any of that right now. She just wanted to have dinner with her boys. She'd already spent too many nights crying herself to sleep about Port Charles, her family...and Jason Morgan.

### *Port Charles*

The mark was more than just burn or a discoloration on the skin — it was a pentagram with visible ridges. Nadine barely remembered her mother, but she remembered the touch and feel of the mark on her wrist. Grace's body had withered away as the cancer had eaten at her body, that wrist becoming thinner and thinner—

But the mark had remained until the day she died, and Nadine always known—though she couldn't remember how—that the mark was the reason. But Nadine hadn't been born with it, and neither had her cousin, and that had been reason enough for their family to accept that the curse was broken.

Firstborn Soltini daughters had always possessed the mark from birth, except for Elizabeth and Nadine. And of course, Anna, but that was a different story. A different spell. One that hadn't worked for her sisters.

Nadine sat in her car outside of the house on Charles street, sliding her fingers over the mark, feeling the ridges and edges, outlining with her nails. No matter what she did, it wouldn't go away. She'd cast all the charms she'd learned, she'd scrubbed it, and she'd even tried to cut it out—

But it had survived. It was indestructible.

She closed her eyes. She needed answers. She needed to know why. But she didn't want to go inside. She'd fled this house on her eighteenth birthday, leaving behind the memories.

And the people who had lived there.

Her heart twisted again, remembering her cousin. Her beloved Bits whom Nadine had idolized. Bits and Deenie had left Maine and disappeared in this house, driven apart by the simmering tensions and bitter resentments. And now Bits was just one more piece of Nadine's life that she couldn't think about.

That list felt endless now—what was one more item?

Nadine pushed open the door and went up the walk, approaching the door with trepidation and caution. She had stayed here briefly when she'd come home, broken and devastated, from New York, but in the five years since, she could count on one hand how often she'd come to this house.

The door was open even before Nadine reached the front step and her aunt stood there, calm and cool as ever, hints of a smile teasing the corner of her mouth. "Well, isn't this a surprise," Anna said. "What brings you by, darling?"

"I wish it was good news," Nadine said, sliding past Anna and deftly avoiding her aunt's outstretched arms. She waited for Anna to close the door before holding out her wrist.

Anna seized it, dragging Nadine closer. "When did this show up?"

"I can't say for certain," she replied, wincing as her aunt's fingers dug in a bit



harder. "But I noticed it last night. I tried to charm it away—"

"That never works," Anna murmured. She released Nadine's hand, exhaling slowly. She scrubbed her hands down her face. "I don't understand. This shouldn't be—it doesn't happen this way."

"It's never just shown up so late in someone's life?"

"No," Anna said sharply. She whirled around and charged up the stairs. Nadine reluctantly followed. She passed the bedrooms—her stomach rolling as she saw through open doors that Robin's room still looked as it did when she left for college, as did Nadine's. She paused in the doorway, for a moment, thinking wistfully of sharing this room with her cousin when they'd first arrived.

Her eyes drifted to the tree outside the window. Elizabeth's tree. How many times had Nadine found Bits curled up with her sketchpad on that large branch? At least until Anna had moved her into the room next door. It had a lovely view of the back garden and it was larger, but—

Anna had cleaned out Elizabeth's room almost as soon as Elizabeth had left, even though Nadine had begged her not to. Everyone knew that Uncle Robert had helped Elizabeth find somewhere to live and had sent her money for a while, but Anna hadn't spoken of it. She'd packed Elizabeth's things, sent them off, and then it was like she'd never existed. Elizabeth lived in this house for six years, but no one would ever know it.

Troubled, Nadine went to the room at the end of the hall—the largest room in the house—Anna's workroom and research library. The room was covered from floor to ceiling in books and shelves full of ingredients and trinkets and charms — most of which she thought were too dangerous to go into the shop downtown.

Anna was dragging a book off a shelf and taking it to a table when Nadine found her. "The earliest mark showed up in 1803," Anna told her niece. "Maria Theresa del Soltini married a cousin, Roberto Soltini. She had a daughter, then died in 1807. The daughter, Maria Anna, kept the first journal. No one remembered the mark before her mother was married, but the origin is unknown."

"I know this—"

"The curse skipped around," Anna continued, ignoring Nadine. "Haphazard. No boys born, but the women didn't always die. Every other generation, mostly. Until my great-grandmother. Until Benedetta Soltini—"

"I'm glad we don't marry cousins anymore," Nadine muttered. "Maybe inbreeding

with powers caused the curse—"

Anna's eyes flashed with irritation. "This isn't a joke, Nadine. We need to know what that mark means. Why it's back. Thank God you don't have any children, but—"

Nadine flinched, then looked at the table. No, she didn't have any children, did she? But Elizabeth did. She had a little boy. Proof the curse had been broken, wasn't it?

"Benedetta was born with the mark and died in 1922. Then her daughter, my grandmother, Sofia, died in the war after my mother was born."

"But Nonna—"

"Broke the curse in her own way," Anna muttered. "I'll have to find her journals. I don't remember the spell now. She broke it for me, but Maria—" She squeezed her eyes shut. "Born two minutes later. She had the mark."

"And so did Mama," Nadine murmured, tracing the mark with her fingers, remembering doing the same as a child. "You've never told me how Mama broke the curse. How Aunt Maria—"

"Silly girls," Anna managed. She sat down, rubbed her mouth. "They both promised themselves they'd never get married and have children—" She looked away. "I suppose that was unrealistic. And unfair of me to hold them to that promise."

Nadine kept her thoughts to herself, knowing that Anna would not be interested in her opinions on the subject. "What happened to them?"

"What always happens to girls in Harpswell during the fishing season. First Maria and that no-good Jeff Webber." Anna grimaced. "She could have cast the same charm Mama did, but she wanted more children. Maria spent most of her pregnancy trying to break that curse, but couldn't see a way forward." She stopped. "And then Gracie fell pregnant, so they wrote a spell together."

"Aunt Anna?" Nadine pressed when Anna said nothing. "Why can't we use that spell? The one that finally broke the curse?" And allowed for a son to be born, though once again Nadine did not speak of it.

"Because it required sacrifice, of course," Anna said finally. She met Nadine's eyes. "That can break any curse. The sacrifice of a life. Grace and Maria argued bitterly over who would do the sacrificing, so they finally wrote a spell to split the odds. One of them was always going—"

"One of them always going to die as soon as the baby was born," Nadine finished painfully. "And the curse would take the other."

"But the children would be free." Anna dipped her head, her breathing a bit labored. "And you were. You both were. You've been free all this time. And...I knew the curse was gone. Even though I knew it would take my sisters. Robin would never have to fear it had only skipped her, and you could all have a full life. A healthy, safe life with a future."

Anna exhaled slowly when Nadine said nothing. "The mark has never shown up this way. I have to locate the spell they wrote. Maybe it backfired."

How horrifying would that be? To know that her mother and aunt could have cast the spell Nonna had, but had sacrificed their lives to give all Soltini women a chance at freedom — and to have it backfire? To take their lives anyway?

"The good news," Anna said slowly, "is that the curse only shows itself with pregnancy. It shouldn't affect your everyday life and we'll have time to get answers."

"Right." Nadine wanted to ask about Elizabeth. Wanted to ask what it meant that Elizabeth already had a son. Was her cousin out there right now, staring at the same mark? Had the clock already started for her?

Was her cousin even still alive?

But she didn't say Elizabeth's name. Couldn't. Elizabeth had disappeared without a trace eight years ago, and no one ever spoke about her. By the time Nadine had come home from New York, everyone had been pretending she didn't exist for so long that Nadine didn't feel comfortable challenging it and bringing up the forgotten past.

And Nadine felt the shame of knowing she'd abandoned her cousin, her Bits, her sister of the heart. She'd been selfish, focused on her own survival and escape. So she said nothing, and left Anna to her research with vague promises of checking in.

She couldn't say Elizabeth to Anna or Robin, but that didn't mean she couldn't try to find her cousin on her own.

### *Washington Heights*

Elizabeth ignored the mark on her wrist for a few days. She'd spent a long time learning how to do that—how to put thoughts, memories, feelings, emotions, and anything that could upset her into a box into her mind. She liked to think of it as an

archive with a deadbolt. Things went in, and they didn't come out.

Once she'd learned how to archive things in her head, it had been easier not to have people and their feelings screaming at her all the time—she could finally walk down the street without being bombarded with whatever everyone else was going through. She didn't have to feel the trauma of the little girl terrified to go home with her father or giddiness of the boy asking a girl out for the first time—

Separately, it had been exhausting, but when all of those emotions had swirled at once, she couldn't breathe. Couldn't make room for herself. For what she was feeling. No, things were better now. She turned everything off, including herself. She'd bricked herself up, letting nothing in or out.

There was only room for Cameron and Jake.

But it wasn't as easy to turn off tangible things—like the feeling of the raised skin, the ridges of the pentagram reminding her every day of how she'd grown up without her mother, without knowing who she was or what she was.

And how not knowing what was inside her and what she could do with it had shattered her into millions of jagged pieces—

She shoved it out of her mind again and focused on what mattered. The here and now. She had the mark, so what? She wasn't going to have any more children, so she should be fine...right?

There was no need to think of what had come before and the people that had made it a nightmare.

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Elizabeth pushed open the door to the apartment and waited for the boys to go in before she closed and locked it behind her. "Cam, get the plates out of the cabinet—"

"I wanna see my birthday book," Cameron complained. "It takes forever to get here, and I helped this year—"

"I wanna see mine, too," Jake said, smiling at her with his quiet, soft smile. He clambered up onto the stool and reached for the brown box that she'd set on the counter. "You put Santa in there, right?"

"I did," Elizabeth said with a sigh. She stripped open the box and pulled out the photo albums. "I'll get dinner together," she told them, handing over the hard-bound books. "Go ahead and look at them, then I'll put them on the shelf with the others."

She busied herself with the plates and utensils, then unpacking the dinner she'd grabbed from Mama Mangia's on the way home from the meeting with her agent. The tradition of putting her favorite photos into a book with descriptions and stories had started when Cameron was born, when she'd had little money. The first few books had been home made. In the last few years, as her career as a children's book illustrator had taken off, Elizabeth had been able get them professionally bound into hardback books.

She was never able to do much for their birthdays in the way of parties—they moved too often for the boys to make really lasting friends. This was their first year in Washington Heights. Last year, Elizabeth had lived on Staten Island. And before then, she'd been outside the city. There'd been Albany, Buffalo, Schenectady—

She'd never stayed too long in the same place, though maybe it was time to stop running. If Anna had meant what she'd said on that terrible morning, she would have been able to find Elizabeth by now. But changing her last name and staying on the move, staying off social media—it seemed like it was enough.

And Anna couldn't do anything to her now, Elizabeth decided as she plated Cameron's favorite meal—the chicken parmigiana—and set it on the counter. She was a good mother. She had provided for her boys. No one would take them from her. No one could. And if they tried, she'd just run again.

"Mom?" Cameron asked. "Did you ever find my other books?" He picked up his fork and dug into his food. "The ones from when I was a baby?"

"Oh." Elizabeth bit her lip. "I haven't looked for them in a while," she said, a curl of shame licking at her spine. She'd told Cameron several years ago she'd lost his first two birthday albums in a move.

They were in a box in her closet, locked away with other pieces of her life.

"I'm sorry," she said, and Cameron shrugged.

"It's okay. I was just wondering." He flashed a grin at her, but Elizabeth was troubled by it. She'd put those memories away because it hurt so much to look at them, but it wasn't just her life she was locking away. It was Cameron's past. His story.

He had a right to his own truth. To make up his own mind.

"I'll look around again. They might be in a box I haven't looked at yet. You know, there's always a few after every move I just shove in a closet."

*Port Charles*

Though they worked in the same hospital and had since Nadine had moved home, she rarely saw Robin. Her cousin worked in the pathology lab and Nadine was a NICU nurse. Their departments had little to do with one another and they didn't have any friends in common.

In fact, as Nadine had deliberately chosen to shed her surname of Devane after leaving Port Charles and adopt the name of the father she'd never known, she wouldn't be surprised to learn that most people at GH didn't even know that Nadine Crowell was related to Robin Scorpio.

And Nadine would have gone to her grave preserving that fiction, but the guilt and shame ate away at her in the days after she discovered the mark and said nothing to Anna about Elizabeth.

She'd been unable to find any mention of Elizabeth on social media, but she'd never been that good at research. She thought about hiring a private investigator, but it felt so strange and intrusive when she didn't even know why Elizabeth had left Port Charles without a word to anyone.

She found Robin in her lab, surprised to find her talking with another doctor that Nadine recognized—Patrick Drake—a tall, good-looking neurosurgeon with a rakish smile and sparkling eyes. He was leaning over Robin's work station and the two were grinning at each other.

Nadine coughed to get Robin's attention, and her cousin turned, her eyes widening. "Nadine?"

Patrick straightened, furrowing his brow. "You're from the NICU, aren't you?"

"I am, but—" Nadine shoved her hands into her scrubs pockets. "I needed to talk to you, Robin. Family business."

"Family?" Patrick repeated. Robin exhaled slowly, then slid off her stool.

"Family," Robin confirmed. "Nadine is my cousin. She and I grew up together—"

"For a little while." Uncomfortable, Nadine shifted. "Sorry to interrupt, but—"

"No, it's fine. Patrick, I'll call you later."

"Oh, yeah, you better." He glanced at them one more time over his shoulder, then

left the lab.

"Mom told me about the, um, mark." Robin gestured at Nadine's wrist. "I'm so sorry—"

"Yeah, thanks. I got the memo a long time ago that no one wanted to talk about this, so I didn't say anything to your mother, but I can't help it." Nadine met Robin's eyes. "Elizabeth. She's out there with this mark, and she's got a son. What if the clock is already ticking on her?" What if it had already run out?

"I've—" Robin's face lost some of its color. "I've thought about that. It's been...a long time since any of us heard from her—"

"Since when?" Nadine cut in. "Before she left or after—"

"To the best of my knowledge," Robin said slowly, "she hasn't contacted anyone. And we all know I'd be the last person she'd call. I'm surprised you haven't—"

Nadine wasn't. She'd let Elizabeth down the most, hadn't she? She'd promised to never stop loving her. "No one ever told me why she left. She stayed in Port Charles after your mother kicked her out, but pulled up stakes eight years ago and disappeared. What changed?"

"A lot of things," Robin said faintly. "Some of them—some of them my fault. And others—" She sighed. "She was dating someone pretty seriously and it fell apart at the same time my mother started making threats about Cameron again."

Of course Anna was at the bottom of this. Nadine had left town after Cameron's birth, gone away to college, but she knew her aunt had been ruthless in her quest to *protect* Cameron. Or to control Elizabeth. It was always difficult to tell with Anna. "And this guy? He never heard from her again?"

"I don't—I don't know. Um—" Robin took a deep breath. "We should find out," she said. "I mean, you're right. She's out there or maybe she's not. If the mark showed up on her sooner, we should make sure Cameron is all right."

"I already did a social media search, but I was thinking a PI?" Nadine said. "Would you split the costs on that?"

"Yeah, yeah. And I'll talk to her ex. She was really crazy about him, and I know—" Robin pressed her lips together. "I know he loved her and Cam."

"I don't want to tell your mother right now," Nadine said. "At least until we have something to say. Elizabeth might not want her involved, and I think—even

without knowing everything that happened eight years ago, she's earned that right, don't you think?"

"Yeah. Yeah, she has. Nadine—"

"I'll let you know when I need money for the investigator." Nadine left, the burn of shame even brighter now. What if Nadine hadn't left her cousin behind? What if she'd been in touch and kept her promises? Would Elizabeth have turned to her instead of disappearing?

She'd never know the answer to that, and only hoped she hadn't lost all hope of making up for what she'd done.

### *Washington Heights*

Elizabeth brushed Jake's blond hair off his head, smiling as her baby turned over in the bed, kicking at the top sheet. The building super had fixed the air conditioning, but it still wasn't quite powerful enough to combat the hot and heavy heat outside the building.

She straightened to check on Cameron in the top bunk who was laying on his back, snoring lightly, his Captain America t-shirt twisted up above his waist. She gently adjusted it, then left the room closing the door behind her.

She stood in the tiny hallway for a minute, lit only by the night light in the outlet by the bathroom, meant to keep the boys from stumbling into walls in the middle of the night. She felt her wrist, closing her eyes when her fingertips brushed over the raised edges of the mark.

The mark that might mean nothing as long as she had no more children or had started the ticking of the clock. Would she have five years as her aunt had? Or would there be less time? She could cast Nonna's charm which had saved her own life, but she didn't know how. She'd have to go home and ask Anna for the spell.

Elizabeth went into her bedroom and switched on the laptop, her fingers hesitating over the keys. For eight long years, she'd closed off this part of her life. The memories, the emotions, the people — they'd all been put into the box in her mind and locked away. She'd spent so much time locked down, only letting her boys in. Cameron and Jake were the center of her universe, and she showered all her love on them, only letting them into her heart and her mind. Everyone else, she pushed out.

Elizabeth navigated to Facebook, the only social media platform her aunt had been using at the time Elizabeth had left Port Charles and reluctantly typed in Rituali



Soltini. It was still in business, and Anna still owned it. The banner of the page had her aunt and two girls Elizabeth recognized as cousins on her uncle's side, Maxie and Georgie Jones. Anna was owner and proprietor while Maxie had been promoted to manager.

Elizabeth exhaled slowly, then wrote down the contact information — the hours and the store's number. She could simply call her aunt and ask her for the charm. Then it would be over, wouldn't it? Anna would give her the charm, and Elizabeth would then block the number and go back to pretending none of this ever existed.

*I am done letting you waste my sister's sacrifice...*

She'd never asked her mother to die for her, and no one had never told her why Grace and Maria was dead while Nonna had lived. Why hadn't her mother simply cast the same charm? Why was it Elizabeth's fault that her mother was died? How could Anna have held her responsible? Elizabeth wouldn't dream of letting the weight of her actions rest on Cameron and Jake's small shoulders, and that was all Anna had ever done—

She closed her eyes. Pushed away the thoughts. Her aunt had lost her twin sister and buried another. It had twisted Anna, made her bitter, and she'd taken it out on her sister's children. Elizabeth had long ago accepted that nothing she could have done would change Anna's mind. And Robin, once a beloved cousin and confidante, had followed in her mother's footsteps, refusing to forgive Elizabeth for crimes she'd never committed.

Elizabeth didn't have a choice. She had to reach out to Anna for the knowledge — she didn't have her own contacts. She'd never joined the community, had walked away from all of that when she was sixteen. She couldn't do this on her own.

Elizabeth started to close the page, but her eyes drifted down to the other pages liked by her aunt's page — and saw a familiar name. A beloved name that broke into that box in Elizabeth's mind that she'd built to protect herself.

Abrams & Brothers. Home of Bernie and Max and Francis and Johnny and Milo. And Jason. Oh, God. She hadn't let herself think of the garage since her letters had gone unanswered. She'd thought of herself as part of the family, had let herself believe—

But her calls had been ignored, her letters returned or unanswered. They'd all believed the worst of her, and Anna had been right. The garage hadn't wanted her back. They hadn't been hers, they'd been Jason's.

Still, Elizabeth clicked on the page, unable to stop herself. She smiled even as tears

stung her eyes. The banner was a staff photo, a newer one because everyone was older, but, oh—they were all there. All them of smiling, selling the promise of a place that cared about you and your business.

And there was Jason. The father of her son. The man who'd almost made her believe in love again, but she hadn't trusted him, and then he'd turned from her. He'd rejected their son.

Elizabeth nearly closed the page now, the burst of pain was almost overwhelming, flooding every inch of her—but then she stopped—she saw the album of "Staff Photos" pinned to a post. Of course her photos would be gone. They wouldn't want the memory of her, would they? She should remind herself that she'd never mattered.

She clicked on the album, and they were there. Taken like clockwork every, June, and not a single one had been deleted since the page had been launched in 2008. Elizabeth was there in 2011, cradling a newborn Cameron, beaming at the photographer. Bernie stood next to her, like the sweet, proud grandfather she'd always pretended he was. On her other side—Jason, turned slightly towards her even though he was also smiling at the photographer.

Then in 2012, just a month after they'd started dating. Cameron was in Jason's arms this time, Elizabeth tucked into his side, her arm curled through his. In 2013, that final photo—

The box had broken completely open and now the memories were flooding—Jason the day Cameron was born, waiting patiently in the break room, timing the contractions, holding her hand in the car as Max drove to the hospital—

The entire staff crowding her room after Cameron had been born, each arguing over who would be godfather, the room exploding in the flowers and stuffed animals. Bernie's proud smile as Cameron took his first steps in the bay, reaching for the wrench Jason was holding—

The playpen Bernie had set up in the bay and the waiting area so Cameron could come to work—the guys taking turn babysitting so she and Jason could have a night out for dinner, just to themselves—

Elizabeth pushed away from the desk, pressing her hand to her face, the pain spreading from her chest into her arms, down into her fingers, to her toes, until she was on fire, until she was trembling from the bitterness, the love, the anger, and the devastation—

She'd loved them all so much, but she'd been so scared that they'd turn from her if

they knew who she was, so she'd never said a word. She'd never told Jason the truth, and then it was all over and they'd rejected her—

But how could they have—how could Jason have done that—

Almost in a trance now, Elizabeth grabbed the chair from her desk and went over to the closet, standing on it until she could reach the box on the shelf in her closet.

Her Jason box.

She set it on the bed and opened the flaps, worn and faded with age. It had been closed since the last time she'd tried to contact him—just after Jake had turned one. She'd sent a letter with a photo of Jake, hoping that he'd read this one.

It had gone unanswered, but unlike the others, it hadn't been returned to her with a bold, thick scrawl "RETURN TO SENDER" written across the address of the garage. She'd felt almost hopeful and had waited a few weeks for him to call the number in the letter—

The call had never come. She'd looked at this box one more time and then put it away. Jason had made his choice, and so now she was going to make hers.

She put aside the letters that she'd written him, the ones that had been returned, and dug deeper into the box for the books at the bottom. They were notebooks with lined paper—old and tattered now, some of the pages nearly falling out.

She'd bought a pack of three for less than ten dollars and had filled nearly every page of the blue one with photos and memories of her son's first year. With a deep breath, Elizabeth opened the first page and looked at the photo—the one she knew would be there.

Elizabeth in the hospital, holding Cameron, her face red and exhausted, and Jason standing there next to her, with that mixture of nerves, excitement, and bewilderment on both their faces—

She traced her fingers over Jason's face, a face she only saw whispers of in Jake now. She hadn't really let herself think of him much since she'd closed this box, and when she did, she only remembered that last morning.

But now, looking at this notebook, at this image of Jason with her on the most important day of her life—

Elizabeth wondered how the man in this photo could have rejected the child they'd created together when he'd loved Cameron so fiercely from the moment he'd been

born. It was why she'd had to put away this book. Why she'd hidden it. It hadn't been a book she'd meant for Cameron's eyes. It had been hers. Her journal where she'd written down every fear, every dream, every thought she'd had during his first year.

Elizabeth exhaled slowly, then flipped to the end of the book, to Cameron's first birthday. To the picture of the three of them at the park, after the birthday party Elizabeth had thrown. Anna had shown up, but she hadn't stayed long.

She'd been upset—she knew Anna had been disappointed in her, in the way Elizabeth had lived her life before Cameron was born—but she'd wanted her aunt to see she was doing better.

Jason had kissed her for the first time that day, and for the next year—

Elizabeth rubbed her hands over her cheeks. She didn't think about these things anymore. She couldn't. They had to be locked away. They had to be in the archive. She was a terrible mother when she let them out. She was a terrible person who did bad things and had bad things happen to her—

But they wouldn't go back in the box. She'd dragged out the literal evidence of those memories, and now the metaphorical box had been shattered. Now Elizabeth had these memories, these emotions—all of it swirling around. She'd finally let herself remember why she'd gone to Jason's that morning.

She'd known he'd believe her. That he loved her. She'd known it because she could see it, she could feel it inside her own body every time he looked at her. He'd hidden it until that day in the park or maybe she hadn't been ready to see it—but the world sparkled when he looked at her—

But emotions could lie. And she'd never been all that good at using her powers. Could she have been so wrong about him for all that time? Or had she been wrong that morning? Elizabeth put the books back in the box and slid it underneath her bed, troubled now at everything swirling inside of her.

What if the clock had already started ticking and Elizabeth was going to die just like her mother and aunt had? Like her great-grandmother and countless other women for generations— What would happen to her boys? Where would they go? Would they go into the foster system? Oh, God, would they go to Anna? Would her babies grow up like she had, unloved and unwanted?

Elizabeth stepped into the bathroom and splashed water over her face, then looked at her reflection in the mirror, tracing her fingers over the pentagram.

Whether the clock of the family curse was ticking now or not—Elizabeth knew it was time to stop running.

It was time go home.

*Port Charles*

The last time Robin had seen Jason Morgan had been the invitation to his second wedding, though it had come from the bride, not the groom. That had been almost two years ago, and the last Robin had heard, the divorce had been finalized earlier that spring.

They'd been friendly once, but had drifted apart after Elizabeth had left town. Robin knew Jason partially blamed her for it. Whatever Elizabeth had done—if Jason had been alone when she came that morning, things might have been different. He'd never say so, but it had created a tension between them that wasn't going to go away.

After all, Robin knew the truth, didn't she? And Jason still didn't.

She found him where he always was during the day — at the garage. Now, he owned the controlling interest, but still worked on the cars as he had since he'd started there as a part-time mechanic in high school.

He was at the sink in the back of the garage, wiping the grease and oil from his fingers — his black t-shirt stretched across his broad shoulders, the jeans ripped at the knees and covered in grease stains.

"Spinelli said you were back here," Robin said as Jason frowned at her and turned off the sink. "Hope it's okay I didn't wait in the office."

"No, uh, it's fine." He grabbed a towel to dry his hands, still squinting at her. "I can't remember the last time I saw you."

"It's been a while," Robin said. "Um, when you married Sam?"

Jason winced, tossing the towel aside. "Yeah, well, at least it was a good party," he muttered.

"Yeah, I heard through the grapevine that didn't work out. I'm sorry," Robin offered.

Jason jerked a shoulder. "It's fine. What brings you by? Something happen to Nadine or Anna?" He cleared his throat. "Someone else?"

"I don't know," Robin said slowly. "I think I was hoping that you might tell me. Um, we haven't—we never talked about what happened—"

Jason's jaw clenched, his blue eyes flashing before they shuttered and the emotion winked out. "Why would we? You told me what happened, and she split town instead of denying it."

"She..." Robin bit her lip. "I know she left right after that—but, um, that wasn't really why." At least this, this she could fix. She could bring him peace for whatever it was worth. The truth of that night wasn't hers to tell.

She shoved a piece of her dark hair behind her ear. "After she left your place, she went to my mom's. That's who was watching Cameron."

Jason frowned, tilting his head slightly. "I don't understand."

"I—" Robin closed her eyes. She couldn't tell him everything, but she had to say something. Had to make him understand that they needed to find Elizabeth and Cameron. "I didn't go straight to your place after the party," she said softly. "I was upset, and I told my mother what I thought had happened, so when Elizabeth showed up—"

"Your mother wouldn't give Cameron back," Jason said flatly. "Elizabeth was always afraid of that. Your mother liked to make threats."

"She didn't think of them that way—" Her voice faltered as her throat tightened. "She knew Elizabeth was in trouble before Cameron—when she got pregnant, Mom—Mom just wanted the baby to be safe."

"I know that's what she said, but your mother has a control problem," Jason muttered. "That's why Elizabeth left. She'd gone to a party, had too much to drink, and Anna decided that it was the last straw. Didn't she?"

"Yes," Robin said faintly. "She refused to give Cameron back. Elizabeth only got out of the house because she threatened to call the police, but Mom made it clear — she was going to call social services and go after custody."

"So Elizabeth left town instead of waiting for Anna to come after her kid." Jason scowled and stalked away. Robin scurried after him as he went out the back door into the back alley, littered with trash and two dumpsters he shared with a restaurant on the other side of the block.

"Jason—"

"Why didn't you tell me this back then?" Jason demanded. "If I'd known—"

"At the time," Robin said slowly, "I was happy to have her gone."

He exhaled slowly, put his hands at his waist and looked down. "Yeah, okay. I get that. What's changed? Why are you telling me now?"

"You know Elizabeth and I were not close." Robin paused as he lifted a brow. "Okay, we hated each other. Mostly I started it. And I think—I wonder—I don't—" She cleared her throat. "There's a family thing going on, and I need to find her. We haven't heard from her since that day. Not even in passing."

"And you think I have?" Jason asked. "Why would she contact me?"

"I don't know," Robin said. "She never called or wrote to tell you her side of things?"

"No. I figured—" Jason scrubbed a hand over his face. "I knew things were going south," he said after a long moment. "I asked her to marry me. I wanted her and Cameron to move in with me, and you might have thought I'd punched her in the face. We had a huge fight, and she—she went to that party because of it. She'd been sober almost three years, Robin, so I know if she was drinking that night she was upset." He paused. "I would have forgiven her. For all of it."

Tears stung Robin's eyes. "Jason, I think—" She cleared her throat. "I don't think what I did—how I handled it—I don't blame myself for talking to my mother. I was upset when I went home. But going to you—that *was* vindictive. I did that because I wanted to hurt her. But if I hadn't—"

If she hadn't—

"It doesn't matter anymore," Jason when she didn't finish her statement. "It's been years, Robin."

"I know. I just—we need to find her," Robin said. "So I started with you. I guess we'll have to try something else."

"*Why* do you need her?" Jason asked as she started towards the back door. "What's happened?"

Robin paused, her hand on the door frame as she looked back at him. "Just family business. Um, if we do find her—should I—I mean, do you want her information?"

Jason swallowed hard. "I—No. I mean—" He exhaled on a frustrated huff. "No, but you can give her mine. I just—I want to know she's okay. And Cameron. I—I think

about him a lot."

"I'll do that. I'm sorry, Jason, to drag all this up again. I just—I should have been a better friend. A better cousin."

"Yeah, well, too late for that now, isn't it?" he bit out. Robin blanched and left.

*August in Port Charles, New York*

"Cam! There's a yard! And there's a swing set!" Jake's voice echoed in the empty walls of the new house. Cameron dropped the box he'd been carrying into the house and ran through the kitchen to the backyard.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and set her own box on the table before walking into the kitchen to look at the boys as Jake pumped his legs on a swing and Cameron started climbing the jungle gym attached to swing set.

It had taken her a month to get things in order, to find a house to rent in Port Charles that was far enough away from her family that she wasn't likely to run into them, but still within her price range. They'd never lived in a house before, so there had never been a backyard. A place just their own to run and play and imagine things.

She smiled at her boys, then turned back to the boxes in her living room and the U-Haul in the street. She had a lot to do if she was going the house organized before the boys started school in two weeks.

Elizabeth's hand hovered over the list of helpful numbers the real estate agent had given her. There were restaurants, take out places, hospitals, police stations—and a few garages listed, including Abrams & Brothers, still located at 132 Juniper Street.

She wondered if he still worked there. What he would say if she showed up tomorrow to tell him that his son was in Port Charles if he was ready to give a damn—

Elizabeth exhaled slowly, her fingers tracing over the familiar address. The part of her that pushed herself into this move, into coming home because maybe there'd been a mistake or misunderstanding all those years go—that part of her wanted to call Jason now.

But the other part of her—the one that remembered vividly that last morning—the pain of whatever was in that room slamming into her like she'd been hit by a truck—



Elizabeth let her fingers fall away from the number. There was time to call Jason. Time to contact her aunt and find out about the mark and the curse.

She might not have all the time she thought she had a month ago, but digging up the graves of her past and family could wait a few more days. Or even weeks.

She pushed open the kitchen window. "Hey! You guys wanna try out a pizza place for dinner?"

September

Elizabeth tapped her fingers restlessly, irritated as a detour on Central Avenue took her down another street. She was on deadline for another children's book, and heading down to the realtor's office to sign the last of the paperwork had derailed her entire day.

Maybe it was the irritation that let her lose track of where she was driving — but somehow she'd forgotten that to get from Central back to Kensington Street so she could head home meant passing through the business district near Charles Street.

She had nearly driven past Rituali Soltini before she realized it—but the name emblazoned in gold script lettering across the dark exterior made her tap the breaks lightly, slowing her car. She took a deep breath, then pulled into a parking spot. She'd never spent a lot of time developing the intuition that most of the women in her family inherited, but she had occasional bursts.

The decision to go into Abrams & Brothers, for one. Coming home to Port Charles. And taking the left from Central instead of the right when the detour had started. Had her brain been reminding her that it had been a month since she'd arrived in Port Charles and had yet to reach out to either her aunt or Jason?

Elizabeth had made a major life change, uprooting her boys and dragging them to Port Charles. She could have stayed in Washington Heights. She could have gone back to Harpswell. There was a magical community there that she could tap into for knowledge, for help.

But she'd come to Port Charles, to Jason and Anna. To not only get the spell Elizabeth needed to save her life, but to explore the sense that something wasn't right with the way Jason had rejected Jake. And she'd been so sure of it at the time that she'd moved here.

But what if Anna refused to give her the spell? What if Jason truly had rejected Jake? If she never sought them out, she could still protect herself—

She spent another minute looking at the shop, willing herself to get out and seek Anna out. To get this over with.

Instead, Elizabeth put her car into drive, pulled out, and drove three blocks until she was across the street from Abrams & Brothers, the first place she'd ever felt at home. She watched the garage for nearly twenty minutes, telling herself if she saw Jason, she'd take it as a sign. She'd go inside.

Instead, she saw Johnny and Max — but no one else. She wanted to talk to them, to hear their voices, listen to their jokes, their gruff sweetness—she'd loved them so very much, and she'd pretended they were her older brothers.

But she wasn't ready for any of that. Couldn't face it yet. She didn't know what it would feel like to be ready for this, but Elizabeth knew it wasn't time yet. Maybe it was just cowardly to keep running, but Elizabeth had a right to protect herself.

She drove away from the garage, knowing that she was running out of time. Eventually, she'd have to face everyone.

But not today.

*October*

"I like my math teacher," Cameron said, frowning slightly as he peered at his computer screen. "But I'm in fourth grade now, so I don't need word problems about ducks anymore."

Amused, Elizabeth paused as she put away a box of cereal. She closed the cabinet and turned to look at her son at the counter. "You're too old for ducks?"

"Mom." Cameron rolled his eyes. "Fourth grade. That's middle school—"

"Just because the fourth grade is located inside the middle school, that does not mean you're *in* middle school," Elizabeth said with a wince. Her baby was not old enough for middle school. "It's upper elementary."

"Whatever." He turned in his assignment on Google Classroom, then closed his Chromebook. "Where's Jake?"

"Drawing in his room." Elizabeth glanced towards the stairs. "He's been a bit quiet lately. I know you guys hate moving."

"The backyard makes up for it," Cameron told her. "Plus, I get to play soccer. Jake will be cool when he can play baseball in the spring." He wrinkled his nose. "How

come we had to move out of New York City? I thought you liked the city. You saved forever so we could live there."

"I did," Elizabeth admitted. "I just...I needed a change. And you guys needed more space to play." She bit her lip, then went over to a drawer in the little foyer between the kitchen and living room. "I found something in the move." She pulled out two battered notebooks.

Cameron's eyes lit up. "You found my birthday books!"

"Yeah. I, uh, I hadn't seen them in a long time." She set them down. "I need to redo your first one," she told him. "I used it as a diary because I was really scared when you were a baby, so I wrote a lot of things. The second book is more for you right now. But I want to do them over in the hard bound—"

"Can I see the pictures?"

"Sure." Elizabeth sighed, then flipped around in the first book, but Cameron tugged the book away from her. "Cam—"

"I won't read anything, Mom, I just—" Cameron made a face. "I'm all red and wrinkly." He laid the book flat. "Who's that—" His eyes widened and then he looked at her. "Is—is that my dad?"

Elizabeth rested a finger on the photo—the same one that had caught her attention back in the city. "No, he's not your father. He—he was a really good friend."

"Oh. I thought—" Cameron turned the page. "He's in a lot of pictures." He found the photos from his party. "Who's that?"

"That—" Elizabeth's throat felt tight. "She's my aunt. Anna. My mother's sister."

"I didn't know you had an aunt." Cameron continued to flip. "She's not in any of the others."

"No, we're not that close."

Cameron set aside the first book, then reached for the second, flipping to the first page. "You know, this guy is in a lot of my pictures. How come I don't know him?"

"Well, I moved away and we..." Elizabeth wished she hadn't shown him the pictures. Why hadn't she realized Cameron would be curious about Jason? He was right. Jason was in almost half of the photos. Of course he'd have questions.

"One of the reasons we moved to Port Charles," Elizabeth said finally, "is that I grew up here. This is where you were born."

"I was?" Cameron asked. "That's cool! So I can meet your aunt and your friend? Does he still live here?"

"He does." Elizabeth bit her lip as she took the book from him and looked at the picture he'd stopped on. Cameron at eighteen months old, in the garage. He had a wrench in his hand and was handing it to Jason.

"Can we go see him?"

"I—" Elizabeth paused. The sweltering heat of summer had given away to the crisp fall — before long, winter would set in. She'd done nothing to contact her family beyond drive past the garage and the shop that day. Nothing to address the reason she was here.

"We've been so busy getting settled in," she said finally. "You've been getting to know all your friends on the soccer team. I haven't really gone to see anyone."

"Oh. Well, I'm almost done soccer, right? I only have two more games." Cameron sat back on the stool. "I'm gonna miss seeing Morgan all the time. Not his stupid sister," he added. "She keeps saying she's going to marry me. Her mom needs to leave her at home."

"Well, we'll have to have Morgan over for a sleepover or something. I thought you went to the same school."

"Yeah, but he's not in all of the advanced classes like me. Only science."

"Well, when we go to your game on Saturday," Elizabeth said, "make sure you point out his mom. I'll set something up."

"Cool. Thanks for finding my birthday books, Mom." Cameron closed the second notebook. "But you're right, they're kind of old. I don't wanna mess them up."

"I'll put them away until I can redo them. Go get your brother so we can go grab something to eat."

---

Jason strode into his sister-in-law's kitchen through the back door after parking in the driveway and was unsurprised to hear screaming. He'd known Carly for years, and there had never been a dull moment.

"Thank God you're here." Carly turned away from the teenager sitting at the table to look at Jason with a scowl etched across her features. "Do you know what your nephew did?"

"She's making it sound worse than it really is," Michael Quartermaine said with a roll of his eyes.

"Michael," Carly said, ignoring the thirteen-year-old, "decided that it would be a great way to get back at his science teacher for failing him if he covered the house in toilet paper—"

Jason winced and looked over at the sullen eighth-grader. "Michael."

"Well, I shouldn't have failed science," Michael insisted. "I just bombed one test. It's not fair!"

"Anyway—now I have to go spend my entire afternoon in a lawyer's office negotiating with the prosecutor from family court," Carly muttered. "And thanks to my terrible taste in men, not one of my ex-husbands is available to help me out today."

Jason shoved his hands into his jeans. "What do you need?"

"Morgan has a soccer game today, and he can't miss it. He only has two left. Can you take him and hang out? And Joss, too?" Carly asked, gesturing at the kids sitting at the table with their brother.

"Can we have ice cream after?" six-year-old Joss asked. She smiled at him. "I like ice cream."

"Yeah, sure—" Jason sighed. So much for kicking back with a beer and a book that night. "Where's the game?"

"At the middle school. Morgan's pretty good," Carly told him. "Tell your uncle—"

"I'm okay," Morgan said, with a shrug. His dark hair and dark eyes, the polar opposite of his mother and brother's sunny, bright blonde hair and blue eyes, had been inherited from Carly's second husband, and so had Morgan's brooding nature. "Cam's better."

Jason furrowed his brow. "Cam?"

"New kid at the school," Carly explained as she checked Morgan's equipment bag.

"He moved here in August. He's been good for Morgan. Great kid—does all his homework, in advanced classes—Morgan's talking about getting in them for fifth grade."

"Cam's work doesn't look that hard." Morgan finished the last of his juice and wiped his mouth. "I could do it. And we'd have more classes together. He's lucky. He's got a little brother." Morgan looked at his sister who glared at him. "Sisters are stupid and embarrassing."

"Joss told Cam she'd going to marry him," Carly said with a hushed whisper and smirk. "It happened on the bus today, and Morgan is mortified beyond the speaking of it."

"He's my soul mate," Joss chirped. "I'm gonna change out of my uniform. I want to look nice."

"Mom!" Morgan moaned. "Can't she go with you? What if Cam's mom says I can come over?"

"Not on a school night, but maybe we'll do something this weekend, babe." Carly dropped a kiss on the top of Morgan's head. "Sisters might be annoying now, but you might like her when she grows up."

"I doubt it."

Carly dismissed Morgan and looked at Michael. "Get changed out of your uniform and into a suit. Now. You're going to convince this prosecutor that you're not a deviant little shit and that I raised a normal kid—"

"Oh, so we're acting?" Michael tossed over his shoulder. "Great!"

"You know, he's starting to act like his father," Carly complained to Jason. "AJ whined all the damn time."

"And you decided to create a kid with those genes, so it's on you," Jason said easily, leaning back against the counter.

"We all make mistakes," she retorted. "I'm gonna go pick out the suit for him. He can't be trusted."

"Thanks for taking me, Uncle Jason," Morgan said. He sighed and folded his arms on the table, then rested his chin on them. "How come everyone is so loud and annoying all the time?"

"Everyone? Or just the people you live with?" Jason asked. He pulled out a chair and sat down across from the ten-year-old. "Family can be a pain. Especially when your parents are divorced." The one silver lining in the break up of both his marriages was that there had been no children involved, though he'd wanted them.

"Yeah, Mom said that. Cam's lucky. He said he never had a dad and his little brother's dad isn't around either. It's just them and his mom. Dads just mess things up."

"Morgan—" Jason winced, then paused. Cam. Without a father around. In Morgan's grade. "Your friend. Cam. Is that short for something?"

"Yeah. Cameron." Morgan straightened. "He used to live in New York City."

Jason forced himself to be casual as he asked the question. "What's his last name?"

"Oh. Webber. That's his brother's name, too," Morgan said. "Just like their mom. We all have different last names," he reminded Jason. "And it's confusing."

Webber. Not Devane. Jason's chest eased as he nodded. It wasn't her. Of course it wasn't. Why would she have come back to Port Charles? What was here for her? "I know. My brother has a different last name, too." Though divorce wasn't why.

"It'd just be nice if people got married and stayed married. Or didn't do dumb things like my dad did." Morgan wrinkled his nose. "What does it mean when Mom says Dad ruined your life, too?"

Jason grimaced. "Nothing. And you should stop eavesdropping."

"Mom screams very loud," Morgan said soberly. "There's nowhere in the house I can go."

"Fair enough—" Jason glanced up as Joss waltzed back into the kitchen in a pink dress and white cardigan sweater. "Uh, is that really a good idea for a soccer game?" he asked.

Joss slid her hands down the skirt and smiled at him. "Cam's mom comes to the games. She's gonna be my mom one day, too."

"Oh my God—" Morgan dropped his head on the table. "Kill me now."

---

Elizabeth had selected the neighborhood and school where her sons attended very

carefully — it was far enough away from the house on Charles Street and the garage that she wouldn't run into her family or Jason unless she wanted to. Even so, she was careful at the soccer games to keep her sunglasses on and her hair tied back. She wanted to make contact on her terms, not anyone else's.

After Cameron had asked her a second time about the man in his birthday book, Elizabeth knew it was the sign she'd been waiting for. She'd go to the garage the next day while the boys were in school to talk to Jason. She had some hopes that Jason would keep her presence to himself if she asked him to, but she knew she wouldn't be able to remain hidden forever.

At some point, she'd have to deal with her family if only to find out what was going on. And really, three months after the mark had appeared on her palm was long enough. She wanted to be able to stop running. From everything.

"Can we get ice cream after?" Jake asked as he climbed onto the stands next to his mother, licking mustard from his hand. Then he bit into his hot dog.

"Maybe—" Elizabeth scanned the sideline, trying to locate her blond-haired son. "Do you see your brother?"

"Yeah, he's by Morgan." Jake pointed. "See. There he is." He gestured to the dark-haired kid next to Cameron. "Cam wanted to know if he could sleep over."

"Not tonight," Elizabeth said. "But we can ask his parents about this weekend. Do you see his father?"

"His dad doesn't live here anymore," Jake said. He bit into his hot dog again. "We met Joss's dad. His brother has another dad, too. They all have different last names."

"Hmm," Elizabeth murmured absently, rummaging in her bag for her phone.

"Yeah, I don't like his brother," Jake continued. "Michael is kind of mean, and he thinks he's better than us because he's a Quartermaine—"

Elizabeth froze, then tipped down her sunglasses to peer at her son. "I'm sorry. *What* is Morgan's brother's name?"

"Michael Quartermaine," Jake said, scrunching his eyebrows. "I told you, they all got different last names. Michael Quartermaine, Morgan Corinthos, and Joss Jacks. You met Joss's dad, but he's not Morgan's stepdad anymore." Jake scrunched up his nose. "It sounds complicated and annoying."



Elizabeth closed her eyes. She'd forgotten about Jason's sister-in-law and her two sons, Michael and Morgan, the younger named for Jason. How had she'd not made the connection when Cameron had come home weeks earlier, bubbling about his new friend? Why hadn't she ever asked his last name—

"Mom?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"The game's starting." Jake gestured with the hand holding the hot dog. "Cam's going in."

"Oh—good—" Elizabeth shifted her focus to watch her son, trying to ignore the way her heart was pounding. She'd never run into Carly at any of these games — dumb luck? Or had she just not been at the games—

"Oh, no," Jake moaned. "Morgan's stupid sister. Mom, she told Cam she's gonna marry him today on the bus. It was awful—"

"You're on the *same bus*?" Elizabeth said, her voice climbing higher. Oh, God, did Carly live in her neighborhood? What—

"I wonder if that's Morgan's dad—" Jake continued and Elizabeth whipped her head around to look where Jake was pointing.

She saw the little blonde girl, overdressed for a soccer game played on a muddy and dirty field, walking carefully along the path from the snack stand with her hand tucked tightly into the hand of man next to her.

Elizabeth shrank back as the pair drew closer—

Because it was Jason. *Jason* was at the game, walking towards her. And Joss knew her—Joss knew Jake.

Oh, God, she wasn't ready—she wasn't ready—

He hadn't changed much in the last eight years—though his chest seemed broader somehow, the blue t-shirt stretched even more tightly. His hair still worn in those careless spikes, and she knew those eyes would be Caribbean blue behind the sunglasses—

"Mom, you okay?"

"I—" She swallowed, clenched her hands in her lap. Did she run? Did she grab Jake

and Cam and flee?

Or did she hope Joss didn't remember what she looked like and that they'd find somewhere else to sit—

"Cam's mom!"

Elizabeth bit her lip, then slowly twisted her body to until she was facing the little girl at the bottom of the stands. Joss beamed up at her and waved frantically. Next to her, Jason yanked off his sunglasses to stare at her, his eyes wide.

No time left. No chance to run away.

And hadn't she just told herself she was done running?

Elizabeth slowly took off her sunglasses and folded them, her fingers trembling. Then lifted her chin and met Jason's eyes.

"Elizabeth?" he asked, his voice rough and low—just the way she remembered. And oh, he said her name exactly the way he had all those years ago—

"Jason." She forced her lips to curve into a smile as she greeted the man who had refused to believe her, then rejected his son. Their son.

The little boy sitting next to them with his father's eyes.

"It's a been a long time, huh?"

---

It *was* her. She was here, in Port Charles, in front of him. Elizabeth was back.

Sitting six feet away from him, perched on the edge of the metal bench, her dark hair swept off her face into a messy bun, strands falling down around her neck and face—how could he had forgotten how vivid her beauty was?

"Mom?"

Elizabeth looked away from him to the little boy next to her. Jason swallowed hard. Webber. That's what Morgan said her name was now. He'd thought from their conversation Cameron's mother wasn't married but maybe Morgan hadn't understood. Maybe Elizabeth *had* married someone long enough to give Cameron a name—there was another boy—she'd had another child—

"Jake, you remember I told you that I lived here when Cam was a baby?"

"Yes," the boy said, drawing out the words. He studied Jason suspiciously, his sunny blonde hair cut in short spikes wearing a shirt featuring one of the superheroes Morgan liked. There was something familiar in his face that Jason couldn't place. "You're in my brother's pictures."

Elizabeth winced as Jason felt her son's words like a punch in his gut. Cameron's pictures.

"Jason was one of my friends," Elizabeth told him. She handed the boy her phone. "Here, play one of the games, okay? I'll be right back."

"Okay." Jake abandoned his suspicions for the device his mother handed him while Elizabeth got to her feet and carefully stepped down the metal bleachers until she was on the ground, standing in front of Jason.

She'd slid the sunglasses back on her face after giving Jake the phone and Jason wanted her take them off. He wanted to see her eyes. She was good at hiding her emotions, at locking herself away—but Jason could always see the truth in her eyes.

"It's good to see you," she said after a long moment and he blinked realizing he'd just been staring at her. "I didn't—I didn't realize Joss and Morgan were Carly's kids when we met a few weeks ago."

"I didn't—I heard the name Cameron," Jason said after a moment, "but I didn't recognize the last name. Or know you'd had another kid—"

Elizabeth looked back at Jake who was laughing maniacally at whatever game he was playing. Joss had climbed the bleachers to sit next to him. "Webber was my father's name," she offered. "I needed a fresh start after I left."

Her father's name. So she wasn't—He dropped his eyes to her finger and felt the release of tension in his chest when it was bare. Not that it meant anything but—

"Um, we can't really talk here." Elizabeth glanced around the area, then looked at the field behind Jason.

The field. Cameron. Jason turned around, looking at all the players on the bench, then the ones starting. "Cameron's here, isn't he? He's—"

He found him. The little boy he'd watched come into the world and helped to raise for two years. The boy he'd never been able to forget. He'd had bright, almost white hair as a baby but it had darkened into a honey blond. Cameron was playing center,

kicking the ball down the field—

"He's tall," Jason found himself saying even though it sounded stupid to his ears, but it was the first thing that struck him. Cameron had just really been getting his feet under him—the chubby little legs toddling everywhere, figuring out how to run—how many times had Jason chased him through the garage—

"Yeah, he didn't get from me. I think Zander was tall. At least taller than me," Elizabeth murmured. She rubbed one hand against the other forearm. "I left a lot of things unfinished when I left, Jason. I was hoping we could talk about them."

"Yeah. Yeah." His mind was still racing, still trying to process that Elizabeth and Cameron were back. That she *wanted* to talk to him— "Have you talked to Robin yet?"

It was the wrong thing to say, and he knew it immediately. Her lips thinned as she pressed them together, then she dipped her chin down to take a deep breath.

"Elizabeth—"

"I haven't spoken to Robin since that morning," Elizabeth said flatly. "And I intend to go to my grave that way. So if you're still friends—"

"We're not—she just—" Jason frowned. "She came to the garage asking if I'd heard from you last month. She and Nadine are looking for you."

Elizabeth slid her hands into the back pockets of her jeans, her elbows cocked at her sides as she took in that information. "Okay. Well, they haven't found me yet. What did you tell her when she asked?"

"I—I told her the truth. I haven't seen or heard from you since you left that day."

She raised her head to look at him, and though he couldn't see her eyes behind the sunglasses, he felt a strange prickling on his neck. "You're still at the garage, then?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Same hours," Jason offered. "Come by anytime." Now. Tonight. Immediately. He needed to know where she'd been—what had happened all those years ago when she'd come to his house and fled—

Why was Robin looking for her?

"All right. I'll stop by tomorrow when the boys are in school. Thanks." Elizabeth went back to sit in the bleachers next to her son. Recognizing the look in Joss's eyes and knowing his niece wasn't about to be moved, Jason sat down on the bottom row,

trying hard to ignore that Elizabeth was only steps away.

---

"Your nephew is a boil on the butt of humanity," Carly muttered as she flipped off the cap from the Rolling Rock and passed it to Jason. "I was just able to keep him from mouthing off long enough to get the prosecutor to agree to community service."

"Yeah, he looked pissed when he came in." Jason leaned against the counter in his sister-in-law's kitchen, stared down at the beer, trying to decide if he wanted to tell Carly he'd seen Elizabeth. He was never entirely sure how he'd ended up staying friends with her after her marriage to his brother had collapsed, but it had been more than a decade and she was still here.

"He thought I was going to get him out of it entirely." She snorted. "Nah. He's gonna get some consequences for a change. I've spent way too much time protecting him. I'm not raising a little shit." She poured herself a glass of wine. "Morgan and Joss didn't say much at dinner. The game okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Morgan's team won." He paused. "You know Morgan's new friend? Cam Webber?"

"Yeah. The one who Joss thinks she's going to marry?" Carly's lips quirked into a smile. "Was his mom there for her to impress? We keep missing each other—"

"Carly." Jason paused and waited for his friend to look at him. "He's Cameron. My Cameron."

"Your Cam—" Her brown eyes widened. "No. His name is Webber—"

"Elizabeth was at the game today."

She pressed her lips into a thin line. "Elizabeth. She's back in Port Charles? But Cam has a little brother. Oh—" She made a face. "She's married. Well, Jase, I mean, it's not like you were waiting around for her—and good, because she already broke your heart once—"

Jason just shook his head and went out onto the back porch. "She's not married," he said when he heard the door behind him.

"Okay," Carly drawled. "So she got divorced. I mean, I'd say that wasn't a good sign, but you and I both know marriages can fall apart even when you try your best. But Jase—I know you've missed Cameron all these years, but it doesn't change the fact that she walked out on you. She cheated on you—"

"I—" Jason winced. He knew Carly was right. Elizabeth said she wanted to clear up some unfinished business—and he knew that last morning was part of it—

"Robin came by the garage last month—"

"Oh, God, what did *she* want?" Carly demanded. "I hate that little prissy bitch. She's always got something to say, and you know half the problem she had with Elizabeth was she wanted you for herself—"

"She wanted to know if I'd heard from Elizabeth."

Carly pursed her lips. "Last month? So she moved back and didn't tell her family? Not that I blame her, but—"

"But," Jason repeated with a nod. "There's something there." He hesitated. "Everything happened so fast. Elizabeth and I had a fight, and then she left. Robin dragged me out of bed at dawn to tell me she'd caught Elizabeth in bed with her boyfriend at a party—but I didn't believe her."

"But Elizabeth never denied it—"

"She came into the apartment and she looked at us—and I think—I don't know. She didn't even say anything. Robin said something—" He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Elizabeth looked so—"

Broken. She'd looked destroyed. And, based on what Robin had said, that was *before* Elizabeth had the run-in with Anna over Cameron.

"I didn't believe her," Jason repeated. "But then Elizabeth left. She stayed gone. I—I thought—well, that's it. That's just how it is."

"I know it hurts, Jase, and maybe you need closure with all of that, but—"

"She didn't leave town because of me. She left because of her aunt."

"Her aunt? The judgmental bitch who runs that stupid shop downtown?" Carly asked. "What's her damage? Why would Elizabeth run away from her?"

Jason told her about the threat Anna had made about Cameron, and his sister-in-law sighed. "Well, I guess that makes sense. Elizabeth was still pretty young then, right? And I remember she had a really terrible reputation. Wasn't social services involved when Cam was born?"

"Yeah." Jason's mouth tightened "Not because of anything Elizabeth did. Anna called them, said Elizabeth had been drinking when she was pregnant and thought Elizabeth didn't have a place to live."

Carly paused. "You never told me that—"

"Because it wasn't true. Elizabeth stopped drinking when she got pregnant, and she just never told Anna when she moved. The complaint went nowhere, but Elizabeth knew Anna wasn't making an empty threat that morning."

"Figuring that she'd burned her bridges with you and that she might be out of a job since the garage was your place and you were there first—she split. Jason—"

"I'm not saying—" He cleared his throat. "I'm not saying that her being back means—I just—"

"Hey, you don't have to pretend with me, Jase. That's not what we do. I know how much you loved Cameron. You've wanted a family forever, and you've been looking for that since the day she split town and took the kid with her. No one deserves a family more than you, okay?"

"Carly—"

"Just be careful. It's been eight years. Neither of you are those people anymore. I don't want her to hurt you again."

---

Stepping inside of Abrams & Brothers felt like a trip back in time. Nothing had been changed in the small lobby, from the ancient sofa with cushions so thin that no one would dare to linger longer than necessary to the high counter with the chipped black laminate behind which Elizabeth had waited on customers. The floor was concrete and chipped in some places—a few more than seven years ago—and the calendar was updated for this year.

"Hello," a lanky young man behind the counter chirped. He adjusted his beanie on his head, shoving some brown hair beneath it. "Welcome to Bernie's! Can I help you?"

"Is Jason around?" Elizabeth asked. She folded her arms, clutching at her middle as she looked towards the windows that overlooked the bay with the mechanics and the cars. She knew the staff had mostly stayed the same. Was Max Giambetti still specializing in trucks? He'd worked so hard to get her to the hospital the day Cameron had been born—

"He's in his office. Can I give him a name?"

"Elizabeth." She paused, nearly giving the name Devane before remembering that he knew her new last name. Her identity. Something about being in Port Charles, back in this garage—

It made her think of the days when she'd someone else.

"Elizabeth Webber," she said finally.

"Be right back." The kid disappeared behind through the door that she knew led to the two back offices. One had been used as the lounge when she'd worked here and the other was the main office. He came back shortly. "He said to come right back. Do you need me to show you?"

"Oh, no, I used to work here," she volunteered, passing him as he held the door open for her. "I had your job for a while. Um, does Bernie still own the place?" He'd always talked about selling out to Jason—

"He retired a few years ago after his heart attack. Practically had to ship him to Florida to better weather. He comes up sometimes to pretend Jason needs his help and Jason lets him." He smiled. "I'm Spinelli, in case you need something."

"Nice to meet you, Spinelli." Elizabeth took a deep breath and went down the short hallway and found the office door already open, Jason already on his feet, waiting for her.

He hadn't changed anything in the office. The same rickety desk Bernie had used, the hard wooden chair—

And the pictures on the wall. The same photos she'd seen online, but it was jarring to know that her face was still on the wall. That Jason had photos of her and Cameron that he could look at everyday if he wanted.

"Most of the guys are still here," Jason said as he came up behind her. "And it's still Bernie's."

Her eyes burned as she took in the last staff photo she'd been in. Bernie grinning in the middle, his arm slung around Elizabeth, and on his other side was Jason, holding Cameron. It had been taken just two months before it had all fallen apart, and Bernie had hung it the last day she'd worked here.

"You even kept the ones with me and Cameron," she murmured. "I thought—"



"You know what Bernie always said. You went into labor with him here and he took his first steps out in the bay. He was part of the staff." Jason hesitated.

"Elizabeth—"

"This was the first place I felt like I had a family," she murmured. "Since my grandmother died and I had to move in with Anna. Bernie gave me a chance. I felt bad leaving the way I did. I didn't even give him notice." She bit the tip of her thumb, trying to order her thoughts.

She had thought she was ready for this — she'd had months to prepare for this moment, but she'd never expected to see her face on the wall like she still belonged.

Like she still had a home here. They hadn't forgotten her.

"Bernie figured you were in trouble," Jason said, breaking the silence had hung awkwardly between them. "He was hurt, I think, that you hadn't come to him."

She closed her eyes, a tear sliding down her cheek, chilling the skin as it made its journey. "I left messages," she breathed. "Here. At the garage." Elizabeth turned to face him. "For you and for Bernie. I *did* call, Jason."

His eyes widened and he shook his head. "No—"

Elizabeth reached into the bag she'd brought and drew out two letters. "I sent letters. The first one—I sent to the apartment, but it was returned so I tried the garage." She held them out so that he could see the RETURN TO SENDER scrawled across them.

Jason nearly ripped them out of her grasp, his fingers tightening around the envelopes. He stared at them, taking in the postmarks. "You—someone sent them back."

"There was a third letter. It never came back. I thought for a long time, Jason, that there was nothing for me here. That no one wanted to hear what I had to say." And so she'd boxed it up, built the wall, and put it all away.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath. "We hired a new desk clerk after you left—when it was clear you weren't coming back," he said, his tone strangely flat, almost numb. "She picked up my mail a few times at the apartment, and handled the phones here."

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. "And you think she deleted my messages? Sent back my letters? To protect her job or—" Jason met her eyes, and she closed her mouth.

"Oh." Her chest felt tight. Whoever had taken her job had apparently also taken her boyfriend, and the woman had seen her as a threat. Had kept Elizabeth from reaching Jason or anyone else at garage—

And that meant—

He didn't know about Jake.

How did she start to explain what had happened?

"I thought for a long time," she said after a moment, "that you and the people I did care about here had turned your backs on me. I locked it out of my head."

Except when Jake smiled at her. He had her smile, but his daddy's eyes and they crinkled up at the corners the way Jason's did on the rare occasions he smiled.

"But this summer, I started to think about it again, and I decided it was time I came back. Um, there are family things that I'm not dealing with yet, but there's also—" Elizabeth rubbed the bottom of her lip with her thumb. "There's the boys."

"The boys—" Jason's entire body stilled and she knew that he'd connected the dots. "Carly said Jake was older than Joss."

"So is Jake. He turned seven in May."

"Seven. In May." Jason looked back down at the letters. "This—this letter is postmarked in May of 2014. You wrote me when he was born."

"I did. I sent a picture of him." The tears were simply sliding down her face now, but she couldn't feel them anymore. Couldn't feel anything. He hadn't known. All these years—

*He'd never turned away their son.*

"I wrote you when I realized when I was pregnant," she continued. "I called, too. I tried your cell phone, but it always went to voicemail. You never—you never called back."

"I—I can't explain that. I never got any messages—"

"I tried the garage—but after the third letter—after Jake turned one, I just— I stopped. I couldn't keep reaching out."

Looking vaguely ill, his mouth pinched, Jason sat beside his desk staring at the

envelopes. "He was born in May."

"Yes. May 4. Full-term," she added. "The blackout—I think—"

"Yeah." Jason cleared his throat. "He's—I'm sorry. I'm trying to—"

"I'm sorry, Jason. I didn't keep him from you on purpose—"

"No—no, clearly—" He gestured at the letters. "I believe you about the messages. About the other letter. I can't—I can't get into why I believe it. I just—I need you to know that I do." He scrubbed a hand up and down his face. "I don't know what to say. How to—he's seven. He's healthy? He's okay? And Cameron—they're both—you came home for a reason—"

"They're absolutely perfect. In all ways." She sat in the wooden chair and pulled out Jake's first birthday book. She set it on the edge of the desk. "I have one for every single year. I thought—maybe you'd want—"

"I do want. I want it—" Jason squeezed his hands into fists. "I was there when Cameron was born. You weren't—was someone with you with Jake?"

"No." She managed a smile. "But he was an easy delivery. Cameron—that was so much harder. Jake has been an angel since the moment I found out I was pregnant. Except when Cameron gives him the look. Jason, I—"

"Does he know about me? I mean, did he—"

"No. He knows it's just us. He's never asked," Elizabeth confessed. "But Cameron—he knows you were in his life. He saw your picture a few weeks ago in his birthday books. The first two—I had to put them away for a while."

"Birthday books," Jason repeated. He reached for Jake's book, running a single finger down the hardbound cover with Jake's face emblazoned across it. "Jacob Martin Webber," he murmured. "How old is he in this picture?"

"Two months. He'd started to smile, and it took me ages until I could get it on camera." She hesitated. "Jason, I'm sorry."

Jason raised his eyes from the book, frowning at her slightly. "Sorry for what? Why?"

"Seven years is a lot of time to miss, and I feel like I should have tried harder. I mean—"

"You called me and wrote me in the ways you knew how to. And—" He paused, setting the book down. "I know you were afraid to come back to Port Charles. At least, at first."

Her blood ran cold as she stared at him. "Why do you say that?" What did he know? Had someone told him—

"Anna threatened to take Cameron from you," Jason told her gently. "I didn't—I didn't know that at the time," he added. "Robin—Robin and Nadine are trying to find you. She came to see if I'd heard from you. She told me what her mother did."

"Oh." Elizabeth put a hand against her abdomen. Robin had told him? Why? She filed that away for later. "I let that fear run my life for far too long. She can't hurt me now. Or my boys. But that's part of the reason I knew I had to come back now and see you in person. I'm all they have, Jason. It's just been us against the world, but if something—if something happens to me—"

His eyes sharpened. "Are you sick? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I mean—" she hesitated. "You never know. I was scared they'd end up in the system or that someone would send them to Anna. I can't—I can't let her be in charge of my babies. They're my entire world."

"No, she should barely be in charge of a hamster," he muttered and she found herself, despite all the odds, smiling. He'd never liked her aunt.

"I pulled out Cameron's birthday book and I looked at those photos for the first time since I left, and I started to ask myself if someone who loved my son that much could have rejected his own." She bit her lip. "I mean, if you need a DNA test—"

"I—" He stared at her, then shook his head. "No. I've seen him. He looks like me." Jason paused, the air between them strained. "I don't have doubts."

She hadn't expected that either, but it was true. Jake didn't look like—her stomach rolled. She rubbed her hands against her jeans. "Um, okay. I mean, if you change your mind. But—it's also—I thought maybe—about Cameron—I know it's a lot to ask, but—"

"I've thought about Cameron every day since you left," Jason told her starkly and she broke off in mid-sentence just to stare at him. "It's one of the reasons why that picture is still on my wall. So if you're trying to ask me if I'll be there for both of them, the answer is yes."

---

She promised Jason that she'd talk to the boys, and though she thought Jason might push to do it immediately, he agreed to give her a day or two.

She'd made the mistake of letting herself be open to him in that office, into letting his emotions spill out into her—Elizabeth had wanted to know the truth, had wanted to get his real reaction to the letters, to Jake, to her request—

But she hadn't been prepared for his overwhelming grief at the time lost, at the joy and love that he'd felt learning about Jake—and, oh, when he'd spoken about Cameron—Elizabeth sat in her car across the street for a long time trying to get herself under control. To lock it all away again. She'd wanted to know the truth, to be sure her babies would be in good hands. If the curse did take her — Jason would not only take in his own son, but he'd raise the boys together. They'd have a father who loved them.

When Elizabeth felt as though she was safe, she drove a few blocks away to Charles street. To the house where she'd spent so much of her life. She hadn't been here since learning how to truly block it all, and worried that seeing it again would tear down the defenses, would smash the wall—

But she felt nothing as she parked the car and stepped out. Her heart was empty, her mind all but numb as she walked up the front path. The door opened as Elizabeth approached, and there her aunt stood. Much as she had that final day.

They stared at each other for a long moment, their eyes locked but neither of them saying a word. Anna's expression was blank as Elizabeth's own, and that was useful. The first burst of her empath powers had been Anna's bitterness and resentment that day in Maine, and it had colored every interaction ever since.

Without a word, Elizabeth held out her wrist, and Anna slowly exhaled. "I was afraid of that," she murmured. She stepped back. "Would you come in?"

Elizabeth followed her into the living room, glancing past the shelf, then stopping. Robin and Nadine each had two photos arranged — a senior portrait from high school and a graduation photo. For a long time, there had been a photo of Elizabeth there, and at the time Elizabeth had left Port Charles, it had been one of her and Cameron.

Now there was nothing. Not even that single reminder.

She shook it off, then turned to face her aunt. "I heard Nadine was looking for me, too. Does that mean—"

"It does. You and Nadine both have the mark. Just as your mothers did. Robin doesn't. Whatever has happened—" Anna held out her wrist, still unmarked. "My mother's original charm still protects us." She paused. "How is Cameron?"

"Fine. Both of my sons are," Elizabeth continued. Anna's eyes sharpened. "Jake is seven," she continued. "I've lived past age five for both of them."

"That is—" Anna pursed her lips, went over to a table to pick up a thick book that Elizabeth recognized from her childhood. Anna was always jotting down notes and thoughts for charms and spells. She scribbled something. "That helps me to confirm my theory that whatever is going on, it's something new. I don't think it's precisely the same curse."

"That doesn't make me feel much better," Elizabeth said.

"No, I imagine it doesn't." Anna hesitated. "I can't be sure, of course, but the mark is the same as it always was. I think that means the curse is the same. As long as you and Nadine don't have more children, you ought to be safe."

"Does Nadine—" Elizabeth pressed her lips together. "Does she have children?"

"No," Anna said softly, her eyes regretful. "She doesn't." She paused. "There's something you should know, however. Women who are subject to the curse—they become pregnant very easily—"

Elizabeth's throat tightened. "And you're telling me that because I'm a whore?" she demanded sharply. "Because I sleep with everyone, including your daughter's boyfriend?"

"No—" Anna looked away. "No," she repeated. "I'm telling you because of my sisters. Gracie and Maria both were using protection. They swore it. And it didn't matter. It doesn't matter if you're married or sleeping every man you meet. This curse was designed to torment and torture the women in our family. It needs you to have children for that to work. It heightens fertility."

She paused. "I've thought of you these last few years—"

Elizabeth put up her hand. "I'm not interested," she said cutting Anna off. "Whatever it is you want to say. To apologize, to yell at me, to judge me—I don't care. I used to," she added as Anna flinched. "I use to crave your love and your acceptance. But I finally let go of that dream. I'm here because I love my children, and I want to see them grow up. I came home to get the charm from you that Nonna used."

"I—I would give that to you, and I will," Anna added, "but it won't work. The way it's written—" She cleared her throat. "You need to be pregnant," she told Elizabeth. "You can try it, but Nadine already has. It didn't remove the mark as it did for my mother."

That was a punch to the gut, one that slipped through Elizabeth's defenses as she absorbed it. "Then we'll rewrite it—"

"And we've tried," Anna said. "We'll keep trying." She hesitated. "Elizabeth, you must let me try to make some sort of amends—"

"I don't have to let you do anything. You didn't want to be part of my life when I was a mess," Elizabeth said. "You don't get to be part of it now that I've found success. You—and your daughter—blamed me for things. I couldn't control. You knew why I was acting the way I was. You knew why things got so bad, but you always made it seem like I had a choice and I was always choosing the wrong ones."

Her eyes burned. "Do you know when I finally got my powers under control? When I could finally build that wall and protect myself?"

Anna folded her arms. "Elizabeth—"

"It was when I left this house. When I got myself out from underneath the weight of your resentment and hatred. You hated me, Anna." Elizabeth's mouth tasted like ash as she continued, "And you made sure I felt responsible every day for my mother's death. It's taken me a long time to forgive myself for killing her because you made it my fault."

"I know, and I can't ever take that back—"

"No, you can't. My mother gave her life so that I would be safe and happy." Elizabeth's smile was bitter. "I finally realized that it wasn't me that my mother would be ashamed of. It's you. You ruined any chance I ever had at a normal life, and I will never forgive you for that."

## Part Five:

### Run

*And I just want to tell you  
It takes everything in me  
Not to call you  
And I wish I could run to you*

*And I hope you know that  
Every time I don't  
I almost do, I almost do*

The last time Jason had seen his first ex-wife had been in the office of their divorce lawyers when he'd signed the papers and watched her do the same. That had been six years ago, and he'd planned to go to his grave without being in the same room with her again.

But that wasn't possible. Not after he'd learned just how deep her lies and deceptions had gone.

Jason knocked on the door, and Courtney Matthews pulled it open, her cornflower blue eyes widening as she saw him. She fell back a step. "Jason. What—"

He tucked his hands in his pockets, keeping his voice even and flat. "When I found out you lied about being pregnant and filed for divorce, did you even consider telling me about the child I already had?"

Courtney's hand fell from the door frame, hanging limply at her side. She swallowed hard. "How—I—" She paused. "I don't know what you're talking about—"

"I might believe that if you'd just returned the letters unopened, if you'd just deleted the voicemails," Jason said roughly. "But there was a third letter. In May of 2015. And it was never returned." He waited a beat. "The same month I found out you lied to me and moved out."

She said nothing for a long moment, the only sounds were cars passing by the house. She looked away, her blonde hair sliding over her shoulder, blocking her profile. "We could have been happy if you'd—"

"I'm not here to argue about that," Jason said tightly. "We said everything we needed to six years ago. You told me you were pregnant, and I married you because I cared about you and wanted children."

"I thought—"

"And you waited five months before faking a miscarriage," Jason retorted, "and if a friend of mine hadn't worked at the hospital where you pretended to go, I might still think I'd lost a child. We're not doing this, Courtney—"

She huffed, swinging her face back to face him, those blue eyes flashing. "Then why are you even here if you think you know?"



"Because I want you to say it. I want you to admit it—you read that letter. And you kept my son from me—"

"Fine!" Courtney snapped. "Fine, I didn't tell you. God, how can you even know it was yours? Everyone knew what a whore she was—she come crawling back looking for child support?" She jerked a shoulder. "She was trying to use a sob story to get you back—"

Jason clenched his jaw. "What did you do with the letter?"

Courtney snorted. "What, do you think I kept it? I read it, and shredded it the day it arrived. I thought she might finally get the point. And you know what I didn't tell you after the divorce?" She arched a brow. "Because I wanted to hurt you the way you hurt me—"

"The way I—" Jason fisted his hands. "The way I hurt you?" he repeated, his voice low. "What the hell—"

"You got drunk and slept with me, and then you decided sex made you feel better after that bitch ran out on you and took her bastard with you," Courtney spat. "I was nothing more than a substitute. No one at that garage gave me a chance — everyone was waiting for her to come back. You wanted kids? I tried to give them to you. And you never even tried to love me—"

He shook his head. "I never made you any promises until—"

"And then when we were married, I knew you didn't love me. You didn't even try to be happy with me. You kept waiting for *her*. If she'd showed with those little bastard boys, you'd have shoved me out the door so fast—" Courtney stepped back. "I hear you got married and divorced again within a year," she jeered. "Another woman decide she couldn't live up to the almighty Elizabeth?"

No, his second wife had decided that another man with more money and more polish was more to her liking, but Jason ignored the jab. "Seven years," he said, "is a long time to punish me for something that you know wasn't my fault. You've remarried, Courtney. You have kids with your new husband. And you still said nothing. You stole years from me."

And now Courtney exhaled slowly, some of the ire fading from her expression. "I thought about telling you once or twice a few years ago. After my daughter," she said. "But I let it go. I suppose I'm sorry for that."

"You suppose." Jason shook his head. There was no point in this conversation anymore. He'd gotten the confirmation of what he'd already known. Maybe he'd just

needed to see her face, to try to understand how she could hate him so much after all this time.

But the reality didn't bring any comfort. Courtney hadn't just kept Elizabeth from reaching Jason, she'd kept Elizabeth from the others at the garage. From her family. Making her think that none of them had stood by her.

"Anything else?" Courtney asked.

"No. I'm done with you."

---

The day after her visit to the garage was a Saturday which was probably sort of a blessing. Elizabeth didn't want to squeeze a conversation like this into the short time before or after school.

She made the boys their Saturday waffles, listening to Cameron plan a sleepover with Morgan while Jake commiserated again on Joss's most recent marriage proposal the day before on the bus. How was she supposed to have this conversation with them? And what had Jason meant by saying he'd take them both? She had little doubt that Jason would want to be in Jake's life now — he'd seemed so destroyed by the time that was lost — but how would Cameron fit in?

"Mom, did you call Morgan's mom yet?" Cameron asked. Elizabeth turned, then smiled hesitantly at him.

"No. We should talk about that." She sat down at the table across from them. "I told you I grew up here, remember?"

"Yeah—"

"Well, it turns out I knew Morgan's mom back then. A little bit, anyway. Morgan's uncle Jason is...well, he's the Jason from those photos," she told Cameron. "And Jake, you met him yesterday."

"Oh, okay. That's cool, I guess." Cameron furrowed his brow. "But can't Morgan come over? I don't know why that matters."

"Well—" Elizabeth turned the cup of tea in her hands. "A long time ago, Jason and I dated. And we had a fight. I moved away because I was hurt, and he didn't know how to contact me. I tried to call and write him a few times," she continued, "but he didn't get any of my messages." She hesitated. "I wanted to tell him that I was going to have a baby."

Cameron's body went still and he looked at his brother whose face was scrunched up in confusion. "He's Jake's dad, isn't he?"

"I have a dad?" Jake demanded. "How come I didn't know? How come you didn't tell me yesterday?"

"Because I didn't—" Elizabeth exhaled slowly. "I didn't know Jason hadn't gotten my messages, baby. I thought he knew and didn't care. But that's not true," she added quickly as Jake's face fell. "He absolutely never knew and was sad to have missed so much time with you. He wanted to see all your pictures and your birthday books—"

"But he's not my dad," Cameron said quietly. "Is he?"

Elizabeth's stomach twisted. How to explain that no, biologically — but emotionally, Jason had been Cameron's father, and Elizabeth had ruined that by not trusting him. If she'd told him the truth, if she hadn't gone to that stupid party—

"Not by blood," Elizabeth said finally. "But he knew and loved you. You can see it from the photos."

"But he's my dad," Jake said slowly. "Do I have to go live with him?"

"No, I mean—" God, they hadn't talked about that. Of course Jason might want to split custody. Her heart pounded. Why wouldn't he? "Jason and I haven't figured anything out, and even when we do, we both agreed we'll do what's right for you both," Elizabeth told him.

Cameron put his hands on the table. "Jason is Morgan's uncle, right?"

"Right." Jason had always been closer to Carly than his own brother, so Elizabeth wasn't surprised that Jason had continued to remain close to the kids.

"That makes him your cousin," Cameron told Jake. "And Joss is, too."

Jake's face cleared and he immediately cheered up. "Oh, awesome! She can't marry me anymore! You have to tell her, Mom, right?"

Elizabeth rubbed the side of her face, not really understanding the shift in the conversation. "I mean, I don't—we can cover all of that later—" Her phone flashed and she saw Jason's name popping up on the screen. "I'll be right back," she told them. "Eat your waffles."

She went out to the back porch, closing the door behind her before she answered the door. "Jason."

"Hey. I—" There was a pause. "I'm sorry. I know I said I'd wait for you to call, but I can't—I need to know what to do next. When you're telling Jake—"

"I—we should talk about the practical stuff, I guess," she murmured. She wrapped an arm around her waist and turned to face the windows, to see into the kitchen. "I told them. And they have questions I didn't have answer to. I think we should have those answers before you come over."

"Yeah. Okay. Okay. Can you—I don't know. Can we talk? Maybe Carly could watch them. I could—I could meet you somewhere. I just—" Jason was quiet. "I've missed seven years—"

"And you shouldn't have to miss another day," she cut in softly. "The kids know Morgan and Joss. And they need to meet Carly, I guess. If she's okay with it, call me. We'll set it up."

---

Carly had given Jason the fish eye when he'd asked her to watch the boys while he worked things out with Elizabeth, but she'd reluctantly agreed to it.

"Cam's a good kid," she'd said grudgingly, "so his mom is doing something right." Then she'd stabbed a finger at him, her nail painted blood red. "But you make sure she knows I'm watching her. If she so much as steps wrong and hurts a hair on your head—"

Jason had hung up before Carly had completed her threat, just eager to have Elizabeth bring over the boys. He'd promised to wait in his car across the street, not wanting to confuse the boys until they knew more.

He watched as Elizabeth pulled into the driveway and two boys tumbled out of the backseat, both of them blond. He'd seen Jake the day before, but—watching him again, knowing that Jake was his son—seeing Cameron up close—

He wanted to run up to both of them, to hold them close, and make sure they knew that Jason hadn't left them—

Elizabeth exchanged some brief words with Carly, who then pointed at Jason's car. Elizabeth hugged the boys, then waited for them to go inside.

He unlocked the door so she could slide into the passenger side, and then—then she

was sitting next to him, closer than she'd been in eight years. He could smell the light floral scent of whatever spray she'd tossed on, see the flash of silver at her wrist as she tightly clasped her hands in her lap.

"Your hair's longer," he said without thinking, and she turned to look at him, her brows drawn together. "I'm—I'm sorry. I didn't—" She'd worn it shorter when he'd known her, just to her shoulders, but now it hung halfway down her back in soft waves that he just wanted to touch—

"So is yours," Elizabeth replied, a hint of smile on her lips. "Or maybe you're not using as much product."

Jason grimaced, sliding his fingers self-consciously through his hair. He'd gone through a stage in his early twenties with gel. "Yeah, well." He cleared his throat. "I live around the corner—"

She closed her eyes, almost flinching, and he looked away from her, out the window shield. "We can stay right here. Sorry—"

"No, it's not—" Elizabeth sighed. "I found a house nearby that I was so sure was far enough away that I could control everything. I wouldn't have to deal with this until I had to." She bit her lip. "But I picked the neighborhood where you live. Where Carly lives. I'm three blocks away."

Three blocks. His son lived three blocks away from him. "But it's far away from Anna."

She smiled at that reminder, and he felt better. "Yeah. We can go to your house," Elizabeth said. "I want to see where Jake might be spending a lot of time—"

"Jake and Cameron," Jason corrected and she turned to him, her face carefully blank. "I told you. I wanted them both."

"You—" On a shaky breath, she exhaled. "You want them both. What does that—"

"I always—" Jason tightened his fingers on the wheel. "Back then," he said carefully, "I told you that I wanted to adopt him. I've thought about him almost every day since I last saw him." He hadn't even known it would be the last time— "Can we talk about that day—"

"No," she said, and all of the emotion had disappeared from her voice. He straightened his shoulders, frowning. "Look, I want you to be part of Jake's life. And Cameron's if that's how this works out. They'd be lucky to have you. But we're not talking about what happened before."

"We're—" Jason's throat tightened. "But—"

"It doesn't matter." She looked at him and her eyes were empty. Blank. It chilled him. A few moments ago, she'd been hopeful, her eyes soft and warm. And now it was gone. "We're not going to talk about it. I won't. And it has nothing to do with any of this."

"It's why it's been eight years since we saw each other," Jason said tightly. "It's why I didn't know my own son—"

"And you can blame me for that if you want. But I don't owe you anything more than I've already given." Elizabeth turned, her eyes trained on the street in front of the car. "I should have come to Port Charles to tell you in person. I'll accept the blame for that. There's no point in—"

"You need to know that I would have forgiven you—"

The energy in the car shifted, the weight of the air becoming heavy and almost oppressive. When Elizabeth looked at him with those terrible, dead eyes, he almost flinched. "I'm not asking to be forgiven. If you can't accept this, then maybe we should just call some lawyers and work out custody that way—"

How was he supposed to take any of this? Why the hell was she making this like it was his fault? He'd done nothing wrong except plan a future and share his dreams with her about getting married, adopting Cameron, and having more children. And she'd not only rejected him, she'd gone to a party, gotten drunk, and slept with someone else.

And now he was the bad guy for bringing any of this up? For wanting to clear the air? Just like somehow he'd deserved the lies Courtney had told him about being pregnant, about losing the baby?

"I've done nothing wrong," Jason said, matching her emotionless tone. "I never knew Jake existed, and I didn't force you to go to that party. Whatever happened there—it's your fault. Not mine. And you're the one who didn't stick around to deal with the consequences."

"You're absolutely right," she said softly. "It is my fault." She clasped her hands in her lap. "So if I hadn't left, you would have forgiven me for my sins. Do you feel better now that you've told me?"

He pressed his lips together, shook his head. "No."

"Then what's the point?"

"There's none." He cleared his throat. "I want them both if Cameron is on board with it. If he's not, that's fine. I'll do a guardianship in the event anything happens. But if he's okay with it, I want them both." He paused when she said nothing. "But they don't know me, so we should take it slow. But eventually, I'll want them with me part of the time. I think that's fair."

"It is."

"We can figure everything else out later, I guess. Child support. Visitation. We can get lawyers if you want—"

"I don't want any of that." Her shoulders slumped, and the terrible, oppressive weight in the air eased back. "I just want my boys to have a better family than I did," she murmured. "And if something happens to me, I want you to promise that Anna and my cousins will never get anywhere near them."

There it was again. That hint that something else was at work here. "If we're going to co-parent, then you need to tell me now. Are you sick? Is that why you're here?"

"No, I'm not sick." Elizabeth tipped her head back, closed her eyes. "I'm not. But I could be. My mother died from an undiagnosed aneurysm. My aunt had cancer. Terrible things happen to the women in my family when we least expect it, and I've ignored the possibility for too long. If I got hit by a bus tomorrow, the boys would go into a system or they'd go to Anna. You're not even on Jake's birth certificate. No one knew you existed. I need to protect them better than my family did me. I'm asking you to keep them away from Anna."

"You know I will."

"Okay. Okay. That's all I need then." She reached for the handle, but Jason's hand shot out and stopped her, his fingers resting on her forearm, jolting him.

"You'll ask him tonight?" Jason asked. "I know I'm rushing it, but—"

"But you're impatient. Yeah, I'll talk to Cameron tonight. But first I have to go take care of some family business." Elizabeth paused, looked at him, and her eyes had cleared of that dead look, but she still seemed...closed off somehow. "I'm sorry. I know you meant well when you said you would have forgiven me. I'm not trying to hurt you by not talking about it. I just—I can't talk about it. Please understand and respect that."

---

Nadine was sitting in the little courtyard outside the diner, twisting a napkin in her hand, shredding it into pieces. Elizabeth stopped at the entrance, swept her eyes around the familiar place. Kelly's was on the waterfront, but it had always been within walking distance from Charles Street. She'd scraped and scrounged for enough money to buy fries so that she could have a reason to stay away from that house.

Then later, after she'd left the house, her uncle had arranged for Elizabeth to work there. He'd told her it would be good practice for controlling her powers. Hiding wouldn't work forever. She'd managed six months before the voices had overwhelmed her, and she'd left in the middle of the shift. Just walked out and never came back.

"Elizabeth—" Nadine got to her feet, nervously shoved her blond hair behind her ears, then folded her arms. "Hey. Hi. I didn't—I didn't expect you to—"

"It was you or Robin," Elizabeth said flatly, "and it was never going to be Robin." She edged away from Nadine and sat down. "Anna gave me your number."

"Yeah, I, um, was thinking about the last time I saw you," Nadine said. She returned to her seat. "I can't really remember, I guess. Which is bad—"

"Your high school graduation," Elizabeth said. "You said you were leaving for New York early." She fisted her hands in her lap beneath the table. "I'm not here to reminisce, Nadine. I just want to find a way to protect myself and my boys."

"I know, but first — I need to apologize—"

"I don't want—"

"You don't want to hear it, I know. I wouldn't either, if I were you. But, um, I need to say it anyway. It needs to be said. You don't have to accept it, but you deserve the words. You deserve to hear me say what I did wrong." Nadine exhaled slowly. "We promised each other when Nonna died that we'd stick together. Bits and Deenie. We'd be a team—"

"You were a child, Nadine. I don't blame—"

"I tried really hard to keep that promise, but I always knew Anna didn't really connect to either of us. I mean, it was harder with you because of your mother, but she didn't really like me much either. I couldn't feel it the way you could," Nadine told her, "but the thing about dreams — you know it's not just the dreams in your sleep I could see. Sometimes I could feel the fantasies and daydreams, and those



come with emotions. Twisted ones because they don't—" She shook her head. "No, no. This isn't what I wanted to talk about."

"Nadine—"

"I ran as soon as I could. I got that scholarship in New York, and I left Port Charles. I sacrificed you to get out of here. I had to leave this all behind, Bits." Nadine's eyes were an intense shade of blue, compelling Elizabeth to keep her eyes on hers. "I let them erase you because it felt like it was the only way to survive. Things were bearable until Uncle Robert died, but I think it was just one more loss Aunt Anna couldn't handle, you know? She just got colder. Harder. I didn't even know it was possible. And the dreams—" She closed her eyes. "I let them erase you," she repeated. "And I made myself forget you."

She'd always known why Nadine had run so far away, but it had cut deeply for letters and phone calls to go mostly unanswered. For emails to be ignored. And after a while, Elizabeth had just stopped trying. And yet, knowing all of that, it still sliced at her to hear Nadine say the words out loud. To admit what Elizabeth had always known.

"When I came home, it was like you'd never existed, and I didn't say anything. Even when this—" Nadine held out her wrist, the mark evident. "Even when I asked Anna about this, I didn't say your name. But I—I wanted to find you. I hired a PI. He couldn't—"

"Because I changed my last name," Elizabeth said. "I use my father's name."

Nadine's smile was small. "So do I. I changed it in New York. I wanted to leave everything behind. I should have thought about that, I guess." She bit her lip.

"If you're done apologizing," Elizabeth said coolly, "can we move on to why I agreed to talk to you?" She wouldn't let herself feel bad when Nadine flinched, drawing back her hand. She'd realized after that terrible scene with Jason in the car that she would have to completely shut down. Letting anyone in was a mistake. They didn't matter to her. No one other than her boys.

"Yeah, um, sure. Anna probably told you everything we know," Nadine said. "At least that's what she said. The spell Nonna used won't work because we're not pregnant. Um, I guess we could try writing a new one but I was never good at that—did you—"

"No, I wasn't trained in the charms," Elizabeth said. "Anna said we'd get to that when I learned to block the voices."

"Right. You didn't—you didn't seek out the craft afterwards?" Nadine wanted to know. "I found some people in New York. Some shops. You know I always liked the crystals—they were good for the dream walking—"

"No. The community was closed to me after I left the house."

Nadine cleared her throat. "Anna said she'd work on a charm, but it's hard to write for someone else. Robin's pretty handy—" She stopped. "But you said you don't want to talk to Robin—"

She wanted to go to her grave without ever looking at her cousin again. She was terrified that all the work she'd done wouldn't hold up. She'd been able to block Anna — but Robin — she couldn't go back to that morning. Couldn't feel any of that, couldn't be there again. She'd slipped there for just a moment in the car with Jason, and it had nearly broken her.

But if Robin could write a spell that would make this stop — "Would Robin write a charm for me?" Elizabeth asked. "I'm sure she'll do it for you—"

"I don't want you to think that we've all been close or whatever since you left," Nadine cut in. "We're not. Robin and I both work at the hospital, but we have different last names and most people don't know we're related. I almost never see either of them. I came back because, well—" She closed her eyes. "Because I didn't think I had anywhere else to go, I guess. I don't know. But I think Robin will help. She seemed different when I talked to her—"

"I'll take your word for it. Fine, ask Robin if she's interested in helping. The sooner we can get this dealt with, the sooner we can go back what we do best. Pretending we don't know each other." Elizabeth got to her feet, and Nadine hurried to get up.

"But that's not what I want. Can't we just leave things in the past—" Nadine reached for Elizabeth's. "We can be Bits and Deenie again. You have children. I want to know them—"

"No, you're worse." And now the grief swept through her, sliding in and out, rising in her throat and making her voice almost inaudible. "Because I never really believed they were my family. Not like you. You were mine, Nadine. And we both know that I made mistakes, but I'm not the one who left. That was you." She paused. "Text me when you hear from Robin. I don't want to meet again unless we have to."

---

Elizabeth still hadn't quite found the words to tell Cameron that Jason wanted to be

his father, too. She was very nearly afraid that Cameron might ask her why he'd want that after so much time, and she would need to explain that Cameron had already considered Jason his father once. He'd spoken his first clear word at eleven months old, reaching for Elizabeth and calling her mama.

But Jason had been his second word, and Cameron had used started calling him dada by the time he was fourteen months. He'd cried for him after they'd fled Port Charles, and Elizabeth had often sobbed herself to sleep, too, wishing there had been another choice. Wishing she'd trusted him with the truth instead of fleeing to that party—

*Whatever happened there—it's your fault...*

*I didn't force you to go to that party...*

*Your fault.*

She knew that, of course. If she had just told Jason just once that she was a hereditary witch, that Cameron and any children they shared would also develop their own powers. But then she'd have to explain the curse and why it was her fault her mother was dead, and that even though the curse was broken—it still haunted her dreams—

And now—

She sat in her living room, tracing the edges of the pentagram on her wrist, wondering now if Jason would have taken the information in stride. If he might have merely nodded and gone on planning a future with her. Another regret in a long list that seemed endless.

But it was a regret that she couldn't undo. She would, of course, have to tell Jason the truth eventually, but there was another year before Cameron would develop his powers and while Jason might have rejected them in Elizabeth or theoretical children, she suddenly felt sure that he wouldn't reject them in the boys.

She'd seen too much that day in the garage, felt too much in the car, and after that disastrous meeting with Nadine it had taken the better part of a day to push everything away. To lock back in that box and throw away the key.

Jason was due over in less than twenty minutes, and Elizabeth still didn't have the words for Cameron. Still — the time for procrastination had ended so she went to the front door and called the boys in from the lawn.

"What's up?" Cam asked, his cheeks flushed from the burgeoning chill in the air. He

hung his jacket on the hook and reached for Jake's who still struggled sometime with the zipper. He frowned at her. "You look worried."

She didn't, but she felt it. And the air on her arms stood on end. It wasn't the first time Cameron had noted her mood and mistaken it for her expression. It had started that way for her—

She exhaled slowly, sliding her fingers through Cameron's honey blonde hair with a wistful sigh. Her little boy looked to be developing empathic powers. She hoped for a better path for him — more love and acceptance. She'd learned so much working at the garage, being surrounded by respect and genuine warmth. She'd make sure Cameron had a good foundation to learn.

"Mom?" Cameron asked. "You're making a weird face."

"I wanted to talk to you and your brother before Jason comes over. You know he's coming to have dinner," she told them, "but first—"

"Am I going to live with him?" Jake asked, his face scrunched up. "Because I don't know him, and I don't think—"

"Let Mom explain," Cameron said. They followed her back to the living room and flopped on the sofa. "I mean, I'll hang out," he said, "so that Jake feels okay—"

"Well, that's part of what I wanted to talk about. When Jason and I knew each other before Jake was born, you know he was part of your life," Elizabeth said. She bit her lip. "He cared about you a lot." When Cameron just stared at her, she continued, "He thought of you as his son."

"He—" Cameron's face changed, and Elizabeth could feel the strange mixture of hope and worry and fear and shock swirling inside. "He did? Did I—I mean, I was just a baby—"

"You were just over two years old when I left, and you loved him, too," Elizabeth said softly. "You won't remember the memories, but maybe you might remember the feelings." She took his hand, squeezed. "You're like me, aren't you, baby? You know what people are feeling."

"I—" Cameron shook his head. "No, I'm not supposed to get my powers until I'm twelve—"

"It's not a calendar, Cam. I didn't know what was happening for me. I just could feel what people felt. Sometimes—and only if it was really strong. Later, it was different. But it was always easier for me to remember the way I felt. Even when I

was very young."

She'd been just four when her aunt Grace had smacked her hand sharply and reminded her not to call her Mama, and she'd never forgotten the devastation, the rejection—

Her baby hopefully only remembered love.

"So if I see him," Cameron said, "will I remember him?"

"I don't know. But I don't want you to be scared if you do," Elizabeth said. She paused. "He doesn't know yet about the powers. About our family." Idly, she traced the pentagram yet. "I never told him." Before Cameron could say anything else, Elizabeth continued, "He wants you, too, Cameron. I didn't even have to ask him. He wants you both."

"You mean like—" Cameron looked at Jake, then at his mother. "Like a stepfather, like Morgan has?"

"No, I mean like a father. We'll sign paperwork and make it official. He'll adopt you. He—" He wanted to all those years ago, but Elizabeth had run—

No. Can't think about that. Shouldn't think about it. Couldn't face it.

"But only if you want it, too," Elizabeth assured him. "We both want it to be your decision—" She twisted as she heard a car engine. Jason's SUV had pulled into the driveway behind Elizabeth's car. "Wait here."

She met Jason on the porch as he climbed the steps to the house. Oh, how hard it was to keep herself locked away when she could feel the nerves and excitement and worry leaping off him—she allowed herself that small peek before shutting it down. "Hey. I just wanted to let you know that I just told Cameron."

"Just now?" Jason frowned, glanced past her. "But—"

"I know. I meant to say something last night after I left you, but I just—" She lifted her hands at the side. "I didn't have the words. I still don't know if I do. He didn't—I never told him about you."

"And he doesn't remember me," Jason said, almost too softly for her to hear, but she still flinched.

"No. But—" She could do this for him even though it tore at her to remember. "He cried for you after we left. For weeks."

He dragged his eyes away from the front door, meeting hers with irritation and hurt. "You think that helps?" he demanded. "You knew how I felt about him. You knew how he felt about me. And you didn't give a damn about any of that. You took my son and disappeared without a trace." He exhaled slowly. "I know you were scared of Anna. I know you were—" He shook his head. "I'm trying not to be angry. I'm trying to remember that you tried to reach out, but—"

"But I could have done more," she admitted. "And saying I'm sorry will never be enough, Jason. All I can say is that I wasn't thinking of any of that when I left. I just—I was scared, I was—" Broken into pieces. Shattered almost beyond repair. "It was months before I felt like myself again, and then I was pregnant."

"And you think we don't have to talk about any of that," he bit out and now she flinched, folding her arms and looking down at the planks of the porch. "You don't want to talk about why you left."

"I can't. I won't."

"But I'm supposed to forgive you—"

"I didn't ask for that. I won't ask for it." And if he tried to offer it again, she might actually scream—

"Fine. Can I come in and meet them?"

Elizabeth stepped back and pushed open the door, her heart pounding as Jason brushed past him. She closed her eyes, his familiar touch and scent all but making her tremble. She hadn't been touched since—

Jake and Cameron were where she had left them, sitting on the sofa. They stood when Jason entered the room, Cameron standing just in front of Jake almost protectively.

"Boys, this is Jason Morgan," Elizabeth said. "Jason and I knew each other a long time ago. Jason, you—well, Cameron's taller than when you knew him, but—"

"A lot taller," Cameron supplied. "I'll be taller than Mom soon." His eyes searched Jason's, his small hands fisted at his side. "Mom says I knew you before. When I was a baby."

"Since before you were born," Jason said, a bit roughly. He cleared his throat. "I was there at the hospital. I held you."

"And drove me home," Elizabeth supplied softly. He looked at her, a bit surprised. "You helped me with the car seat, and then I wouldn't get out of the backseat. I was afraid the straps wouldn't hold him, so you left your car at the hospital and drove us home."

"I remember." Jason looked back at Cameron. "You were two the last time I saw you." Eight long years.

"Mom said—" Cameron paused, swallowing hard. "You're Jake's dad by blood. But that you—you were like my dad then. And that you want us both now."

"I've missed you every day since you left," Jason said. "I lost—I lost touch with your mom, and I looked for you. But I never found you."

"Did you look for me?" Jake wanted to know. "What about me?"

"Jason didn't know about you, baby," Elizabeth hurried as Jason's face tightened. "Remember? My letters and calls—they never got to him. I didn't know that, but as soon as I realized it, we came here."

"Oh." Jake pouted. "So I don't remember you. And you don't know me." He looked at Cameron. "Mom said you might remember him, do you?"

Elizabeth flinched, and Jason furrowed his brow. "I don't expect—" he began.

"I don't know," Cameron interrupted. He approached Jason slowly, then reached for his hand. Jason held it out, his breathing almost still as Cameron traced his palm, his tiny fingers running over it.

"It feels like maybe I know you," Cameron said finally. "I don't know. Maybe I'll remember later."

"It's okay if you don't." Jason squatted down, his eye line just below Cameron's now. "I can remember enough for both of us. Will you give me a chance to make new memories?" He looked to Jake who'd joined his brother. "Both of you. As soon as your mother told me about you, I knew I loved you. And I've always loved you," he said to Cameron. "I don't expect you to be ready just yet. I just want a chance."

"Yeah." Cameron nodded. "Yeah, okay. I want that, too. Mom?" he looked over at Elizabeth. "You're crying."

Jason straightened, pulling himself to his full height, frowning at her. "Are you—"

"I'm fine—" Oh, she was never going to be able to close this out, was she? She'd

always been a bit helpless around Jason, unable to keep herself on guard against him. "I'm just—" She took a deep breath. "I need a minute. Um, I'll go order pizza, okay? Cam, Jake, tell Jason about school or something."

Elizabeth ducked into the kitchen, pressing her hands against her flushed face. It was like a storm rising inside of her, trying to force itself out, but she couldn't let it happen. Couldn't let it be. "What I feel, hold it secret, hold it tight," she murmured, "this I ask, three times three. As I will, so mote it be."

"Elizabeth?"

She stumbled, whirling and finding Jason in the doorway, concerned. "I—"

"Are you all right?" he asked. "I heard you mumbling something—"

As if she could ever explain that she'd been writing a spell that would calm her down and allow her to be a blank slate? To protect herself from everything that rose up inside of her, clawing at her to be set free? She wanted to fall on him, to babble everything about that terrible night—

But to let it out, to release that darkness — She couldn't do it. She wouldn't open herself like that. To be an open book to this man who may not have rejected their son, but had truly believed the worst of her. Had believed it so thoroughly that he'd been willing to *forgive* her. No one had believed her. No one that was supposed to love her.

"I'm fine. I was just—I've wondered for months what it would be like for you to meet Jake. I never dreamed you and Cameron—" She forced a smile. "But it went well."

"So far." Jason shoved his hands in his pockets. "They went to get their birthday books. I want to see them all."

"Good, good—" She crossed to a drawer, fumbling to pull it open. "We should get that pizza—"

"Why did you think he'd remember me?"

Elizabeth's breath caught. Why, oh, why had she started that conversation with Cameron while Jake was listening? Jake didn't quite understand how important their secrets were—and he might not be able to accept that his father wasn't part of it.

"I don't know," she lied. "I guess I didn't think he would. Not specifically. But maybe, I don't know, he'd feel a connection." She jerked a shoulder. "Sometimes



children do. My aunt died when I was five, and I remember things."

Slapping hands, bitter eyes— She looked at Jason. "And if he doesn't, you do. You're right. You'll remember enough for the both of them."

Jason studied her for a long moment, and she almost felt like he was going to challenge that. Push back.

"I always knew that part of you didn't really trust me," Jason said. The menu in her hands slipped, floating like a leaf to the floor. "Maybe that's why I pushed that last day—"

"I told you—"

"You're not talking about it. I am. Part of me knew you'd say no," Jason said. "And I pushed anyway. Because I thought we needed it in the open. I thought you'd trust me if I told you what I wanted for us. I'm sorry for that. I shouldn't have asked you to marry me when I knew you'd say no."

"I wanted—" She closed her eyes, her throat tightening. *Hold it secret, hold it tight. This I ask, three times three*— "I wanted to say yes. If I could have, I would. I don't know if that makes it better."

"I don't know either. I just wish you'd have trusted me. I don't know if whatever your aunt did to you as a kid—whatever happened with your cousins to make you so scared they'd end up with the boys—" Jason's eyes were intent on hers. "There was always a piece of you that you'd never let me see. I'm sorry I didn't make you feel safe enough to show me."

"You—if anyone could have—" Elizabeth forced herself to take a breath. "If anyone could have, it would have been you. But I don't think anyone can. I'm sorry."

"Me, too." He put his hands back in his pocket. "I hear the boys on the steps," he told her. "I better go see those birthday books."

"Yeah," she said, watching him go. "What burns inside of me, let it fade into memory. Let it be cast away. As I will, so mote it be."

And this time, it worked. An icy wave slid through her, cooling the tears on her cheeks and the heat in her belly. And she was okay again. She'd put it away where it belonged — and where it couldn't hurt her anymore.

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After dinner, Jason reluctantly said goodbye to Cameron and Jake, promising they'd make plans to hang out soon. Elizabeth hung back, not committing to anything specific but he was determined to push on this. He'd already called a lawyer to find out how to get the paperwork moving. He'd learned a valuable lesson eight years ago. Until he had legal rights—until his name was on some paperwork—Elizabeth could disappear again.

And no matter how much she seemed to regret it, he couldn't ignore that she refused to talk about it. She wouldn't tell him why — he realized now he'd accepted Robin's story and presented to Elizabeth as fact. She'd never denied it—but she hadn't confirmed it either.

No, Jason wanted his name on Jake's birth certificate and the adoption paperwork started as soon as possible.

He headed a few blocks over to Carly's, not interested in returning to his empty home. The house he'd purchased after proposing to his second wife, the house where he'd thought he'd raise his family. The bedrooms were still unfurnished, and most of the upstairs echoed. Being alone there would only remind him again all of the years that had passed—

"Hey—" Carly stepped back from the doorway. She studied his face. "How did it go?"

"It went." Jason shoved his hands into his pockets, looked around the living room. "Where are the kids?"

"It's Parent Weekend," Carly reminded him, "so Morgan and Joss are with their dads. And Michael's upstairs." It went without saying that AJ rarely visited — he'd headed to New York after the divorce and Carly only received child support now. "How were the boys?"

"Good." Jason went to the kitchen to grab a beer out of the fridge. "They seem okay with it, I guess. Or at least they seem like they are. I don't think Cameron's made up his mind yet, but it feels like—" He stopped, staring out the back window over the yard. "I thought about him all the time—"

"I know you did—"

"No, I mean—" Jason turned to face Carly. "When Courtney told me she was pregnant, I thought about Cameron. I thought about what kind of brother he'd be. When Sam and I were planning for kids, I thought about Cameron. I always knew how old he'd be, the grade he was in, and he and Morgan—the same age—" He exhaled slowly. "I missed all of that time with him. I missed it with Jake, and I'm angry about it, but it's not the same."

"You didn't know Jake existed," Carly offered softly. "You didn't have a chance to dream about being his father. He never called you daddy." She hesitated. "It must hurt that Cameron doesn't."

"Yeah." Jason took a long pull of the beer. "I can forgive Elizabeth for Jake. She tried to contact me. Courtney admitted as much, and whatever sent Elizabeth running from Port Charles in the first place—not even hearing back from Bernie or the guys at the garage—she must have thought she burned all those bridges. I can forgive Jake. I hate it, but I can see where it's not on her. Not all the way."

"But Cam's different." Carly leaned against the door frame. "I know it—"

"He was mine, and she didn't think about that. She didn't care."

Carly was quiet, and he turned to look at her frowning. "No opinions on that?"

"I don't know. I didn't know her very well. I know you loved her, and I thought she loved you, but she didn't ever seem—" Carly stopped, searching for the words. "I don't know. She never seemed connected. She didn't want to spend time with me. With the boys. But then the guys at the garage would talk about her, you'd share these stories, and it just didn't seem like the same woman."

"She was always guarded," Jason murmured. "It took a long time to get a read on her, and even then — I wasn't sure I ever knew her."

"When I was a kid, when I went through what happened with—" Carly closed her eyes. "What happened to me as a kid, it warped me. It made me look for love in all the wrong places, and that's how I ended up married to your idiot brother and pregnant by the age of seventeen. You always told me that Elizabeth had a piss poor relationship with her family. And didn't her aunt like cut her off cold when she was sixteen?"

"Yeah. Elizabeth never wanted to talk about it, and I let it go." He waited a beat. "I let a lot of things go. Maybe if I hadn't—"

"You can stand here on my porch and complain about it forever," Carly told him. "And, hell, I'll listen. And contribute, because I have a lot of irritations stored up. But life's too short to bitch all day, and no one is going to wait around for you to suck it up and get over it. Which is what my second ex-husband told me shortly after you found him in bed with your wife—"

Jason glared at her, and she shrugged. "If I don't make it a joke, I'll keep being pissed about it, and I think I'm more angry than you were anyway even though

Sonny and I were divorced for like three years by then. Or five. How long was it?"

"Seven," Jason repeated through gritted teeth. "You married Jax after my first divorce."

"Man, we're a pair." Carly shrugged. "Anyway, should I grab a beer and join in?"

"No." Jason grimaced. "No. There's no point. She left, and now she's back. I just want my sons." He finished his beer. "She doesn't want to talk about why she left, then we won't. It's as simple as that."

He tossed his beer into the recycling, then headed towards the front door and Carly watched him go. She snorted. "Sure. Simple as that. Woman he's been pining after for eight years rolls back into town with a sob story and a victim complex. She's gonna reel him right back in," she muttered.

Not on her watch. She'd been too busy with the dissolution of her second marriage to watch out for Jason the last time, but she'd be damned this little bitch hurt him again. Elizabeth Devane or Webber, or whatever the hell her name was had another thing coming.

## **Part Six** **What It Was**

*Well, maybe we got lost in translation  
Maybe I asked for too much  
But maybe this thing was a masterpiece  
'Til you tore it all up  
Running scared, I was there  
I remember it all too well*

