

# Darkest Before Dawn

Elizabeth Webber felt a hundred years old as she stepped up to the porch to unlock her front door. Behind her, she could hear the booted footsteps of Jason Morgan who had driven her home from the hospital.

In the last twenty-four hours, she'd been kidnapped by her most recent romantic mistake, then rescued by her ex-fiancee, and then, somehow, the city had been saved when the antidote to the poison in their water system had been located. She and Jason were still slightly damp from the rain that had finally given them a sense of relief at the end of it.

It had been a hell of a couple days, she thought dryly as she slid her key into the lock. She turned back to Jason. "I'm pretty sure I have a frozen pizza in the kitchen. I want to call Gram and the boys in Disney World one more time, but if you want to stay—"

"Sure," Jason said, with his own tired smile. He likely hadn't slept much in the last week either—it usually took him three days of running on empty before he looked this tired, she mused, as they went inside and Elizabeth wrinkled her nose at the living room.

"You know what?" she said, stopping abruptly. Jason bumped into her, putting his hands at her waist for just a moment to steady them both. "I'm done."

"Done?" he repeated.

"Done." Elizabeth nodded. "I just kidnapped by the first guy I've dated since I almost dated Matt Hunter. And then he turned out to be a murderer. And before that—"

She scowled. Best not to think about about what had been before her brief flirtation with Patrick's younger brother who was now in prison for killing Lisa Niles.

"Okay," Jason drawled. He stepped around her to pick up a photo that had fallen from her table. He set it back in its place. "So you're done."

"I have the worst taste in men—present company excluded, mostly—" She added as an afterthought. She wandered into the kitchen. "Zander. Nikolas. Lucky. Matt.

Ewan. Ric. Am I leaving anyone out?” she tossed over her shoulder as she pulled out the pizza from the freezer and flicked the oven on to preheat.

“Uh...” Jason slid his hands into his pockets and furrowed his brow at her, as if actually thinking it over. “I don’t know. I think that’s it.”

She pursed her lips, not sure if he was teasing her or not. “Hmph. Anyway, that’s a terrible list, and you—” Elizabeth stabbed a finger at him. “Are the best of a bad bunch, and let me tell you, you’re not a shining star either.”

“No arguments there,” he muttered. “Elizabeth—”

“Anyway. I’m going to raise my boys, go to work, and keep Patrick out of trouble. That’s it. That’s all I want to do for the next twenty years. Maybe—just maybe—I’ll be in the mood to find someone to die with.”

Jason raised his brows. “You’re planning to die at the age of fifty-three?”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes at him. “Listen—”

“Elizabeth—”

“Never mind.” She reached into her fridge and handed him a bottle of the Rolling Rock she’d bought on a whim a few weeks earlier. Jason had been stopping by more and more, and she’d just grabbed it the last time she’d been in the store. She opened her own bottle. “I’ll talk to Brad tomorrow,” she said.

Jason sighed and sat on a stool at the island. “You think I’m wrong?”

“I think,” Elizabeth said, slowly, “that you’re feeling guilty about everything that’s happened in the last year.” She offered him a faint smile. “I know you think it was your fault—”

“If I’m right, and Tea Delgado’s son was switched with Sam’s,” Jason said, “then it was my fault. Sam was only at the motel because of me.”

Elizabeth sighed and took a pull of the beer. It was hard to argue with him on that score, she knew. Sam had been living apart from Jason because he’d struggled to accept her pregnancy, the result of a rape from Franco, the serial killing psycho Jason had finally killed in January.

“Thank you for not arguing with me.”

“I think that it’s simple to say it was your fault it happened,” Elizabeth corrected.

“Yeah, I think you were probably not as accepting as Sam probably deserved—” Jason looked away. “But to say someone kidnapping Sam’s son and replacing it with a dead child is your fault for that is to say it’s Sam’s fault for living in a motel instead of with her mother.”

“Elizabeth—”

“We’ve been over this,” she reminded him. “Just because there’s a possibility Danny might still be alive—it doesn’t mean what happened is one hundred percent on you.”

“But you’re not saying it’s not on me,” Jason replied.

“I—” Elizabeth shrugged, and ignored the question by turning around to slide the pizza into the oven. “Could you have done better with all of it? Sure. But you’re human, Jason. Maybe thing would have been different if Danny had survived.”

“Maybe.” Jason was quiet for a moment.

“You never used to think about this kind of stuff,” she said. Elizabeth tipped her head to the side. “Things were what they were, and there was no point in looking back. I used to envy that about you.”

“Yeah, well, then I started to make a lot more mistakes,” Jason muttered.

“Well, hey, then join the club. I am the Queen of Regrets.” She held out her beer and he clinked his bottle with hers. “You can be the King.” Elizabeth wagged her finger at him. “Platonic though. Because I told you, I’m on a twenty year break.”

Jason shook his head, but then smiled. “Yeah, okay, we’ll talk in twenty years.”

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Brad Cooper was cleaning up the lab in the hospital after a long week of running tests and developing serums. He was whistling under his breath, thinking of the vodka and popcorn he’d have when he finally got home.

He heard a throat clearing in the doorway, and he turned to see Tracy Quartermaine in the doorway. “Ms. Quartermaine.” Brad snapped to attention, but frowned. He didn’t think he’d ever seen this member of the family in the lab. “Did you need something?”

“Someone is going to ask you run a test tomorrow,” Tracy said with an arch of her brow. “I’ll make it worth your while if you do it my way.”

Elizabeth's sons returned from Disney World two days after the authorities assured them that the poison in the water had, indeed, been eliminated. She'd refused to let them return until she was confident—and even so, she'd asked Jason and Patrick to drag in gallons of water to use in their food and for baths.

It might be a while before she completely trusted the water system again. Patrick didn't balk at helping, and Elizabeth also sent Jason to help Patrick with water for his house. The two of them even delivered water to Carly's place.

No one was taking any chances.

"It would be nice if we could stop having this insane level of drama for like eight seconds," Elizabeth muttered to her brother, Steven, as he joined her at the nurse's station to grab some charts. "Aren't you exhausted?"

"Constantly," he agreed. But he grinned. "But it's never boring."

"I could do with boring." She wrinkled her nose and frowned when she saw Brad Cooper, the lab tech she'd asked to run the maternity test several days earlier. "Hey, Brad. What are you doing up here?"

"Oh, well..." Brad slid a glance at Steven. "Just delivering some test results."

"Hand delivering?" Steven smirked. "Brad, I told you. The lab is safe. ELQ donated enough money to keep all the positions secure for another year." He scribbled something in a chart. "Don't know what made Tracy get all generous, but let's hope that it doesn't go away."

"I know, right? She was always worse than Edward." Elizabeth looked at Brad. "Are those the results for Patrick? I can take them to him." She put her hand out and Brad hesitated. She frowned, wondering if he was worried he'd get in trouble or something.

She'd told him the test was completely on the level — Patrick had agreed to run the test for her and ordered them. Jason was getting billed. All Brad had to do was run the test but maybe he was still a bit jumpy after nearly getting laid off.

Steven looked at Brad, then at his sister. "Uh, do I have to know something? Or should I go?"

"It's fine," Brad said finally. "Sorry, I just—Patrick told me these results were important, so—" He set the envelope in Elizabeth's hands. "I just want to do it right."

“Elizabeth here is Patrick’s right-hand man,” Steven assured Brad. “And you’re not getting fired for giving results to a nurse.”

“Right, right.” Brad made a hasty exit, skipping the elevators and taking the service stairs. Elizabeth stared after him, frowning in complete bewilderment.

“Oh, man, he’s weird,” Steven murmured. “Where did we find him?”

“I don’t know. Ask the lab director. She hired him. Maybe he really just was nervous—I mean, I know you’re an idiot, but other people might respect you.” Elizabeth shot her brother a smirk, and he flicked her nose.

“Quiet, Bits. What’s the test? What’s so important?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “Just a test Patrick wanted done. One of his VIPs, I think. That’s why I handled it.”

“Right. Keep your secrets. Just don’t get me sued,” Steven told her. He picked up his chart and headed down the hallway.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and turned back to her monitor, slipping the envelope into her scrubs pocket. “One time, and he acts like I’m a walking lawsuit,” she muttered.

When she’d finished marking up her patient charts, she headed for the break room so she could text Jason and tell him to head over on her break. She wasn’t really in a hurry to give him these results, but she knew he wanted them quickly.

Elizabeth had listened to the reasons Jason thought Victor Delgado might be Danny McCall, and was reluctant to admit he might be right. Victor and Danny had been born on the same night, around the same time — without doctors. Todd Manning had been lurking in the area, as had Heather Webber. If you threw in the fact that Victor had an genetic illness that she knew some Cassadines had also inherited—

It was just—she knew that the friendship she and Jason had enjoyed over the last few months, the quiet talks, the spontaneous dinners with her and boys—it would all end. Because if Victor was Danny, Jason would rush off to bring him home to Sam, and she’d be grateful. They’d reunite and that would be that.

Not that she wanted Jason back, but she also didn’t want to lose him again in her life. Without Jake to tie them together...

Elizabeth sighed and sent Jason the text message, telling him her break was in an hour and she’d meet him on the roof.

It didn't make her a bad person if she didn't necessarily think it was fair that Sam got her child back while Elizabeth's would never come home again. Particularly Sam, a woman Elizabeth loathed with every fiber of her being.

But she was also a grieving mother, so if she could relieve another mother's mind—

Jason responded to let her know he'd seen her then, and she got back to work.

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Jason found Elizabeth on the roof, looking out over the city—where she'd been a week ago when the rain had finally poured down on the city, ending a recent drought and bringing some symbolic relief to end of the poisoned water crisis.

“Hey.”

She turned and flashed him a smile—one he returned automatically. It was rare to see Elizabeth smile these days when she wasn't with her boys. When they'd lost Jake the year before, a melancholy sadness had settled inside of her—even he could see she wasn't the same.

He understood — he hadn't even been a true part of Jake's life, but the loss of their son had cut him deeply. He didn't know how either of them would ever really get past it.

“Hey,” she greeted. She slid an envelope out of her pocket and handed it to him. “Here are the results.”

Jason frowned as he took the sealed envelope. “You didn't look at them?”

“No, I figured you'd want to do that.” Elizabeth's smile dimmed slightly. “I just—I was thinking about how much—” She exhaled slowly. “How jealous I am of Sam, and she doesn't even know it. I'd give anything to be holding a set of results like that—to just...” She looked away. “To just have hope our little boy was out there.”

Instead of lying in a coffin in the cemetery, a headstone with dates indicating just how little life their son had enjoyed.

He didn't have the words to comfort her, so Jason opened the results and looked at the paper. He exhaled slowly and then looked up to find her studying her.

“Well?” Elizabeth asked.

“I was wrong,” he said. He carefully folded the results and placed them back in the

envelope. “Victor—it’s not him.”

“Oh.” A little breath rushed out, and Elizabeth bit her lip. “I guess—I don’t know. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Me either.” He’d wanted to be absolved of this guilt, the sin of what he’d done to Sam and how it had destroyed everything. But it wasn’t going to happen. “I’m glad I never told her.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Elizabeth cleared her throat. “I should get back to work.”

She started past him, but he grabbed her elbow and drew her back. “Hey,” he said, “why don’t I come over tonight? I’ll bring some pizza or something.”

“Yeah.” Elizabeth smiled, her face brightening slightly. “The boys would like that. Thanks. I’ll see you then.”

Brad Cooper was not having the best of days even before Tracy Quartermaine ambushed him at the Metro Court. He’d just wanted to get a little bit drunk to forget the crime he’d committed earlier that day, but of course—the motivation for said crime just had to check in.

She sat next to him at the bar and ordered a glass of white wine, waiting for the bartender to wait on another customer at the other end of the bar before she spoke. “Well?”

“It’s done,” Brad muttered.

“And my results?”

“I was going to mail them to you,” Brad said. He sipped his whiskey, trying to look casual. He knew he actually just looked like someone trying to act normal. He’d always been a terrible actor. He dug the envelope out of his back pocket and laid it on the bar.

Tracy set her purse down—over the envelope and sipped her wine. “Was I right?”

With a shuddering sigh, Brad nodded. “Yeah. The kid is definitely hers.”

“And what about the other test?”

“Right again. He’s not the father.” Brad paused. “And he’s no relation to the actual father.”

Tracy pursed her lips. “Interesting. I’d hoped for that, but that does make me curious.”

Of course it did — Tracy had paid him to deliver a set of results of to Elizabeth Webber the declared Victor Lord, Jr. Was not a match for the DNA of either Sam McCall or Jason Morgan. The actual test had matched Sam, but not Jason.

Tracy had also wanted to know if Jason Morgan was related to Franco in any way—and since he wasn’t, Brad knew that it meant there was probably still a mysterious twin brother floating around out there but he didn’t care.

“If he’s not related to you,” Brad said as Tracy looked at him, sharply, “Why do you care if the mom gets him back?”

Tracy raised her brow. “That’s an interesting question. I shouldn’t. But I know this gold digger. She gets him back now, that idiot will probably stop the divorce.” She frowned at him. “Don’t get cold feet now.”

“I just—”

“Because the deed is done. There’s no turning back. I protected my family and that child from a vicious con artist who only cares about money. You protected your job. Everyone wins here.” She finished her wine, picked up the purse from the bottom so she could deftly slide the envelope inside.

“Ms. Quartermaine—”

“And if you think you can turn on me, remember who I am, who you are, and why you’ll only lose.”

And with that, she sauntered out of the room, confident in her privilege and position while Brad just ordered another whiskey. Maybe if he drank more, he’d be able to forget what he’d done.

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“I am not ready for this,” Elizabeth declared the night before school was scheduled to start. This was the first year that Aiden would be attending—he was going to the two-year-old program for a few hours.

“You said the same thing when Cameron started kindergarten,” Jason told her as he handed her the last form. “This is for field trips—”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. “I thought about homeschooling him, to be honest,”



she told him. She scribbled her name at the bottom of the form. “Why is there so much paperwork? Ever year, the school mails like eight extra forms.”

She caught a glance at a picture across the room—a photograph of all three of her boys the day she’d brought Aiden home from the hospital—the only photo she had of the three of them. She swallowed hard. “Jake would be in first grade this year.”

Jason met her eyes, then looked at the photo, before turning back to the paperwork. “Yeah, I know.”

“I wonder what kind of student he’d be,” Elizabeth said. “Cameron still likes school, you know, but he’s in third this year, and I think he’s going to start hating it soon. But I think Jake would have loved it.”

“Elizabeth...”

“I’m sorry.” She tossed her pen down and pressed her hands to her face. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t do that.”

“It’s okay.” He squeezed her hand. “Hey, it’s okay,” Jason repeated when she looked at him. “Why do you think Jake would have loved school?”

“Oh.” She smiled even as a tear slid down her cheek. “He was good at focusing. Even as a baby, you know? He could play with one toy for twenty minutes. He was like you. A-and I think maybe he would have just—he would have been good at sitting, and reading. And maybe he would like math like you do.”

“Numbers make sense,” Jason told her as he slid closer and enveloped her in a one arm hug. “You can rearrange words to do a thousand things, but numbers never change. I liked that after the accident.”

“Cameron hates sitting still. He loves running and jumping and hiding, and just—he’ll be the class clown. He loves attention. Jake didn’t—” On a shuddering sigh, she forced herself to take a deep breath. “I’m okay. It’s just—it hits so hard in these moments, and I think—I don’t know. Maybe it always will.”

“Because there will always be something the boys are doing and Jake isn’t,” Jason said softly. “It’s okay—”

“You don’t have to say that. It’s not—it’s why I fell apart last year, you know. Why I ended up in Shady Brooke. I kept seeing Jake everywhere, I was making all those mistakes—I’m pretty sure I killed Siobhan—” Elizabeth sighed. “I thought about—when we were talking about Sam and her baby—I thought about not helping.”

She looked at him but his expression didn't change, so she continued. "Because I didn't want—I thought you were right, and why did she get to have her baby back? And then Brad gave me those results, and I wanted to throw them away—I wanted to hurt her because she was going to get what I couldn't—"

"Why didn't you?" Jason said when she didn't say anything else. "Why'd you give them to me? Why didn't you open them?"

"Because—because I wanted you to be okay," she admitted. "I knew you wanted it to be true, and I—I'm the reason Jake is gone. I messed up, and I let our baby die."

"Elizabeth—"

"And I know—I knew if you brought Danny home, you could get back together with Sam, and then you'd get to have him—and I—" She bit her lip. "That sounds insane, doesn't it?"

"No, it doesn't." He pulled her close again, tightening his arm around her shoulders. "We're going to be okay. You didn't let Jake die, Elizabeth. You loved him. And it's okay if we think about how he would have grown up. I want to do that." His voice faltered. "It's the closest I'll ever get to being his father again."

She closed her eyes, leaned her head against his shoulder. "He would have loved your motorcycle."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Cameron loves it, too. He wants to drive it."

Jason laughed, his voice a bit rusty. "Just like his mother."

Elizabeth knocked on the door to Jason's penthouse, then nervously ran a hand down the front of her dress.

This was not a date.

Jason pulled open the door and offered her a grin. "Hey—sorry—I'm running late." He stepped back to let her walk through the front door, and Elizabeth arched her brow as he grabbed a tie from the back of the chair and wound it around his neck. "I got back late from the warehouse."

"Oh, it's fine. It took me longer than I thought to drop Cameron and Aiden with Patrick." She wrinkled her nose, thinking of the third-degree her best friend had

given her about today.

This was not a date, she'd told Patrick with exasperation. Just two friends attending the same event.

An event to which she hadn't been invited, Patrick had reminded her with that irritating smirk. She was Jason's date.

Guest, Elizabeth had thrown back at him, but now she was flustered because why had Jason invited her in the first place? It wasn't like he couldn't go alone—Carly would be there.

With Johnny Zacchara, her boyfriend—

“What's going through your head right now?” Jason asked as he knotted the tie. He still had that sparkle in his eye—the one that told her he was teasing her.

She liked seeing that—liked remembering how nice it was that they were friends again, like they had been in the beginning. Jason had teased her all the time back then—

“Oh, nothing.” She played with the strap of her tiny purse. “Just thinking about something at the hospital.”

“Uh huh.” Jason grabbed his suit jacket and put it on. “Let's get this over with,” he said, with a grimace.

“Oh, come on, it's a wedding.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes as she followed Jason out the door and towards the elevator. “And Sonny and Kate deserve this. I mean, they've worked so hard to get back here.” And she would absolutely not mention where she and Jason had been in their relationship when Sonny and Kate's first wedding had ended tragically.

She'd been left waiting at an airport gate, so close to their dream trip. She should have known better.

They stepped onto the elevator. “I know. But the Haunted Star?”

Elizabeth made a face. “I know. It doesn't really seem like Kate, does it? And it guarantees Carly will bring Johnny. Anywhere else, she might have left him home.”

“No, she wouldn't have. Carly lives to annoy Sonny.” He looked at her. “Thanks for coming with me. If I'm alone, Carly tries to make me have a good time.”

“We can’t have that.”

The elevator stopped at the parking garage level, and Elizabeth started towards her car but Jason took her hand and led her in the other direction.

“We’re going to a Corinthos wedding,” he told her. “Do you mind if we take the SUV?”

“The bullet proof SUV?” Elizabeth repeated. “Don’t tell me you’re expecting mayhem. I thought all of that was over—”

“It is, but it’s—” He unlocked the door with his remote. “Has Sonny ever been able to get married without something going wrong?”

“Yeah, but both those times were to Carly, so point taken.”

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Elizabeth sighed as she watched Kate walk down the aisle towards Sonny. “She looks so happy,” she murmured to Jason, then caught Carly’s eye in the row behind them. Carly narrowed her eyes with a dirty look.

Some things would never change.

Kate reached the end of the aisle, and the guests took their seat. She could feel Jason’s tension next to her—this had been the moment in the last ceremony when Kate had been shot by Anthony Zacchara. She reached over and took his hand in hers, lacing their fingers together.

“Relax,” she said softly. Their eyes met. “It’ll be fine—”

“I’m sorry, Sonny. I can’t marry you.”

They both looked to the front of the room as Kate Howard smirked, then angled herself towards the audience. She tossed her bouquet at a stunned Maxie Jones. “I’m already married!” she declared.

“What the—”

Elizabeth heard a groan behind her and twisted in her seat just as Kate declared. “To Johnny Zacchara!”

“What?” Carly screeched. She lunged to her feet, took one look at her shame-faced boyfriend sitting next to her. “What? You just asked me to run away with you?”

“What were you saying about everything being fine?” Jason asked Elizabeth as the room exploded in chaos. She didn’t get a chance to answer him because Jason had to stop Sonny from choking Johnny Zacchara.

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“You know, it could have been worse,” Elizabeth told Jason as they pulled the SUV back into the parking garage at the Towers. She climbed out of the car and waited for him to meet her at the back of the car.

“I guess. No one died,” Jason said with a sigh. “You want to come up?”

She hesitated. Cameron and Aiden were supposed to spend the night with Patrick and Emma since she’d expected to be a wedding reception until midnight, but it was barely seven at night. And they hadn’t eaten. “Um, okay—”

“I mean, we could get dinner. Or something.” Jason slid his hands into the pockets of his dress pants. “I promised you food.”

“True.” She wrinkled her nose. “But I guess we should have known better. Going to a Corinthos-Howard wedding. Oh, wait. Falconieri. Hey, how is that going to work?” She and Jason traced their earlier steps back to the elevator. “Didn’t the Connie alter cause that car accident?”

“I guess we’ll find out tomorrow.” He pressed the button. “Sorry.”

“For what?” She smiled at him as they stepped inside and he used his key to allow for the penthouse level.

“I don’t know,” Jason replied. He shrugged. “It feels like I should apologize.”

“Well, I was looking forward to the reception.” She glanced at him under her lashes. “I bet Carly could have made you dance.”

“Uh, probably not,” Jason said with a smile and shake of his head. His lips quirked up at the sides, that light in his eyes again. “You might have though.”

“Oh—sure, you say that now when you don’t have to.” She rolled her eyes. They stepped out into the hallway of the penthouse.

“I would have,” Jason protested as they stepped into the hallway and he unlocked his door

“Fine.” Elizabeth shrugged, walked into the penthouse ahead of him and spun to face him. “Then how about right now?”

Jason wasn’t entirely sure what was happening with Elizabeth.

A few months ago, it had seemed clearer. His marriage was breaking up, and he was reconnecting with her—remembering the son they’d shared, regretting how he’d handled things with Sam.

Then he’d kissed her that day on the bridge, starting stopping by her house, spending time with her and her boys. He’d saved her from Ewan Keenan, the crazy doctor who had helped Jerry Jacks poison the town through the water system. Since then—it was different.

And standing in front of her, in his penthouse, the place where they’d reconnected six years ago and created a little life that hadn’t survived—where he’d proposed to her twice—Jason knew she was calling his bluff.

Elizabeth fully expected him to step back again—like he had after the bridge, like he had a thousand other times in their long history. For too many years, he’d stepped back.

Run away.

“I am the Queen of Regrets,” she’d said with a smirk the night he’d saved her life. “And you can be the King.”

He didn’t want that anymore.

So Jason did what he knew she didn’t expect. He stepped forward, took the strap of her purse between two fingers and slid it off her bare shoulder. “You know where the stereo is.”

Elizabeth blinked at him, her breath caught in her throat, and then she searched his eyes for a moment—as if trying to figure out what he was thinking.

“Or did you change your mind?” Jason asked. He set the purse on the desk, next to his keys. He lifted a brow.

“No.” She bit her lip. “That’s what you do.” Elizabeth wandered over to the shelf by the stairs and glanced at the old stereo that had been sitting for years. She didn’t even wait for his reaction—

Because he knew what she was thinking. What she was remembering. He’d never

had any trouble remembering their history or the moments that should have changed his life.

They were standing nearly in the same spot where he'd asked her to marry him the last time. And she'd looked so scared, so excited—and she'd said yes.

And then he'd promised not back out.

He swallowed hard as she finally found a station and turned it on low. Then Elizabeth came back to stand in front of him.

Making him choose. Leaving it up to him.

So Jason stepped forward, took her arms and slid them around his neck, his fingers trailing down her bare skin as he settled them around her waist. He didn't hear the lyrics, didn't even really register the music.

Only the way she looked up at him, at her eyes, and the way it felt to have her back in his arms—wondering why he'd ever let her go.

They swayed there, barely even dancing, barely even breathing. He couldn't have said how long it was until the song she'd found drifted from a slow ballad to something more upbeat and rock.

Elizabeth started to pull away, started to break eye contact, but Jason tugged her back and bent his head to brush his lips against hers. Her mouth parted beneath his, and then she kissed him back.

For only a moment before she jerked back, then nearly flew away from him, standing by the sofa, her eyes large on her face.

“Should I apologize?” Jason asked roughly, his stomach rolling with worry. Had he ruined everything? Should he have just let her go home?”

“N-No.” Elizabeth took a deep breath, closed her eyes, then shook her head. “No. But I can't—I can't do this again.”

“Elizabeth—”

“I love—I love being around you,” she told him. “But you—” Elizabeth bit her lip, looked away. “You just finalized your divorce. And the last time—” She straightened and seemed to find her strength. “The last time we were here, in this position, you walked away from me. And the family you told me you wanted.”

“I know—it was a mistake—”

“You didn’t want it with me,” she continued, her eyes glimmering with tears. Tears that felt like a punch to his stomach. “You chose them with Sam. Less than a year later. You always—you go back to her. So I can’t—” Her voice quavered slightly. “I can’t be the second choice.”

“You’re not—” Jason took a step towards her, but Elizabeth lifted her hand to stop him from coming any closer.

“I am. Right now. Because we’re spending a lot of time together, you know? And it’s great. I don’t want to lose that. Every time we do this, and we fail, I lose you again. And I’m—” A tear slid down her cheek. “I’m not strong enough to do it again. Please.”

He let his hands fall to his side. “You’re stronger than you think,” Jason said softly. “But okay. I won’t—we’ll just—we’ll just put this away.” Again.

“Okay.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “And I’m sorry—I know I was probably sending you mixed signals—”

“You weren’t—”

“I was,” she insisted. Elizabeth closed her eyes, took a deep breath. “The truth is that I am always going to be in love with you. And I’m sure—I’m sure that, in some way, it’s the same for you. I’m willing to accept that. I just—I’m not sure it’s enough. Not after the last time we went through with this.”

“I know.”

“And I also know—I can even accept that it was circumstances—you know, the world around us. We let it ruin things. What happened with Michael, then the Zaccharas, and the Russians—we let it mess things up. You walked away, and I let you go.” Elizabeth walked past him to pick up her purse.

He turned to face her as she walked towards the door. “You walked away from me once, too,” he reminded her. “I let you go.”

“Twice.” A hint of a smile. “We’ve both walked away twice. You left town, then I wouldn’t leave Lucky.”

“And you left after Sonny—”

“And then you left after Russians.” Elizabeth exhaled. “I’m not walking away, this



time, Jason. We're not going down this road. Not again. Not now."

"And I'm not letting you go. Not again. Not now," he repeated softly. "I'll walk you out."

Elizabeth made a face when her pen rolled off the desk at the nurse's station. She ducked down to grab it—and then because it was a Monday, and this was her life—it rolled underneath a table.

"Damn it—"

It took her nearly two minutes to drag the stupid thing out, but if she'd left it on the floor, she'd end up tripping on it.

Because it was a Monday.

She finally straightened up—and Brad Cooper, standing just on the other side of the nurse's station jumped nearly a full foot in the air, his eyes bulging out of his face. "Where the hell did you come from?" he demanded, claspng his charts to his chest.

Elizabeth frowned at him, looked around her as if to check to see if Helena Cassadine or someone terrifying had popped up — but no, he was talking to her.

"Uh, I dropped my pen. Where did you come from?" she asked pointedly. Strange little man.

"I have test results to drop off." Brad dropped them in the basket, then walked very quickly towards the elevators, looking at her again as he jabbed the button.

"Scaring the lab techs again?" Patrick asked as he came up behind her. They both watched Brad jabbed the button two more times in quick succession before giving Elizabeth another look, then stepping on to the elevator.

"No, that's your job," she said. "I think I just scared him, and he's jumpy as it is."

"I try not to talk to the people who work in the lower levels," Patrick murmured. "It gives them ideas."

She rolled her eyes, leaving the moment light as he knew he'd appreciate. Of course, Patrick had once been married to a woman who worked in those lower levels.

Robin had died only eight months earlier, in a ghastly explosion that had devastated them all. Patrick had really struggled in the first six months, but since

they'd all nearly died in the water poison crisis, he seemed to be getting better.

"Hey, I was thinking about Halloween," Patrick told her. "It's in three weeks, but Emma's got a party—"

"So does Cameron," Elizabeth said. "He asked me to bake brownies. Do you want me to toss a batch Emma's way?"

"It would save me from from running to the store in the middle of the night and ending up with candy corn." He grimaced. "She still brings it up like it was some kind of terrible crime."

"Candy corn is a war crime, and should be treated as such," Elizabeth returned with a roll of her eyes. "Yeah, sure, I can double up the brownies. You still coming over for dinner tomorrow?"

"Yeah, thanks for the invite." He hesitated. Lifted his brows. "Is Jason going to be there?"

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes at him, but his expression remained bland and innocent. She didn't believe it for a minute, but still answered him. "Yes. He's going with us to Cameron's pumpkin carving thing in the park, and Cam asked him to stay for dinner. Is that a problem?"

"It should be," Patrick said darkly. "He's the reason—"

"No." Elizabeth touched his arm. "No. It was his medicine that Robin went back for, but he's not the reason. You know that. She would have done it for any patient."

He exhaled slowly, looked away. "I know that." Patrick waited a moment. "I know that," he repeated. "But it makes it easier to blame someone. If I can't blame him, I'm stuck with Maxie, and she's been through enough."

"He never would have asked her to sacrifice her life for his, you know that." Elizabeth sighed. "Look, it's not—we're not dating, so if—"

"You can say that, and he can say that, but we both know that's not true—"

"We're not—" She huffed. "But if we were—which we're not—if it bothers you enough you and Emma won't enjoy yourself, I can ask Jason to stay home tomorrow—"

"No." Patrick picked up a chart. "No. You're right. Robin would have gone back for anyone. It's just Jason's bad luck it was him." He tipped his head. "A few years ago,

you would have jumped at the chance to call this dating. What's the deal?"

"The deal?" Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Oh, you mean, the fact that his divorce was finalized a month ago? A divorce from Sam, the woman he forgave and married despite everything she did to me and the boys? Yeah. I can't imagine why I don't want to trust he's really done with her."

"People forgive the insane all the time, Elizabeth. Robin forgave me," he told her simply. "And no one would ever say she wouldn't have been right to drop me off the cliff."

"Lisa Niles was a psycho—"

"Not when I—" Patrick pressed his lips together, irritated with himself. She knew he didn't like remembering the hurt he'd caused Robin by having a brief affair with the crazy doctor who'd tried to kill them both. Robin had been away, had been gone for a long time—but it didn't make it right.

"Patrick—"

"I don't like Jason, and you know you can do a lot better," Patrick told her bluntly. "But—I also know he's been around a lot, and you've been happier. I think—" He met her eyes. "I think we've both had a handful of bad years. We both know life is too short not to take chance when we can."

"I liked you better when you hated Jason."

"You only have yourself to blame," Patrick called over his shoulder as he took his chart and walked away.

And then her pen rolled to the ground and Elizabeth threw up her hands.

Mondays.

---

The next afternoon, Patrick's words continued to drift through her head as she and Jason walked towards the spot in the park where the third grade was having their fall picnic. She hadn't really thought about it'd mean for Jason to be going with her to the picnic—to be attending as her friend when it was mostly families. Parents.

"You okay?" Jason asked. She glanced at him, then sighed as they crossed the gazebo and wound their way towards the lake. "You've been quiet since I picked you up."

“Long day at work,” Elizabeth said finally. She smiled up at him. “One of the lab techs is easily spooked, and every time someone walks up behind him, he jumps in the air. He’s already done it to me twice this week. Today, he jumped, hit his head and I had to stitch him up.

“Weird.” He flashed a smile at him, then laced their fingers together as they turned a corner. “But it’s not boring.”

“Not it’s not that—” Elizabeth drew up short as they came across a cluster of benches and—just in front of them sat Sam McCall and John McBain, lost in a conversation.

Sam turned her head and saw them.

And Elizabeth didn’t want to look at Jason. Didn’t want to know what he was thinking.

“We’re going to be late,” Jason said after a moment when neither Sam nor John moved. He tugged on her hand and she finally looked at him. “Cameron’s waiting.”

“Right.” She smiled, then they walked away. But she knew why she couldn’t take Patrick’s advice.

She didn’t know how to believe in dreams anymore.

Jason set a twenty on the counter, picked up his coffee, and turned around to head out the door—stopping short when he saw Sam just behind him.

He cleared his throat, and she looked at the ground. He hadn’t seen Sam around all that much since they’d signed their divorce papers in August—just that one time, really, in the park two weeks earlier when he and Elizabeth had been on their way to Cameron’s fall picnic.

He’d turned a corner, and Elizabeth had stopped first. Jason hadn’t noticed Sam or John McBain at first—he’d been looking at Elizabeth, enjoying the way she talked about her day at work and her stories about the patients she’d treated. She’d been happy that day—happy in a way that she wasn’t often after they’d lost Jake.

Jason had looked over, followed Elizabeth’s eyes to the bench where his ex-wife was sitting with McBain. There’d been a slight tensing in his stomach, in his shoulders, and he’d almost said something—

But then he’d felt Elizabeth’s grip on his hand weaken, starting to slide away from

him, and Jason was jolted back to where he was—and what her fears were. She didn't trust him not to go back to Sam, not to drift back to the comfort of someone he knew wouldn't challenge him. Wouldn't make him want to be a better person.

He'd smiled at her, and they'd continued on to the picnic, even after he'd seen Sam look at them. Jason had handled that moment just right, and he'd swallowed any other feeling. It was better than upsetting Elizabeth even a little.

But now he was standing in front of his ex-wife. No Elizabeth around to influence the way he reacted, and no one in the diner that might take news of this back to her.

"Uh, hey," Sam said, finally. She scratched her forehead, and offered him an awkward smile. "I haven't seen you around in a while. Not since—" She cleared her throat. "Anyway." She folded her arms. "How are you?"

"Good," Jason said cautiously, not sure where she was going with this. "You?"

"Good," she repeated, nodding. "Um. I—" She pursed her lips. "I don't—I shouldn't ask you this because it's none of my business. It's not," she added as if he'd argued with her. "But I guess I can't help myself."

"Okay." Jason waited as Sam's cheeks flushed slightly, and she looked away. She rocked back on her heels, then took a deep breath.

"Are you and Elizabeth—I mean—are you—" Sam looked at him, and he could see the vulnerability in her eyes—and he realized that he'd left Sam with the same worry that Elizabeth had. Neither of these women were confident that he'd chosen them—that he would choose them—that they weren't in competition with each other.

Jason hesitated, unsure how to answer the question, uncomfortable with the realization of what he'd done somehow, without meaning to. He didn't want to lie to Sam, but he wasn't sure of the truth.

Were he and Elizabeth together? No. Not technically. Not in a way that she was comfortable stating, but—

Jason didn't want to lie to Sam, to himself, or anyone else. "Yeah," he said finally. "We're working on it."

"Oh." Sam's mouth formed the word, but the sound was barely audible. She hadn't expected that. "I—I didn't—" She took a deep breath. "Okay, then."

“Should I apologize?” Jason asked, uncertainly, conscious that he’d hurt her but not really sure what to do about it. They’d been separated for six months, and their relationship had already been on life support prior to that. He knew she’d drifted towards John McBain, so was it surprising that Jason had also moved on?

“No, no, of course not. That’s—” Sam coughed. “That’s the whole point of divorce, you know? Um, we don’t work, so it’s—we should go find people we do work with. I just—” She closed her eyes. “Yeah. I think—I don’t know, maybe you should. Or not. This is ridiculous.” Sam rolled her eyes. “You can’t be surprised that I’m jealous of Elizabeth, can you? I mean, she’s always been—” She wiggled her fingers. “There. In the background. Even the first time we broke up six years ago, you know?”

Jason furrowed his brow. “Sam—”

“So I guess maybe I’m looking for an apology I don’t really deserve,” she muttered. “Because I knew it, and I thought I could—this is stupid,” she said. “I’m not doing this to myself anymore. I asked you, you answered—thank you for not lying.”

She turned and stalked out of the restaurant as Jason frowned after her, not entirely sure he’d handled that right but unable to see how he could have done it differently.

—

The next day was Halloween, and Elizabeth was waiting outside of her house with her boys, rolling her eyes as Patrick scowled at the matching costumes Cameron and Emma had picked out from the store. Cameron was dressed as Flynn Rider, and Emma was ridiculously excited over the luxurious long wig she got to wear as Rapunzel.

“They’re babies,” Patrick said disgusted.

Elizabeth snickered as she lifted Aiden, dressed as a pumpkin, into his red wagon. “They’re eight, Patrick. How old were you when you had your first crush?” she teased.

Patrick’s eyes widened with horror. “I was five.” He pointed a finger at her. “You keep your kid away from my princess—”

“Hey, you want to know something really terrifying—” Elizabeth wiggled her eyebrows. “I was also five. Guess who my first crush was?”

“Oh, God.” Patrick groaned. “Who? Scott Baio?”

“Nope. Closer to home.” Elizabeth smiled as Jason stepped out his SUV and walked towards them. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Jason nodded at Patrick. “Sorry I’m late.”

“No problem. Patrick and I were just comparing notes on our first crushes,” Elizabeth told him. “He’s not comfortable with Emma and Cameron—they’re dressed as a couple from a Disney movie.”

“Okay,” Jason said. “I don’t remember mine,” he admitted. “I mean, from their age. But in the hospital, after the accident, I had—I guess you’d call it a crush on Bobbie.”

“Bobbie, huh? I’ve seen pictures.” Patrick looked at Elizabeth. “So if it’s not Scott Baio, who? Oh, God, a New Kid? Jordan?”

“We’re going to come back to your knowledge of 1980s heartthrobs in a minute,” Elizabeth said. “But, no. The summer I was visiting my grandparents when I was five.” She grinned at Jason. “My brother was hanging out with a couple of kids his age. AJ was his best friend back then, but ah, I had thought his twelve-year-old little brother was perfect.”

Jason raised his brows. “Me?” he repeated.

“Oh, yeah.” Elizabeth shrugged. “So, Patrick, it could be worse.”

“I hate all of you,” Patrick muttered.

“Cameron Hardy Webber—”

The eight-year-old dressed as Flynn Rider paused, his eyes wide, the unwrapped lollipop a centimeter from his mouth.

“I told you she’d see you,” Emma Scorpio-Drake sniffed.

Elizabeth shoved the pumpkin-clad Aiden at Jason and stalked across her living room to glare at her eldest son. Still clutching the lollipop, Cameron grinned back at her.

Behind Jason, still in the entry of the house, Patrick grimaced. “A Webber stand-off. We could be here for hours. Shove over, I need to remind my kid about rules.”

“Daddy, I told Cameron not to eat the candy before his mommy told him he could,” Emma assured her father. She fluttered her eyelashes.

“Uh huh.” Patrick, standing next to his fellow parent and comrade in arms, raised a brow. “What’s that on your face?”

“Where?”

“Corner of your mouth.”

Emma’s tongue darted out to lick the spot, and then her eyes narrowed. “It was Cameron’s idea!”

Stunned at this betrayal, Cameron whirled on his—now former—best friend. “You lie! You said we should sneak a piece!”

“And we would have gotten away with it if you hadn’t picked a Blow Pop!” Emma shot back. Her Rapunzel wig slumped forward on her forehead. She shoved it back.

“You have chocolate all over your face—”

“Candy.”

Jason looked down at the two-year-old he held and saw that Aiden’s chubby hand was reaching for the plastic container he had on his arm—filled with Aiden’s candy. “Uh—no,” he told him. With one hand he set the container on the table and stepped down into the living room, behind the sofa.

“They always dime themselves out,” Elizabeth said as she traded a grin with Patrick. “Works every time.”

“Divide and conquer,” Patrick agreed. “God help us if they ever figure out they’re stronger together.” They shared another smile before Patrick strode over to pick up his daughter before she landed a kick to Cameron’s shins.

“Cameron, go upstairs and change and wash up. We’ll have order pizza, and then you can have some candy.”

Cameron scowled as he stomped across the living room, up the raised stair to the entry, then up the stairs, grumbling all the way about dumb girls and their stupid plans.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Patrick told Elizabeth as Emma kicked over his shoulder, railing at the injustice of taking the blame for the candy crime. “Dinner? Emma made you a card, so you can’t skip it.”



“Yeah, I’ll see you then. Bye, Emma—”

“Bye Aunt ‘Lizabeth,” Emma muttered, remembering her manners as Elizabeth closed the door behind them. She turned back to Jason.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” she asked, as she retrieved the pumpkin from his arms. Aiden pouted, pointed at the candy on the table.

“No. I, uh, don’t think I’ve been trick or treating in a while,” Jason admitted. “Joss usually goes with Jax and Carly. And Michael hasn’t gone out—” His mouth tightened slightly, remembering that Michael’s last Halloween had likely been the year before he’d been shot in the head.

“Thanks for coming, by the way,” Elizabeth said as she dropped Aiden on the sofa and started to strip him of the costume. “With three adults and three kids, it’s easier to keep an eye on them.” She exhaled slowly. “Last year, Cameron almost wandered in front of a car.”

Jason sat next to her, Aiden between them. “Hey.”

She met his eyes, smiled ruefully. “Sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay. You want me to order the pizza?” he offered, relieved that the sadness in her eyes had been fleeting.

“Yeah, thanks. I’ll get Aiden washed up, and we’ll pick a movie.” She lifted Aiden, then hesitated. “Um...do you—do you want to stay? I mean, for the movie.”

“Sure.” Jason watched her go up stairs with her son, then pulled out his phone to make the call.

—

A few hours later, Cameron had passed out in front of the television, a pile of candy wrappers in front of him, the ending credits of his favorite Halloween movie, *Hocus Pocus*, scrawling across the screen.

“I might just let him sleep on the floor,” Elizabeth told Jason as she reached for the last slice of pizza in the box on the coffee table. “You know...” She looked at her son again. “I read somewhere that one day, you’ll realize that you picked your kid up for the last time, and you didn’t even know it. He’s—he’ll be as tall as me in a few years.”

“I can take him up if you want,” Jason offered. Elizabeth bit her lip, looked at him.

“If you want,” he repeated.

“I—” Elizabeth hesitated, set the pizza down. “This is going to sound insane,” she said. “But I’m not sure it’s a good idea.”

“I won’t drop him—”

“No—” Elizabeth shook her head. “No, that’s not what I mean. I just—” She met his eyes. “I like having you around. With the boys. Tonight. I mean, Patrick and I—we’ve mostly got this single parent thing down. He’s struggling a lot, but he’s getting there. I’ve been doing it longer.” She paused. “I don’t want to depend on anyone to help me with the boys.”

She waited for him to tell her that it was just a trip up the stairs—that it wasn’t that serious—but Jason didn’t do that. He just took in her words, then nodded.

“I understand. I—” He looked at Cameron again. “I promised you once that I wanted to do that. To be with them. I thought—I thought he’d be mine,” Jason murmured, almost inaudibly. “And the last few weeks, sometimes I’ve....”

“Found yourself pretending,” Elizabeth offered when he trailed off. He managed a slightly embarrassed smile.

“Yeah.”

“Me, too,” she admitted. It had been almost six weeks since that day at Sonny’s non-wedding. Since they’d brushed up against that line, and she’d run away from it.

And he was still here. Still not going back to Sam.

Was it time to stop being so scared?

“Why don’t you take him up?” Elizabeth told him. “I’ll be up in a minute to tuck him in.”

“You sure?” Jason asked as they both stood. He caught her elbow. “I don’t want to do anything that might hurt you—”

“I know.” She leaned up, their eyes met for a second before she brushed her lips across his. “But I think it’s time we stop pretending this isn’t happening, and find out if...this time...”

He tucked her hair behind her ear, leaned down to return the soft kiss. “This time, it’s different,” he promised her.

“I know,” Elizabeth said. She smiled at him, even as her stomach fluttered, even as her brain screamed at her that it never was. She was going to ignore all common sense and try—

Just one more time.

Elizabeth handed Patrick a chart with a wrinkle of her nose as she watched one the nursing students drop a huge stack of charts by the vending machine. “I’m trying to remember if I was that bad when I started.”

Patrick frowned, followed her eyes, then shrugged as he looked back at the computer. “Probably. You’re not much better now.”

She narrowed her eyes, then whacked his arm. “You’re a jackass.”

“It comes naturally.” Patrick scowled at the chart in his hand. “Did you take handwriting class from Satan or something? I can’t read this—”

“You’re just getting old,” she muttered, snatching it back from him and read out the medication dosage. “Why are you in such a cranky mood today?”

“Because the world is stupid and I’m tired of it—” Patrick exhaled sharply. “I went downstairs this morning.”

“Downstairs—” She sighed. “To the lab?”

“Yeah. I haven’t been down there in months, and I wanted to avoid it—I usually do. That’s why that weird lab tech is always up here.” Patrick gestured at Brad who had just left the elevator. “They gave her station to him.”

Elizabeth looked at Brad, who looked at her at the same time. His eyes got wide and he immediately turned and sprinted away. She squinted. “He keeps running from me,” she murmured.

“Who does?” her brother asked as he walked up to the hub, set down one chart and picked out another from the tray. “What’s wrong?”

“Brad Cooper, the weird lab tech,” Elizabeth said. She looked at Patrick. “I mean, isn’t he always running from me? What did I ever do to him?”

“Maybe he was running from me,” Patrick said. “I was a little...irritated when I saw he’d moved into Robin’s station.”

Steven hesitated. “I should have warned you, man—”

“No, it’s fine—”

“I don’t think it’s you,” Elizabeth insisted. “He’s been weird around me for, like, months.” She wiggled her shoulders. “Since the water thing—” Then her pen dropped from her fingers.

She could almost pinpoint the day his strange behavior had begun—the day he’d delivered those test results to her.

Sam’s test results.

“Well, maybe that’s it,” Steven suggested. “Everyone’s been a little weird since then—” He tipped his head to the side. “You okay, Bits? You look weird.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth blinked a few times, then focused on her brother. “I’m, uh, fine. I was just, um, thinking about Thanksgiving. You said Mom and Dad are going to Sarah’s this year. Are you coming to the house? Patrick and Emma are coming.”

“That depends,” Steven told her with a lift of his brows. “Is Jason going to be there?”

Elizabeth pursed her lips. “You mean one of my best friends and whom I’m currently dating? Yes. He will be there. You’re not going to do this again, are you? I didn’t want to hear it on my birthday, I don’t want it now—”

“Well, you love to make the same mistakes over and over again, it’s not my fault that I mean I have to—” Steven scowled, looked at Patrick. “Come on, man. You were around for her first round with him. Can’t you talk sense into her?”

“He is not in charge of me—”

“Uh, point of correction—” Patrick put up his finger. “None of us were around for that first round. No one knew it was happening.”

“That—” Elizabeth glared at him. “One, that’s not the point. And Two, not helping!”

“Also,” Patrick continued, giving Elizabeth an eye roll before looking at Steven. “You weren’t around for any of that either. You wanted her to give Lucky another chance which really made me want to punch you.”

“That—” Elizabeth stabbed a finger at her brother. “That is an excellent point!”

“Fine. You be an idiot. I’ll talk to Liv and see if she wants to come, but I think we

might be invited to Dante and Lulu's—"

"Son of a criminal by the way!" Elizabeth called as her brother walked away. "Honestly," she muttered. She saw Brad step on the elevator. "Hey, Brad!"

He looked at her, and almost in a cartoon manner, started pressing the button faster. Elizabeth scowled, and started over to him — but he was able to get on the elevator before she could reach him.

"Sorry! Send an email!" Brad said as the doors closed.

"This is...not good," Elizabeth decided as Patrick stepped up behind her. "I told you it's me he's avoiding."

"Yeah, but why?"

"I—" she sighed. "I have a bad feeling I know why, but I need to check something out first."

"All right, but if you get arrested, make sure to give me a heads up in case you need bail," Patrick sighed as they returned to the hub.

---

That night, Jason came over for dinner as he did most nights now, and after Cameron had finished his math homework (with a lot of grumbling and complaining), he decided this was a good time to teach Jason how to play video games.

"Okay, so you press this button—" Cameron said, pointing at something on the controller. "Then this one—"

"Uh huh," Jason said, looking at it skeptically. "I'm going to be bad at this," he warned.

"That's okay." Cameron pressed play, and sat next to him. "I like to win, anyway. Why do you think I want you to play me? Patrick and Uncle Steven always kick my butt."

Elizabeth ignored them, reaching for her phone when it lit up with a message.

*Happy to help! What do you need?*

She bit her lip, looked at her son and Jason playing video games as Aiden cackled in

the background—because it turned out Jason wasn't too bad at the game after all and had already beaten Cameron in the first round of Mario Kart.

She should leave this alone. She'd done what she was supposed to do and had no reason to believe the results had been faked.

But then Elizabeth sighed. She'd never be able to live with herself if she didn't find out for sure.

*Can you get into test results at the hospital?*

A few minutes later, Spinelli replied. *Yeah, but why?*

*Because I think someone lied to me, and we need to fix this.*

Elizabeth nervously played with the straw on her iced tea, then looked up with relief when Spinelli finally came in through Kelly's door. He waved, then weaved through the tables to join her in the corner.

"Trying to be incognito?" he asked. "This must be really top secret."

"Not top secret—" Elizabeth waited as a waitress came over and Spinelli gave her a drink order. When they were alone again, she continued, "It's more that I just don't want anyone to hear. I might be wrong—" She wanted to be wrong. Oh, man, so much. "It's just...something is so weird and I can't pretend that—"

"Back up." Spinelli held up hand. "Whose results are we talking about?" He hesitated. "This isn't, like, before, right? With Aiden? Or Jake? Like what level are we talking about?"

"A few months ago, Jason was talking with Tea Delgado about her son." Elizabeth sighed. "This was, um, back in early August, I think. Before the whole water thing. And Tea mentioned that her son—you know, Victor?—he has this genetic illness. An illness that is...common in the Cassadine family."

She saw the moment Spinelli knew what she was referring to. "Oh. Damn. You don't mean—"

"Jason thought it was strange. And there were a few other things—namely, that Todd Manning was involved—that it all kind of happened in the same area—that Sam kind of...had a rough time—" Elizabeth sighed. "Anyway—he didn't get a chance to do anything with his suspicions because—"

"The world went insane for a while?" Spinelli finished. "Yeah, okay. So how'd you

get involved?”

“Well, he told me. In the hospital. After Ewen—” She bit her lip. “And I—I know how much he wanted it to be true. He blames himself.”

“Stone Cold does like to make everything his fault,” Spinelli said with shrug. “It’s one of his fatal flaws. You ran the test?”

“I don’t have the ability to just—” She gestured, then broke off when the waitress brought his drink. “I can’t just get a blood test run on my own. Patrick did me a favor, and it went through the system like a normal test. It wasn’t even a full DNA test — just one looking for enough markers. Those are faster.”

“Right, right. Then what?”

“Brad Cooper brought back the results,” Elizabeth said. “He gave them to me, and I gave them to Jason. Unopened—” she added. “I had nothing—I wouldn’t—”

“Elizabeth.” Spinelli shook his head. “I know you. Even if you’d thought about it, you’d never go through with it. So—Jason was the first person to see the results?”

“Yeah, he said that we were wrong, and we just—we put it away.” She bit her lip. They’d put it away and continued on the path they’d already been traveling. Back to each other.

“So why are you suspicious now? What’s been going on?”

“Brad Cooper. He’s acting weird around me—running from me, just being—really shady.” Elizabeth made a face. “I didn’t really know him before the test—but I know—you’re dating that lab tech, right? Ellie?”

“Yeah. She could run the test for you again if I can’t find anything on the main frame—” Spinelli hesitated. “Wait—Brad Cooper? Ellie said something about him.”

“It’s what made me wonder about all of this,” Elizabeth continued. “Because I know Steven was talking to the head of the department — they were going to make cuts. Layoffs. And Brad had only been hired a few months ago. He would have been first in line.”

“But ELQ made a donation after the water crisis,” Spinelli said. “Oh. You think—”

“Tracy Quartermaine,” Elizabeth finished. “Who does not like Sam.”

“No, I, uh, remember vividly how much she does not like Sam.” Spinelli scratched

his nose. “You think she found out? Why would she care? It’s not like it was his kid.”

Elizabeth looked at her iced tea, pushed it across the table. She didn’t want to say it outloud, didn’t want to admit that everything she had right now was built on a foundation that was about to crumble.

Because if she was right, Jason was going to be able to give Sam back the child she’d lost—the loss he blamed himself for. And Sam would forgive him.

“Elizabeth.”

She looked up to meet Spinelli’s kind eyes. “You’re doing the right thing,” he said. “And this is how it went down, you’re going to do something really great for Sam. I wish I could do the same for you. I wish I could bring Jake back.”

“Me, too.” She sighed. “I think Tracy knew what we all knew—if Jason had been the reason Sam got her son back—”

“The divorce might not have been finalized.” Spinelli grimaced. “You don’t think that’s still on the table, do you?”

“I think,” Elizabeth said carefully, “that when this happened three months ago, that was a definite possibility. I don’t know about now. I can’t think that far ahead.”

“Okay.” And gratefully, Spinelli did not push her. “Well, I’ve got some good news for you,” he told her. “Ellie hates Brad, so I don’t even need to do anything nefarious. I can just...ask her to look up the test probably, and I can tell from there if it was messed with. Can you get me another set of samples for her to test?”

“I don’t know. That might be harder,” she admitted. “But let’s start with the original test result and see what comes up.”

—

Jason did not like shopping, and normally asked Carly to pick up something he needed. He’d give her a list and his credit card and that would be the end of it.

But he knew if he asked Carly to help him shop for Elizabeth and the boys for Christmas, he’d have to listen to her complain. Asking Michael meant he might tell his mother—

He just wasn’t in the mood.

So he stood at the jewelry counter in Wyndham’s, staring at the tray of necklaces,



wondering why it was so hard to pick something out for Elizabeth after all the years they'd known each other.

“She’s not really a necklace person, is she?”

Jason turned around to find Sam standing behind him, a hesitant smile on her face.

Spinelli knocked lightly on the side of Ellie Trout’s work station, and his girlfriend turned to flash a bright and happy smile at him. “Spinelli!”

“Hey. Hope you don’t mind me dropping by.” He couldn’t quite get past how happy she looked to see him. It was still very strange to him that Ellie liked him, but he wasn’t complaining.

“No problem. On the phone you said it was, like, important, and that it had to be during Brad’s break—so...?” Ellie looked at him expectantly.

Spinelli winced, then sat on the spare tool in her cubicle. “Listen, here’s the deal. I have a friend—who is not a drama queen and dumb about this kind of thing—she is pretty sure Brad is acting very weird around her and it started when he ran a DNA test for her.”

Ellie furrowed her brow. “A DNA test? Those are pretty standard. Why would Brad be weird about it? Other than the fact that he is a major league tool,” she muttered darkly. “I hate him.”

“Duly noted. Uh, well, it turns out that my friend—who works here, making it, like, totally above board and all that good stuff—ran this test for a friend of mine—”

“Spinelli.” Ellie rolled her eyes. “Can you just bottom line it for me? You think Brad screwed up a test. You want me to run it again?”

“Well, that’s the other question I have — is it possible he just—left the original tests in the computer or something and just gave my friend the paper results?”

“Uh...” Ellie frowned. “I don’t know. Electronic results go into the database. Did she look them in there?”

“Yeah—they matched the paper, but you guys have different databases down here and I know—”

“Oh—you mean, like when we literally ran the test matching the sequence—can I pull up those results?” Ellie turned back to her terminal. “Yeah, probably. What’s the patient name?”

“I don’t know. I just have the file number.” He slid it across the table to her. “My friend ran it through the standard system, but, um, I think maybe the actual names weren’t attached to the file.”

“Well, we’ll see—” Ellie tapped a few keys. “Man, I’d love to nail Brad for something. He’s just a dink. He was supposed to be laid off, but noooo, Tracy Quartermaine just had to donate enough money—”

She turned back to him. “Okay, so what I have here is the original sequencer. Looks like he ran a marker test on a—four month old male? Does that sound right—”

“Yeah—”

“He ran those markers against three people—” Ellie squinted at the screen. “Two sets of male DNA and one set of female—”

“Two sets of male—” Spinelli straightened his shoulders. “Are there names?”

“Nope. Initials though. J, D, S, and F. Weird. We usually use numbers. I wonder why he did it like this—I mean, every tech has their own thing and it usually doesn’t matter because it’s our internal system but—”

“Ellie,” Spinelli said with a bit of impatience. “What were the original results?”

“Oh, right! Sorry—so, it looks like D is the son of S and F. Does—does that help?” She looked at him. “I mean—”

“Wait—” Spinelli frowned. “He ran a maternal and paternal DNA marker test? How is that possible? Those two male DNAs should be related—”

“Oh, nope. No one is related to anyone—except, S and F. To D.” Ellie pursed her lips. “Is there a point where I get to know names?”

“Uh...maybe. Can you print that out for me? I need to go, um, deal with this.”

---

Jason rocked back on his heels and studied Sam, uncomfortable to have been caught shopping for Elizabeth’s Christmas present. “No, I, uh, just don’t know what—” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Did you need anything?”

“No. No. I just—” Sam bit her lip. “I felt bad about the last time we talked. At Kelly’s, before Halloween.” She folded her arms. “I had no right to ask you that

question. We're—you know, we signed the papers and everything. I just—"

She looked at the linoleum tile. "I don't know. I know you saw me that day with John, and you didn't say anything about it. And maybe I was mad. Because you hated me spending time with him before and now it's like it doesn't matter—"

"I didn't like it before," Jason said carefully, "because I knew you were telling him things we should have been handling together. I was angry because I knew I wasn't treating you well. That I wasn't there for you. I hated him for being able to help when I couldn't."

"Oh." Sam met his eyes. "Okay. Yeah, that makes sense. Um, you know, that's part of the reason I don't like Elizabeth. Like—she always seem to get you and—it's not that I didn't—but it always took me longer, and that was—I hated it. And I hated her. Then I hated you, and it just—" She exhaled on a huff of air. "It twisted everything inside, and I don't know if we ever fixed it."

"Sam—"

"And none of it really matters now," she continued, "because we are divorced, and I don't know, I think maybe it's for the best?" Her voice trailed up—and he knew she was asking him the question.

Was he sorry their marriage was over?

"I'm sorry that I hurt you," he said after a moment. "That we hurt each other. Back then, a year ago, a few months ago. But yeah, I think it's for the best. The divorce."

Sam did a slight double take, and he thought maybe—maybe she'd been hoping for something else.

But he was...happy now. Even if he didn't know what to buy Elizabeth for Christmas, he'd been happy these last few weeks since Halloween, since the day she'd declared herself the Queen of Regrets and offered him the position of king.

He didn't want to go back. Didn't see a reason to.

"I'm dating John," Sam told him. "I just—I thought you should know."

"I hope you're happy," Jason told her. "That's all I want."

"Well, then you're a better person than me," Sam confessed. "Because I don't think I'm ready to wish you the same. Not with her. Maybe one day."

She walked away, leaving Jason at the jewelry counter. He'd promised to tell the truth and he wasn't sorry for it. He just wish the truth didn't always seem to hurt someone.

When Spinelli stepped off the elevator that afternoon, Elizabeth had a pretty good idea what he was going to tell her. His normally relaxed and spirited expression was muted as he approached her at the hub.

"Hey. Can we find a place to talk?" he asked, glancing over at the student nurses behind Elizabeth.

Elizabeth winced, then nodded. "Yeah, I can take a quick break. Sabrina, Felix — if anyone needs me, tell them to page me."

"Sure—"

She walked Spinelli over to a conference room where she locked the door behind them, not wanting anyone to interrupt them. Her palms damp, she rubbed them against her scrub pants as she turned to face him.

"Well?"

"You were right," Spinelli told her. He handed a print out to her. "Ellie found the original test in the computers. The markers on the maternity test indicate that the child tested is related to the mother."

Elizabeth drew in a sharp breath as she looked down at the sheet, then frowned. "There's—there's more than one test—"

"Because Brad ran three DNA tests," Spinelli told her. "One for Sam and Danny, then another for Danny with...two other men."

Her heart began to pound, her mouth was dry as Elizabeth scanned the results — "These are initials—Brad tested Danny against Jason and Franco—"

"And Franco against Jason," Spinelli finished. "The baby Tea Delgado is raising belongs to Sam, that's true. But he's also definitely Franco's child."

"And Jason isn't—" Her fingers tightened, the paper wrinkling in her grasp. She looked at Spinelli. "They're not related. He's not Franco's brother."

"Which is a relief," Spinelli admitted. "I know that was weighing on Jason. I mean, there's a whole lot of questions — why would Heather lie—and what exactly was she lying about? Is there still a twin brother out there or was that all a lie?"

“Oh, man—” Elizabeth exhaled. “Okay. Well—well, I have to—I have to tell Jason.”

“We could do that,” Spinelli said. He hesitated. “Or we could take it right to Sam. Leave Jason out of it for now. That would—that would make it easier for you, wouldn’t it?”

Tears stung her eyes. “Easier yes,” Elizabeth murmured. Because taking the news directly to Sam put Sam in charge of the choices. She could go to Jason, she could elect not to—but to take it to Jason—

It meant Jason could give the news to Sam. To look at her and tell her that the child whose death he blamed himself for was alive.

“But it’s not the right thing to do,” Elizabeth finished. “Because Jason was the one who saw the possibility. And he—he feels so terrible for what happened last year. For not being there for her—”

Carefully, she folded the paper and met Spinelli’s eyes. “Not letting Jason be the one to make up for that—not letting him have the chance to make this choice, to look Sam in the eye and give her back her son—it’s just me not trusting him.”

“Elizabeth—”

“I don’t—I don’t want to be the consolation prize. If I don’t let Jason do this—if I don’t trust him—then it’s like...winning a contest no one else entered.” She bit her lip. “That makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“It does. You know Stone Cold loves you,” Spinelli told her. “He always has.”

“Never doubted that,” she murmured. “But love was never the problem.”

“Elizabeth—”

“Thank you for this,” Elizabeth told him. “I’ll make sure Jason knows you helped—that Sam knows it. But I think I need to tell him alone.”

—

She wanted to wait. She wanted to take the rest of her shift—to just close it down and not think about it— what was one more day?

Elizabeth went back to the hub, the test results burning a hole in her pocket. She tried to complete her paperwork, attempted to answer questions for Sabrina and

Felix, the nursing students assigned to her—

But she couldn't.

Holding this truth back because she was scared of what it would do to her and Jason — how was that different than what Sam had done to her once upon a time?

Sam had been desperate to keep Jason, had let Maureen Harper walk away with Jake, and not tell anyone—Elizabeth had lost three weeks with her little boy—three precious weeks she'd never get back.

If she did this to Sam now—if she waited even one more day—was Elizabeth any better?

She took out the DNA results. Stared at them, then reached for her cell phone.

—

Elizabeth waited for him on the roof like she had months ago with the original results. It was colder now—she'd had to stop for her jacket—the bitter December wind made the air feel like ice this high up—

But it felt right. This was there she'd handed him the false results.

Jason closed the roof door behind him. “Hey—” He approached her, dropping a kiss on her lips. “You're cold—” He took her hands in his, warmed them. “What's wrong? What's the emergency?”

“The lab tech I told you—I've mentioned that he's been weird the last few months?” Elizabeth told him. “Always jumpy, always looking at me weird—”

“Did he—” Jason frowned, drew his brows down as his tone chilled. “Did he do something?”

“Yeah, but not to me. I realized—I realized—his behavior started after he ran those tests for me.” Tears stung her eyes, but then froze before they could fall. “So I asked Spinelli to get me the original results.”

Jason blinked, stepped back. “What?”

“Tracy donated a lot of money to the hospital from ELQ,” Elizabeth continued. “And I think—I think she did it so Brad Cooper could keep his job. In return—” She handed him the results. “He gave us fake results. Danny's alive, Jason. Sam's son is alive.”

Jason stared at Elizabeth for a long time before looking down at the envelope she'd placed in his hands.

They had stood here in late August, in the same positions—she looking at him with sober, sad eyes, holding out a stark white envelope with General Hospital's logo and Patrick's Drake name scribbled across the front.

She was still looking at him with sober, sad eyes and he realized, even before he had opened the results—before he had confirmed that her words were true—that she was expecting the same outcome as she had three months ago.

That Jason would rush off to tell Sam, bring home her son, and reunite, saving their marriage, and getting a fresh start.

Jason exhaled slowly, drew out the folded paper, and read it. He furrowed his brow slightly at the notification a few tests—he'd look at that more carefully in a minute, but—

Sam's son was alive. At least, according to this test, he was.

"Why didn't you tell me you thought Brad Cooper was lying to you?" Jason said. He folded it again, slid it back into the envelope, and tucked it inside his jacket. "Why did you go to Spinelli?"

"Because I wanted to be wrong," Elizabeth admitted. She folded her arms, tightly, as if she could hold herself together. "And I'm terrible for that. Terrible for hoping that Sam's son stayed dead. I have to live with myself, knowing that I feel that way—"

"Elizabeth—"

"I just—" Elizabeth's eyes squeezed shut as she turned away from him, looked out over the skyline of Port Charles. "I can't stop hating myself. I almost—" She sucked in the breath. "I was going to wait. Until the end of my shift. To keep putting it off. I'm no better than Sam was when she kept the truth about Jake—"

"Elizabeth, how long did you have these results?" Jason asked. He put a hand on her shoulder, turned her back to face him. "An hour? Two?"

"Ten minutes," she said with a wince. "But I thought it—"

"And I thought about strangling Lucky Spencer every time he puts his hands on you or Jake," Jason said in a low voice. "I didn't do it. You didn't lie to me, Elizabeth.

And you didn't let anyone walk away from Danny. You didn't watch whatever happened—you didn't see it happen."

He paused. "And this isn't August," Jason continued. "Things are different now—"

"Jason—"

"I can't tell you what would have happened if we'd...if we'd learned this back then," Jason said slowly. "I can only tell you what changes today. And it's nothing."

She met his eyes, frowning slightly. "I—"

"I mean, we'll take this to Sam, and let her handle it. And then I'll go deal with Tracy because she had no right to do this—" Jason squinted. "And was there another test in there that compared my DNA to Franco's?"

"Uh—" Elizabeth scratched her temple. "Yeah. Um, I guess Tracy wanted—you're not Franco's brother. I mean—DNA wise, there's no blood—"

And that was a relief—a weight off his shoulders. "Okay. But that's all that changes."

"I—"

"I love you," he told her quietly. "But I understand that you don't trust that."

"It's not that I don't—" She drew her bottom lip between her teeth, bit down. "It's not that I don't trust you—"

"You don't trust me to stay," Jason told her, with a shake of his head. "And that's because I didn't. When it mattered. It matters now. You did this, even worried that it meant I'd leave you. And that means—" He took out the test again. Really thought about the risk she'd taken—believed she'd been taking.

"I hope it means part of you does trust me," Jason added, "but it also reminds me that I can trust you. To always be honest. Even when it might hurt us both. And that's—" He hesitated. "That's not something we've always shared."

"No, I guess that's true." Elizabeth's smile was tentative. "So—I mean—"

He leaned down, brushed her lips with his. "Nothing has changed for me. I love you. And I love the life we're building together. I'm glad I get to tell Sam her son is alive, but I want to do that with you. She should know that you were part of it."



“I can probably get Epiphany to cover the rest of my shift,” Elizabeth admitted. “I’d—I’d like to be there when Sam finds out.” She stood on the tips of her toes, kissed him. “I love you, too.”

---

Jason called Sam and asked her to meet him in the park — on neutral ground. Sam had seemed confused with the call, but he told her that he and Elizabeth wanted to talk to her about something.

He’d heard the pain in her voice as she asked him if he was telling her they were getting married. He assured her that it wasn’t the case, and she agreed.

Still — Jason wasn’t entirely unsurprised when Sam walked into the park with John McBain at her side.

Sam never liked to walk into any battle outnumbered—and everything was a battle to her.

“Jason—” Sam looked at Elizabeth, standing at his side. “What’s going on?”

“A few months ago, I met Tea Delgado’s son,” Jason told her. “And I got suspicious because her son was born the same night as yours—”

“Jason—”

“And there were other reasons,” he continued, “that I won’t get into right now, but I told Elizabeth about my theory. She arranged a DNA test.” He looked at Elizabeth.

“The first test came back negative,” Elizabeth told Sam, “but the lab tech who ran it was nearly fired due to budget cuts. Budget cuts that were solved by a donation from ELQ—from Tracy Quartermaine—”

Sam closed her eyes, her face pale, her hands shaking as she put them up. “What are you saying—”

“I was worried the tech had lied to me,” Elizabeth said. “So I asked Spinelli if he could track down the original test.”

She held out the envelope. “And the original test confirmed Jason’s theory. Tea Delgado’s son is Danny. She’s raising him in Llanview, but he’s—”

Sam gasped, choking on a sob. “What—What? Are you—”

“Danny is alive, Sam. Your son is alive.”

Elizabeth watched the news wash over Sam’s the face — the shock—the flash of denial—the desperate hope—

What she wouldn’t give for just the briefest glimpse of that same hope her little boy would come home—

Sam took the results from Elizabeth’s hands, ripped open the results—her hand was shaking so bad that she couldn’t get the paper out of the envelope. At her side, an ashen John McBain helped her—

“How could this have happened?” Sam demanded as she looked over the results. She shook her head. “What—these are just—initials—”

“Tracy had Brad run two DNA tests,” Jason told her. “The baby with your DNA, Franco’s, and mine—”

Sam’s eyes flew to meet Jason as she flinched. “Why? We—we already knew—”

“I guess Tracy wanted independent confirmation,” Elizabeth said softly.

“And Franco—” Sam closed her eyes. “It’s okay. It’s okay,” she said softly. “I knew it. I can—I can live with it. John—”

John took the results from her, scanned them for himself. “And the second test?” he asked. “Is—”

“There’s no blood relationship between Franco and me,” Jason reported. “I guess—Tracy figured while she was at it—”

“I will kill her for doing this to me—” Sam pressed her hands to her face. “Okay, okay, what do I do? What do I do? Tea—” She looked at John. “She wouldn’t—this isn’t something—”

“Tea wouldn’t do this,” John said slowly. “Not willingly or knowingly.” His face screwed up in distaste. “Todd,” he muttered. “He delivered Victor—and this isn’t even the first time he would have done this—I told you what he did to Blair and Jack—”

“How—” Sam took a deep breath. “How do I tell her it’s—her baby is gone—how do I tell her that—” She hesitated. “What do I do?” she repeated to John, and Elizabeth was surprised — Sam hadn’t even spared much more than a glance for Jason.

“Well, first things first, I need talk to Tea,” John said. He folded the results, tucked them into his coat pocket. “I think—I think I can talk her into getting Victor tested. If that doesn’t work, we can try a court—” He looked at Jason and Elizabeth. “Was this test—was it done—”

“It was all above board. Jason gave me the samples, and Patrick wrote the test order for me. We put it through the lab,” Elizabeth explained. She folded her arms. “Brad gave me a false set of paper results, but the original test is in the General Hospital computers, and Spinelli told me he and his girlfriend have already put a lock on the file to keep it from getting corrupted.”

“Thank you.” Sam looked at Jason, finally, meeting his eyes briefly before looking at Elizabeth. “Thank for doing this. For—for thinking it was a possibility, and then not giving up. I just—I think—I think John and I can handle it. I mean, he knows Tea, so—” She paused. “What do we do about Tracy?”

“Leave Tracy to me,” Jason said. “I’ll take care of that. Good luck, Sam.”

“Thank you. Oh, God, my son—” Sam’s eyes were shining with tears and joy as she turned to John. “Danny—”

“Let’s go, talk to your mother,” John told her. He put an arm around her shoulders and they left.

Elizabeth hadn’t known what to expect, but to see Sam walk away—to not even ask Jason for help getting Danny back—

“So what are you going to do to Tracy?” Elizabeth said, finally. Jason tugged lightly on her elbow as they walked in the opposite direction, walking back towards the parking lot.

“I don’t know,” Jason admitted. “I doubt she’ll be sorry. She never liked Sam, and she knew that if—” He winced. “If Sam and I had been together—not divorced—Danny legally would have been mine and then—”

“Entitled to ELQ shares when Edward passes away.” Elizabeth put her hand on the car door, then looked up at him. “She did this because Danny might have inherited stock? She lied about this baby just to—”

“There’s not a lot Tracy wouldn’t do to protect ELQ from anyone she thinks might hurt it.”

Inside the car, he rubbed his face. “This is why I left the Quartermaines,” he muttered. “Because this is what they do. This is what they always do—”

“Not Quartermaines. Tracy. And maybe—” Elizabeth leaned back against the seat with a smirk. “Maybe we should give her a taste of her own medicine.

Jason eyed her out of the corner of his eye. “What are you thinking?” he asked, a mixture of nerves and curiosity in his eyes.

“When Emily turned eighteen,” Elizabeth said, looking at him, “she inherited stock. Like you and AJ did. And when she passed away—she left it to Cameron and Jake.”

“She—” Jason stared straight ahead. “I didn’t know that.”

“No, and Tracy was very annoyed by that,” she told him. “She wanted to buy it back from me, but it’s all my boys would ever have from Emily, so I told her that I would agree to let her vote their proxy. Because I knew she’d protect ELQ, and that was fine. But I think maybe it’s time I tell her I want to sell to someone else.”

Jason frowned. “Who? She’d never believe you’d sell it to Sam—”

“No, but she’d believe me if I said I wanted to give it to Nikolas. You know, since he and Emily were engaged at the time, and he might have inherited it otherwise through their kids.”

“Letting Tracy think Cassadine Industries might get a foothold in ELQ—” Jason squinted. “Let me make a few calls. I think we can get a few other people on board.”

“Miss Tracy is in the library,” Alice told Jason and Elizabeth as she let them into the mansion a few days later. She frowned. “Are you sure you want to see her? Because Dr. Q is at the hospital—”

“It’s definitely Tracy,” Elizabeth told her. “But, um, Jason isn’t going in with me. He’s going to wait outside. Is...can you not tell her that he’s here?”

Alice sighed. “Miss Tracy is up to something again? All right. I’ll go let her know just you’re here, Miss Webber.”

Elizabeth handed her coat to Alice, keeping hold of the paperwork in her hand. “You’re the best, Alice. Thanks.”

In the library, Elizabeth found Tracy scowling at a newspaper and holding a glass of orange juice. “What do you want?” the older woman demanded.

“It’s December, Tracy,” Elizabeth said blandly. “You know that what means.”

“Oh—right.” She sighed, set down the juice and newspaper. “Time to sign over the proxy for another year—” She peered at her. “Have you reconsidered my offer to buy you out? Neither of you are DNA relatives—”

“No, but Jake was, and I inherited his stock—we’ve been over this, Tracy,” Elizabeth said with a roll of her eyes. “Emily left this stock to my boys. They—” Her voice tightened and Tracy looked away. “Cameron can do whatever he wants when he’s eighteen.”

“I’m sorry. I—” Tracy pursed her lips. “Of course. Then maybe sign the proxy until he’s 18? There’s no reason—”

“Actually, I wanted to let you know that I’m planning to sell my shares,” she told Tracy. “I know that Emily’s stock should have passed to her children, and she should be raising Spencer—”

“Elizabeth—”

“I spoke Nikolas in Greece,” Elizabeth continued, watching as Tracy’s face paled. “I’m not a Quartermaine, and my little boy is gone. Emily is gone. I think these shares should go to the other little boy she loved. So Nikolas is going to buy them in Spencer’s name—”

“You’re selling part of my company to Nikolas Cassadine?” Tracy hissed. “You—you can’t do that—we—we had an agreement!”

“We did. Every year, I re-authorize the proxy. And we’ll continue doing that for Cameron—because Emily left those to him. But Emily loved Spencer like her own. This wasn’t my idea,” Elizabeth assured her. “Nikolas approached me. He’s been working on this for a while, I guess. I think he said Jason sold his stock to him as well—”

“That reprobate! It was all we could do to wrestle his back from Sonny, then my bloody mother had to leave him stock all over again—”

“And you know, Skye adored Emily—she wouldn’t sell all of it—”

“You—” Tracy jabbed a finger at her. “You’re not—you’re not serious! No, no—there’s no way you’ve orchestrated the sale of almost twenty-five percent—”

“No, it’s more like forty percent,” Elizabeth said. “Because Jason talked to Carly, and you know Michael has fifteen percent from Lila and AJ—”

“I—” Tracy stumbled over to the sofa, sat down. “How could you do this—how—”

Suddenly, she focused on her, squinted her eyes. “You know, don’t you? You know what I did?”

“I do,” Elizabeth said coolly.

“I never knew about Jake!” Tracy lunged back up. “You have to understand—when I changed that will—I never knew about Jake!”

Elizabeth put her hands up, took a step back. “Wait—wait—what will?”

“Alan’s—” Tracy’s eyes bulged. “Oh—you don’t—”

“No, we don’t know,” Jason said, stepping in from the hallway, his tone like ice. “But maybe you should tell us.” He stepped up next to Elizabeth. “What did you do to my son?”

“I—I—” Tracy scowled. “I didn’t know about Jake! Alan left his stock to your children! And your children were going to be from that lying, gold digging con artist! I was never going to let Sam get a single piece of this company!” She hesitated. “Wait, if you didn’t know about the will—”

“We know about the the DNA test,” Elizabeth said, slightly shaken. “What you did to Sam and her child—all so you could keep her out of the company?”

“You—” Tracy stabbed her finger at Jason. “This is your fault! If you knew that child was Sam’s, that bitch would have gotten her claws back into you, and my father would have given him shares!”

“So, instead you let Sam think her son was dead. That is—” Elizabeth shook her head. “I would think that’s the worst thing you could do, but Emily told me enough stories. I know you’re capable of cruelty.”

Tracy lifted her chin. “I wanted to protect my family—” Then she exhaled slowly. “What are you going to do?”

“I could report you to the police,” Elizabeth said. “You participated in kidnapping an infant—” Tracy’s eyes bulged, “—bribery, extortion—falsification of medical records—”

“I—I—”

“But I’ll settle for Alan’s shares,” Jason said. “You’ll sign them over to Elizabeth. Now. They belonged to my son. They should be hers—”

“Jason—”

“You can split them between Cam and Aiden, I don’t care,” Jason told her. “But she’s not keeping them.”

“I—” Tracy shook her head. “How would I ever explain that?”

“I don’t care,” Jason told her. “You stole from my father. If I had known the contents of his will—Jake would have had his inheritance—I might—” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. They belonged to him. And you’re not keeping them.”

“Okay, okay—but you’re not selling to Nikolas?” Tracy asked, worried. “And Jason isn’t—”

“Michael’s thinking about business school,” Jason said, with a shrug. “He might want ELQ one day. And Cam and Aiden might want to go to college.” He paused. “Diane will be in touch with the paperwork.”

—

“You don’t think we let her off easy?” Elizabeth asked as they got into the car. “I mean, she’s losing shares—but she’ll probably inherit from Edward—” Jason’s mouth tightened at the mention of his grandfather—they knew he was ill and would pass soon. “She’s not going to learn anything.”

“I’ll talk to Monica about the will. Tracy didn’t do this alone. And I know who’d she ask to help.” Jason looked at her. “Who do you think Tracy would go to? Five years ago?”

“Luke.” Elizabeth stared straight ahead. “Well, at least you know he feels guilty enough to tell the truth. After what he did.”

A few weeks later, Elizabeth was sitting at the table, struggling to wrap the last gift that needed to go under the tree. She usually did a pretty decent job of not shopping until the last minute but despite eight years of being a mother—she’d never managed to finish wrapping before Christmas Eve.

Now it was nearly midnight, and she still had to put the boxes under the tree. She wrinkled her nose as she stared at the closet where she had hid the gifts while the boys were in school that day — she hadn’t been able to hide them at home since Cameron had learned to climb.

The door opened then, and a rush of swirling ice and wind came through as Jason entered, closing the door softly behind him. “Hey.” He joined her at the table,

brushing a light against her lips. “Sorry, I’m late. It took longer than I thought to put together the bike.”

“But it’s in the garage?” Elizabeth asked, wrinkling her eyebrows. “It’s the only thing Cameron really asked for—”

“It’s in the garage,” he confirmed. He stripped off his jacket and tossed it on the hook. “What else can I do?”

“I just need to finish wrapping this last one, then I can start putting things under the tree—” She nodded at the closet door. “Everything is in there if you want to start, and I’ll be over in a second—” She handed him the key to the closet, and he went to unlock it.

He stared at it for a long moment, then turned to her with raised eyebrows. “Did you leave anything in the stores?”

“Listen. At this age, it’s about quantity. When they’re teenagers or grown adults, I can start cutting back.” The last box in her hands, she went to the tree and set it down. “Let’s do Cameron’s on this side, and then Aiden on the other—”

Jason handed her boxes, and she arranged them—they worked in silence, hoping to get everything done quickly and quietly so that boys wouldn’t wake up — it had been incredibly hard to get Cameron to sleep that night, and Aiden always fed off his brother’s energy.

Halfway through the closet, Jason hesitated with a box in his hand. He looked at her, then looked back at the tag. “This is, uh, it says Jake—”

“Oh.” Elizabeth took the brightly colored gift, smoothing her thumb over his name. “I should have—I—” She cleared her throat. “Last year—it was the first year—” She paused. “I had ordered something for his birthday, and it came after he died. It was the first time I saw him—I saw him riding the little bike I’d bought for him—and I—”

Jason put his arm around her shoulders, drawing her close. “I’m sorry.”

“Last year, when I went shopping, I didn’t mean to—but I bought something for him. I got home from Wyndham’s and I just—I wrapped it, and I put his name on it. And I felt good about it. Because if I don’t buy presents for all of them, it’ll be like I don’t have three boys anymore. And I guess—” A tear slid down her cheek. “It’s silly.”

“It’s not. I know how much you love Christmas.”



“Jake did, too. More than Cameron. He loved the magic of it—that last year—when he was just three—it was the first year he didn’t cry sitting on Santa’s lap—he was so excited, and he babbled on for ten minutes about everything he wanted—”

Elizabeth sat on the sofa. “I know it gets easier to live with it,” she told him as he sat next to her. “And it has—I mean, I don’t think about him every day. But someone will ask me how many kids I have—and it’s wrong to say two. I have three beautiful boys. I had—” She put the gift on the coffee table. “I’m okay. Christmas is hard. But I don’t want Cameron to know it. I don’t want him to think about this as being a sad time.”

“He won’t. And one day, he and Aiden will be grateful you kept Jake’s memory alive for them. For all of us.” He kissed her, pressing his forehead against hers. “I don’t have enough memories of him,” Jason told her, his voice a bit rough. “That’s my fault.”

“Well, I’ll share all mine. You gave me that beautiful boy and kept him safe for me all those years. You always brought him back to me.” She touched his face. “It’s okay. We’ll put this upstairs with last year’s gift. And the birthday gifts I bought.”

Elizabeth scrubbed her hands over her cheeks. “I forgot to ask—you were supposed to meet with Diane to finalize the ELQ stuff today. Did Tracy sign over her shares?”

“Yeah, Diane has it ready for you after Christmas. She was kind of curious why Tracy was giving you another ten percent—”

“I still wish you’d take it—you’re the Quartermaine—” She grinned when he scowled at her. “I’m kidding. It’s okay. I’ll hold on to the extra fifteen percent, and then divide it among the boys when they’re old enough so they have equal shares.”

“Diane also told me that Sam has a hearing after Christmas about custody,” Jason went on as Elizabeth started to put away the trash and supplies she’d used for wrapping. “Tea is fighting her on custody—”

“Hard to blame her. I think, even if I knew the truth, I’d want to keep my baby. Six months is a long time.” Elizabeth sighed. “But she’ll get her baby back.” She looked at the Christmas tree, smiling at the paper chains that decorated it. “It looks a lot like that first tree, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Jason stood her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders to draw her back against him. “With an angel to watch over things.”

“It helps,” Elizabeth murmured. “To think of Jake being safe with Emily, you know?”

She'll take care of him until we're together again." She took a deep breath, looked at him and smiled. "We're going to have a great Christmas. I can't wait until the boys get up tomorrow."

"Me either." He kissed her again. "Let's get cleaned up and get some sleep before they get up at dawn."

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Meanwhile, in Greece...

Nikolas Cassadine sighed and pushed open the door to the cottage on his estate. It was a small and modest set of rooms, tucked away from any visitors.

"Hello? Anyone here?"

"Uncle Nikolas!"

A little boy with blonde hair and blue eyes dashed out of the back room, followed by his nanny and another man with dark hair and dark eyes.

"Hey—" Nikolas lifted the boy into his arms and smiled at him. He looked at the older man. "Father."

"Nikolas. Jake and I were just getting ready to have dinner. Will you join us?"

"Sure. Yeah." Nikolas looked at Jake, flinching slightly as he smiled. He looked so much like Elizabeth.

Soon. Soon, he'd be able to bring her son back to her.

THE END

# A Shot in the Dark

Okay — big story here is Jake is alive. Stavros has him, Nikolas knows it and wants to return him to Elizabeth.

Lucky and Luke should be on Helena's tail, seeing some strange expenditures and activity after Nikolas returned to Greece.

Jason and Elizabeth are really putting their relationship together — he's moved in and is talking, once again, about adopting Cameron. Sam has Danny back and is dating John — she's relatively removed from their lives. Liz is not ready to discuss marriage — three marriage proposals and she's...burned.

Sonny and Carly are adjusting to this — Sonny is dealing with the Kate/Connie nonsense while Carly is irritated that Jason is abandoning her at the same time she's going through all this other crap, but Michael is happy for Jason so there's that.

So after Christmas, start with Jason and Elizabeth in the winter — Cameron's got a hockey game, and he's playing against Spencer (living with Laura and Kevin). They're in the stands, cheering them on — Elizabeth is unhappy when Spencer clearly goes after Cameron — they're fighting over Emma again. Patrick thinks it's time to teach Cam how to fight.

After the game, Laura asks Liz if she's heard from Lucky lately — no, he missed his call to Aiden last week and hasn't contacted since. But it's not the first call, Liz admits, and Laura is sad about that. She's tried to call Luke to track him down, but Luke is spotty at best. They talk about about Liz's future with Jason, and Laura is surprisingly open to Jason being more involved with Aiden as well as Cam.

At home, Liz thinks it's strange that Laura hasn't heard from Luke or Lucky — Lucky's never been great about keeping in touch with her — he left town so soon after learning Aiden was his son — he's never really connected with him. Jason offers to look into it, and she's grateful.

In Greece, Nikolas visits with Jake again, alone in the gardens. They talk about the secrets Jake isn't supposed to tell Stavros — who still thinks this is Luke Spencer's grandson he's raising. Nikolas shows him pictures of his mother and brothers and

Jake wants to go home. Nikolas promises he's working on it, but he knows his grandmother is planning something, and Nikolas is afraid to trigger it.

Luke and Lucky meet and Lucky reveals he's seen Jake with Nikolas. Lucky thinks Nikolas has decided to steal his son because of Aiden. Luke isn't so sure about that, but agrees that Nikolas isn't innocent. Luke thinks he should tell Liz Jake is alive, seeing as how she's shacked up with Morgan again and this seems like their business, but Lucky wants to bring Jake home on his own. He can do this.

Jason tells Liz that Spinelli found Luke and Lucky in Greece. Liz thinks that's strange — unless the Cassadines are up to something — which makes her unhappy. She still hasn't forgotten what Helena did to her when she was pregnant with Aiden. She passes the info on to Laura, who is also — not happy. They discuss what they should do.

Jason goes to Sonny — the Cassadines might be up to something again. Sonny gets Jason's concern — Liz will always be connected to the Cassadines because Helena holds a grudge. He talks about the 2001 fake death debacle. But all they have is suspicion. Maybe Jason should go do a recon.

Elizabeth and Diane talk about the adoption paperwork and Diane says it's interesting that Liz is willing to trust Jason on the father thing, but less so on the husband thing. Liz reminds her to butt out, and Diane just shrugs. She goes home and talks to Cam — paperwork started. Cam is excited, but talks about missing Jake. It feels wrong to have Jake's dad without Jake being here.

Jason and Liz talk about the Sonny and Laura scenes, and Liz asks him if it bothers Jason that she's willing to let him adopt Cam without making any kind of other commitment. It doesn't. She knows he can be trusted with the boys — her heart is going to take long, and he's okay with it. That means a lot to her. She's not sure if she wants to seek out Cassadine mischief, but Laura's in the middle of it and she's important to her and the boys.

Basically — Jason, Liz, and Laura need to end up in Greece (Patrick will take on the boys because he is the man), just as Luke and Lucky make their move to go after Jake and get him back — but Luke and Lucky are caught and Nikolas is forced to choose between Luke and his own father — in front of Laura.

February 2013

Port Charles Park: Ice Rink

“Are you blind?” Elizabeth Webber shot to her feet, cupped her hands around her mouth — “Hey, Ref! Get your eyes checked!”

“

“That’s crap!” Patrick Drake shouted from her side, dragging his hand through his slightly shaggy dark hair.

Sitting next to them, Jason Morgan just frowned, then looked at the rest of the parents in the stand—who were all on their feet, screaming obscenities that were a lot worse than Patrick and Elizabeth.

“She doesn’t look like she’d be a crazy sports mom, does she?” Laura Spencer mused as she picked up her grandson, two-year-old Aiden Webber, and cuddled him in her lap. “I’ll talk to Spencer about trying to decapitate Cameron. I promise.”

“He’s just mad that Emma made Cameron a nicer card for Valentine’s Day,” Elizabeth muttered as she sat back down. “And he keeps calling Cam a townie—”

“He likes to ignore the fact that he lives in town now, too,” Laura said dryly. “We’re working on it—” She winced as Spencer’s skates slid out from underneath him, and the eight-year-old started to slide across the ice. “Oh, no—”

“He’s back up,” Jason said, reassuring her. He winced as Spencer Cassadine got back to his feet, unsteadily, and started to skate in Cameron’s direction.

“I wear to God if that referee calls one more foul on my kid,” Elizabeth said, her teeth clenched. “And—hey!” She lunged to her feet again as Spencer bypassed Cameron and headed for Emma Scorpio-Drake.

“Oh, I know he’s not going after my kid!” Patrick said with a scowl.

“They know they’re talking about kids, right?” Jason asked Laura a bit dubiously. This was a side of Elizabeth he’d never seen before — but maybe it shouldn’t surprise him. She’d always been fiercely loyal to the people she loved and there was no one she loved more than her boys. It made sense it would translate to supporting them in sports, but this—

He found himself grinning as the referee managed to grab the back of Spencer’s uniform before he was able to finish swiping out with his stick towards Emma. Patrick’s daughter turned, narrowed her eyes, and launched herself at the Cassadine — the two kids hit the ice and started rolling around, shoving each other.

“Just like her mother,” Jason said, with a slow exhale. Robin had never taken shit from anyone, and he knew from experience she could throw a punch.

Elizabeth heard him, then smiled at him. “Yeah, Robin taught Emma how to defend herself. But—”

“There it is,” Laura said with a sigh, as Cameron launched himself on the two of them, dragging Spencer away from Emma, and the irritated umpire ejected all three of them. “I guess we’d better go get them.”

“I’m buying Emma all the ice cream she wants,” Patrick told Elizabeth as they trooped down from the stands and headed over to pick up their kids. It wasn’t the first game that the trio had been thrown out of, and they were used to the routine by now.

It was Jason’s first time making it to one of the games, and while he’d heard about the bitter rivalry, it was something to see the eight-year-olds all trying to kill each other. They could probably hold their own against Carly in her heyday.

“You know, Cameron told me that Joss gave him a Valentine,” Elizabeth said, as if reading Jason’s thoughts. She took Aiden from Laura and grinned at him. “I think that’s going to complicate things.”

Jason winced. “Oh, man. Joss takes after her mother, so—”

“It’s not my fault,” Emma said immediately as the adults reached them. Standing next to them was their beleaguered coach who was not having a great day.

“Mrs. Spencer,” Dustin Phillips said, with a sigh to Laura. “We’ve talked about Spencer’s sportsmanship—”

Spencer gasped. “He attacked me!” He jabbed a finger at Cameron who stuck his tongue out at his cousin. “You—you—you townie!” Spencer launched himself at Cameron all over again and would have reached him if Jason hadn’t waded in and grabbed Laura’s grandson — Elizabeth got her son, and they dragged them apart again.

“We’re working on it,” Laura said. “But in my defense, I told the league not to put them on the same team.”

“One more ejection, and I’m cutting all three of them,” Dustin said. He went back to the kids still playing.

“You’re ruining it for all of us!” Emma screaming, stomping her foot at Spencer. Her cheek was cut. “And you’re the townie, you dink!”

“I am not a townie! I live on an island!”

“You live on Charles Street you—” Emma went after him, intending to deliver a

kick to the shins, but Patrick grabbed his daughter.

“Well, this has been fun,” he said dryly. “But I’ll take my kid home before she does anymore damage.”

“It’s not fair, Dad!” Emma complained as the Drakes walked towards their car. “He’s such a brat!”

Spencer glared at Cameron with an utter look of loathing that might have worried Jason if he wasn’t eight. “You turned her against me!”

“All right, all right—that’s enough!” Laura snapped. She grabbed Spencer’s shoulder and shook him slightly. “You went after that girl on the ice, Spencer Cassadine! And you tried to hit your cousin—”

“He is not my cousin!” Spencer wiped his nose, then glared at Cameron. “Uncle Lucky said you’re just a bastard—”

“Shut up!” Cameron roared, and then he was airborne, tackling Spencer to the gravel parking lot, then punched him square in the face before Jason was able to grab him, lifting him in the air, still kicking wildly.

“I’ll kill him! Let me kill him!”

Shaken slightly, Laura pulled her grandson to his feet, looking at Elizabeth with a blank expression. “I—”

“We should go,” Elizabeth said, tightly, sliding a hand down Aiden’s back as the toddler started to cry. Jason put Cameron on the ground, but kept an arm around his shoulders, holding him back.

“I think that’s a good idea. I’ll—I’ll talk to him.” Laura leaned forward to kiss Aiden’s cheek, then tried to hug Cameron, but he turned his face away from her. “I love you, baby,” she murmured, brushing his hair back. “I’ll call you,” she told Elizabeth, before taking Spencer’s hand and dragging him away.

“I want to go home,” Cameron said, flatly. He shrugged away from Jason and stalked towards their car.

Webber Home: Hallway

“Hey.” Jason touched the small of Elizabeth’s back as she left Aiden’s room, switching on the night light and closing the door. “Why don’t you let me put Cameron to bed?”

“I—” Elizabeth sighed, looked down the hallway towards her oldest’s room. “I don’t know. You think that’s a good idea? I mean—God, if Spencer’s right—I can’t believe—” Distressed, she looked away, swiping at her eyes.

“You’re still upset,” Jason told her. “And you know Cameron doesn’t like to see you cry. I’ll talk to him, and see if he’s up to talking tonight. Otherwise, it might be better if we gave him some space.”

“All right.” She clenched her hand in his shirt briefly before releasing it. “I’ll be in the bedroom if you need me.”

He kissed her forehead, and they separated. He waited to hear their bedroom door click shut before he knocked on Cameron’s door.

“I don’t need to be tucked in. Go away.”

“I just wanted to say good night,” Jason said. “Can I come in for a minute?”

“Jason?” There was a sigh. “Fine.”

Jason pushed open the door, then went inside the room to find Cameron sitting up in his bed, already dressed in his Captain America pajamas. He eyed Jason suspiciously. “Why are you here and not my Mom?”

“I can go get her,” Jason offered, closing the door, then leaning against it.”

Cameron shrugged a shoulder, then stared at his blanket. “It’s fine,” he said dully. “Spencer is a doofus. I know that.”

“He doesn’t seem like a nice kid,” Jason agreed.

“And I don’t care what Lucky says about me,” Cameron said in a small voice. “He’s not my dad. I know that. He doesn’t want me. He only calls Aiden. And he never comes to see him either. I don’t care—” His voice trembled slightly.

Jason stepped forward, perched on the edge of the bed. “It’s okay to be hurt,” he said softly. “There’s nothing wrong with admitting it.”

“I don’t need him,” Cameron said. He looked up, his blue eyes burning into Jason’s. “My mom is best mom ever. She’s all I need. I don’t need Lucky. I don’t need you either.”

“Okay.”



Cameron looked away, then a tear slid down his cheek. Then another. “I miss Jake.”

Jason exhaled on a shaky breath. Cameron didn’t often talk about his little brother, and he and Elizabeth were both careful not to reminisce about him often around the boys. “I do, too.”

“You were his real dad, weren’t you?”

“I—I was,” Jason admitted.

Cameron swiped his hand under his nose. “My real dad is dead. Spencer said his dad said my dad was a bad person. Was he? Did you know him?”

“I did know him,” Jason said carefully. “And Zander was...he knew how to get himself into trouble. But I know your mother liked him. And my sister—Aunt Emily—she loved him. She was married to him for a little while. He wasn’t all bad, Cameron. He just didn’t make a lot of good choices.”

“Mom says I have to be nice to Spencer because his dad just dumped on him Grandma Laura, and she didn’t want him stuck in boarding school. His mom is dead. And his dad doesn’t want him. So I guess—I mean—” Cameron sighed. “I’d be really mad at everyone if my mom dumped me on someone.”

“It sounds like a tough situation.”

“But my mom would never do that,” Cameron told Jason. “Never.”

“No, your mom would walk through fire for you. And your brothers.” Had walked through fire, Jason remembered.

“I’m sorry I said I don’t need you,” Cameron muttered. “I like that you live here now. Christmas was more fun this year.” He peeked up at Jason. “Mom smiles a lot now. More than since Jake died. Last year was hard.”

“I’m glad we’re together. I love your mother. And I love you and your brother,” Jason told him.

“You’re not going to leave, are you?” Cameron cleared his throat. “I mean, you and my mom—you’re gonna marry her, right? I don’t want her to cry again.”

“That’s something your mom and I have talked about,” Jason told him. “But I’m not going anywhere. There’s no where I’d rather be.”

“Okay.” Cameron nodded. “Okay. I’m okay,” he said, and this time it sounded like he meant it. “Tell mom I’m okay. She was right. Spencer is awful, but I think—I know what it’s like for a dad to dump you. And if my mom were gone—if I never knew her—man, that would suck.”

Cameron had his mother’s soft heart and kindness — with Zander’s recklessness. God help the world, Jason thought as he helped the eight-year-old climb under the blankets.

“Hey, Jason?” Cameron asked as Jason switched off the lamp on the night stand.

“Yeah, buddy?”

“You promise you’re not leaving?”

“I promise.” Jason ruffled his blonde hair, then Cameron grinned, turned over, and closed his eyes. “Good night, buddy.”

“Night, Jason.”

Elizabeth was pacing when Jason went into their room, biting the nail of her thumb as she walked from the window to the end of the bed, before turning around and starting again. At Jason’s entrance, she whirled around.

“Is he okay? Does he need me?”

“He’s fine. He’s probably already asleep.” Jason rubbed his hands down her arms. “By the time I left, he’d already reminded himself that Spencer has it pretty rough right now — and Cameron says he knows how it feels to have a dad dump him, and how much worse it would be not to have his mom.”

Elizabeth groaned, then let her head drop against his chest. “Oh, God. I tried so hard not to let Cameron feel Lucky’s leaving like this. Lucky was already not doing much with the boys by the time he left the country—but he never calls Cameron—”

“He doesn’t blame you,” Jason assured her. “In fact, you’re the only person in the world he does believe in one hundred percent, so you’re doing something right.”

“Something,” Elizabeth muttered. She sighed, pulled away from him, then sat on the bed. “You’re sure he’s okay?”

“Yeah. He was mad at first, but he’s okay. He’s a good kid, Elizabeth. A good kid who’s asking questions about Zander, by the way. Apparently, Spencer also told him Nikolas said Zander was a bad person—”

“I could really kill the two of them right now,” Elizabeth snarled. “Talking like that in front of Spencer—What were they thinking? I liked it better when they hated each other—” She dragged a hand through her hair. “What did you say?”

“That Zander wasn’t a bad person. He just didn’t make great choices. That you liked him. That Emily loved him.” Jason hesitated. “Cameron seemed worried I might leave.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth blinked at him. “Oh. Well, I guess—I mean, you only moved in a few weeks ago. Maybe we rushed it. Did we rush it?” She chewed on her lip. “I just—I want so bad to be a better mom than I had, but I think I keep messing it up—”

“You’re an amazing mother,” Jason told her. “And Cameron would be the first to tell you that. No, I think he’s just been through a lot. Losing Jake. Then Lucky moving away — me moving in. It’s been a lot.”

“Right.” Elizabeth frowned. “We’re not going to have this fight again, are we?”

“No,” Jason said. “I asked you to marry me. And you wanted time. This was a compromise. And we didn’t fight the last time,” he reminded her. “But I’m in this. For good.”

“Jason—”

“It’s okay that you don’t believe me yet,” Jason said. “But this is what I want. You and the boys. It’s all I ever wanted. When we talked about getting married four years ago, one of the things I wanted to do was adopt Cameron.”

Elizabeth stared at him, her eyes widening. “Jason—”

“I know Aiden—I know Aiden has a relationship with Lucky, and I don’t want to mess that up. And if you think it’s not a good idea—”

“You want to adopt Cameron?”

“I’ve always loved him,” Jason told her. “Because he was yours. And then because he’s Cameron. Lucky had the chance to be his father—he doesn’t want it. I do. I can’t—it’s not about making up for not being there for Jake.”

“I didn’t say it was—”

“It’s about this life we’re building together.”

“I’d—” She hesitated. “I want to talk to Cameron about it. But, Jason—” She leaned forward, kissed him, fisting her hand in his shirt. “I love you. For wanting it.”

“I love you, too.”

### **Kelly’s: Diner**

“First,” Laura said with a sigh as the waitress set down her iced tea and Elizabeth’s soda, “let me apologize.”

“Laura—”

“No.” Laura shook her head and held up her hand. “Absolutely not. You’re going to start apologizing to me again about what happened two years ago and I’m not interested. It’s not my business. This current situation is not about that.”

“Isn’t it?” Elizabeth sighed. “Lucky left town and ignores the boys. Nikolas left—”

“Having issues with the mother of his children does not give my son the excuse to say the things Spencer overheard. And I’m sorry—” Laura lifted her brows. “What exactly does Nikolas have to complain about?”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together. “I—I don’t know—”

“You made a mistake,” Laura said gently. She tilted her head. “You made some poor choices a few years ago when you were hurting, you were confused, and neither of my sons acted well. Before or after any of it. I’m sorry you were all hurt, but at the end of the day, Elizabeth, maybe it was for the best.”

Elizabeth slowly blinked, then focused on her former mother-in-law. “I’m sorry. Come again?”

“If I had known—if I had been here when Lucky had the drug addiction—” Laura sighed. “If I had been here to see how he treated you—you never would have married him again. Because I would have *killed* him—”

“Laura—”

“No! I spent too many years of my life thinking that I had to sacrifice everything to be Luke’s wife. I won’t watch you apologize over and over again—” Her voice trembled slightly. “You’ve been through enough, Elizabeth. And I’m angry that my sons continue to put you through this. Spencer and I had a very long discussion about what he’s said about Cameron.”

“Cameron is trying not to be angry or hurt,” Elizabeth told Laura. “Jason talked to him last night, and Cameron remembered what I’d told him about Spencer having a tough time and taking it out on him. Not that it makes it right or—”

“But it’s a good lesson for Cameron to learn some empathy,” Laura nodded. “And I’m so glad Jason was there for him. I’m so glad to see you happy again. Jason clearly loves you, and he adores the boys. If my son can’t step up and be a good father—” She tightened her mouth. “Either of them—well, then I don’t want to know them.”

“I’m just surprised Nikolas dropped Spencer on you like that last fall,” Elizabeth said. “He loved Spencer. Loves him. I can almost understand Lucky—almost—” she added when Laura narrowed her eyes. “But Nikolas—”

“He said he was in the middle of something and he wanted Spencer to be with family. He refused to give me more details. And he rarely calls either of us.” Laura grimaced. “I’m worried about him, but short of going to Greece myself and dragging him home—I don’t know what else to do.”

“I wanted to run something by you that Jason suggested,” Elizabeth said. “Um, a few years ago—Jason and I were—we were thinking about getting married. That—that fell through obviously. But he’d planned to...” Her voice tightened. “We were going to raise the boys. Lucky was already spending less time with them, and he wanted to adopt Cameron then.”

“I thought you told me you didn’t think you’d get married again,” Laura said.

“I—I don’t know. Um, Jason knows how I feel about that. We...” Elizabeth sighed, pushed her salad around with her fork. “We argued about it. I know he’d say we didn’t. But we did. He’s...he’s still trying to prove that he’s staying, and I don’t need proof. I just need him to do it. But I don’t think marriage is in the cards for me. I’m—I’m not good at it. But—I could—he was wondering if maybe adopting Cameron was something we could do.”

Laura pursed her lips. “And you’re not sure?”

“I am...” Elizabeth searched for the right words. “Apprehensive. I know Jason wouldn’t suggest it if he didn’t mean it. But I also know—I know that legal ties should mean something. And they don’t always. I mean—I had a legal tie to Lucky twice. And well...” She jerked a shoulder. “And Jason and I have been engaged. I’ve heard these promises before.”

“I’m surprised Jason moved in when you’re still so unsure,” Laura said. “Are you sure that was the right choice?”

“I don’t know.” Elizabeth met Laura’s eyes. “But I don’t know what time was going to change. If he’s staying, then he’s staying. And I wanted him to know that I’m trying hard to trust it. Trust him. And I do most of the time. I think it’s me. He hasn’t done a single thing since—God—since September—and I can’t quite bring myself to go all in.”

“It’s hard, sweetie. I know that. When Luke and I divorced the first time, that was the right choice.” Laura paused. “We had just gone so far down the wrong path and we needed a change. If...If I hadn’t had my breakdown, I think maybe he and I could have made it. But time had changed us too much by the time I recovered. He’d changed too much. But I loved him so much, I wonder if he came to me and asked to take just one more chance—” Laura smiled wistfully. “I wonder if I’d be able to resist.”

“That’s kind of how I feel sometimes,” Elizabeth admitted. “And I start to think this is just another version of what happened with Lucky. I loved him so much for so long, and losing him broke me in so many pieces — I kept trying so hard to get it back. For ten years, Laura. With Jason—it’s—we never had a chance. Not really. We were engaged for a total of ten minutes. Ten minutes of perfection.” She swiped a tear. “Sometimes I think we’re just together because we miss Jake. We feel guilty.”

“Have you talked to Jason about this?” Laura asked softly.

“No. Because it’s...it’s fleeting. And I think it’s me. Because I’m scared so I make up reasons to explain the fear. Because this isn’t like Lucky. We’re not building old dreams — Jason’s—Jason’s all in. I know it. He’d marry me tomorrow if I agreed.”

“It doesn’t matter if Jason’s all in,” Laura told her. “It matters if you are. Do you want to be?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.” She cleared her throat. “Because sometimes he looks at me, and I can see how he feels. And I want to trust it. I know that I love him. I just—I don’t know how to get over this.”

“It’s so easy to let fear run your life,” Laura said. “I remember when Nikolas first came to town—it was so difficult. I believed Stefan was his father, and it was difficult enough for Luke to accept him even though he believed he was the result of—” She cast her eyes away, and the words were unsaid. Luke believed Nikolas was the product of marital rape.

“I was terrified he’d learn that I’d have an affair with Stefan,” Laura murmured. “For years, I lived that way. And I kept myself from Nikolas. I can never have that

time back.” She focused on Elizabeth. “But then Luke learned the truth — at least the truth as we believed it. And as terrible as it was — I was free. The lies were done. There’s something so liberating about telling the truth even when it destroys everything.”

“I wish I were keeping a secret,” Elizabeth said with a sigh. “I wish this could be as easy as just telling the truth. But I don’t know how to fix it.”

“If you’re afraid of jumping in,” Laura replied, “then the answer is usually to dive in head first. Jason wants to adopt Cameron. He wants to have a permanent role in your son’s life. And after what Cam’s heard about Lucky, that little boy deserves it. If you’re really not ready for your relationship with Jason to change, then go for the shallow end of the pool. What does Cameron want?”

### **Cassadine Estate: Gardens**

Nikolas scrubbed his hands over his face, stared at the missed call from his mother and the voice mails he knew were from her.

He knew he’d never be able to explain this to her — to Spencer — who might never forgive him, but Spencer was safe. He was growing up with his mother who would protect him from the darkness of his own family.

Nikolas had been fighting them his whole life only to learn there was always another battle. He could never win the war. Somehow—the Cassadines always rose from the ashes to continue the onslaught.

He forced a smile as Jake inched his way into the garden, on the hand of the nanny hired to look after him and give him a few lessons. “Uncle Nik!”

Jake let go of the nanny’s hand and hurled himself at his uncle. “I missed you! It’s been days!”

“I know, I know. I tried to get back sooner, but Grandmother keeps me busy.” He settled Jake at his side, waited for the nanny to melt away. “Have you been good for Berta?”

“Yup. Just like Mama said. Always be nice unless people mean. Then you get even.” Jake flashed his bright smile at him—sometimes he looked so much like Elizabeth Nikolas could hardly stand it.

“That sounds like your mother,” Nikolas agreed. He pulled out his phone. “I have new photos for you. From Christmas.”

“Christmas was a long time ago,” Jake said with a sad sigh. “But okay. Can I go home soon? I miss Mommy. I miss Cam. And I don’t even know Aiden.”

“I know.” Nikolas handed him the phone. “This is your mother at the GH Christmas party. She’s holding your little brother. And that’s—” He paused. “That’s your dad. He’s got Cameron. They’re waiting to hear Uncle Patrick tell the story.”

“Daddy’s in a lot of the pictures now,” Jake said, furrowing his little brow. “He didn’t used to be.”

“No,” Nikolas murmured. “But he and your mother miss you so much. They talk about you often.” He didn’t know for sure, but it was an easy guess. Next month, Jake would have been gone from Port Charles two years.

Two years was a long time to keep memories alive, but the moment Nikolas had discovered Jake’s existence here — he’d been determined to bring home. To make sure Jake never forgot the mother who loved him. The brothers who needed him.

Elizabeth had sacrificed too much for him—for his family for Nikolas not to return the favor.

“She’s so pretty,” Jake said. “I miss her,” he repeated. “I wanna go home. Doesn’t Mommy want me home?”

“She thinks about nothing else,” Nikolas said fervently. “And she wants you home every day. I’m trying so hard to make it happen, kiddo. I promise. Soon. I—” When Jake rubbed his eyes and sniffled, Nikolas made a rash promise. “You’ll be with your mother by your birthday. I swear.”

“Birthday?” Jake frowned. “I’m six on May 7,” he told Nikolas. “It’s February. Nanny says that means—” He stared at his hand, then counted. “First comes January, February, March, April, May—that’s still so long! I want to go home now!” He shoved the phone at Nikolas and hurled himself off the bench. “Now! Tell Mommy I don’t wanna wait!”

“She can’t—” Nikolas swallowed hard. “She can’t do anything about it. It’s not her decision.”

“Why? Why can’t I be with my mommy? I wanna be with Daddy. My real daddy. You said my real daddy cried so hard when I left. I want my mommy!” Jake shouted.

“Calm down,” Nikolas said, casting an uneasy look over his shoulder. Last he heard, Helena was irritating Victor in Russia, but his father walked the grounds and



Nikolas wasn't sure about his loyalty on the best of days. "Jake, I told you. We have to be careful. Someone took you from Mommy to hurt her. And it worked. She's hurting so much without you. But I have to be sure no one else gets hurt when I take you home."

Jake sniffled, then sat on the ground. "I want my mommy," he said again, but his voice had subsided. He focused his eyes on Nikolas, and for the first time, Nikolas saw Jason in those eyes. A hard glare. "I will hate you forever if I don't get my mommy when I turn five."

"Fair enough." Nikolas held his hand out. "We should get you home—back to the cottage with Uncle Stavros," he said grounding out the name.

"Okay." Jake climbed to his feet. "And I can't talk about Mommy, I know. Or Daddy or Cam. The next time you come, can you bring me her voice? I don't remember what she sounds like anymore."

"I—I can do that." Nikolas handed Jake back to Berta along with the usual bribe. "I'll see you in a few weeks," he murmured before heading back up to the main house and the emptiness of his estate without his son.

If Nikolas couldn't bring Jake home soon, a lot of people were going to hate him forever.

### **Rafina, Greece: Bar**

Luke Spencer slid onto a bar stool next to his son and removed the fisherman's cap he wore over his thin hair. "Hey, Cowboy."

"Dad." Lucky kept himself crouched over the ouzo he was sipping. "You get eyes on him?"

"I did. First time in weeks," Luke admitted. "But there's a lot of guards. I don't think we're going to get the kid out without some big guns—"

"No," Lucky snapped. "My enemy did this. It's my fault. It's your fault. We're going to make this right." He stared blindly at the dull, aged wood of the bar. "I can't make it right any other way."

"I'm the one that caused the accident, Cowboy. You said some harsh words to Elizabeth," Luke said. "It's not the same thing—"

"I did this. I did something that made her go to him." Lucky tossed back the rest of his drink, called for another. "I made her so miserable she wanted to hurt me. I can

fix this. I can make her love me if I bring Jake home.”

Luke pursed his lips, signaled for a whiskey. “Uh, Cowboy—”

Lucky turned to look at his father, his blue eyes unfocused and glazed from the alcohol. “I can fix this, Dad. You said you’d help. I can bring Jake home. We just have to get past the guards. And whoever’s in that cottage when Nikolas isn’t..”

He turned back to the new drink set in front of him. He picked it up, studied it. “And when I give Jake back to Elizabeth, I’ll make Nikolas regret the day he ever looked at her. And then I’ll kill him for kidnapping my son.”

Webber Home: Kitchen

It was a few days before Elizabeth could get Cameron on his own long enough to bring up the topic of adoption which was for the best, honestly, because Elizabeth wasn’t sure how she felt it about it herself.

Not that Jason wouldn’t be good for Cameron or that either of them would regret it, but she wondered what it said about her that she was willing to literally give Jason one of her boys — both of them really since Lucky barely managed to call Aiden once a month these days — but was hesitating to make any other kind of commitment.

She’d give him the boys she loved more than herself, but not herself.

And that was such a strange realization that Elizabeth almost let the whole idea drop, knowing Jason wouldn’t bring it up again if she didn’t.

Then Cameron trudged in after school on her day off, dragging his backpack by the strap. He let it go in the foyer, then went into the kitchen without a word to her. Elizabeth frowned, followed him, and watched him take out the gallon of milk, pour himself a glass, and get a box of cookies.

She folded her arms. “Tough day?” Elizabeth asked, leaning against the door frame. Cameron sighed, climbing up on the stool before dunking his first chocolate chunk cookie.

“Can I move to a new class?” he asked dully.

Elizabeth walked over to the counter, put the cap back on the milk, then put it away. “What happened?”

Cameron jerked a shoulder as he crammed the cookie into his mouth. “Emma’s mad

at me.”

“She never stays mad—”

She thinks I like Joss.”

Elizabeth furrowed her brow. “Joss? When did that happen?”

“Dunno. Girls are weird. She got mad at me because Trina hates Joss, and Trina is Emma’s girl best friend, and I think that’s supposed to mean something to me, but Trina isn’t in our class so it doesn’t matter if I like Joss—”

Elizabeth tipped her head, trying to follow this logic. “Wait, are Trina and Joss still mortal enemies?”

“Trina swore on blood,” Cameron told his mother very seriously. “Joss’s blood.”

“Oh—” Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut. “Do I want to know?”

“Last year,” Cameron replied. “We were on the playground, and Joss told Trina to brush her hair—”

Elizabeth winced. “She didn’t.”

“She did. Trina made that face, too, but then she punched Joss in the face—” Cameron’s mouth quirked up in a half smile. “That was funny. She hit her really hard, then started, like, hopping up and down, because she hurt her hand. Then everyone got in all kinds of trouble—their moms came to school—but anyway—before the teachers stopped it—Trina had Joss’s blood on her knuckles, and swore on it that she’d hate that—” Cameron hesitated. “Well, there were some words I’m not allowed to say—”

“I get the gist. I guess I missed this,” Elizabeth said with a sigh. She scratched her temple.

“It’s okay. Joss’s mom didn’t know what the big deal was, so Trina’s mom threatened to sue the school for something, and Mrs. Jacks had to take some sort of sensitivity course. So did Joss. She told me that it’s rude and mean to say things about a Black girl’s hair like she did, but that she wasn’t wrong, so she didn’t mean it when she said she was sorry—”

“Oh, Lord—” Elizabeth exhaled. “So wait—”

“Joss gave me that stupid Valentine,” Cameron muttered, “and Spencer told Emma

about it, but I'm not supposed to be friends with her anymore, Emma said."

"Cam—"

"But it was forever ago," Cameron complained, "and I didn't know what I was supposed to do. Emma said I was supposed to tear it up in front of Joss so she'd know, but that seemed really mean, Mom."

"It does," Elizabeth said, making a mental note to talk to Patrick — and possibly pass this on to Jason in case Carly was going to get into more trouble at some point. It didn't surprise her at all that Joss had a mouth on her like her mother.

And they'd only been in fourth grade the year before—Elizabeth couldn't even bring herself to imagine what they'd do in high school—

"So I told Emma that, and instead of not hurting Joss, Emma and Trina are mad at me, Spencer thought it was hysterical, and Joss is always mad at me because of Emma—" He sighed. "I tried to be nice to Spencer, Mom. Just like I told you and Jason. But it doesn't work. How come I always got to be the good guy? Everyone else gets to be mean and stupid. It works for them."

"You never did ask the easy questions." Elizabeth reached for a cookie, dunked it in Cameron's milk. "It's hard to be a good person when it feels like everyone gets rewarded for doing the wrong thing. I get it, I do. But I've been on the other side." She pursed her lips. "Actually, I wasn't that different from Joss when I was a kid." Maybe not passively racist, she allowed, but — "I talked back to my parents, I skipped school whenever I could, I smoked—"

Cameron's eyes were wide. "Mom, smoking is really bad—"

"I know, I know. But I wanted people to look at me. And I didn't care if it was good or bad. I just wanted attention. I was selfish, and I was mean. A lot."

"That's not—" Cameron shook his head. "No. I don't believe it."

"I should put you on the phone with my sister one day." She chewed her cookie. "She'd tell you about the time I stole test answers in English class and planted them on her to get her kicked out of school."

"Mom!" Cameron was scandalized. "That's really bad!"

"It is. And it was exhausting being like that all the time. Never having anyone to talk to. The thing this, Cam, when you're the bad guy — when you're mean and stupid — you don't get to have any friends. Not really. I didn't have a single best

friend until I was sixteen.” She sighed, thinking wistfully of those days. Of the Four Musketeers and sharing brownies at Kelly’s.

“My life isn’t always easy, Cam, and I’m not always happy. Sometimes I still want to do the wrong thing because it’s easier. And it might get me what I want in the moment. But at the end of the day — doing the right thing — being a good person — it’s worth it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I turned out okay, right? I’m not perfect,” she said with a smile as Cameron smiled back at her. “But I do okay. And I’ve got great friends. I’ve got Patrick and your uncle Steven. I had Aunt Emily—” Her throat tightened lightly as it always did. “I have the best boys.”

“And you have Jason,” Cameron said. He poked out a chocolate chip. “I like having him around. And you’re happy with him. Did you do the good stuff? And that’s why you got to be happy this time?”

“Yeah,” she said softly. “I did the good stuff. The right stuff. Even though it was hard. Life isn’t easy, Cam. And the right choice is sometimes going to be the worst one. Joss and Trina might be enemies until death.” And since Joss was Carly’s daughter, and Carly still hated Elizabeth because Jason had let Elizabeth help him after being shot, not Carly —

“They probably will,” she corrected. “But how you treat people is up to you. Would it make you feel better to laugh in Joss’s face? Rip up her card?”

“No. I don’t like that Emma’s mad or that Trina got mad. She was really mad last year. And she cried. I don’t like that either.”

“You can’t win all the fights, Cam. Take the hits, get back up, and then live to fight another day.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “Actually, there’s something I wanted to ask you. About Jason.”

“Yeah? Emma said that since I’m the man of the house,” Cameron told her, “that when he wants to marry you, he’s gotta ask me. Is that true?”

“Well...” Elizabeth squinted. “No. Because you’re eight.”

“Almost nine.”

“And being nine won’t give you the ability to grant my hand in marriage either.”

“Okay.” Cameron shrugged. “So what about Jason?”

She cleared her throat. “He loves you and Aiden. And me,” she added. “You know we dated a little a few years ago. You were only about four.”

“I remember. He was around, and then he wasn’t. I thought—” Cameron stared down at the counter. “I thought he was gonna stay. And he didn’t. Why not? He’s Jake’s real dad. Didn’t he love him?”

“He did—he does love Jake. We will always love Jake,” Elizabeth said. She reached across the island counter, squeezed Cameron’s hand. Waited for him to meet her eyes. “And what happened four years ago—Michael got hurt. You remember? He has that scar. And he was asleep for a whole year. Jason got scared you and Jake would get hurt. So he left. But it was a mistake. We know that. I shouldn’t have let him leave, and he shouldn’t have gone.”

“Okay.” Cameron frowned at her. “So are you getting married?”

“No. But back then—Jason was going to adopt you,” Elizabeth said. “So that he would be your father legally. And forever.”

Cameron looked away, looked down at the counter. “Is...do you want him to adopt me?”

“That’s up to you, baby. Because this didn’t come from me. This is something Jason suggested. Something he wants.”

“He—” Cameron swallowed hard. Looked at her again. “He does? Why?”

“Because he loves you.”

“But—if you got married, he’d be my stepfather. I don’t—”

“If you don’t want it—”

“I—I just—” Cameron blinked hard, swiping an hand under his eyes. “I want it,” he said in a small voice. “I don’t need a dad. You’re awesome, Mom. Just you. But it’d be okay. To have a guy. In case I needed one.”

“But?” she prompted softly.

“He...wanted me before, you said. But he left. And I didn’t know him anymore. What—” Cameron shoved cookie crumbs around the counter. “What if he changes his mind again?”

Elizabeth bit her lip. “Cam—”

“Or you guys have another baby. You might want another kid. And what if Jason gets a real one?”

“You would be his real kid—” She paused. “It’s okay to say no, Cameron. It’s important for you to be comfortable.”

“I—don’t wanna say no. I just—” Cameron sniffled. “It’s just scary to say yes.”

“I know. It’s a lot to ask. And you know, Jason would answer these questions if you want to talk to him about it,” Elizabeth told him.

“Can I—can I think about it?” he asked.

“Sure.” Elizabeth forced a smile as her stomach twisted. Her little boy had the same trust issues as she did. Neither of them had a lot of experience with people who wanted to stay.

And she really didn’t know what to do with that realization.

Spencer House: Living Room

Laura scowled as she scanned the note from Spencer’s teacher, then raised her eyes to glare at her grandson. “Spencer Michael Cassadine—”

“It’s really not that serious,” Spencer began as he flashed a smile at her. “It’s one little F—”

“Because you didn’t bother to even start the math test—”

“I don’t need any of that,” Spencer said scornfully. “I’m a prince—”

“Not if I don’t let you live to reach eighteen,” Laura muttered as she stalked away from him, towards her ringing cell phone. She hadn’t really raised Luke or Lulu once they’d hit the teen years, but Lucky hadn’t been this mouthy—

Had he? Luke had always known how to handle him—he’d always been Luke’s son—

“Hello?” Laura demanded, not bothering to check the caller ID. “I have a nine-year-old for sale if you’re interested. Slightly used, bit of a mouth—”

“Well, Darlin’, I don’t think that’s a good idea seeing as he’s the Spawn of the Dark Prince.”

Laura sighed and turned away from Spencer’s eye roll. “Luke?” she said. “What’s going on? I haven’t heard from you in months—”

“I know, I know, I’ve been looking up some things with Cowboy,” her ex-husband said. “That’s why I’m calling. Uh, we—I got myself into something here. And I need you.”

“You need me,” Laura said. She narrowed her eyes. “What did you do?”

“For once,” Luke said carefully, “I feel like I might be on the side of the angels—”

“That has literally never been true a day in your life, Lucas Lorenzo Spencer—”

“I’m glad I’m not the only one getting the full name treatment,” Spencer muttered.

“Now, Laura—”

“Don’t Laura me. Call Robert. Or Ethan,” Laura retorted. “I have things to do—”

“Robert and Ethan can’t take care of these things, Angel,” Luke said. “It’s Cowboy. I can’t—I think he needs you. I—I thought I could help. I thought we do this on our own, but he’s—he’s starting to look wrong. Like he did before.”

Her blood chilled. “Luke—”

“And Helena’s up to no good. Some serious, serious no good. I just—I need you to come to Greece. I need you to help me with our boy. Before we lose him for good.”

“I can’t just come to Greece. You need to tell me more—”

“I—”

Laura heard nothing but his breathing on the phone for a long minute. “He’s threatening to kill Nikolas, Laura. He thinks Nikolas kidnapped his son.”

“What?” Laura demanded, her shrill tone grabbing Spencer’s attention. He furrowed his brow, sitting up from his flip on the couch. “Spencer right here—”

“Not Nikolas’s son. Lucky’s—” Luke paused. “Well, I guess he’s still Lucky’s. On paper.”



Laura closed her eyes. She put her hand against the back of the sofa. “Luke. You need to tell me everything. Now.”

Webber Home: Living Room

Elizabeth frowned as she passed in front of the living room window and saw Laura’s car in her driveway—and Laura and Spencer walking across the front lawn—followed by Patrick and Emma. “Jason,” she murmured.

Jason looked up from the dinner table where he was coaxing Aiden to eat his vegetables—he always refused to eat them for her—and got to his feet. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth said. She went over to the door, reaching it just as Laura raised her hand to knock. “What’s wrong?” she said to her former mother-in-law. Laura’s face was pale, her eyes looked shocky. And Spencer wasn’t even glowering as the four of them stepped inside.

“I’ll explain in a minute. I’m sorry just to show up like this—um—” She pressed a hand to her head.

“She asked me to come over,” Patrick told Elizabeth. “Emma—” He nodded at Cameron. “Cam, Spencer, go upstairs. Don’t kill each other. I mean it.”

Cameron got warily to his feet, pausing his Mario Kart game. “Mom—”

“Go upstairs,” Elizabeth repeated. “Please.” Her palms felt sweaty. God, what if something had happened to Lucky? But why would Laura bring Patrick over—

Cameron start up the stairs, and the bewildered Emma and Spencer followed him. A few minutes later, Elizabeth heard his bedroom door close. She paused, leaned up the stairs.

“I didn’t hear enough steps over my head—”

“How does she always know?” Emma hissed. A few minutes later, they heard the door again—and this time, there were steps over Elizabeth’s head.

“Laura—”

“I asked Patrick to come over because if—if I’m right—if Luke is right—” Laura twisted her hands together. “You’ll want someone to take care of the boys—”

Jason lifted Aiden into his arms and came over to stand next to Elizabeth. “Laura,

what's going on—”

“Luke called me tonight. He needs me to come to Greece because Lucky is there. He's threatening to kill Nikolas.”

“I—” Elizabeth started to shake her head, exchanging a bewildered look with Jason because what did that have to do with them—

“He says Nikolas kidnapped his son. And Luke said—Luke said—” Laura's voice almost broke. “He said he saw him.”

“Saw—” Elizabeth's entire body froze. Her brain simply stumbled to a halt.

“Laura—” Patrick said.

“Elizabeth, Luke said he saw Jake on the grounds of the Cassadine estate,” Laura told her. She reached for Elizabeth's hand as Elizabeth stared at her blankly. “He saw him. Alive.”

“I can't—” Elizabeth shook her head. “No—No—”

“Jake is alive,” Laura repeated, more firmly. “But there's more—”

“More—” Patrick demanded, his face pale, his dark eyes stark against the color. “How can there be more—”

“He saw Jake with Nikolas,” Elizabeth finished faintly.

“Not just Nikolas. Elizabeth—it's not just Jake who's alive. It's Stavros.”

“St-Stavros,” Elizabeth repeated, her pulse skittering. “Stavros. Your—Nikolas's—”

“Who the hell is Stavros?” Patrick demanded.

Elizabeth looked at him, as her head felt faint. “Can you imagine someone worse than Helena? Because that's—That's who has my little boy” She swayed slightly and Jason shoved Aiden at his grandmother, catching Elizabeth before she hit the floor.

### **Webber House: Cameron's Bedroom**

Spencer stared at the closed door with a suspicious look. “They're very quiet down there,” he said.

Cameron wrinkled his nose and went over to the heating vent. He shoved his hockey uniform off and leaned closer. “Shut up, or I can’t hear anything,” he muttered.

“Whoa—I thought your mom found out—” Emma launched herself off the bed and joined Cameron the floor, laying on her stomach.

“What did I just say?” Cameron said to her with narrowed eyes. “Quiet.”

“Luke...Cassadines...”

“Oh, no,” Spencer muttered. “Not again—”

“Shhh—”

Cameron heard his mother’s voice, sharp, upset—but he couldn’t make out the words.

“Nikolas—” That was Grandma Laura this time. “Stavros—”

Spencer straightened, his face paling. “Stavros.”

“Who’s that?”

Cameron cleared his throat. “Uh, I think that’s not a good thing, is it?”

“That’s my grandfather. He died before I was born. A long time ago—”

“...worse than...”

“This is terribly inefficient,” Spencer muttered.

“I can’t just go to Greece!”

That was his mother again, and Cameron scowled. “Why would anyone go to Greece? What the heck—”

“Elizabeth—” Voices faded out again, and then Cameron heard Emma’s dad.

“Why the hell would they take Jake?”

Emma gasped loudly, then clamped her hands over her mouth as the voices in the living room stopped. Cameron shoved the hockey shirt back over the vent, grabbed Spencer and Emma and was dragging them over to his video games when the door

opened.

Patrick was there, a brow arched. “Heating vents? Really. I’m disappointed. I would have thought with Spencer’s ingenuity, you would have rigged up a system to dangle one of you outside the window downstairs so you could hear everything.”

“Well, given some time and materials,” Spencer began.

Patrick crooked his finger. “Come with me.”

“We gotta get better than this,” Emma told Cameron as the three of them filed down the hall to Elizabeth’s bedroom.

In the back of the house, with a heating vent that was not at all connected to the living room. “I’m never gonna know anything again,” Cameron muttered. “And what’s this about Jake? Did someone hurt him? Is that why he died?”

Patrick hesitated, then handed them the remote. “Do me a favor, guys, stay young for a while longer. You got the rest of your lives for the crap Port Charles is going to throw at you.”

Then he closed the door.

Spencer glared after him, then turned to Cameron. “If someone hurt your brother, and it was from my family, then I’m honor bound to right this wrong.”

“What did he just say?” Emma said with a furrowed brow. “What’s happening?”

“If someone from your family killed my brother,” Cameron said, darkly, “then you’ll have to get in line.”

“You guys—” Emma began. Then sighed. “We should call Joss.”

The boys blinked at her. “You hate Joss,” Cameron said suspiciously. “A lot. You yelled at me for being nice to her.”

“That’s true,” Emma said. “But Joss has something we don’t. And if you guys think you’re gonna avenge something, it’ll probably be in Greece. I was listening in class the other day, and I think that’s on the other side of the world.”

“And Joss can help us with that?” Spencer said skeptically.

“Joss’s dad has a private plane. And her brother’s dad has a plane, too. Do you either of you dorks have a plane?”

“No,” Cameron said slowly. “But—”

“I’ll call Trina, too. She’s always got plans, and hers usually work.” Satisfied, she went over to the land line on Elizabeth’s night table. “Let’s get started.”

## **Living Room**

Elizabeth dragged her hands through her hair. “I don’t understand how any of this is happening,” she said to Laura as Patrick came down the stairs. “How—”

Her little boy. Her precious angel—She looked at Jason whose jaw was clenched. The idea that their baby boy was alive and with the Cassadines—

“We can’t just go to Greece,” he said after a minute. “Not if this is about the Cassadines. We can’t jump into it. I remember when Helena was going after Emily—and I don’t—” He met Elizabeth’s eyes. “I can’t believe Nikolas would have helped anyone take Jake.”

“Luke didn’t explain why Lucky’s convinced of that, either,” Laura said. “The kids are in the back room now?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know what they heard,” Patrick told them. “You might want to do some damage control later.”

“This is—” Elizabeth picked Aiden up from the playpen where Laura had set him, started to pace. “Why would Helena take Jake? To get back at Luke?”

“Maybe, but why keep him? I mean, it came out pretty quick that Lucky wasn’t Jake’s father. That would have mattered,” Laura said. “Blood is everything to her.”

“She hates you,” Patrick reminded Elizabeth. “She lied about Aiden’s paternity to torture everyone, including Nikolas. Do you think she’d do this to go after you?”

“I—” Elizabeth hesitated. “I just—I don’t know. I don’t know anything. Jason—” She pressed her lips to Aiden’s curly hair, closing her eyes. Remembering another little boy that had been just a little bigger than him.

“How sure is Luke?” Jason asked. “If he’s screwing with us and Jake’s not—” He swallowed hard. “He saw him? He actually laid eyes on him—”

“He says he did. He says he and Lucky have both seen Jake, but they can’t get close enough.” Laura shook her head. “Luke might be a lot of things, but I don’t think he’d come to me with this if he didn’t know for sure. And I agree, we can’t just run

off to Greece. Not right this second. But I'm worried about what else Luke told me—"

"Lucky threatening to kill Nikolas," Elizabeth remembered. "If he thought Nikolas did this on purpose—but he has to know—I mean, God, everything else aside—Nikolas would never do that to us."

"But Luke saw Nikolas with Jake," Patrick told her. "If that's what he's saying, Nikolas knows he's alive and hasn't said a word. In fact, he dumped his kid on Laura. Maybe so he could devote his time to whatever his grandmother and father are planning."

"Stavros," Elizabeth repeated. "How can this be possible? How many times do we have to kill him?"

"Now, you say he's worse than Helena—" Patrick looked at Jason. "What do you know about him?"

"I don't know," Jason said, shaking his head. "I wasn't living here the last time he was around. By the time I came home, it was over."

"Stavros collects things," Laura murmured. "He saw me when Luke and I went to the Cassadine Island to stop Mikkos from freezing the world. He decided he wanted me. So Helena kidnapped me. Forced me to live there. Marry him." She sat on the sofa, weary. "For three long years."

Because Laura was pale and shaky, Elizabeth took up the tale. "The official story was that Laura escaped, and Luke killed Stavros when Stavros came to get her back. That's what we all believed. Until the garage fire. Helena kidnapped Lucky to brainwash him and turn him against the Spencers. Under her control, Lucky—" She rubbed her chest. God this was supposed to over.

Why didn't Cassadines ever stay dead?

"Lucky threatened Lucas's life if Tony Jones didn't revive Stavros. Helena had all these labs and tunnels under the hospital. So Tony brought Stavros back to life." Elizabeth took a deep breath. "Nikolas pretended to be loyal to Helena in order to get on her side, to get a head of things, but he had to kill me to prove his loyalty."

"Of course he did," Patrick muttered. "I don't like where this is going—"

"You shouldn't," Jason said dryly. "She took a poison that made her heart slow down to the point she appeared dead. Sonny sent her to the island."

Surprised, Elizabeth looked at him, and he smiled wanly. “Carly took a great deal of pleasure in contacting me to tell me you were dead.”

“Oh—” Elizabeth scowled. “Naturally.”

“Sonny got word to me—” He shook his head. “Anyway.”

“We won that time,” Laura said, “and Stavros—I thought he was dead. But no body. I should know better by now.” She got to her feet. “I understand if you can’t come to Greece right away, Elizabeth, but I have to go. I have to make sure Lucky doesn’t hurt Nikolas.”

“Of course, Laura, but just—” Elizabeth rubbed a finger against her bottom lip. “I want to go. I can—I can try to explain things at work—”

“You have more vacation time coming than most people get in a life time,” Patrick told her. “And you know I’ll take care of the boys. I might have to tie them up—” he said with a wince, “but I got this.”

Elizabeth looked at Jason. “Can—”

“I’ll call Sonny,” Jason told her. “And Spinelli. I’ll get the jet ready and he’ll meet us there. Whatever we need to know, we can figure out on the way there.”

“What are we going to tell the kids?” Laura said. “We can’t tell the truth—”

“Actually—” Elizabeth paused. “That’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

### **Jason & Elizabeth’s Bedroom**

Elizabeth was unsurprised to find Emma on the phone while Spencer and Cameron were furiously writing things down, using the notepad she kept in her nightstand and a fuzzy pink pen from her vanity table.

“So who’s plane are you trying to commandeer?” she asked.

Cameron dropped the pen, scowling as Emma’s eyes widened. “Joss, I’ll call you back later.” She slammed the phone down, and smiled at Elizabeth. “Hi, Aunt Elizabeth. Everything okay?”

“Joss, huh? I know how you feel about her, so that’s real loyalty. Too bad for Joss that her father’s plane is out of town,” Elizabeth said, “and we’re taking Sonny’s. Any other friends with private planes?”

“No,” Spencer muttered. “But I’ll find one. This is Port Charles—”

“Mom, did someone hurt Jake?” Cameron asked, his lip trembling. “Is that why he’s gone?”

“Actually,” Elizabeth said, hoping she wasn’t making a mistake. “It looks like there’s a chance that he’s not—” Oh, God, her little boy—he was alive! *Let it be true. Please, please, let it be true.*

“We heard you guys talking about my family,” Spencer said. “If my family hurt Jake, I have to help fix it. It’s a matter of honor—”

“You are not responsible for your family,” Elizabeth told him. She sat on the bed, ruffled his hair. “As a Cassadine, you need to learn that early. Your father still hasn’t. I think the reason he left you with Grandma Laura was to do exactly that. Grandpa Luke says he’s seen Jake,” she said to Cameron.

“Seen him—” Cameron shook his head. “But—but when you saw him, you had to go away—”

“I was so sad, I dreamed I was seeing him. But Luke says he really—he really did. He’s in Greece with Lucky. They’ve seen Jake. Alive. On the Cassadine estate with Nikolas.”

“With my dad—but—”

“I think your dad found out that your great-grandmother has been keeping a lot of secrets that would hurt people, and he decided to make it right.” Elizabeth saw Jason standing in the doorway. “The jet?”

“Wheels up in an hour,” he said.

“Is it really true?” Cameron asked him. “Is Jake alive?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. He met Elizabeth’s eyes. “I’m not sure I can trust it,” he admitted. “But whatever is going on, we need to find out.”

“You and Spencer are going to stay with Emma and Patrick,” she told Cameron. “I need you two to promise me—no, the three of you,” she said, crooking a finger at Emma who made a face. “That you are not going to tie Patrick up, steal a plane, and follow us.”

Jason raised his brows, but she just shook her head and continued. “I know you want to help. And I love all of you for it, but this isn’t a game. I’ve been fighting the



Cassadines since I was a few years older than you. And I don't want it for you."

Emma sat next to her on bed. "But what can we do here? We have to do something. We need bring Jake home. And Spencer's dad. We need to help."

"You can help by staying here," Jason told her. He looked at Cameron. "We'll bring Jake home."

"If he's alive," the little boy said with a sigh. "I'm afraid it's not true," he told his mother. He swiped at his cheek. "But if it is, don't leave without him, okay? I want my brother back."

"If Jake's out there, there's no way I'm not bringing him home." Elizabeth pulled her eldest into a tight hug. "There's nowhere in this world I wouldn't go for my boys." She kissed his forehead. "Now, go into your room. Get your things together. Spencer—"

"Grandma Laura brought my things in the car," he said. He looked oddly vulnerable. "Do you really think my dad is away trying to make things right?"

"That sense of honor you have? The need to make up for your family?" Elizabeth smiled at him. "Where do you think it comes from? It's not Helena. Nikolas loves you. The only reason he'd give you up would be to keep you safe. Trust me — you don't want to be in the middle of this, Spencer."

### **Cameron's Bedroom**

Jason followed Cameron into his bedroom and watched the eight-year-old pull a bag from his closet. "Do you want me to help you with anything?" he asked.

"No, I'm okay." Cameron sat on the edge of his bed, staring down at the carpet for a minute. "Mom told me what you asked her. That you wanted to adopt me."

Jason hesitated, then sat next to him. "I know. She said you wanted time to think about it."

"I want Jake to come home," Cameron said. He sniffled. "I want it a lot. I love my brother. I want Mom to have him back. But mostly because I think if he's here, we'll be okay again." He looked at Jason. "Why do you want me? I'm not a baby. I know I'm not your kid. Not really. Not like Jake."

"If we decided to do this, you would be my kid. Just like Jake. I'm adopted," Jason told him. "Monica isn't my biological mother, either. She adopted me when I was a baby. And after the accident, when I didn't remember her—she never stopped loving

me. Sometimes you're born in a family, Cam. Sometimes blood does that. But I got to choose a family after my accident. I chose Sonny and Carly. And your mother."

"Mom told me Aunt Emily was adopted, too." Cameron's lip trembled. "And I never knew that because no one never said it. She wasn't your real sister—"

"What does real mean?" Jason said. "It's just a word, Cameron. I want to choose you because I love you. I've known you all your life. And I want to be part of the rest of it." He ruffled Cameron's curls. "But you have to want it, too."

"Maybe. But I don't know yet." Cameron sighed heavily. "But maybe. I want Jake to be alive so much it hurts," he whispered fiercely. He turned and hurled himself into Jason's arms. "I miss him. Don't let nothing else happen to him. Or Mom. Okay?"

"Okay." Jason hugged him back. "I promise."

"You scared, too?" Cameron said, his voice muffled. "That it's not true?"

"Terrified," Jason admitted. "I'm trying not to think about it. Just putting one foot in front of the other until we know."

"Mom will be really sad if he's not alive. Don't let her get too sad because she had to go away last time. I don't want to lose Mom again."

"You won't," Jason promised. "Let's get your things together, okay?"

"Okay."

## **Front Porch**

Elizabeth watched as Laura walked over to Patrick's house with all the kids, rubbing her arms. "Is this really happening?" she asked Jason as he came to stand next to her. "We're going to Greece to bring our son home?"

"Maybe," Jason cautioned. "I know Luke said he was sure—"

"I know you're not convinced. And maybe I'm wrong to cling to it. But it makes a terrible amount of sense," Elizabeth said. She looked at him, her eyes shadowed in the setting sunlight. "Helena has always hated me. And she came to taunt me while I was in Shadybrooke. She could have done this, Jason."

"She didn't do it alone," Jason said softly. "If Jake's alive, someone else had to know. How else did Joss get a kidney?"

Elizabeth pressed her lips together, then stared blindly out to her front lawn. “You think Luke is lying.”

“I don’t know,” Jason said, hesitantly. “I want it to be true,” he said in a low voice. “And if it is—if anyone at the hospital knew—”

“We’ll find out who took our little boy from us.” She lifted her chin. “And we’ll make them all pay.”

#### Port Charles Airport: Private Hangar

Elizabeth wasn’t expecting both of the men who met them at the steps of Sonny’s private plane, but she was touched to see Sonny Corinthos standing next to Spinelli. Since his botched wedding to Kate a few months ago, Sonny had been laying low, struggling with Kate’s relapse and struggle with her dissociative identity disorder.

“I didn’t know you were coming,” Jason said, echoing Elizabeth’s thoughts as Laura and Spinelli boarded to get started on retcon — Elizabeth knew Spinelli was planning to pull anything Laura remembered from her time on the island to help them put together everything they could before they landed in Mykonos, the closest airport to the Cassadine’s private, unnamed island.

“You tell me there’s a chance your son is alive,” Sonny began, “and I’m not staying home. How many times did you put yourself on the line for my kids?” He set a hand against his chest, his voice a bit rusty.

“Thank you,” Elizabeth told him. She squeezed his other hand. “Did you put Carly on guard to make sure Joss doesn’t find a way to get to Jax’s plane?”

Sonny grinned, his dimple flashing. “Funny thing — Carly was still on the phone with me when she caught Joss trying to sweet talk Jax into coming back from Sydney.”

Jason just shook his head lightly. “They were really planning it,” he said incredulously.

“You mean Robin, Elizabeth, and Carly’s kids were planning to help?” Sonny snorted. “Of course they were.”

“I think that was half compliment, half insult—” Sonny just laughed as he turned and boarded the plane.

Elizabeth looked up the stairs after him. Once she boarded, once the plane took off this — this was real.

“Whatever we find in Greece,” Jason told her, his voice quiet against her ear, “we’ll get through it.”

“The hope hurts more than anything else,” she murmured. “If Luke is lying to us—if he’s wrong—” She looked at Jason. “I’m just barely getting past losing him.” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “But if there’s even a small chance he’s out there—”

“We’ll bring him home,” Jason told her.

Inside the airplane, Spinelli had already set up mission control at a large table, his fingers flying over a laptop. He said something to Laura who was peering over her shoulder.

“You need to get belted in for take set off,” Jason told him as he stored his and Elizabeth’s bags in one of the compartments. “We can get back to this—”

“I can’t believe you’re tapping into active satellites,” Laura said, a touch of wonder in her voice. She sat next to Sonny in one of the take off chairs, pulling the seatbelt across her lap. “When I was on the island with Luke back with the Ice Princess, all we had were the crappy maps Robert pilfered from the WSB—”

“Speaking of Sir Robert,” Spinelli said as Jason grabbed him by the shoulder and all but shoved him into his takeoff chair before returning to the table and closing the laptop and securing it for take off. “Have we considered calling in reinforcements?”

“Not until we know more,” Laura said. “Luke—I’m sure there’s more he’s not telling me. How did he and Lucky get on this trail in the first place? Robert will want to call in Anna, and Luke does not want that—”

She sighed, looked at Sonny as if noticing she was next to him for the first time. “Thank you. For the use of the plane.”

“Almost like old times,” Sonny said. “You still handy with a shotgun?”

About twenty minutes later, the plane had taken off and made it to cruising altitude. Spinelli threw off his seatbelt and rushed back over to his computer.

“Can you zoom in with the satellites?” Sonny asked as they crowded him. “Get some eyes on who is where?”

“No so much,” Spinelli said with a frown as he continued typing. “But once we’re on the ground in Greece, and closer, I can use the satellite connection to pick up any security camera feeds. Once I know what I’m looking for, I can hack in and get some

better information.”

“Can he really do that?” Elizabeth asked, folding her arms. It had been years since she’d seen Spinelli at work. She bit her lip.

“I used to doubt him, too,” Jason admitted, putting arm around her shoulders. “But he was able to get me inside the Metro Court when it was taken hostage.” They traded a glance, both remembering that because he’d been there, he’d been able to save her life—and she’d told him about Jake.

“I have it!” Spinelli announced. He grinned at Laura. “Does this look familiar?”

“Yes—” Laura gestured at the screen. “That’s the main estate. The house that Mikkos’ father built when they came to Greece after fleeing Russia. It was built into the cliff, and—” She took a deep breath. “It’s where I lived.”

“What about the grounds?” Jason said, and she blinked. “What other buildings?”

“There was a dower house,” Laura continued. “In the gardens. There’s a vineyard, of course. And orchards. And Stavros had elaborate English gardens planted while I was there.” She nodded as Spinelli moved the satellite. “Yes — the dower house was in the English gardens. Mikkos’ mother lived there, but I think she’d died. Just before the Ice Princess, maybe.” She squinted at the screen. “That wasn’t there when we came in 1980,” she said. “And I don’t remember it from my time.”

“But it could have been added since—” Sonny began, but Laura shook her head.

“Stefan never cared much for Greece,” she told him. “He preferred the London house and the estate in Scotland. He raised Nikolas there most of the time to keep him from Helena as much as possible. He never added on. This wouldn’t have been there before 2003.”

“Added in the last decade doesn’t mean much,” Elizabeth said, then she paused. “Spinelli—” She leaned into the screen. “Am I wrong, or does that building look wrong?”

“Wrong?”

“It doesn’t fit,” Laura said with a nod. “If Nikolas had added it, he’d have made it match the rest of the estate. But this is an ugly, square building. A concrete block.”

“Wait—zoom out—” Jason waited as Spinelli obeyed. “And it’s set apart. Not the way the other house is—but—”

“Isolated,” Sonny said.

“We’ll want to start there for camera access,” Laura decided. “It’s probably one of Helena’s labs. She always had a hole to run to. She has something on Spoon Island, I’m sure of it. She’s able to slip in and out too much.”

“All right,” Spinelli said. “I’ll keep mapping the island, and try to get a sense of what kind of activity we can expect. I can probably find out if the coast is heavily guarded. It’s going to be hell getting on and off the island—”

“Luke will have that covered,” Sonny said. “He was always handy with a boat.”

### **Mykonos, Greece**

Luke sat on the terrace of the flat he had arranged for him and Cowboy, lingering over a cigar as he looked out over the Adriatic Sea and the dim lights of the Cassadine estate in the distance.

Behind him, Lucky was pacing and raging—another day with bad tides meant another scuttled rescue plan to the island. Luke glanced down at his phone when it lit up. His chest eased as he saw Laura’s text.

*On my way. In the air now. Bringing Jason and Elizabeth. And friends. Don’t go to the island until we get there.*

Then another message.

*Luke, tell me again that you’re sure. Tell me we’re not doing this to Elizabeth without proof.*

Luke exhaled, picked up the phone and opened up the message app. He’d held this back, had waited until he knew Laura was coming. Had worried if he sent this — she might not come, too.

He needed her. Cowboy needed her.

*Angel, I’ve never been more sure of anything in my whole life. If that’s not our boy, then he’s got a twin.*

He hit send, then attached the photograph. He turned to look at his son as Lucky flipped a coffee table, wincing. He just hoped they had enough time.

Plane

Laura made a face when Luke's first message came through — if he Angel'd her one more time—

And then the bottom fell out of her world as the photograph loaded. She brushed her fingers on the image, then zoomed in. She looked up to find Elizabeth sitting on one of the sofas, talking quietly to Jason. He said something, and Elizabeth smiled at him.

Laura looked back at the image of the little boy sitting next to Nikolas on a bench in the middle of a garden — at the grinning, blonde boy with his father's eyes and mother's smile.

If this wasn't Jake—

“Elizabeth,” Laura managed. She looked up, tears spilling over her cheeks.  
“Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth got to her feet, alarm spreading across her expression as she rushed across the plane. “Laura—”

Laura handed her the phone and Elizabeth stared at the photo—Jason was right behind her and they both paled as they took in the little boy.

“He's—” Elizabeth's voice faltered. “He's there.”

“He's older,” Jason said roughly. “He's—”

Jake had left them just before he'd turned four. He'd be six in a few months.

“And Nikolas is right there. Jake is smiling at him. He knows him—” Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut. “Oh, God, oh, God, it's real—it's real—he's real—” She turned to Jason, clutching her hands in his shirt. “You see him, too, don't you?” she demanded, shrilly. “Tell me you see him, too!”

“I see him.” Jason framed her face in his hands, leaned his forehead against hers as his voice dropped. “I see him. He's real. He's alive.”

Spinelli rose from the desk and approached the two of them. “If I could,” he said gently, “if I could see the phone—I could give you reassurances. I can look at the image on my computer and tell you if it's real. When it was taken. Where.”

With a trembling hand, Elizabeth looked at the phone, shook her head. “N-No—” She clutched it to her chest. “No, I can't—”

“Come with me,” the younger man said. “You can hold the phone. I’ll put the cord in. I don’t have to touch it. You just—just save it to the camera roll.”

Elizabeth sucked in a shaky breath, the sob rolling through it as she looked down at the photo. Her fingers were shaking so hard she could barely following Spinelli’s instructions so Jason’s larger hand covered hers and he saved the photo so that Spinelli could attach the cord and transfer the photo.

“Luke had that photo the whole time,” Sonny said, his tone tense. “And he held it back.” He traded a troubled look with Laura. “What the hell else is he hiding?”

“I don’t know, but if we can just bring Jake home—” Laura closed her eyes. “I’ll kill my husband later, Sonny. Just—God, I pray Spinelli doesn’t say the photo is fake or altered. I’m not sure she can handle it.”

“She’s stronger than she looks,” Sonny murmured, “but she shouldn’t have to do it. If Luke is screwing with them about this for one of his stupid plans—” He shook his head and sat down, putting his head in his hands.

### **Cassadine Estate: Lab**

Nikolas sighed and pushed open the heavy metal door, walking into the square room with its work station and cot. He closed it, then leaned against the door frame. “Hey.”

A woman with dark hair looked up from the desk, the skin beneath her eyes dark purple. “Hey,” she said dully. She cleared her throat. “What time is it?”

“Nearly nine,” Nikolas said. “In the morning,” he added because she was never allowed to leave the lab and there were no windows. “You didn’t sleep again.”

“Couldn’t. If I sleep, I’m wasting time.” She bit her lip, met his eyes. “I think it worked this time. I think the message got out. I just don’t know—God I don’t know if he’ll understand it. Nikolas—” Her voice broke. “I just want this to be over.”

“I promised Jake he’ll be home by his birthday,” Nikolas said with a false smile. “So, let’s hope Patrick can understand what you sent him, and that he gets it to Jason and Elizabeth.”

“Yeah.” Robin Scorpio dragged a hand through her hair. “Yeah, well, when Jason finds out that your family faked Jake’s death—” Her smile was humorless. “Your grandmother is going to wish she’d picked any other enemy. Jason will take her apart.”



“I’m counting on it,” Nikolas admitted. “How soon will you know?”

“I don’t know.” Robin stared at the terminal in front of her. “He just needs to reply to it. C’mon—”

“It’s after midnight there—”

Robin sighed. “You’re right. He’s probably asleep. I guess I should go back to working on Helena’s project. Though why she wants Stefan to wake up when she has Stavros to do her bidding—” She jerked a shoulder.

“It’s best not to expect rational explanations from my grandmother.”

### **Drake House: Bedroom**

Patrick glared at his cell phone as it lit up. He’d just barely managed to break up a fist fight between Cameron and Spencer before Aiden had started to cry, missing his mother — and Emma had started to cry because she wanted to know but her why people came back from the dead but her mother couldn’t —

He just wanted to go to sleep, and nearly ignored the message. But the doctor in him didn’t know how to do that, so Patrick stopped pulling off his shirt to reach for the phone on the table beside his bed.

Then stared at it for a long moment, unable to believe what he was seeing.

*race cars. our special code so you know its me. am alive. trapped on cassadine island. world is going to end. need jason and the cavalry. i love you.*

Race cars.

The pulse in his temple began to throb as he remembered the night they’d laughed about her parents in the WSB and running operations and having code words— She’d been so beautiful, laughing, and teasing him — telling him that if she were in trouble, she’d send him the words race cars because of their first real date in his hotel room.

He’d laughed at her, but here it was—here it was. Her code. Their code.

His heart pounding, Patrick typed in his code and replied.

*pain in the ass. jesus christ. please don’t be a dream please dont be a lie. cavalry already coming. i love you.*

He hit send, then dialed his mother-in-law. “Anna? Get Robert on the line. As soon as I find a babysitter, we need to go to Greece. Robin is alive.” Patrick scowled. “No, I’m not on pills again—damn it, Anna—she used our code.”

The other line was silent for a moment.

“I’ll call Mac and Felicia to stay with Emma,” Anna said. “Wheels up in an hour—”

“Great. Oh, and Cameron, Aiden, and Spencer are here, too because Laura, Jason and Elizabeth flew to Greece because Jake is alive, too. See you in an hour—” Patrick hung on Anna’s protestations as he stared at himself in the mirror.

His phone beeped again.

*race cars. i can't believe you really weren't joking when you said my code name would be pain in the ass. honestly. we're changing it. can't wait to see you.*

## Plane

By the time Spinelli had transferred the photo to the computer to study the metadata or whatever it was, Laura had sent it to Elizabeth so that she could have it for herself. Elizabeth sat on a sofa and just stared at it, tracing her little boy’s face. She felt Jason’s weight next to her and she looked at him. “It has to be real,” she managed. “It has to be. He’s—this is exactly what he’d look like. He’s just—” A tear slid down her cheek as she looked back at Jake. “He’s lost some of the baby fat in his cheeks, see—”

“Yeah.” He put an arm around her shoulder and Elizabeth curled into his embrace, angling the phone so they could both look at the photo. “He looks like you,” Jason said after a minute.

“Really?” Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. “I always thought he was more like you. The blonde hair, blue eyes—” She closed her eyes. “He had this way of smiling at me, and I just—I let him get away with murder. There was just this—this twinkle he’d get that was so much like you—”

“Twinkle?” Jason raised his brows and she smiled up at him. “Don’t let Sonny hear you say that.”

She laughed. “You know what I mean—that agitating mood you get in when you’re teasing me. Remember the Christmas party? Before Nikolas came in acting like an idiot, and you stole my stupid Santa hat?” When he nodded, she continued, “that’s

what I mean. Jake could get the same look.”

She looked over at the table where Spinelli was studying the photo. “Is it real?” Elizabeth asked him, raising her voice so that it carried over to him.

Spinelli blinked, then looked up. “Oh.” He leaned back. “Yeah. Yeah. It’s about—” He squinted. “It’s about a week old. And it was taken in Greece. I can’t get it any closer, but it’s real. It looks like the raw photo an iPhone would take. If it’s faked, I can’t find the evidence.” He stared at them. “And if it’s real—”

“Then Jake either has a twin or that’s him,” Sonny said. He looked at Laura. “You knew Luke was holding something back.”

“And when we land, I am going to punch him so hard,” Laura muttered. “He had an actual photo of Jake and didn’t—” She took a deep breath. “Spinelli, where are you in the rest of it? The island?”

“I’ve got all the aerial footage I can get here, and I’ll be able to put together pretty good maps and keep you out of trouble,” Spinelli said. “There’s not much else I can do until we land. I’ll be able to tap into the local—”

Elizabeth frowned at her phone lighting up with Patrick’s number. “Patrick?” she said, putting him on speaker phone. “What’s wrong? Are the kids okay?”

“The kids are now staying with Lulu and Maxie,” Patrick said. “I’m on my way to the airport with Anna. We’re meeting Robert in Athens.” He paused. “I got a message from Robin.”

“What?” Sonny jerked out of his seat, his eyes wide. “Robin?”

“She sent it through an unnamed number,” Patrick continued, his voice tinny as their connection faded for a minute, “but I know it’s her. We have a code. She used it.” His voice faltered. “She’s alive. And the Cassadines have her and the world was ending. She said I need to bring the cavalry. And she wanted Jason. She must know about Jake.”

“Okay, let me know when you’re landing in Athens,” Elizabeth said. “We’ll—we’ll make sure you get a connection to Mykonos and we’ll regroup there.” She hung up with Patrick, her pulse still racing.

Robin was alive. Jake was alive. The Cassadines had them both. “She wanted the calvary—and Jason. Patrick’s right—she wouldn’t have asked for Jason if she didn’t know about Jake.”

Laura nodded. “The calvary would definitely be Robert and Anna,” she murmured. “Robert would still know the island like the back of his hand, and no one is going to separate them from Robin. Why the hell would Helena want Robin—”

Elizabeth exhaled slowly as Laura’s voice broke off. Their eyes met. “Maybe the same reason she wanted Tony Jones,” Elizabeth said. “Robin’s done some amazing work on brain chemistry. Look at what she did for Jason—” She looked at him. “Your memories in 2005 and then last year—”

“Oh, man—” Sonny’s voice was a low moan as he sat down. “Don’t tell me the Cassadines are raising the dead again.”

“It looks like they already have,” Laura said. “Do you think it was Stavros that Robin brought back?”

“If it was just Stavros,” Elizabeth said slowly as she stood up, “then Helena would have gotten rid of Robin. And Nikolas is part of this, probably playing the same role he did ten years ago during Endgame.” She paused. “Laura—”

“Don’t say it—” Laura shook her head. “Don’t even—”

“Mikkos was frozen to death,” Elizabeth said. “What if—” she swallowed hard. “How sure are we that Helena hasn’t been searching for a way to bring him back—”

“Damn it.” Laura squeezed her eyes shut. “Robin said the world was ending. I think she might mean that literally.”

Jason just stared at both of them wordlessly, unsure how to operate in this world. He looked at Sonny who appeared as lost as he did. They worked in a world of rules—physical rules. You shot someone, they died.

He’d never really appreciated the danger Elizabeth had lived through as a connection to the Spencer family, and watching her and Laura debate the situation while he and Sonny sat on the sidelines —

“What do we know for sure?” Sonny said. “We know Jake and Robin are alive. Nikolas is hopefully a friend, but honestly—” He looked at Laura regretfully who nodded.

“He could be either,” she agreed.

“Luke definitely knows more than he’s saying, and I don’t think the picture is all he’s holding back,” Sonny continued. “He said Lucky threatened to kill Nikolas?”

“The last time Lucky threatened to kill Nikolas,” Elizabeth said, with a light flush, “wasn’t when he found out about the affair. It was when he was being controlled by Helena.” She pressed her lips together. “How did Luke and Lucky find out Jake was alive?”

“Could Helena have wanted this?” Jason said finally. Their eyes turned to him. “I don’t have a lot of experience, but this is a lot of things happening at the same time. Robin finally manages to get a message to Patrick the same night Luke calls us about Jake? We’re all going to Greece at the same time? Stavros Cassadine is alive. You think there’s a chance Mikkos might be, too,” he continued.

“She’s trying to play the game again,” Elizabeth realized. “She never really forgave Nikolas for betraying her, and she blamed me for it.” She hesitated, focused on Laura. “She kidnapped Jake because of me. Not Luke. To hurt me. And, oh, God, she might mean for Lucky to kill Nikolas. As revenge.”

“Well—” Laura took a deep breath, squared her shoulders. “The Cassadines have already aimed at my family more than once. We’ve always won.” She offered Elizabeth a faint smile. “We’ve done this before, Elizabeth, but we didn’t finish it. We thought it was over when Stavros died, but—”

“But this time Helena has to go,” Elizabeth agreed. “We need to cut the head off or it’ll just grow back.”

“I would really like to retire from hunting Cassadines,” Laura said fervently. Her smile broadened, turned a touch mean. “We’ve left it up to the Spencer men a little too long, haven’t we? I think it’s time for the Webber women to do some damage of their own.”

### **Mykonos, Greece: Airport**

Sonny and Laura went to go take care of the customs officials — Sonny had money and Laura knew how to bribe officials in most European countries thanks to her years on the run while Spinelli started working on getting a local connection so he could hack into the Cassadine estate’s cameras.

This left Jason and Elizabeth standing with their luggage, waiting for them to return. Elizabeth frowned at him slightly. “Are you okay? You didn’t say much on the plane.”

“I am—” Jason paused. “Processing,” he admitted. “This time yesterday, Jake and Robin—” He looked out over the hills barely visible through the morning fog. “And now—” He met her eyes. “I’ve gone against some of the most dangerous men in the world, but I don’t know how to do this. I’ve never really had to deal with the

Cassadines, and now—” He cleared his throat. “I think about all the times I pushed you away because of the danger—”

“Jason—”

“And I’m sorry,” he continued, “because it’s clear that you’ve faced worse. Because the Cassadines? They’re not like anything or anyone I can predict.”

“It’s scary,” Elizabeth acknowledged, “and they’ve been haunting Laura her entire life. They stole her away from her life—Helena and Stavros forced her to marry him. For years, she endured that abuse. And I wish it could be over for her.”

“I just don’t know how much help I can be in a situation like this,” he continued.

“Can you still shoot?” she asked, dryly. “Pilot a boat if we need it? Keep Spinelli from getting distracted? Move quietly? Jason—Luke and Laura didn’t know anything about them either, and they saved the world. I don’t need to save the world. I just want my son back. And I want my friend to come home.” She leaned up on her toes, pressing her lips against his. He wrapped his arms around her waist, dragging her closer, deepening the kiss.

“We’re going to bring Jake home,” Elizabeth told him when she drew back. “That’s what matters. Jake and Robin. And yeah, I want to make Helena pay for putting us through this. For putting Patrick and you and everyone who loved Jake and Robin through hell these last few years. I need you to be strong in all the ways I can’t be.” She searched his eyes. “Can you do that?”

“Yeah,” Jason said, leaning down to kiss her again. “I can do that.”

“All right, we’re good to go,” Sonny said as he and Laura returned. “The jet is heading over to Athens,” he continued, “where it’ll be waiting for the rest of them. We’re going into the city to meet with Luke?”

“Yeah, I told him I want to meet him in a public place.” Laura paused. “Sonny, you and Spinelli should find somewhere safe to set up. I don’t trust Luke, not if Lucky’s been compromised. Spinelli—”

“Get the security feed—number one priority,” Spinelli agreed with a firm nod. “Mr. Sir?”

“Jason,” Laura said, turning to him. “I think Elizabeth and I should meet Luke alone—” Jason opened his mouth to argue. “You can be nearby. I’m sure you know how to blend in if you need to.”

“I can manage it, I’ve been to Greece,” Jason replied. “But—”

“If Helena is watching,” Laura said, “she probably already knows we’re here. So we need to throw her off. And if she isn’t—then Luke will never talk to you the way he’ll talk to Elizabeth.” She looked at her former daughter-in-law. “Play him with the guilt. Rub it in. Helena might have kidnapped Jake, but Luke was still driving the car. And he lied to you. Kept the photo back.”

Elizabeth nodded with a clench of her jaw. “Yeah, it’s not hard to find the anger,” she told Laura.

“Exactly. We’ll signal you,” Laura told Jason, “when we’re ready for you to join us, but I want Luke to feel outnumbered. I’ll go after him on Lucky, Elizabeth will kick him with Jake, and we’ll find out what we’s hiding faster.”

“I’m just the muscle,” Jason said. “You obviously know this better. Just tell me where you want me and who to shoot.”

“I like a man who can take directions.” Laura beamed at him. “Let’s get to work.”

### **Cosmo Cafe: Outdoor**

Luke got to his feet when Laura and Elizabeth approached, his hesitant smile fading as the women approached. He cleared his throat. “No Morgan?”

“He went to get set up with Spinelli,” Elizabeth said. She drew out an iron chair and took a seat. Laura sat next to her, then Luke gingerly lowered himself back into his chair across from them. “You’re going to need a good excuse when you see him, by the way.”

Luke grimaced. “Darlin’, I know I held back the photo, but—” he spread out his hands. “I wanted to make sure Laura would come—”

“There wasn’t a chance in hell I would stay at home,” Laura cut in ruthlessly. “Cut the bullshit, Luke.”

“Are there more?” Elizabeth asked, her voice trembling slightly. Laura glanced at her, but Elizabeth didn’t look at her, didn’t even glance at Jason who had taken a table ten feet away, dressed in tourist clothes, complete with a pair of sunglasses and a hat. He really did know how to blend — he was sitting behind Luke, completely out of his eye line.

“More—”

“More photos? Of my little boy? I haven’t seen him—” Elizabeth pressed a finger to her lips. “He’s two years older, and they stole that time from me. And Nikolas—he’s sitting next to him. I need—”

Luke pulled out his phone, started rifling through them, then shoved it across the table. “Here,” he said in a rush. “I know, kid, I know it hurts. When I found out the Cassadines took Cowboy—”

Elizabeth stared at a photo, looked at the date underneath it, then looked up. “You’ve known my son was alive since December. At least.” She clutched the phone tightly. “While I was buying him gifts and hiding them in a closet so no one would think I was crazy—you knew Jake was alive—”

“Luke!” Laura said, her eyes bulging. “How could you—”

“I knew Jake was safe enough,” Luke said. He put up his hands. “Let me—let me explain—”

“How can you possibly explain this?” Laura demanded. She planted her hands on the glass table top and leaned forward. “Three months. Three months! Of all people—you drove the car that started all of this—”

Elizabeth squeezed her eyes closed. “Why? Why call now? What’s changed?” She looked at Laura, saw the other woman adjust her self. Back to the plan. Back on track.

“Lucky,” Luke said slowly. “At first, we were doing recon. You know, trying to find the weak spots. We got that picture just before Christmas. The first—” He sucked in a deep breath. “The first real proof. I wanted—I wanted to call you. Lucky wanted to call you,” he told her. “He’s got this idea he’ll give you Jake, and it’ll be like it was again—Lucky and Liz.”

“That’s over,” Elizabeth said flatly.

“I know it, but he—he couldn’t get it out of his head. And then—” Luke nodded at the phone. “He saw Jake with Nikolas. And it was—” His voice shook then. “It was like a switch in his head. Like before.”

Laura nodded grimly. “Helena.”

“We never broke it,” Luke said with a shake of his head. “It’s always been there. Always in his brain. Like a bomb. Lucky nearly killed Nikolas that day. I’ve spent the last three months trying to fix it, trying to talk him down, trying to find the trigger—” He looked at Elizabeth. “You need—you need to save my boy. Just one



more time, darlin', save my son."

Elizabeth stared at him for a long time, then shook her head. "It's not my job to save Lucky," she said. "You took Jake from me. The night of the accident, you hit my little boy. He didn't die, but that doesn't matter, Luke. You put him in that hospital, close to death. And then you stole three months from me. It's not my job to save Lucky," she repeated.

"Angel—" Luke switched his attention to Laura. "You gotta see, if we can break the control—"

"We've got bigger problems than that," Laura told him, regretfully. "Because Robin Scorpio is alive and being held by Helena."

Luke bowed his head, all the fight sinking out of him. "So you know. You know that Mikkos is back."

"Wait—" Elizabeth jerked up and Laura stared at Luke. "Wait—he's actually—it's not something Robin is working on?"

"No—" Luke nodded at the phone. "Go to the last photo. It's why I called."

Elizabeth handed Laura the phone and she scrolled to the last one, her face paling. She showed it to Elizabeth.

She'd only seen Mikkos in photographs, but there was no mistaking the people in the picture, clustered around a dining table. Helena and Mikkos. Stavros and Nikolas. Jake. And Stefan Cassadine. Her little boy surrounded by the darkest evil she'd ever known.

"All alive," Laura breathed. "All four of them." She raised her eyes to Luke. "All the Cassadines."

"Yeah, and I got word from a contact—" Luke's smile was grim. "Valentin is on his way to Greece. The Cassadines are about to have a family reunion, and Jake is in the middle of it all."

Mykonos, Greece: Flat

After Luke had shown them whatever he had on the phone, Elizabeth had gestured for Jason to join them at the table, and Luke didn't even look that surprised to see him. Jason wanted to throttle the other man for the grief he'd brought to Elizabeth, for the lies he'd told—but a single look at the women told Jason that he was best just standing behind them and taking his cues from them.

So they'd returned to the flat where Sonny had taken Spinelli to get started. When Jason had admitted to Elizabeth that he literally had no idea how useful he'd be during all of this, he knew that Sonny felt even more useless. Sonny didn't even go into the field anymore—he'd been delegating that to Jason for years. But Sonny knew how to look like he had things together, so putting him with Spinelli who was good at taking orders had been the best plan.

"All of the Cassadines," Sonny repeated, staring at his former business partner. "Mikkos. Helena. The sons."

"And Nikolas and Jake," Laura said faintly. She went over to Spinelli's computer where he'd downloaded Luke's photos, looking for any extra information he could find. She stared at the photograph, the sight of Mikkos with both of his sons.

She could scarcely believe Stefan and Nikolas had thrown in with the murderous trio, and if Luke was right, if Valentin Cassadine, the most notorious double agent DVX and the WSB had ever employed, was on his way—

"This is Endgame all over again," Luke said.

"It's worse than that," Elizabeth said. Laura and Luke frowned, looking at her. "Endgame was just Helena and Stavros. They wanted revenge against you, Luke. But Lucky told me stories about Mikkos. Stories that he'd heard from you all his life."

"He's the one that wanted to freeze the world," Sonny said. "He's insane—"

"He makes insane look normal," Luke muttered. "How sure are we that the Dark Prince and Stiffin aren't part of this?"

"I don't know," Laura admitted. "But—" She bit her lip. "Luke, the Ice Princess—"

"I broke it into pieces a long time ago," Luke reminded her. "And it's not nearly as powerful as anyone ever said. It was just a diamond—"

"And nearly everyone sitting at that table is supposed to be dead," Elizabeth interrupted. "And if Lucky has been brainwashed again—Helena used the diamond to do that. She used it as a trigger."

"Let's just focus on getting eyes on the estate," Sonny suggested, trading an uneasy look with Jason who felt as out of depth as Sonny looked. Brainwashing, diamonds, weather machines, dead Cassadines —"

“I’m working on the network now,” Spinelli said. “I can’t work any faster or I’ll be caught.”

Elizabeth’s phone vibrated and she glanced down at it. “Patrick, Robert, and Anna have landed in Athens. They’ll be here in another two hours.”

“They’ll know how to deal with Valentin,” Luke said. “Anna trained him at the WSB before he went rogue.”

“I’m going to go call the boys,” Elizabeth told Jason. “Patrick said they’re with Lulu and Maxie.”

But when Elizabeth went to place the call to Lulu’s cell phone, it went to voicemail, and disappointed, Elizabeth left a message for Cameron and Aiden, hoping that she’d be able to keep her promise and see them again.

### **Scorpio House: Living Room**

Dante Falconieri shoved open the door to the house, grimacing as he saw the toys strewn across the living room. He’d gotten his wife’s voice mail at the end of a long overnight shift, and the last thing he’d wanted to do was help babysit anyone’s kids.

He frowned when he didn’t hear any sounds, so he went upstairs to Emma’s room, then just stopped and stared at the two women who were sitting on the floor struggling to free themselves—

They were seated back to back, with a rope tied around their upper bodies, tying their arms down with their mouths gagged.

Dante dragged the gag from Lulu’s mouth. “What the hell?”

“Those are not children,” she seethed. “Those are demons from hell and we are never having kids—”

He untied them, trying not to snicker. “Where’d they go?”

“By now?” Lulu huffed. “I’m sure they’ve hijacked a plane. Oh, damn, where’s Aiden?” She rushed out of the room.

Maxie sighed, shoved her hair out of her eyes. “They left a letter,” she told Dante. “Spencer said it was a matter of honor, and Cameron said something about older brothers.”

“Did Emma leave a cryptic message?” Dante asked dryly as he picked up his ringing

phone, unsurprised when he learned from Carly that somehow, Joss had also disappeared, leaving a letter about how her mom should understand, she'd do it for Jason.

Just another day in Port Charles, Dante thought grimly, as he called the airport and put them on alert for short people trying to get to Greece.

### **Mykonos, Greece: Flat**

Luke checked his watch, wincing. "I gotta get back to my place. Lucky will be wondering where I am, and if he starts thinking I'm against him—" He looked at Laura. "What do I do with Cowboy?"

"Bring him here," Laura said reluctantly, shooting Elizabeth an apologetic look. "If Helena does have him under her control again, seeing Elizabeth might shake him into saying something. And if it doesn't, well—"

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose at being volunteered to play even a small role in Lucky's nonsense, but it would be important to learn whether or not Lucky was being his normal jackass self or a new breed of brainwashing had taken hold. She left the Spencers alone to determine the best way to deal with Lucky and went back over to Spinelli's computer desk where Jason and Sonny were studying some of the prints they'd made.

"Hey, Luke is gonna bring back Lucky," she warned them. "But Patrick should be here—" she checked her watch. "In about an hour—"

"Spinelli's getting closer to the security cameras," Sonny reported. "He's found the network—" He hesitated, looked at Spinelli. "What did you say?"

"I found the network, but decrypting it might take a while," the younger man said. "Unless Robert and Anna can do this faster—"

Elizabeth started to reply, but her phone beeped and she picked it up. "It's Dante," she said as she pressed play on the speaker. "Dante?"

"Listen, I don't want you to worry—"

"Where are the kids?" Elizabeth demanded.

"I got to Patrick's place and found Maxie and Lulu tied up," Dante said. Sonny scrubbed a hand over his face. "Apparently, Joss hitched a ride to the house—and distracted them—they can't really explain it—"

Elizabeth hissed. “Are they gone? How long?”

“No more than half an hour,” Dante assured them. “They left Aiden in the living room with a Lunchable and the remote. He’s watching cartoons, so he’s fine—”

A Lunchable and remote. Elizabeth shoved the phone at Jason to put her head in her hands. “They could get into a lot of trouble in thirty minutes—”

“Clearly, but Carly and Michael are on it. Joss thought she turned off the tracker on her phone, but apparently Carly put one on something else Joss carries because, well, she doesn’t trust her. They’re on their way to the airport, and Michael is meeting them there.”

“The airport,” Jason repeated. “What were they planning to do, hijack a plane?—”

“They didn’t give details because, and I’m quoting Cameron here, only dumb villains monologue and give away the plan.”

Sonny snorted and turned away before Elizabeth could set him on fire with a glare. “Ask Carly where she got the tracker because I’m gonna need to lojack my kid when I get home. Thanks, Dante.”

“Honestly, tying Maxie up and gagging her is probably the best thing that’s happened to me,” Dante said easily. “I’ll keep you posted, and we’ll put the kids under closer watch. We underestimated them.”

“You have my permission to use the handcuffs.” Elizabeth took the phone from Jason and hung it up. She looked at Laura who came over now that Luke had left. “Cameron, Emma, and Spencer — with help from Joss — tied up Maxie and Lulu and made a run for it. They’re tracking them to the airport.”

“Oh.” Laura couldn’t fight the giggles. She pressed her hands to her mouth, but the mirth slipped out. “Oh, my. Did Dante take pictures?”

Jason put an arm around Elizabeth’s shoulders. “It’s okay. Carly and Michael are on it,” he assured her. “You’ve always wanted to gag Maxie.”

“This is insane. The kids are trying like hell to throw themselves in the middle of the nightmare and you’re all laughing—” Elizabeth stalked away, storming out onto the terrace. Jason winced, and followed.

“I shouldn’t have laughed,” Laura said, her humor sliding away. “She’s scared for Jake—”

“Jason will take care of it,” Sonny assured her. “Let’s look over these maps. Tell me how much this has changed.”

#### Port Charles Airport: Drop Off Entrance

Cameron slammed the door on the taxi and shoved a pile of cash at the driver while Spencer lugged their duffles out of the backseat. “Okay,” he said. “We got to the airport. How do we get to Greece?”

“I reserved tickets,” Spencer said. “I used my father’s credit card, and we’re traveling as unaccompanied minors—” He peered at his phone and the email with the information. “We just gotta avoid everyone until the flight to Mykonos—”

“Oh, balls,” Jocelyn Jacks said with a sigh as she saw the tall, blonde man leaning against the glass entrance. “How’d he get here so fast?”

“What?” Cameron turned, his stomach sinking as he recognized Joss’s older brother. “Damn it! Your mom must have put something on you.”

“Going somewhere?” Michael Corinthos asked, sauntering over, his hands in his pockets. “How were you planning to get to Greece?”

“Unaccompanied minors travel all the time,” Spencer said loftily. “And my father never pays attention to credit card bills. I stole one last year and he never noticed. I only use it in emergencies.”

“Passports?”

“I brought mine,” Joss volunteered. “Spencer always has his because he’s a Cassadine. We were at Emma’s house, and—”

“I grabbed mine when we were packing. I never used it before,” Cameron explained, “but one time, my mom was going to take us on a trip and we all got one.” He’d had to slide it out of a drawer where it sat next to Jake’s. Aiden didn’t have one—his mom must have gotten them before Aiden was born.

Michael frowned. “This might have been dumb enough to work.”

“But Mom doesn’t trust me,” Joss complained. “What did she put the tracker on? Oh my God, did she like, open me up while I slept and slap it on my ribs?”

“Yeah, not telling you. Let’s go. We’re going home.” Michael looked at Cameron. “Dante had to call your mother in Greece, Cam. And she was not happy.”

His stomach sank. “He’s my brother,” Cameron said, dully. “I gotta help bring him home. Wouldn’t you try everything to bring Morgan or Joss home?”

“I would,” Michael said, “and part of me is pretty impressed by the four of you.” He met Cameron’s eyes. “But your mom has been through enough, Cam, and you know that. Don’t ask her to worry about you. And Spencer—”

“I’m a Cassadine—this is a matter of honor.” Spencer sniffed. “You have no right to tell me what to do—”

“Really? Because your mom and my mom were best friends,” Michael said. “And my mom wouldn’t want Courtney’s son getting hurt. You’re not just a Cassadine, kid. You’re my cousin, too. And Aunt Courtney took real good care of me.”

“My dad took off with my grandparents,” Emma complained, “and I don’t get to know anything.” She pouted as Michael picked up her duffel bag. “I just wanted to help.”

“I brought the rope,” Joss said when Michael started herding the four of them towards the parking lot. “Would you believe Dr. Patrick didn’t have none?”

“Shocking.”

### **Mykonos, Greece: Flat**

The sun was just starting to set over the Adriatic Sea as Jason joined Elizabeth at the terrace as she looked out at the distant lump of land where the Cassadine estate could be found.

“He’s just across the water,” Elizabeth said. “And he’s sitting in the middle of some of the worst people in the world, Jason. It was one thing when it was just Helena and Stavros. I was scared, but I didn’t think they’d hurt him. But I don’t know Mikkos. And this Valentin—Luke said Helena is terrified of him.” She looked at him. “If we get this close to getting Jake back and lose him—”

“We won’t,” Jason told her. “We’re not going to get this close and go home alone,” he added. “I might not know much about the Cassadines, but I’m a pretty good shot, and I know how to follow orders. Robert and Anna—Luke and Laura—you were right. This is what they do. And you and I—Spinelli and Sonny—we’re smart. We think on our feet.” He tipped her face up to his. “We’re going to get our son back,” he promised her. “And we’re going to stop the Cassadines from coming back.”

Elizabeth leaned forward, her forehead resting against his chin. “And then Dante calls, and Cameron’s trying like hell to get here because he wants to help. Part of

me is just so angry and scared—”

“And the rest of you is proud,” Jason said. “Because you’ve raised a really great kid who’d put his life on the line for his little brother without even blinking.”

“He’s just a baby.” Elizabeth swiped tears from her cheeks. “They’re all just babies. He shouldn’t be worried about this. He’s barely eight years old, Jason.”

“Barely eight, and without even taking a minute, he and Spencer put together plan to get to Greece, and Emma and Joss agreed to help because they’re best friends. There are worst in the world than finding out you’ve got a strong, independent kid who could take on the world.”

“I know.” Elizabeth’s mouth twitched. “They left Aiden with a Lunchable and a cartoon.”

“Resourceful,” Jason said and she laughed. Her phone rang and he handed it to her. “It’s Michael. He probably has them.”

Elizabeth took the phone and put it on speaker. “Michael?”

“Mom?”

“Cameron—” Elizabeth closed her eyes, relieved. “Baby. You’re with Michael?”

“He found us at the airport. I—I’m sorry. I just—” There was a pause as Cameron’s voice faltered. “I just want to find Jake. I want to bring him home.”

“I know you do. I’m so proud of you, and I love you so much. Jason and I were just talking about how amazing you and Spencer and the girls are to get that far. Did you have tickets? What about passports?”

There was a pause. “Dante said you didn’t want to reveal your plan,” Jason said, “but I think it’s safe now.”

“I found my passport in your room, Mom. I saw it once when you were getting my birth certificate. It was next to Jake’s. Spencer got tickets on a credit—” There was a scuffle. “Uh, I don’t know how Spencer got them.”

Tickets and passports. If Michael and Carly had been ten more minutes behind the kids, would they have been able to stop them? Elizabeth sighed. “Michael, are you there?”

“Yeah, hey. We’re on our way to Mom’s place. Dante is coming over to hang out. For



some reason, Lulu and Maxie are tapping out.”

“Please, I did the world a favor,” Joss said from the background. “They should always be gagged.”

“Anyway, Mom’s got this. She’s always one step ahead of Joss mostly because Mom already did worse than Joss is ever gonna try—”

“I’ll find that tracker!”

“I’ll call you if they break out again,” Michael said.

“Okay, thanks. Cameron, I love you,” Elizabeth said. “But if you decide to tie up Carly and gag her—”

“Make sure you take pictures this time,” Jason offered.

Michael snorted. “We could make a lot of money selling those.”

“Bye, Mom. Bye Jason.”

She hung up the phone, looked at Jason. “We’re going to get our little boy, aren’t we?” she said softly. “We’re going to get Jake and bring him home.” She slid her phone in her pocket, then reached up to kiss him fiercely. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

They stood there for another minute, looking out over the island but then Laura came out on the terrace. “Before you decide to just swim over,” she said, “Luke’s on his way up with Lucky.”

“Well, I guess I’m back in the Saving Lucky business,” Elizabeth muttered, but Laura shook her head.

“No. It’s not like that, sweetheart. If Helena has control again, it’s not on you to take care of it. It’s me. And Luke. We should have finished this a long time ago.” Laura lifted her chin. “But I think seeing you—with Jason—it might shake Lucky enough. If he thinks giving Jake back to you will win you back—”

“You always did piss him off just by breathing,” Elizabeth said even as Jason made a face. She focused on Laura again. “Michael called. They have the kids.”

“Oh, good. How close did they get?”

“Honestly, ten more minutes, and we’ve have a child army ready to go to war,” Elizabeth admitted as they went back inside. “I think they might stay put for a while, but—”

The door opened and Lucky stumbled in, blinking at the crowd of them. Spinelli got to his feet, Sonny angling himself slightly in front of the younger man, unsure what Lucky might do or say.

“What’s—” Lucky looked around. “Mom—” His eyes found Elizabeth. “Why—you came. You came to help. Dad told you? He told you Nikolas stole our boy—”

“No, Nikolas stole my son,” Elizabeth corrected, gently. “Min and Jason’s. We’re here to get him back. To take him home.” She slid her arm through Jason’s, smiled up at him. “Together.”

Lucky shook his head. “No—No, that’s not—” He looked at his father who sighed. “That’s not how this is supposed to happen.”

“Cowboy—”

“She—” Lucky’s hands fisted at his sides. “I’m supposed to—I’m—” He glared at Elizabeth. “You’re doing it again. You’re ruining everything!”

“How am I ruining anything?” Elizabeth said coolly. “You left Port Charles and made it very clear that you didn’t want me or any of my boys in your life.”

“No, no, no—this is wrong.” He took a step towards her, and Jason’s hand tightened around hers, tugging her back slightly. “I’m supposed—you’re supposed to come back to me.”

“According to who?” Elizabeth asked. “I’m telling you how it is—”

“Damn, she said that if I killed Nikolas, I could have Jake back!” Lucky raged. “If I could bring him home, you’d love me again! She promised!” He turned his fury to Jason. “You’re always ruining everything—”

He lunged at Jason, pulling a knife from beneath his jacket. The room exploded in chaos as Jason tried to shove Elizabeth aside just as she pushed him away—overbalancing them both—Lucky crashed into them, sending them all to the ground.

“God damn it!” Sonny growled as he waded in. Luke grabbed Lucky by the back of the jacket—just as blood began to pool on the floor. “Who the hell—”

“It’s not me,” Lucky said dully—his face crumpled as Jason rolled over and shoved

Elizabeth on to her back—the knife shoved into her gut. Elizabeth stared blankly at the knife, then at Lucky before her eyes rolled back in her head and she passed out.

### **Mykonos, Greece: Flat**

Jason cradled Elizabeth’s head with one hand while taking in the wound to her abdomen. With gritted teeth, not taking his eyes off the woman bleeding out in front of him. “Get him away from me or this time he’s not coming back from the dead.”

With tears streaming down her face, Laura helped Luke shove a struggling and still bellowing Lucky down the hall. She shoved her son and her ex-husband into the bedroom, turning back to Jason. “How bad is it?”

“Sonny—” Jason looked at his best friend as the older man knelt on Elizabeth’s other side, taking her wrist in his, monitoring her pulse. Spinelli hovered in the background, biting at his nails.

“Pulse is thready, but there—” Sonny exhaled on a hiss. “I didn’t see how long the blade was. If we pull it out—looking at where it is—”

“Where’s Patrick?” Jason demanded. “Laura, call—”

“I’m already on the line—” Her face pale, but her fingers steady, Laura had pressed Robert’s contact information and put the phone on speaker. “Robert?”

“Laura—”

“Where are you? Elizabeth’s been stabbed and we could use a surgeon.”

“What the hell—” came Patrick’s shout from the background. “How the hell—”

Jason ignored that, and focused on Elizabeth. “Elizabeth? Can you hear me?” Not like this. He couldn’t lose her like this—not after everything—not before they could bring Jake home—

On a low, soft moan, her eyelids fluttered, then closed. Her face scrunched. “Hurts.”

“What do you think? It’s not high enough for the liver—”

“But it might be deep enough to hit the kidney—”

“Patrick is five minutes out,” Laura said, coming to them, getting down on her knees. “What can I do? How can I help?”

The bleeding had slowed, and Jason calculated how much had actually pooled beneath her. “She’s not—she’s not bleeding out. At least not that I can see. If I pull out the knife, that could change—” He knew how to compartmentalize. How to put things into pockets in his brain and separate out the now from the fear and the worry.

He just couldn’t manage it for longer than a minute or two before it all came flooding back in, and the terror swamped him. He couldn’t go home without her. Couldn’t look in Cameron’s sober eyes and tell him his mother wasn’t coming back—

“Elizabeth, can you look at me? Just open your eyes—”

Her lashes fluttered again and a sliver of the blue was visible. “Make...it...stop.”

“I will, I promise. Patrick will be here, and he’ll help me stop it. You’re going to be okay. We’re going to get Jake and take him home to his brothers.”

“Jake.” Elizabeth’s head lolled to the side as she drifted again. “Jake. Wanted to...see him...hold him—”

“You will,” Laura promised. She pressed a fist to her mouth as Sonny put a hand around her shoulders. “Elizabeth, we’re going to bring him home—”

“Cam...” Elizabeth forced her eyes open, found Jason’s. “Cam. Don’t...can’t leave him.”

“You’re not going to—”

The door behind them shoved open as Patrick stormed in, followed by Robert Scorpio and Anna Devane.

“What the hell is going on?” Patrick demanded as he skidded across the floor to Jason’s side.

Laura struggled to her feet, with Robert’s help. “Lucky did this,” she said to Robert and Anna in a low voice.

“I guess that’s the shouts and grunting I hear—” Robert said, squinting in the direction of the closed door. “Is that where Spencer is?”

“He could use a hand,” Laura said, her voice calm and steady, unlike her hands which were trembling as she turned back to the crowd on the ground. “Lucky tried to stab Jason, but Elizabeth got in the way.”

“We’ll sort this out,” Anna promised Laura. “Trust Patrick—”

“Okay, okay—it’s—” Patrick took a deep breath. “Spinelli, you need to get me something like looks like a scalpel—sterilize it. I need towels. I need—shit—” He scrubbed his hands over his face. “I need to wash my hands. I need something to sew. Needles, thread—”

“We’ve got an emergency kit, Patrick. It has everything.” Anna pulled her son-in-law to his feet and went with him to wash her hands.

“This is my fault,” Laura said, staring down at Elizabeth’s prone figure. Jason looked at her, frowning. “I listened to Luke. She already begged us not to make her do this again. She didn’t come here to take on the Cassadines. I should have told Luke to keep Lucky away.”

“As soon as I know she’s okay, I’m going to the island, I’m getting my son,” Jason said, tightly, “and I’m taking her home. You can save the world without us. She and the boys are all that matters.”

“Jase—” Sonny put a hand on his shoulder. “She’s too stubborn to go out like this—” But his voice faltered because even he knew the universe didn’t give a shit about that kind of thing.

“All right.” Patrick turned away from the sink. “We need to move her to higher ground so I can get a better look at things. Clear that table—” he nodded at the longer table against the wall. Jason, Sonny—at either end. Laura, I need you to make sure that knife doesn’t move a centimeter. Spinelli—” He looked at the pale, oddly quiet tech. “Whatever you were doing to find Robin and Jake, get back to it. When she wakes up, she’ll want to know the plan.”

“Got it,” Spinelli said, swallowing hard.

“I’ve done brain surgery by flashlight at gunpoint,” Patrick said, “and my patient lived—” He met Jason’s eyes. “This is a cake walk. Let’s get to work.”

### **Cassadine Island: Lab**

Nikolas paced the stretch of the room, glaring at Robin as she poured over notes and codes. “This can’t be this hard. I need to get Jake off this island.”

“That’s the goal, Nikolas, but you can’t rush this. And remember—by now my parents and Patrick have to be in Greece. I hope like hell he brought Jason and Elizabeth. We’ll get off this island and they’ll be ready with an escape route home.”

She turned back to her research. “I just don’t know how some of this computer stuff works. I never listened when Spinelli talked. I just made him do everything.”

“We just need to get past security long enough to get down to the docks. Once we’re on one of the boats, I can have us in Mykonos in thirty minutes.” Nikolas closed his eyes. “Valentin is coming, Robin. He’s the last piece of the puzzle.”

“Nikolas—”

“It’s my fault. I kept waiting. I didn’t tell anyone. I didn’t say anything when I found my father. I didn’t say a damn word when my grandfather showed up—but Jake.” His terrified eyes found Robin’s. “She sits him at the table like he’s part of the family. I promised him I’d get him home—”

“And we will—”

“I should have told Jason ages ago. I just—” Nikolas sat on the cot where Robin slept. “I wanted to be the hero,” he admitted. “I wanted to be the one who brought the Cassadines down. Permanently. And I wanted to bring Jake home to Elizabeth.”

“You were selfish and stupid—” Robin looked over as another monitor beeped. Her smile spread as she recognized the code.

*thinking of changing pain in the ass to phoenix we landed baby and I brought the whole damn army sit tight we’ll get you out of this*

“It’s Patrick,” she breathed. “He’s here. Oh, God, he’s here, and we’re going to be okay—” Her breath caught as she typed back in response.

*will buy you all the race cars you want. maybe even a real one i love you we’re waiting for instructions*

“Robert and Anna are with him, I’m sure.” Nikolas took his first easy breath. “Okay. I hate to leave you—”

“But you need to stick as close to Jake as you can. I’ll get word to you through Stefan when he brings my meals.” Robin got to her feet. “We’re too close to being done with this—”

“We just need to be gone before Valentin lands tomorrow,” Nikolas reminded her. “Tell Patrick we’re on a deadline. Whatever Helena and Mikkos are planning—it starts when Valentin gets here.”

“I’ll tell him.”

## **Mykonos: Flat**

Robert and Luke emerged from the bedroom, grim-faced. Luke had a black eye while Robert's shirt had a tear in the sleeve

"Where's Lucky?" Laura demanded.

"Handcuffed, tied up, bound, gagged, and sedated," Robert said. He examined. "Bastard bit me." He nodded at the table where Elizabeth was laying, a sheet pulled over her and her head resting on the pillow. "What about Elizabeth?"

"Is she okay?" Luke asked.

Jason glared at him. "No thanks to you. How many times are you going to make Lucky Spencer her problem to fix? He did her one good turn fifteen years ago, Luke. Don't ask her to do this again."

"I—" Luke swallowed. "I won't, but—"

"The knife wasn't as long as we thought," Patrick told him, washing his hands. "Missed the organs, just took in the meat." He sighed as Laura shuddered. "Sorry."

"No, better than the alternative," Laura began as Patrick pulled his phone from his pocket, grimly. "What is it?"

"Robin. She sent me a reply earlier, but I didn't see it and she just sent another one—" He stared at it. "We need to get them out now. She says whatever is going to happen starts tomorrow. They're just waiting on Valentin."

"I hate deadlines," Robert muttered. "What's the plan? Spinelli, what does security look like?"

"While Patrick was finishing up, I got the specs on the security cameras and got through the network." Spinelli twisted on in his chair. "I got eyes on the whole island."

"Where—" Jason started across the room, but Spinelli put a hand up.

"I got it up on the flat screen—bigger monitor," he explained as he switched on the screen in the front of the room. "Island has one dock area where boats are kept, but there are a few inlets where I think you could land some people. Particularly if you're coming in low-tech." Spinelli brought up a satellite image that highlighted the areas he talked about. "The building we saw on the plane—"

He flicked the camera to the front entrance as Nikolas emerged. He turned to talk to someone inside, then walked away. “No cameras inside that I can see, but—” He flipped to another one. “This cottage near the maze has cameras in the common space, and in—” Spinelli swallowed hard as he brought the image on screen.

A little boy with light blond hair was surrounded by toy cars and trains, his face lit up with smiles and laughter.

“This is—” Jason swallowed hard as he drank in the image of his son. “This is right now.”

“Right this second, Jake is in the cottage on the edges of the Cassadine estate,” Spinelli said his own voice a bit wobbly. He cleared his throat. “The cottage is less than a thousand feet from one of the landing spots I highlighted.”

“The other building where Nikolas was—” Patrick hesitated. “How far from the cottage?”

“About half a mile. The whole island is maybe a mile long,” Spinelli clarified. “And I agree, the messages the good doctor has been sending you are from that part of the island. Robin is in that building.”

“We’ll land two boats,” Anna decided. “One team to go in after Robin, and the other gets Jake. We get them off the island and we regroup. They’re more important than whatever the Cassadines might be planning.” She paused, looking at Laura. “Unless Nikolas is with one of them—”

“We can’t get him on this trip,” Laura confirmed. “Jason, I’m sure you and Sonny will go for Jake. I’ll go with you. Patrick, Robert, Anna—”

“I have to go.”

The slurred voice came from behind them as they turned to find Elizabeth struggling to sit up, wincing as she propped herself up on her elbows.

“Careful,” Patrick hissed, rushing to her side. “You’ll tear the stitches—”

“You can sew me up later—” Elizabeth swung her legs over the side. “I’m going.”

“Elizabeth,” Jason began but she shook her head.

“No. No. A thousand feet. I can manage that. I can. And Jake—” Her voice shook. “He might not remember you, Jason. He won’t know Sonny or Laura. He knows me.”



He'll come with me quietly." She held Jason's eyes. "I need to be there. We'll come home, and Patrick can patch me up on the way back to Port Charles. Once we get Robin and Jake off the island, we need to be in the air as soon as we can."

"She's right," Anna said. "If we have a prayer of pulling this off, we need to be off that island before they even know we're there. Spinelli—"

"I can loop security cameras and distract any guards. I wish I had more time to know how people move and find a safe time—" Spinelli grimaced. "But we can make it work."

"We can't take the chance of Jake struggling because he doesn't know you," Anna told Jason with regret.

Jason dipped his head. They were right, and he only had himself to blame. Jake had been gone almost two years—there wasn't even much of a guarantee he'd know Elizabeth but— He looked at her. "All right," he said finally. "Let's get down to it. We'll get Robin the details so she can be ready and do what she can on the island to help. Let's get our son."

### **Cassadine Island: Off the Coast**

Ignoring the stabbing pain in her side, Elizabeth watched as Laura navigated the boat to a slow stop, floating about fifty feet from the inlet that Spinelli had highlighted on the map. Jason and Sonny got the rubber, motor dinghy into the water.

"Laura, I need you to promise me something."

Laura looked at her and shook her head. "Absolutely not. Don't you dare say anything stupid like leave you behind if I need to. I'm not going back to my grandsons without you. And if you think Jason would leave you—"

"He'll put Jake first, just like I am." Elizabeth closed her eyes, took another bracing breath. "I'll get to the cottage. I know I can make it that far. But I don't know if I can make it back—"

"Elizabeth—"

"I'll get Jake to Jason, and I'll make sure he's safe. I'll try like hell to get back, but Laura—"

"In the unlikely event that you don't get back to the boat, I will get Jake off the island—"

“You asked me to save your son a long time ago,” Elizabeth said and Laura blanched. “I’m asking you to make sure you save mine.”

“You don’t fight fair,” Laura whispered fiercely. “But I didn’t either.”

“We’re mothers. We can’t afford to.”

“Ready?” Jason asked, taking Elizabeth’s hand. He squeezed it. “I’m going to lower you into the dinghy—Sonny is waiting—”

“Ready. Let’s get our son.”

### **Cassadine Island: Inlet**

Elizabeth winced as Jason lifted her out of the dingy, but did her best to hide it. Everything was on fire, and she was pretty sure she was going to rip her stitches by the time this was done—

But she couldn’t risk Jake not going with Jason or Sonny, fighting them and drawing attention. She couldn’t take that chance—and from the grim expression on both their faces—she knew that they still agreed.

Even if Jason was probably itching to throw her back in the dingy and send her back to Laura, bobbing along on the small speedboat.

“We wait for Spinelli’s signal,” Jason reminded them both as he took out his phone, waiting for the text. “As soon as they’re in position—” He nodded as Spinelli’s message came in. “Okay, Patick and the others are going in.”

“We’re following you,” Sonny reminded him, before wrapping his hand around Elizabeth’s elbow, firmly. “Let’s go.”

Wordlessly, they set off on the short trek through the dense trees, Elizabeth trying desperately to hide how hard it was to breathe or keep moving. She stumbled over a weed, and Jason started to turn back.

“No, go—” Elizabeth sucked in a sharp, shallow breath. “I’m okay—”

“I got her, Jase. We’re halfway there,” Sonny murmured in her ear as Jason reluctantly moved forward, listening to the directions Spinelli was giving him in the ear piece. “We’re going to get to your boy, and then we’ll go home and laugh about this one day.”

She felt something warm against her skin, then the slow itch of something dribbling down her side. She pressed a hand to her wound, then looked at it—the red staining her fingertips.

Sonny hissed, lifted his head to call out to Jason who was pausing at a stream, getting some more information about where to cross.

“No. We’re not there yet,” Elizabeth said with a shake of her head. “Sonny—”

He grimaced as they caught up to Jason, but he said nothing. Jason turned to them and Elizabeth made sure she was slightly behind Sonny, where part of her body wouldn’t be visible to him.

“The cottage is two hundred feet away. Spinelli says it’s a straight shot. And the others are almost at the bunker with Robin.” Jason hesitated, met Elizabeth’s eyes. “We need to pick up the pace. We can’t let them off the island before us more than a few minutes—”

“Two hundred feet between me and my baby?” Elizabeth clenched her jaw. “I could run that if I had to.”

Jason nodded. “The stream isn’t deep here,” he told them, “not more than a foot. Let’s get moving.”

—

Nikolas checked his watch and looked over at his nephew, playing on the ground with a toy motorcycle. He checked out the window again, then wondered if maybe—

“Uncle Nikolas,” Jake said, pitching his voice low because Stavros was sleeping in the other room and no one interrupted Stavros’s naps. Not even small children who were being groomed to be the perfect Cassadine son. Nikolas gritted his teeth. It was the future Helena had wanted for Spencer once, but Stavros had taken a shining to Elizabeth’s brash, bold son with the big blue eyes and friendly smile.

He’d wanted him, he’d told his mother. Whatever Helena had wanted to for Jake, Stavros said he deserved a chance to raise a child. And why not Laura’s grandson?

Nikolas had been desperate to keep Jake’s paternity from them—his only value—the decent treatment was only because of the Spencer blood ties, but sometimes he saw his father looking at Jake strangely—

“Uncle Nikolas,” Jake repeated, drawing Nikolas’s attention. “We should wait in the garden,” he told him.

“I—”

Then Nikolas saw something out of the corner of his eye—a movement in the trees just beyond the house. He saw a trio coming out of the trees—Jason, Elizabeth, and Sonny. He was going to get out of here. He was going home to his son—

“Nikolas?”

He heard a voice from the back of the cottage. His father was awake. Damn it! He should have given him more—

Nikolas picked Jake up, motorcycle and all, and lunged towards the door. They had one chance to get this right, and he would be damned if Jake didn’t go home today—

“Uncle Nikolas—”

Nikolas burst out of the door and loped across the short field of grass between the cottage and trees.

“What the—” Jason began, confused, pushing Elizabeth behind him. She cried out and fell to the ground. Worried, he turned—

“Mommy? Daddy?” Jake said, brightening. He shoved himself away from Nikolas, almost hurtling to the ground and closing the gap. “Uncle Nik said you were coming!” He threw himself at his father as Jason, in shock, closed his arms around his son.

“Let’s go,” Sonny ordered, hauling Elizabeth to her feet. “Damn it—” he said at the same time Jason saw the bloodstain on her side. Elizabeth swayed.

“Mommy?” Jake whimpered. “Daddy, Mommy’s hurt—”

“Nikolas!” A roar sounded from the cottage, and Nikolas turned to see his father at the door. The fury on Stavros’s face—the other man went back into the cottage, and Nikolas grimaced.

“We have to go—” he began.

“We’ll never make it in time!” Elizabeth said at the same time. “Get Jake out of here!”

“Mommy—”

“I’ll slow him down,” Nikolas said, swallowing hard. His chance to get off the island was done now. He had to stop Stavros from coming back out—and it was him or Elizabeth.

There was no choice at all.

“Nikolas—”

Jason shoved Jake at Sonny, then lifted Elizabeth into his arms. “Stop him,” Jason ordered, and then they disappeared into the trees. Nikolas closed his eyes, thought of his son, then went back to the cottage.

Jake was safe. Wanting anything else had been selfish. He needed to stop his family once and for all.

—

Elizabeth cried out as Jason sloshed through the streams, and his heart was pounding—she was bleeding so much he could feel it against his skin. “We need to stop—we need to rewrap—”

“Can’t—” she panted, closing her eyes. “Jake—he has to be safe—”

“I’ll get Jake back to the boat,” Sonny promised as he held the wide-eyed child against his chest. “Elizabeth—”

“No! No! He needs one of us—” Elizabeth looked at Jason. “Please—”

“Not going to happen,” Jason bit out. “Sonny, get back to the boat.”

“Daddy?” Jake asked.

“I have to take care of Mommy,” he told his son, drinking in every feature of his precious son. “I love you. We both love you.”

“Jason—” Elizabeth sobbed as he lowered onto the ground and Sonny disappeared, taking Jake with him. “No! No! You have to go!”

“Not without you—” Jason tore off his shirt, tore it into two quick strips, pressing one hard against her wound—she only stopped herself from screaming in excruciating pain by biting her lip so hard as Jason used the other strip to tight it tightly around her waist. “He knew us,” she panted. “I didn’t—” Tears streamed down her cheek. “He knew us. Nikolas must have—”

“We can thank him later,” Jason muttered. He got to his feet, but before he could lift Elizabeth into his arms, he heard the crack of a branch. He whirled around — only to see a furious man with dark hair and eyes aiming a gun at him.

“If you move, I will shoot her in the head,” the man snarled

Jason was face to face with Stavros Cassadine, Elizabeth bleeding out behind him, and his own gun tucked into his waistband — but if Jason moved —

He swallowed hard.

—

Half a mile away, just as Anna was joyously hugging her daughter and Robert was growling at them both to get into the damn boat—Patrick’s head whipped around at the sound of a gunshot echoing over the island.

“Oh, damn it—” he swore. Robert—

The other man pressed his ear piece. “Spinelli—” His face blanched. “Sonny got off the island. With Jake. But not Jason and Elizabeth.”

“Get them on the bloody line!” Robert shouted at Anna as he snagged Patrick’s arm to keep the doctor from hurtling off into the trees. “You don’t even know where you’re going!” he barked at his son-in-law.

“Mom, Mom—” Robin focused on Anna’s dark eyes as she pressed her fingers to ear concentrating.

“Spinelli, can you get anything? Where are they?” Anna winced. “Elizabeth’s wound reopened on the way there. She was bleeding too much — Jason had to stop to rewrap and sent Sonny ahead with Jake.”

“All right, all right. Get Robin and Patrick back to the meeting point,” Robert told his ex-wife. “I’ll go after them—”

“Not alone you won’t—” Anna retorted, but then there was a crackling in her ear. “What? Tell me again—”

—

Jason barely had a minute to register the fury and hatred in Stavros Cassadine’s eyes before his head exploded in front of him. The older man dropped to the ground,

a gory hole appearing in the side of his head.

“What—”

He felt for his gun—but it was gone—then he turned to Elizabeth who had pushed herself to a sitting position and now held his gun limply in her hands.

“He—” She closed her eyes, her breathing labored as Jason took the gun from her and returned to wrapping the wound. “He wasn’t—looking at—me—”

“That’s a good shot,” Jason managed as he tied the strip of shirt around her waist, knotting it tightly. “When did you learn how to do that?”

“You taught me. Didn’t mean to—” Elizabeth forced her eyes opened, looked at the remains of the Cassadine scion in front of her. “Wasn’t aiming for his head, but maybe...maybe this time he’ll stay dead.”

Jason’s laugh was shaky as he lifted her into his arms, shifting slightly as a crackling came through on his ear piece.

“Jason! What was that? Are you okay?”

“We’re—” Jason’s breath caught as Elizabeth slumped in his arms, her breathing shallow. “We’re heading back to the boat. Elizabeth got Stavros in the head.”

“Elizabeth?” Spinelli repeated.

Jason ignored him, all but running back to the inlet, hoping like hell Sonny and Laura hadn’t listened to him. If the boat was gone—if everyone had stuck to the plan and gotten Jake to safety at the meeting point—

Elizabeth would die on the island and there’d be nothing he could do to stop it.

He burst into the clearing at the edge of the island, searching the area—but the dinghy and boat were gone.

“Spinelli—”

“Hold on, hold on—Robert and Anna are on their way now—Laura—Laura promised Elizabeth.”

Jason gritted his teeth. “Promised her what?”

“As soon as Jake was safe, Laura would get him back to the mainland,” Spinelli’s

voice was quiet. “Robert is two minutes out—”

“Damn it—”

Jason laid Elizabeth down on the ground, keeping one eye on the edge of the forest as he pressed his hand into her wound, sweat dribbling down his neck.

“Elizabeth—” He tapped her cheek lightly. “Just open your eyes. Stay with me a little longer.”

Her lashes fluttered. “Signed...” She licked her lips. “Told Laura...boys...” Her eyes were a sliver of blue, slightly gazed. Jason pressed a hand to her forehead, hissing at the heat. She was going to end up with an infection. He never should have agreed to let her come—

“Boys...yours,” she slurred. “Promise...”

“Hey—” Jason shook his head. “No. We’re not doing that. Look at me—” He grasped her chin, turned her face towards him. “Just a little longer. We’ll be back on the mainland. Robert and Anna have a first aid kit. They have Patrick—and Robin.”

She smiled, but her eyes drifted closed again. “Should’ve said yes...” she murmured. “Sorry. Scared.”

“Not nearly as scared as I am right now.” Jason grimaced at the blood seeping through the retied shirt. He didn’t have anything else—

Then he heard a boat engine—Jason looked up—saw a dingy being dropped to the water as Patrick and Anna dropped into it. It took almost two more minutes before it was on the shore.

“We can’t stay,” Anna told Jason as Patrick helped Jason lift Elizabeth carefully into the dingy. “Not even to stabilize her. Spinelli said the guards are heading for the marina—”

“Let’s go,” Jason said. His mouth was tight, his lips nearly white as he pressed them together watching as Robert steered the dingy back to the boat and Patrick surveyed Elizabeth’s wound.

“She’s lost a lot of blood,” Patrick muttered, removing Jason’s makeshift bandages. Elizabeth winced. “Hey, Webber. This is not cool. You can’t leave me alone to raise those kids. They almost hijacked a plane.”

“Not alone...Robin...”



“Yeah, we got her—” Patrick didn’t spare a glance for his wife, carefully rewrapping Elizabeth’s wound with a clean bandage. “But those kids outnumber us. You need six kids just to keep Spencer under control. And there’s no telling what Joss adds to the mix.” Elizabeth smiled, but then her head slumped to the side and her eyes closed again.

“Give her here,” Robert said. In less than two more minutes, the boat was speeding back to the mainland, but Elizabeth remained unconscious.

“Patrick,” Robin said grimly as she took her husband aside. “How bad is it?”

“It’s—” Patrick took a deep breath. “It’s not good. I hope your surgical skills are still sharp and that your parents know where the hell to get some blood. She needs a transfusion. Fast.”

“Shouldn’t we go back to the flat?” Patrick asked as Anna docked the boat, and Robert and Jason began lifting Elizabeth carefully to avoid jarring her. “We have to rethink—”

“No, Laura, Sonny, and Spinelli are already at the airport, and the flat may be compromised.” Anna turned to her son-in-law. “We have everything need on the plane and in our kits.”

“Even for an emergency transfusion?” Patrick demanded. “Damn it—and where hell is Luke and Lucky? I need someone to punch—”

“And mess with those hands?” Robin asked as he offered a hand for her to climb from the boat to the dock. “We’re gonna need them.”

Patrick looked at his wife—his miraculous wife who was standing in front of him as if the nightmare of the last year hadn’t happened—and swallowed hard. “She didn’t even get the chance to see Jake. Not really.”

“What happened to the man that did brain surgery by flash light?” Robin’s teasing tone fell short as she climbed into the van, looking away from Jason, cradling Elizabeth in the back seat. “Patrick—”

“I never should have let her come,” Patrick muttered. “We should have locked her up.” He took a deep breath. “But she’s like Cam and would have found a way to come anyway. Emma helped tie up your cousin, by the way.”

“Which knots did she use?” Robin asked.

—

The airport on Mykonos was still within sighting distance of Cassadine Island and Laura found herself watching the land, waiting for something.

“I thought you said the guards were coming to the marina,” she said to Spinelli as the tech scowled at his computer screens. “How much time do we have to get in the air?”

“I don’t know. I can’t track the boats, and I can’t—” Spinelli hissed as one of his screens went dark. “Damn it—” He turned as Sonny emerged from the bathroom, Jake still in his arms. Laura’s face softened.

“Jake. I didn’t get a chance to even look at you,” she murmured. “Thanks, Sonny.”

“You’re my grandma,” Jake said as Sonny set him on the ground. The little boy sniffed and swiped his nose with the back of his hand. “Uncle Nikolas showed me lots of pictures.”

“That’s how you knew your parents,” Sonny said. He exhaled slowly. “He went to Jason and Elizabeth,” he murmured to Spinelli. “If we’d known that, we could have kept Elizabeth home.”

“They’re on their way to the hangar now,” Spinelli said. He hesitated. “But Robert didn’t sound hopeful. It’s bad.” He turned back to Laura and Jake, found it in himself to smile. “But look at Little Stone Cold. He’s here. He’s alive. And he’s okay. That’s something. And they got Doctor Robin, didn’t they? Mission accomplished.”

There was a screech of wheels of the van pulled into the hangar. Laura stepped in front of Jake and Sonny hurried over to her. “We should get him on the plane before—”

“Mommy?” Jake said, his voice worried. “Why is Daddy carrying her? She’s—” He tugged on Laura’s pant leg. “She’s hurt.”

“We need to get her on the plane so we can help her. Sonny—” Laura looked at him. “Take him on the plane. But stay away from the back. That’s where Luke has Lucky locked up.”

“Should toss him out on the way back to New York,” Sonny muttered, but lifted Jake in his arms and strode towards the plane’s steps. Spinelli went after them, still cradling his laptop looking over the security cameras.

Laura blanched as she saw the spread of dried blood on Elizabeth’s midsection as Jason carefully set her in Robert’s arms so he could get out of the van. “Robin—”

Laura touched the doctor's shoulder. "I'm so glad to see you—"

"Me, too. Patrick and I are going to get washed up. We need to be in the air, but I want to get her stabilized so we can—" Robin shook her head and went after her father, Patrick, and Anna, leaving Laura with Jason for the moment.

"She made me promise," Laura said. "I'm sorry, Jason, she made me promise I'd go as soon as Jake was safe." She hesitated. "Did you—what happened to Nikolas?"

"I know. It's—" Jason started to respond, but then the ground beneath them shook, and the sun all but disappeared as a cloud of dust, ash, and debris blotted out the early afternoon sky. "What the—"

"The island—" Laura stepped towards it, her eyes huge. "I—" The estate had once been dimly visible, the stone towering over the trees — but now it was covered in smoke and they could see the flames licking out behind the gray.

"We need to get in the air!" Anna called. "Let's go—"

"But Nikolas—" Laura swallowed hard, nodded. "Let's—let's go."

On board the plane, in the kitchen galley area, Robin paused while scrubbing her hands. She closed her eyes. "He didn't know if he'd make it off in time."

"Robin?"

She looked at her husband, her eyes pale and large. "That was the plan. It was always the plan. Nikolas was going to burn the estate to the ground with all of them inside. But it wasn't supposed to happen yet. He must—he must have triggered it. Oh, God. He didn't make it off the island."

Grimly, Patrick dried his hands. "Then he sacrificed himself to give us time to get out of here. Let's go make sure it wasn't for nothing."

There was nothing else that Jason could do.

He'd carried her to the edge of the shore, onto the bed, into the van, and then laid her down in the back room of the plane where a pale Patrick and Robin were hurriedly arranging the emergency supplies to stop the bleeding —

He'd wanted to stay in the room, to hold Elizabeth's hand, to do *something*—but Robin had gently put a hand on his chest and pushed back until Jason was on the other side of the door.

“Right now,” Robin told him, her brown eyes somber, “Elizabeth would want you to be with the scared little boy who just got pulled off that island.”

Jason exhaled sharply, then nodded. “Okay. But if you need anything—“

“I know where to find you. Jason, she’s ours, too. And Patrick isn’t giving up.”

With that, she turned and closed the door.

Jason returned to the main part of the plane where Sonny was sitting on the sofa next to Jake.

Jake.

His son was sitting on the sofa next to Jason’s oldest friend, his cheeks stained with tears, his blonde hair ruffled and his face stained with dirt and soot—a scratch on his cheek probably from a passing branch as Sonny had carried him through the woods to safety.

“How is she?” Laura asked, leaving Spinelli, Robert, and Anna at a table, looking over satellite images.

“I—“ Jason shook his head. “They won’t tell me anything. Do you—“ Nikolas had tried to buy them time and if Stavros had shown up—if the island had blown up—

Laura had come here to save her children, too. He couldn’t forget that.

“We don’t know anything. And Robin is a little busy,” Laura murmured. She turned to look at the sofa, putting a hand on Jason’s arm. “When I saw Lucky for the first time,” she said, “I was so afraid to talk to him. To touch him. I was afraid that he would disappear. That I was imagining him.”

“He knew us,” Jason managed. “Nikolas told him about us. About me. He called me—he knew me.” He met Laura’s eyes. “I hope he got out.”

“Me, too.”

With that, Laura returned to the computers and Jason finally managed to go over to the sofa, kneeling down in front of Jake. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Jake studied him carefully. “Mommy’s hurt, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, she is, but Robin and Patrick are doing everything they can. She missed you so much, Jake.” Jason reached out to touch Jake’s cheek, but his hand faltered

halfway, falling back to his side.

He didn't dream, but he still couldn't quite bring himself to believe this was their son sitting in front of him like the last two terrible years hadn't happened.

"Are you okay?" Jason asked instead. "You got cut—"

"Sorry," Sonny said, with a wince. "I didn't—we were going to the boat—" He pushed himself to his feet. "I'll get something—"

Jason also stood. "Sonny—" He cleared his throat. "Thank you. For getting him to the boat."

"I didn't want to go without you, but—" Sonny shook his head. "Elizabeth made Laura promise she'd go as soon as Jake was safe, and I guess Laura—"

"It was the right choice," Jason said. "Elizabeth knew the risks. We both did."

Sonny went to find a first aid kit, and Jason gingerly perched on the edge of the sofa next to his son—*his son*—searching for the words.

He'd never been Jake's father. Not when it had mattered. Not when Jake could have remembered. Elizabeth had brought this miracle into the world and had done every ounce of the work since that moment.

He'd never brought anything to Jake's life, and now Jason didn't even know where to start.

"Is Uncle Nikolas okay?" Jake asked. He rubbed a hand under his nose. "He said I was gonna go home before I was six, but then he left, and I don't know where he is."

"We're looking for him," Jason promised. "He was very brave today. He knew it was your best chance to go home. That it was Robin's best chance to get back to her family."

"But I wanted Mommy," Jake admitted in a small voice. "Uncle Nik showed me pictures of you, and I know you're my daddy, and you seem nice. You made sure Mommy got on the plane. Uncle Nik said when I came home, we'd be a family. But—" Tears spilled over his lashes, sliding down his cheeks as his chest hitched and his voice broke. "I want Mommy."

"I want her, too," Jason admitted. He reached for his son and Jake launched himself into Jason's arms, clinging tightly, his arms around Jason's neck, the tears soaking into the shoulder of his shirt. Jason folded Jake into his arms, rocking him slowly as

his son sobbed.

Sonny stopped just a few feet away, the kit in his hands as he took in the sight of Jason finally holding the son he'd believed to be lost for so long. He glanced over to find Laura watching them, tears glinting on her cheeks.

"I left her on that island," Laura said softly so that no one but Sonny could hear her, "and I know it was the right choice. But I asked her to help us one more time with Lucky. Just once more."

"You thought we could find out information," Sonny began, but Laura shook her head.

"She came here to get her son, and my son might have killed her." Laura looked at him. "Did she even get to see him? To look at him? Touch him, hold him?"

Sonny pressed his lips together, and Laura closed her eyes. "No," he admitted. "She was bleeding before we got to the house, and we didn't know this—but Jake recognized Jason. Elizabeth didn't even have to be there. Jason gave me Jake, and took her."

"If one single Cassadine made it off that estate," Laura said, tightly, "I will spend the rest of my life hunting them down and eliminating them."

"You and I agree on that," Sonny promised. He turned at the sound of his voice, softly spoken from the back room. He hurried back, terrified that maybe Robin was telling him that Elizabeth hadn't survived and he needed to help prepare Jason—

Oh, God, how was he—

But Robin didn't give him that news. She pulled him into the room, and pushed him into a chair. "You and Elizabeth. You have the same blood type, right?" she asked. "I remember this. She donated to you once, didn't she? You said—"

"Yeah. Yeah." Sonny cleared his throat. "A lifetime ago." He looked at Elizabeth, on the bed, a sheet covering her chest, her abdomen still bloody, and the wound that hadn't looked so bad before they'd left on the boats—

He swallowed hard and focused on Robin. "What do you need?"

"A blood transfusion. She's not going to make it, Sonny, otherwise. We can stitch her up again, but she's so weak from the blood loss, she'll go into shock—"

"Stop—" Sonny rolled up his sleeve. "Take whatever you need. Take it all. She goes

home with Jake or Jason. Alive. They get to be a family.”

---

It was some time before Jason realized that Sonny hadn't returned. Jake had continue to cry for several more minutes, but they'd slowed into hiccups after a while, and then Jake had pulled back.

“Uncle Nik said my brothers missed me.”

“A lot,” Jason told him. “You know your cousin Spencer? He and Cameron and some of their friends tried to steal a plane because we wouldn't let them help. And then they tied up Aunt Lulu and her friend to head to the airport. That's how much Cam wants you to come home.”

“But Mommy—“ Jake looked towards the door where he knew his mother was. “She was hurt. Really hurt. Why didn't that lady wait for you?”

“Because your mother wanted you safe,” Jason told him roughly. “We came here to bring you home. She got hurt before we got to you. All that matters is getting you home.” He paused, looked at Laura who had clearly overheard Jake's question and was pale, her eyes haunted. “And that lady is your grandmother. She promised your mother.”

“That's Mommy's mom?” Jake asked, frowning his brow. “I don't—I thought that was Uncle Nik's mom.”

“I am,” Laura told Jake, sitting on his other side. “But the universe brought your mother into my life, and she's mine, too. The daughter of my heart. So yes, I am your grandmother. I wanted to wait for your mother. But I know what she wanted. We keep promises in this family.”

“Promises are important,” Jake said with a nod. He made a face as his stomach rumbled. “I didn't eat lunch,” he admitted.

“Why don't I take you over to the galley?” Laura offered, holding out a hand to him. “Jason, you can check in with Spinelli or Robin if she'll let you.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” Jason scrubbed his hands over his face, then pushed himself to his feet. He could focus on Jake and shove Elizabeth out of his head when his son was there, but now his mind was racing as he joined Spinelli and the pair of WSB agents at the computers. “Where are the other Spencers?”

“In another room,” Robert said flatly. “The kid is still knocked out, but Spencer

didn't trust it." He looked at Jason. "He's sick over this, Morgan—"

"He can stay sick. What do we know?" Jason demanded. "Who was on the island?"

"Not much yet," Spinelli admitted. "News media says the main estate is still engulfed in flames, and being on an island, hard to get much emergency help out there. No survivors have been reported yet, but seeing as how most of the people on that island are legally dead—"

"Robin said," Anna said tightly, "on the way to get Elizabeth, that the plan was to blow up the island once Nikolas had gotten Jake and Robin to safety. They hadn't been trying to reach Patrick very long. Nikolas was supposed to get Jake and Robin out, and Stefan was supposed to set the bombs."

"Stefan," Robert muttered. "I forgot about him."

"He brought Robin her meals, and passed messages. To the extent he was an ally—" Anna sighed, rubbed her eyes. "And there's Valentin. Robin doesn't think he was on the island yet. So he's still out there—"

"If Stefan was supposed to trigger the bomb—" Jason closed his eyes. "By the time we got to the cottage, Nikolas was already rushing to us. Stavros followed us. That's why Nikolas wasn't with us. He gave us Jake, and then went to stop him."

"But you said—" Spinelli twisted in his seat.

"Elizabeth couldn't keep going. I had to rewrap her wound," Jason continued. "I sent Sonny ahead, and Stavros caught up to us. Faster than I expected. Elizabeth shot him. And it was a head shot with brain matter. He's not coming back this time," he added to Robert and Anna. "He thought she wasn't a threat, and she took the gun from my holster when he wasn't looking."

"Men underestimating us is always their downfall," Anna murmured. "But he'd caught up to you. Which means Nikolas either went straight to the house—"

"Or Stavros stopped him." Jason grimaced, looking towards the galley where he could just see Laura handing Jake a sandwich. "We need to find out for sure. His son deserves to know what happened."

"Jason?"

Jason turned to find Robin behind him, wiping her hands on a towel. "Robin, is she—"



“Come into the back.”

Patrick was just pulling a sheet over Elizabeth’s chest, tucking it under her shoulders as Robin led him in. Next to bed, Sonny was slowly rolling down his sleeve, his face pale.

“What—“

“Patrick,” Robin told her husband, “can you help Sonny to the kitchen? He needs to eat. And to rest.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Patrick dragged a hand through his hair, and Jason remembered that Elizabeth’s best friend hadn’t slept in days—just like the rest of them. There hadn’t been a quiet moment since Laura had arrived at the Webber House.

Had it just been a few days ago when he’d gone to the hockey game, and watched Patrick and Elizabeth scream at referees?

“What’s wrong with Sonny—“ Jason started to ask as Patrick walked behind Sonny, making sure the other man made it down the hall.

“Patrick and I have done what we can right now,” Robin told him. “But by the time she got to the plane, Jason, she’d lost so much blood—“

“Robin—“ Jason stared at her, his breath hitching. “No—“

“She was going into shock,” Robin continued, “and once that happens, the organs start to shut down, you know that—“

“But I can—“ He looked at Elizabeth, at her pale skin, her still figure—but her chest—it was rising. Falling.

Rising. Falling.

“She’s alive,” he said in a rush.

“She is,” Robin said. “But I don’t know if she’ll stay that way. She needed a transfusion, and Sonny’s a match. He donated all he could safely. And he wanted us to keep going. But we couldn’t.”

Jason pressed his lips together. “She hasn’t even seen him.”

“I know.”

“You need—what can I do?”

“Sit with her. Keep her company. She might wake up,” Robin told him. “It’s just—we don’t know,” she admitted. “We don’t have monitors. We don’t have the testing. We could barely take in her pulse and heart rate. We don’t know,” she repeated. “How bad it was. She could be hanging on by a thread. She could be recovering.” She swallowed hard. “I’d never forgive myself if I told you she was okay, and then she never went home.”

Jason cleared his throat, then sat down on the edge of the bed, took Elizabeth’s slim hand in his. “She killed Stavros, you know.”

“Mom said.”

“She knew she’d sent Jake away, maybe never to see him again, and she was probably in so much pain she couldn’t breath.” Jason pushed Elizabeth’s hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear, letting his fingers drift down her cheek. “And she still got my gun, and saved my life.”

“She knew one of you had to get back to Jake.”

“It should be her,” Jason said tightly. “She nearly died to give him life. You remember?”

“I do—“

“She went into a fire for him.”

“I remember.”

“And losing him—“ Jason closed his eyes. “This isn’t how it ends. Not for her.”

“I don’t want it—“

“No.” Jason looked at Robin. “This isn’t how it ends,” he repeated. “Elizabeth doesn’t die from a stab wound meant for me because of the Cassadines. She doesn’t die before getting to be with Jake. She goes home to her boys. That’s how this ends.”

“I hope it will—“

Jason shook his head, returned his gaze to Elizabeth. “No.”

“Jason, you know better than that. You know sometimes we don’t get a miracle—“

“It’s not about a miracle,” he said roughly. “It’s about Elizabeth. And how strong she is. She made it to the beach. On to the boat. She’s still breathing now.” He nodded. “You got her the blood she needed. And when she wakes up, I’ll bring Jake to her one more time. That’s what I do. It’s all I’ve ever done. Jake gets kidnapped, and I bring him back to her.”

“Okay.” Robin nodded, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Okay. You’re right. Elizabeth is too stubborn. She’ll fight. And we’ll fight with her.”

“Right.” Jason got to his feet. “But first, it’s time to deal with the man who put her here.”

Luke shot to his feet when Jason opened the door to the small room on the plane where Lucky was being kept. The younger man was slumped in chair, his hands shackled in a pair of cuffs attached to one of the chairs, and then both his feet were individually cuffed to the bottom. Lucky’s head lolled to the side, his face still bruised and bloody from whatever fight he’d been in with Robert and Luke who had dragged him away earlier that day—

Had it only been that morning?

“How’s Elizabeth?” Luke asked, stepping between his son and Jason. “Cowboy’s still out of it—“

“When he wakes up,” Jason said evenly, “you’re going to take him out of the country, and I never want to see him again. Elizabeth never has to see him again. He’s done.”

Luke swallowed hard. “Aiden—“

“Aiden doesn’t know him. If Elizabeth wants that to change one day, that’ll be up to her, but right now?” Jason arched a brow. “You want him to keep breathing, Luke? You’ll get him away me and my family.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” Luke said, his voice tinged with desperation as Jason turned away. “I wanted Laura and Elizabeth to help me save him. To save Jake—“

“You wanted them to do the work because you knew you couldn’t,” Jason retorted. “You know, people talk a lot about the hero you used to be. But I’ve never met the man who saved the world from Mikkos Cassadine. I’ve never met the man who took down Frank Smith. The only man I’ve ever known is the coward who couldn’t support his wife after she’d been raped and tortured at the hands of the Cassadines and made a teen aged girl responsible for his son.”

Luke swallowed hard. “I never was a hero,” he admitted in a low voice. “That was always Laura. She thought I was a good man. I wanted to be the man I saw in her eyes. I was for a little while. You know about that, Morgan. About the love of a woman who thinks you’re better than you are.”

Jason stared at him, then nodded. “I do.”

“Sometimes you can be,” Luke continued. “But it’s not in me. Luke and Lulu—they’re all the good I ever did in the world. My boy—” He turned to look at Lucky, his eyes anguished. “You knew him once. You knew what I was trying to save. What would you do for your boy? For Jake? For Michael?” His mouth firmed and then Luke faced Jason. “What lines would you cross to save them?”

Jason took that in, then nodded. “All of them,” he admitted. “But Elizabeth wasn’t just a person, Luke. She’s not someone you should have been able to sacrifice. After everything she’s done for your family—you kept Jake from us. After what you did to him—”

“I needed her to save Lucky,” Luke said simply. “And you don’t get to stand there in judgment of me, Morgan, when I know your crimes aren’t better than mine. You hurt Elizabeth more than I ever did—” He paused when Jason clenched his jaw. “I’m not talking about the accident. Not that. But everything else. You left your family, Morgan. Just like I did. You’re no better.”

There was enough truth in those words that Jason couldn’t find it in himself to argue. “You take him out of the country,” Jason repeated. “And the next time I see you or him will be because Elizabeth wants it.”

“Yeah, okay.” Luke exhaled slowly. “Can I finish the job?” he asked. “Laura will want to know about Nikolas. She deserves that—”

“If Laura wants your help, she can have it.” Jason opened the door and started away again—but Luke’s words stopped him.

“I wanted to be the man Laura saw when she looked at me, but I couldn’t do it. I wasn’t strong enough. I walked out on my family a long time before she got sick. Don’t make my mistake, Morgan. Be the man Elizabeth already thinks you are. She deserves it.”

—

Laura folded her arms, then brought her fingers to her mouth, her eyes intent on

the satellite images as Spinelli scanned the island again for heat signatures. For any signs of life. It had been nearly three hours since the explosion—they were flying over France, and would be coming closer to the Atlantic.

And she still didn't know if her son was alive.

"He might have gotten off the island," Robert reminded her. Laura nodded absently. "Robin says it was the plan after all."

"I know, but—" Laura sighed. "Jason was right. If Stavros caught up to them that fast, then it's likely—" She closed her eyes. "How will I ever explain this to Spencer?"

"Spencer knew that his father was helping Jake," Jason said as he rejoined them. "When we caught them trying to get Jax's plan, Elizabeth told Spencer that Nikolas was trying to make things right."

"If Nikolas doesn't come home from this," Sonny added, "then you tell Spencer his father gave his life to make sure the worst evil this world has ever known couldn't come back again. You make him a hero, Laura."

"It won't be enough," Laura murmured. "But it'll be something." She turned to Jason. "What did Luke say?" She paused. "What are you going to do about Lucky?"

"You can do whatever you want with them," Jason said. "But Elizabeth doesn't ever have to deal with either of them again if she doesn't want to. She'll decide how to handle things with Aiden, but he's done with Cam and Jake. They're mine."

"I know," Laura said softly. "And thank you. For letting him live when I know—I know it's not what you want."

"It's not up to me," Jason muttered. "And it's not—there's a chance it's not all his fault," he added with an irritated growl. "If Helena's still brainwashing him—"

Laura's breath released in a rush of air. "Thank you."

"But you don't ask Elizabeth for a single piece of help. She's going to wake up," Jason said, firmly, "and then we're going home. If she wants to offer it later, that will be her decision. Luke already knows not to ask. She loves you, Laura. Don't ask her."

"I won't. She's going to wake up," Laura said, with a nod. "And you'll bring Jake to her. She's done enough for the Spencers. I started this a long time ago. It's on me to end it."

Jason started back the hallway towards the room where Elizabeth was resting, when Sonny snagged his elbow. “You know there’s not a chance in hell Elizabeth is going to let Laura deal with alone.”

“No, and I’m not done with the Cassadines either,” Jason told Sonny in a low voice. “They took Jake from us and they put Elizabeth through hell for years. I’m not going to rest until every single one of them is dead. But Luke and Laura don’t need to know that yet.”

Sonny smirked, released Jason, then stepped back. “Letting them twist a bit. Good. They deserve it. Go sit with Elizabeth. Jake is resting. When he wakes up, I’ll come get you.”

“Thanks.”

—

He knew she would wake up. From the moment he’d realized that she was still breathing, Jason had known that Elizabeth would be okay. That she would make it to New York where he could get her to a hospital — but he’d never doubted her.

Two hours after he’d gone to sit with her, her lashes fluttered slightly and her head slowly moved—turning towards him. “What....” Her voice drifted in and out, the word rusty and nearly inaudible.

Jason took Elizabeth’s hand more tightly in his, leaning forward. “Elizabeth. Hey. Can you look at me? Please. Open your eyes. That’s all I need.”

Her lids drifted up slightly, just a sliver of those beautiful blue eyes peeking out before they disappeared. Her tongue darted out, the tip touching her dry lips. “What...happ...”

“Jake. We got him off the island. He’s safe. You’re okay. We got away,” Jason told her. “Elizabeth—“

Her eyes opened again, and this time she managed to hold them. “Jake. Jake. Not...not a dream. Oh—“ Elizabeth squeezed her eyes. “Oh, everything hurts.”

“You need something. I’ll get Patrick and Robin.” Jason kissed the palm of her hand. “I’ll get them. And then Jake. He wants you. He asked for you.”

“He asked...” A tear slid down her cheek. “He asked...”

“He did. I’ll get Patrick—“

Not wanting to be more than a few feet away from her, Jason went to the open doorway and called for Elizabeth’s best friend. Patrick came less than minute later, his wild hair and eyes matching Jason’s as he all but lunged to Elizabeth’s side. He reached for Elizabeth’s wrist to check her pulse.

“Patrick...” Elizabeth licked her lips. “On fire.”

“I bet,” Patrick muttered. “Pulse is racing.” He pressed a hand to her cheek. “Burning up. I think infection is setting in—“

“What—“ Jason’s breath quickened. “But she woke up—“

“No, no—it’s—“ Patrick closed his eyes, took a deep breath. “It’s okay. We can—she’s running a fever to fight the infection. That’s good. We can work with that. We have—we have some things we can give her.” He looked at Elizabeth. “You gave me a hell of a scare, Webber. Don’t do that.”

“Sorry.” Elizabeth’s smile was faint. “Was it bad?”

“Bad enough,” Patrick said, “but you’re strong enough to run the fever. That’s good, Jason,” he told the enforcer. “The transfusion worked. She’ll make it to GH.”

“Jake’s out there?” Elizabeth asked. She winced, pressing her hands flat against the sheet, almost if she was trying to lift herself up. “Robin. I remember Robin. And Nikolas. Did they—“ She saw Jason’s face. “What happened?”

“Robin got out,” Jason assured her, as Patrick continued to search through his medical kit until he found a bottle of pills. “But there was an explosion after we reached the airport. We’re—there’s no sign of Nikolas.”

“Oh, God.” Elizabeth closed her eyes. “Oh, no.”

“We’ll sort that out. Here, take this.” Patrick slid two pills between her lips and brought a glass of water to her lip. “That’s an antibiotic and some pain meds. To take the edge off.”

“I want to see Jake. Can I see him? Will I scare him? He’s been through so much—“ Elizabeth reached for Jason’s hand. “But I just want to see my little boy—“

“He needs to see you, too,” Jason told her. He put his other hand on top of hers, engulfing her smaller one between his. He brought her fingertips to his lips again. “He talked to Cam. He was very impressed by the attempt to steal a plane to rescue

him.”

Elizabeth laughed, then winced. “Oh, man.”

“I’ll go get Jake,” Patrick said, then left.

“The next time someone tries to stab me,” Jason told her roughly, “you let them. Do you understand me?”

“No problem,” Elizabeth said. She met his eyes. “Just as long as you agree that the next time someone tries to stab me, you let them.”

“That—“ Jason scowled. “That’s not the same.”

“Feels like it is.”

“Don’t—“

“Mommy!”

A burst of energy shot through the door and nearly launched himself onto the bed, but Jason caught the little boy before he could land his full weight on Elizabeth.

“Whoa, whoa,” Jason said, with a surprised burst of laughter, pulling Jake back into his lap. “Mommy just woke up and she’s still hurt. Let’s take a minute, okay?”

“Jake.” Elizabeth stared at him, then reached out a hand to trace the curve of his cheek. “You’re here.”

“Mommy, I was scared that you wouldn’t wake up. But you did, and Cam said you were awesome, and I’m gonna like my room—“ Jake’s voice wobbled slightly. “Uncle Nik isn’t here.”

“I know. Daddy told me.” Elizabeth reached for his hand. “But he brought you to us so we could get you away. He was so brave.”

“He said you wanted me to come home so much. That you cried all the time.” Jake sniffled, swiped his hand over his nose. “Did you get hurt helping me?”

“Sort of,” Elizabeth said. “But it’s okay. It’s worth it to see you. Oh, God, Jake—“ She leaned up, ignoring the pain in her side as she gathered Jake into her arms, and brought him down to lay beside her, tucked into her arms. “My baby.” She pressed her lips to his blond head. “My beautiful baby.”



“I saw pictures of you, Mommy,” Jake told her, his voice muffled where it was tucked into the crook of her neck. “You and Daddy with my brothers at Christmas. You were at a park in the snow. And you looked sad. Uncle Nik said it’s because you love Christmas but I wasn’t there.”

“We went to the tree lighting,” Jason told Jake, running a hand down his back, as Elizabeth just closed her eyes, tears sliding down her cheeks. “And we were remembering you. We have presents for you at home. Christmas and birthday.”

“Uncle Nik said he’d bring me home and we’d be a family, all of us. That you’d be okay when I came home.” Jake leaned up to look at his mother. “Are you okay now? I’m home.”

“Yeah,” Elizabeth managed. “Yeah, you’re home. I’m perfect.”

“I need you to run that by me just one more time.”

Patrick growled as he pushed past the speechless chief of staff and stalked towards an empty wheelchair. “I’ve got Elizabeth in the car—burning up from infection—and you’re gonna start with the jokes.”

“What do you expect from me?” Steven Webber demanded as he jogged after his best friend towards the SUV parked haphazardly at the curb. “You just told me you two days ago you and Bits were taking off without any damn notice, and now you’re saying my sister was stabbed in Greece—what the hell was—“

Then he stopped as the passenger door shoved open and Robin stepped out. His eyes grew wide as he looked back at Patrick who was carefully lifting Elizabeth out of the backseat, helped by Robert while Anna leaned over to let them know she was parking the car.

“What the absolute hell is going on right now?” he demanded. Steven jabbed a finger at Robin. “You’re supposed to be dead.”

“Supposed to be. I’m not. It runs in the family,” Robin said dryly as she followed Patrick and her father into the hospital. “Try to keep up.”

“Where the hell is Jason?” Steven demanded. “Why aren’t you dead? Where are my nephews? How did this—“

Elizabeth winced as she pressed a hand to her side. “Jason had to go home to be with the boys. He’ll be here later.” She offered Patrick a dry look. “Unless you were lying to him about me not dying.”

“Hey, all I ever promised was that I’d get you to GH alive,” Patrick said. He wheeled her up to the nurse’s desk where Epiphany Johnson merely lifted a brow. “Everything after that is on you.”

“Damn it, tell me what the hell is going on!” Steven exploded. “Who stabbed you? Was this because of Jason? I told you—“

“Actually—“ Elizabeth grimaced. “It was because of me. So shut up, get out of my way, and let Patrick give me some goddamn pain medication.”

—

Jason had wanted to go with Elizabeth to the hospital—hadn’t wanted to let her out of his sight, but she’d pushed him to take Jake home. To get back to Cameron and Spencer who were probably scared as hell.

It was one thing to stick together in the woods in Greece, sending Jake back to the boat with Sonny and refusing to leave her then—but they were parents now. The danger was over.

If she was going to be in the hospital, Jason had to step up at home.

Jason put the SUV into park in the driveway, and glanced over his shoulder at Jake in the booster seat in the back of the car, his head lolled over to the side, dozing gently, before looking at Laura in the passenger seat next to him.

Her face was grimly set as she stared at the house. “Maybe we should have put this off longer,” she murmured. “Dante could have kept the boys at Greystone.”

“He could have,” Jason said. “Laura—“

“It’s just—Spencer’s been through so much. And the last thing, I want him to tell him is that his father might not—“ Her voice broke slightly. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. This is so selfish. You want to be with Jake, and Jake needs his brothers. And Cameron—God, Cameron needs Jake—“

“Laura.”

Jason waited for her to meet his eyes. “I’m angry about what happened to Elizabeth,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean I don’t remember what you’re going through. Spencer needs you, but I think maybe it might help him to see Jake. To see what his father did. If Nikolas didn’t make it, I will always be grateful that the last thing he ever did was get my son away from Stavros Cassadine.”

“Thank you.” Laura took a deep breath. “Let’s go inside.”

Inside, Dante was at the dining room table with the trio of gathered around him, all of them picking at slices of pizza. When Laura pushed open the door, he shot to his feet. “Hey. You’re back.”

“You’re—“ Cameron swung his head around as Jason came in behind Laura, Jake cradled in his arms, still sleeping. His blue eyes were wide as he took in his brother. “That’s...that’s really him.”

Spencer was quiet as he got to his feet, shoving the chair out. He looked past Jason — but no one else was coming in. “Where’s everyone else?” he asked. “Where’s my dad?”

“Where’s Mom?” Cameron asked, his voice rising sharply. “Mom! Is she in the car?”

“Laura—“ Jason looked her, and she sighed.

“Dante, do me a favor,” Laura said to her son-in-law. “Come upstairs with me? We’ll take Jake up to finish his nap, and I can talk to Spencer. Jason needs to talk to Cameron.” She paused. “Emma, you can stay down here.”

“Okay,” Dante agreed as Cameron started to blink rapidly, his chest rising. He strode over to Jason, looking at the little boy cradled against Jason’s torso. “Hell of a thing,” he muttered as the older man gently transferred the precious little boy to Sonny’s son. “Look at him.”

“Spencer?” Laura said, gently.

“Okay.” Spencer looked at Cameron and Emma. “Whatever happens,” he said, taking a deep breath, “it’s okay. Because Jake is home. And that’s what everyone wanted. Honor—I think maybe honor is restored. And your mom would be happy.”

With that, he followed his grandmother up the stairs and Jason gestured for Cameron and Emma to come sit on the sofa.

“First, Mom’s okay,” Jason told Cameron who exhaled on a quick rush of air. “She got hurt, and we were worried for a minute. But Uncle Patrick took real good care of her.” He looked at Emma. “And so did your mother.”

“My—“ Emma’s eyes were round. “What? Wait. What.”

“Aunt Robin?” Cameron asked. “Wait—“

“The Cassadines didn’t just take Jake away,” Jason told them. “They made us all think Robin was gone, too. Emma, your mother is alive. And she’s at GH with your father, taking care of Elizabeth.”

“My mom—“ Emma’s lip trembled. “My mom is okay? She’s alive? She’s okay. She’s home. She’s here. My mom? Mommy—I want to talk to her. I want to see her.”

“I know. And I want that, too. She wants that. She wanted me to bring you to her.” He looked at Cameron. “And your mom wanted that, too. We just—we needed to bring Jake home. And Spencer needs to know—“

“His dad isn’t here,” Cameron said quietly as Emma swiped at her eyes. “He didn’t come home.”

“We don’t know where he is,” Jason said carefully. “When we got to Greece, everything happened very fast, and Nikolas got Jake to us, but he couldn’t leave with us. He wanted to make sure we got off the island safely. And we did. Except your mom was hurt, and we got slowed down. So he stayed behind. And there was an explosion.”

“Why is it always an explosion?” Emma wanted to know. “That’s how they said my mom died.” She turned to Cameron. “So maybe he’s okay, then. No one ever dies in those, do they?”

“Sometimes,” Cameron said tightly, his eyes on Jason. “Sometimes, they do.”

“Yeah, sometimes they do.” Jason paused. “Whatever happens, Nikolas helped us save Jake’s life. And your mother’s. If he doesn’t come back, Spencer is going to need his family. Even if sometimes he’s a pain.”

“His dad helped save my mom, too. We’ll take care of Spencer,” Emma promised. She looked towards the stairs, bit her lip. “I want to see my mom,” she admitted in a small voice. “Do we have to wait? We should, but—“

“No,” Jason said, with a shake of his head. “You don’t have to wait. No one blames you—“

“I want to,” Cameron said. He straightened his shoulders. “You can take Emma to the hospital. You should see your mom,” he told her. “But Spencer is my cousin whether he likes it or not.”

“We can...” Emma nodded. “We can wait a bit. Mom and Dad are probably busy yelling at people and taking care of Aunt Elizabeth.”

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Dante went back downstairs, leaving Laura alone with her grandson in Cameron's room. Spencer sat on the edge of the bed, digging his toe into the carpet. "You don't have to say anything," he muttered. "Dad's not here. He's dead."

"We don't know," Laura said, sitting next to him. "There was an explosion, and we could—we couldn't wait to find out. Everything happened so fast—we were already at the airport—"

Spencer looked at her, his dark eyes so quiet and solemn. "So he might still be back there. He might be okay?"

"He might be. Cassadines don't go down easy," Laura told him. "But I also—" she hesitated. "If he could have contacted us, I think he might have. I don't know if he's coming home, Spencer."

Spencer pressed his lips together and was quiet for a long moment. "Was Aunt Elizabeth right?" he asked dully. "Was he a good guy? He was helping?"

"He gave up his chance to get off the island with the rest of us to make sure Elizabeth had time to get back to the boat," Laura told him. "By the time Jason and Elizabeth and Sonny got to the place where Jake was, she was hurt really bad and moving slow. She almost didn't get out. But Nikolas distracted everyone else with the explosion, and gave them enough time to get away." Better to think it was Nikolas who had set the explosion than the alternative—that Stavros had caught up with Jason and Elizabeth in the woods because Nikolas was already dead.

"So he's a hero."

"Yes. I will miss him if he's gone. He's my son, and I love him. But I love Jake and Elizabeth. They're my family, too," Laura told him. "And he would have wanted them to be okay."

"He did a good thing," Spencer said. His lower lip quivered but he firmed it quickly. "He did the honorable thing. That's good. That's important. I just—" His voice faltered. "I wanted him to be here."

"Me, too." Laura drew him in for a tight hug, pressing her lips to the top of his dark head. "I wanted that, too, baby. This wasn't the ending I wanted, either."

He wrapped his arms around her tightly, clinging to her, and Laura sighed in relief as she finally felt him break and the tears start.

—

“I just want to go over this one more time,” Steven said at the nurse’s station as Epiphany rolled her eyes and Patrick shoved a chart at the nurse behind the desk. “Elizabeth and Jason get news that maybe Jake is alive, and they take off to Greece. They don’t tell me—“

“Well, what are you gonna offer the situation?” Patrick wanted to know. “You don’t have any skills that are remotely useful in this situation—“

“And you do?” Steven demanded hotly. “You’re more useless than I am—“

“I’ve clocked more time in the field than you have. Robert,” Patrick said, nodding to his father-in-law on the other side of the counting, glaring at that phone in his hand. “Tell this dinkus about the Markaam Islands. I did good work there.”

“You did zero work,” Robin reported. “You ended up being helicoptered out of there after we nearly got shot by mercenaries holding my dad and Luke—“

“I did great undercover work,” Patrick retorted.

“Kissing me isn’t really undercover work—“

“Can we go back to the part where my nephew is alive?” Steven demanded. He glared at Epiphany. “Why are you smirking like that? Robin is alive. Jake is alive. Who the hell else is alive that I don’t know about?”

“Well, it is Port Charles. You learn to just go with it,” Epiphany suggested. Behind them, the elevator doors opened and Jason stepped out, followed by Cameron, then Emma.

Emma stopped in the middle of the hallway, her eyes wide as she took in her mother standing next to her father. “Mommy.”

“Emma.”

“Mommy!”

Emma took off like a lighting bolt, and Robin bent down to sweep her daughter in her arms, swinging her around in a circle, the two of them laughing and crying as the world around them came to a stop.

Jason took a deep breath as he stepped up to Epiphany. “Hey.”

“Hey, you.” Epiphany grinned, then peered down at Cameron. “Looks like we got ourself a whole lot of a good news today, huh? Emma’s got her mama back and Jake is home.”

“Yeah. I didn’t get to talk to him yet,” Cameron reported. “He was tired, and Grandma Laura is staying with him to make sure he’s not scared when he wakes up. But he’s home. We’re here to see Mommy.”

“I figured.” Epiphany looked over at Emma and her parents who were clustered around each other—then joined by Robert and Anna.

“Bits is down the hall,” Steven said, still trying to adjust to the entire situation. “At some point, do I get to know who exactly stabbed my sister?”

“Later,” Jason said, nodding to Cameron. “He wants to see his mother, and I—I haven’t seen her since we separated at the airport.”

“I’ll walk you down.”

Elizabeth was pale but awake when Cameron and Jason came in—Steven was a little irritated when Jason closed the door in his face, but Jason didn’t much care about that. Steven had always been one of the ones encouraging Elizabeth to go back to Lucky Spencer two years ago, so he didn’t have the time or patience for his questions right now.

“Mommy!” Cameron rushed over to her side, but stopped short of throwing himself at her the way Jake had done on the plane. “You’re okay? Jason said you were hurt.”

“I was, and it was scary,” Elizabeth admitted. She squeezed his hand. “But Uncle Patrick does pretty good work.” She looked at Jason. “They want to keep me a few days, but I’m going home tomorrow. I don’t want to be away from Jake—”

“You can stay here,” Cameron told her. “We’ll take care of Jake, and we’ll bring him to see you. You need to be okay, Mom.”

Elizabeth pursed her lips. “We’ll see. Did Emma come with you? Did she see Robin?”

“She did. It was really nice, Mom. I’m so glad Aunt Robin is home. I’m sorry Uncle Nikolas might not be, but I’m glad he took care of you and Jake,” Cameron told her.

“Me, too. How did Spencer take it?” she asked Jason.

“Okay, I think,” Jason said. “Emma and Cam wanted to make sure he was okay

before we came to the hospital.” He put a hand on Cam’s shoulder. “Hey, why don’t I walk you down to the nurse’s station to hang out with Uncle Steven for a while? Your mom and I need to talk for a minute.”

“Okay.”

When they were out in the hallway, Cameron turned to him, squared his shoulders. “Before we go, though, I wanted you to know it’s okay if you changed your mind.”

Jason frowned. “About what?” He led Cameron over to a bench and they sat down.

“About me,” Cameron said. He swallowed hard. “You got Jake back now. And it’s okay. We’ll be a family anyway,” he added. “But it’s okay if you don’t need me anymore—“

“Need you?” Jason shook his head. “That’s not how this works, Cam. Not for me. Not now. In Greece, I came close to closing everything. It got—it was bad for a minute,” he admitted. “I didn’t know if me or your mom was coming home. And the last thing running through my head was not telling you myself how much I love you. It’s okay if you don’t want to make it legal, and I don’t expect you take to take my name. But you’re already mine, Cam. I love you. You, Jake, and Aiden. We’re a family.”

“You still—“ Cameron blinked at him. “You still want to be my dad? But I thought—“ He cleared his throat. “I thought maybe Jake was back. You had your real son—“

“There’s no such thing as real,” Jason insisted. “There’s blood connections, and that matters, yeah. But so does choice. My mother chose me, and my sister a long time ago. And she helped make us a family. She and my father. Just like your mom made us a family. I want to choose you, Cameron. I’d choose Aiden, too, if I could. But that’s different.”

“Because Lucky’s alive,” Cameron said soberly. He nodded. “Okay.” He nodded again. “Okay. Then I want to choose you, too. You came back. And you made sure Mom came back. That’s most important.” He leaned and hugged Jason. “But I’m gonna stay a Webber, because that’s what Mom is.”

“Then Webber it is,” Jason promised.

Halfway across the world, a man stood on the pier in Mykonos, staring out at the smoldering ruins of the great estate. He pursed his lips, and turned to the harbor master. “What happened out there?”



The man spoke in a rushed Grecian dialect, but the words were mostly clear — great explosion—but no casualties.

“No bodies? Really?” Surprised the man turned back to the island, considering it carefully. “They’re still looking?”

“Yes, yes, but no bodies. Island empty.” The harbormaster shrugged and went back to his work as Valentin Cassadine considered exactly what to do next.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Laura demanded as she watched Elizabeth sit down on the sofa, wincing slightly as the stitches in her side tugged. "You've only been home for three days—"

"I'll tell you the same thing I told Jason before he took the boys over to Carly's house," Elizabeth said. "I need to know what happened to Nikolas. If he's alive and in hiding or if he's—" She pressed her lips together. "We need answers, Laura. You need them, Spencer does—and so does Jake. He remembers his uncle as someone who promised he'd bring him home. Nikolas made sure my little boy came home. I need to do that for him."

"You don't owe me—"

"This isn't about that," Elizabeth said, reaching forward to touch Laura's hand. "This isn't about what happened with Lucky. This is about me. I don't just want answers about Nikolas. I want—" She hesitated. "I want revenge."

"That's a tricky path to tread," Laura cautioned. "I know—I've gone down it myself."

"Losing my little boy broke me into pieces," Elizabeth said. "It made me someone else. I nearly lost my sanity and my children. My life." Restless, she stood up and went over to the mantel where she'd had a photo of Jake at his last Christmas for the last few years. She'd replaced with a new photo—one of her three boys with Jake at the center.

"Helena doesn't get to just walk away from this. Neither does any other Cassadine who helped it." Elizabeth turned back to Laura. "I shot Stavros in the head, so at least there's something. Robin said Stavros had taken my son and wanted to raise him as his own. I stopped that. But it's not enough. They always come back, Laura. They've spent decades torturing all of us. I can't bear to think that Spencer and Cameron might have to face another generation some day. It has to stop with us."

"I wish I'd seen it," Laura murmured. "Jason said there was brain matter, and maybe I shouldn't take enjoyment from that, but I do." She met Elizabeth's eyes. "What does Jason think?"

"Jason wants Cassadine blood more than I do. He doesn't really want me involved, but I think that's because I'm not a hundred percent yet," she admitted. "But I will be."

"Before all of this started—" Laura tilted her head to the side. "You and I had a conversation about Jason. About your relationship with him. I wondered if maybe things had changed."

"That feels like so long ago." Elizabeth exhaled slowly. "When we got to Greece, Jason sat back and let you and I take charge. Did you notice that?"

"I did."

"Something changed when we found out there was a chance Jake was alive. Not just—" Elizabeth chewed on her bottom lip. "I don't know how to explain it. It just—it changed me. I looked at Jason, and I saw what he was doing here. He asked to adopt Cameron, Laura. And I—" She paused. "He wants this life with me. I didn't trust it before, and I can't tell you why I believe it now. But I do."

Laura turned at the sound of an SUV pulling into the driveway. "Well, he's back with Sonny, and I think Robert and Anna are pulling up behind him, so it's time to find out what we know now that the reports from Greece are in and what's next."

The reports from Greece, however, weren't encouraging.

"No bodies," Sonny repeated. "I know enough about Cassadines to know that's a bad sign."

"No chance we're looking at incineration?" Robin asked as she looked over the report her father handed her. "I mean, isn't it possible?"

"They don't think the fire got hot enough," Robert said with a shake of his head. "The real problem is that the estate is a labyrinth of tunnels and passageways. The main house collapsed on itself, and we're still not all the way through it."

"Any sign of Valentin?" Elizabeth asked. "The Cassadine they were waiting on to start whatever Helena had planned?"

"He made it to Mykonos, and as far as the harbor," Robert responded. "Then disappeared. So he's in the wind."

"What do we know about Valentin?" Jason asked. "Spinelli said he couldn't find much."

"There isn't much to find. He's the illegitimate son of Mikkos — younger than Alexis," Anna added. "He worked for the WSB for a time—I know, don't start," she said when Laura huffed. "But he turned rogue for DVX. Only worked there a few years before the wall fell and they were all out of a job. Rumors that he went KGB—"

"I hate Russians," Sonny muttered.

"But he's stayed under the radar, mostly working as a mercenary for hire in Russia and Eastern Europe."

"What kind of mercenary do they need there?" Patrick asked, furrowing his brow. "I thought mercenaries were like Rambo—"

"Assassin," Jason said, surprising them all. Robert lifted his brows as Jason ganced up, realizing no one had said anything else. "If he was working for the KGB in Eastern Europe, he probably took care of those journalists a few years ago. The ones in Bosnia? And then the one in Britain?"

"Correct," Robert said. "WSB intel says Valentin is one of Putin's best assassins. He specializes in poisons."

"How did he get hired at the WSB as a Cassadine?" Sonny asked. "Wouldn't that keep you out?"

"You'd think," Anna said, "but Victor Cassadine is running our research program. I don't make the calls," she added, when Laura stared at her in disbelief. "I'm a field agent. Robert and I don't do administration."

"But I don't remember Valentin being a player in Cassadine schemes," Elizabeth said. "Nikolas never mentioned him, and I know he wasn't someone you and Luke worried about during Endgame."

"No, Valentin wasn't on the radar back then. After what happened to Alexis's mother, he kept his affairs more quiet," Laura said. "After Mikkos died, I think Valentin fell through the cracks. Helena wasn't thinking about him."

"Then why get involved now?" Sonny wanted to know. "I get that it was a huge reunion, but, uh, Helena never liked Mikkos's bastards. She's been half-trying to kill Alexis her whole damn life. Why invite one to the table?"

"If we knew why Valentin was there, we could maybe figure out if he's a threat. If he's not—" Robert began.

"He's a Cassadine," Jason said tightly. "They all go."

Anna's lips thinned as she hesitated. "This isn't that kind of mission, Jason. I appreciate your anger over what happened to Jake, but if we're involving you—"

"You can cut me out," Jason said, locking eyes with the older woman, "but that won't stop me. The Cassadines came after my family. And if Helena is still breathing, she'll keep coming. She knows what Elizabeth and her boys mean to Laura. She'll keep coming through them. She goes. They all go."

"I agree with him," Robert said, stunning Anna. "And that's not from the head office. It's not revenge, either," he said before his ex-wife could open her mouth to protest. "The Cassadines are a threat to the world, but Morgan's right. If Helena has breath left in that body, she'll come for Laura. And she'll come for Elizabeth. You made the kill shot on Stavros," he said as Elizabeth sighed. "I don't know if she knows that now, but she will. The only body we found was his. And the bullet matched your gun," Robert told Jason. "I made the report disappear. Officially, none of us were on that island."

"But Helena has her ways of learning information," Laura said with a nod. "And even if she doesn't know Elizabeth fired the shot, she'll come for Jason through you. It's not over because we have Jake."

"Now that we're all in agreement that the Cassadines need to go," Sonny said, "anyone got any suggestions for what we do next? Or are we just spinning our wheels?"

"I'm heading back to Greece to start excavation of the estate," Robert declared. "It might take a few months, but we'll get to every damn stone of the island. I was hoping Robin might come back with me to look over the plans and tunnels."

"I want to go, too," Elizabeth said before Robin could say anything. "I want—" She paused. "I want to see where Jake was living. The cottage wasn't blown up, was it?" she asked. "There might be something there that Nikolas left for me. Or—"

"Is it a good idea for you to go back into field?" Anna asked. "You're still recovering—"

"I'm good enough," she said. "Can I go?"

"Uh," Robert pursed his lips. "Yeah, I guess. That's probably a good idea," he admitted. "If Robin can help us with the intel on her side of the island, you knew Nikolas longer and a bit better. Of course, Laura—" He eyed Jason and Sonny. "Are

we bringing the whole gang?"

"Spinelli will want to go to see if there's some networks he didn't crack the first time," Sonny said, "But I'll stay behind with the kids to keep them from trying that unaccompanied minor crap."

"I'm going if you are," Jason told Elizabeth, and she smiled.

"I didn't expect anything else."

Later that night, after they'd put the kids to bed and made plans to leave for Greece in a few days, Elizabeth caught Jason watching her as she checked the stitches in her side—they were the dissolving kind and were already starting to heal into her skin.

"Thank you."

"For what?" he asked, pulling the comforter back.

"Not arguing with me about Greece." She twisted on the stool at her vanity table. "I know you don't want me to go."

"There are times I don't want to let you out of this room," Jason admitted. "But you're right. If Nikolas left anything for anyone to find, it'd be you. It just makes sense." He paused. "What are we going to tell the boys?"

"The same thing we did today when we sent them to Carly's," Elizabeth said. "Cameron knows how dangerous the Cassadines are, and obviously Jake does." She paused. "I don't want to leave him," she said softly. "I'm afraid to let him out of my sight. I woke up in the hospital, and I thought—"

She looked at herself in the mirror. "I thought it was a dream. That I'd hallucinated everything. Like I did when I had pneumonia. Do you remember?"

"I do." Jason sat on the edge of the bed. "It's not a dream."

"No. But every time I go to sleep, I'm terrified this is the night the dream ends. I'll wake up and my baby is gone again. And we'll be back to marking holidays without him, and I'll wrapping gifts he doesn't ever get to open—" She squeezed her eyes shut as he came up behind her, put his hands on her shoulders. "Laura told me I had to be careful about going after the Cassadines for revenge. I know she's right. But I want Helena to pay for every day I woke up without Jake. For every day he had to beg Nikolas to bring him home, and Nikolas didn't."

"I know," Jason said. He drew Elizabeth to her feet. "Because I want her to pay for every tear you cried. For every minute of pain she put Cameron through. But it doesn't matter if I kill her or if you do. Revenge isn't going to make it so none of that ever happened."

"No, it won't," Elizabeth said. She lifted her eyes to meet his. "But killing her and every other Cassadine as evil as she is will make it over. We need to finish it, Jason, so that they never have to take up the fight. I don't want to be like Laura, mourning both my boys because I didn't do enough. Helena Cassadine and her damn family aren't going to take one more thing from me."

*Mykonos, Greece*

So much of that insane trek through the woods on the island felt like a fever dream. Elizabeth scarcely remembered the cottage that had set at the edge of the clearing—there had only been stabbing pain and sweet joy of seeing her little boy for the moment before the world had gone insane.

Now, Jake and her boys were thousand of miles away, safe and sound, tucked away at Greystone with Sonny's security keeping them in one piece. She stood here in the bedroom where Jake had lived for most of the two years he'd been gone.

The room looked like any other boy's—the bed was a messy twin, with a tan comforter, pushed back as if who ever had been sleeping in it last had shoved it away and rolled out of bed without a second thought.

There were toys strewn across the floor, including a little red motorcycle. Elizabeth found it on the shelf and picked it up.

"Elizabeth?"

"This is Jake's."

Jason frowned, and came over to look at it. "I thought— I gave this to Cameron," he murmured, taking it from her.

"I know. There's a scratch from when Cameron crashed it into the fireplace." Elizabeth ran her fingernail over the thin mar in the paint. "He gave it to Jake that last Christmas. Jake loved to play with it. I—I put it at his grave. The day the stone—" She closed her eyes. "They took this from his grave and brought it to Greece."

She clutched the motorcycle to her chest. "The next time I went back, I thought—I just thought it was lost or that someone stole it—or that—but it was here. All this

time—he was here—" She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to force down the waves of pain that radiated from everywhere.

"And he had something from his brother the whole time," Jason reminded her. "This—" He tapped the handlebar. "Jake had part of me and Cam with him. Nikolas kept Cameron in his head, and Jake never forgot his brother. Or you."

"Or you." Elizabeth exhaled slowly. "I'm sorry. I just— I look around this room—and I'm trying to be grateful that Jake was treated well. That even his own twisted way, Stavros loved him. That's—that's better. And he's young. Kevin Collins said he doesn't see any of the same behaviors they saw in Lucky. No memory lapses. Nothing. He's perfect."

"That doesn't change the fact that the Cassadines stole those years from us," Jason said. "From you. Jake should have been with you and his brothers. Not here. We never should have had to buy a grave or a stone with his name on it."

"Laura warned me about wanting revenge," Elizabeth murmured, "but it's all I can think about. I left my boys at home so I could hunt down the woman who did this. I could live with the WSB going after the rest of the Cassadines, you know? Mikkos, Valentin—that's their problem. But Helena—"

She stared at the motorcycle. "I want to know where Nikolas is, I want to know what the hell the other Cassadines have planned—the world needs to be safe from them, and I meant what I said—I can't bear for them to come back one day. But if we can get rid of Helena—" She met his eyes. "The boys could be safer with her gone."

"Then we'll find Helena and we'll kill her," Jason said simply. "Let's search the rest of the cottage to see if Nikolas left anything for you."

Two hours of taking the cottage apart, of searching every nook and cranny—even the mattresses once Jason had slit them open with the switch blade he had in his back pocket—

There was nothing.

Elizabeth sighed. "Maybe he just didn't have time," she murmured. "Is he dead? Did Stavros—"

"I thought so, too," Jason admitted, "but now that we're here—now that I'm looking at the island again with a clearer head—I don't think so. Stavros wasn't that far behind us. Maybe two or three minutes. If he'd killed Nikolas, he wouldn't have time to deal with the body."

"So he went to set the explosions instead?" Elizabeth asked. "Why hasn't he gotten in touch? It's been a week. Longer than—"

"I don't know." They left the cottage and headed back towards the main estate—the ruins of the old Gothic castle that seemed so out of place on a Mediterranean castle.

"I hope they're having better luck with the tunnels," Elizabeth said, rubbing her arms. "Who ever set those explosions knew what they were doing."

"Not enough to make sure that everyone was dead." Jason squinted, stopping in the field a few hundred yards away from the estate. He turned back to look out over the horizon here were blue waters of the Aegean sparkled against the sun.

"What are you thinking?"

"That day was a lot," he said. "We landed here early in the morning," he continued. "You were stabbed by nine—"

"And we were on our way to the island by four."

"Stavros was minutes behind us," Jason repeated. "But that whole confrontation in the woods—it was less than five minutes. I put you down, started to rewrap your wound—" He squinted. "Then Stavros was there, and I didn't even get a chance to think before you shot him."

"Sorry if I stole your thunder," she said with a raised brow. He shook his head.

"No, I mean, it was fast. We were on that beach minutes after Laura left. And it felt like forever," he admitted, "but Anna was there in another ten. We were on this island for maybe thirty minutes. Ten minutes to the cottage, ten minutes back, and ten minutes in between for everything else. And it might not have been that long."

"Okay—"

"And look—we're walking from the cottage—and we're still, what—half a mile from the house? Even if he was running—Where did Robert say the bombs were set?" Jason turned his attention back to the crumbling remains.

"On the far side of the island, near the marine, and in the center of the house. But we don't know if they were detonated manually or—" She paused. "But if Nikolas went to set the bombs, it would be manually. Not remote."

"I don't know. There's just something about the time line that doesn't make sense. If



it was remotely, Nikolas could have come with us and set the bombs from the boat. If it was manual, he might have had enough time to get to the house but barely. The estate exploded when we go to the airport. The airport is five minutes from the pier."

"So we're saying that twenty minutes after after Nikolas brought Jake to us, the house exploded," Elizabeth said slowly. She looked back at the cottage—it was a mile from the house. With adrenaline— "How fast can you do mile?"

"Maybe fifteen minutes," Jason admitted. "Twelve if I push it. It's not something I have to do much."

"And you're in better shape than Nikolas. Could he have—" She folded her arms. "We thought Stefan set one of the bombs. Maybe he set the one down at the marina to stop the guards from getting on the boats."

"Maybe," Jason said slowly, "or maybe the people at the house knew about the breach—" He turned to look at Elizabeth. "And knew that we'd be distracted by looking for bodies."

"Oh." She hissed. "You think the Cassadines blew up the damn estate themselves to get away from the WSB."

"Which means they knew about the bombs being set and where they were."

"Let's get back to the house and talk to Robert and Laura."

### *Bryanka, Ukraine*

The woman crept through the door, closing it behind her, and breathing a sigh of relief. She'd made it to the rendezvous. Now it was time to regroup—

"What did you do to my boy?"

She paused as the voice behind her echoed in the empty room of the small house. A match was struck—and the room was dimly lit. She turned to find a candle in the middle of a beaten up and scratched table had been lit, and a man sat at table.

Helena Cassadine's lips curved into a smile as she took in the presence of her oldest—and dearest—enemy. "Well, Luke Spencer, just when you think a man can't surprise you anymore."

"What," Luke said, leaning forward, the candle's flame illuminating his cold, dark blue eyes and the rage lit within, did you do to my boy?"

"What did I do to the precious Lucas Lorenzo Spencer, Junior?" Helena murmured, pausing deliberately on each word of the name. "Nothing."

"That's a lie!" Luke roared, lunging to his feet.

"Well, I've done nothing new," Helena insisted, amused by his reaction. "It's hardly my fault if you didn't notice all the differences over the years. You tried to undo all my hard work, my dear, but his mind had been changed—"

"No, no, he was okay—he was my boy again—!"

"Was he?" Helena raised her brows. "Well, perhaps you were satisfied. Others clearly weren't. How is Elizabeth? Has she recovered? I look forward to seeing her. We have unfinished business—and Laura—"

"Too long," Luke said, "too long I've let you go after my family. I thought it was amusing to play with you, to toy with you. I should have gutted you the first time you put your hands on my son."

"But you didn't, and here we are—" Helena sighed. "How did you find me, anyway?"

"Sometimes, Mother—" Helena whirled around as another man bled out of the shadows. Her eyes bulged as Stefan stepped into the dim light of the candle. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"No—no—" She turned to Luke, then back to Stefan. "You—you were part of it. I brought you back! I put you under my control! You were chipped—"

"I was," Stefan murmured, "but I'm not anymore. Where is Father? He should have been with you."

Drawing herself up regally, Helena lifted her chin, a woman who knew her time was running out. "You don't know everything."

"True." Stefan flicked his eyes to Luke. "I'll find him, but she's all yours."

Helena looked away from the eternal disappointment of her youngest son—she should have strangled him in the cradle. He'd never measure up to either his brother or father. "I'm surprised you came alone, Luke. No Elizabeth or Laura? I would have thought they'd be eager to finish me off."

"They are. And so is Jason Morgan. You didn't think that through, Hells," Luke said, cracking his first grin. "That is a man you do not fuck with."

"I'm alive so far—"

"I considered trussing you like a Christmas goose to deliver at my angel's feet—to let Laura and Elizabeth decide what to do with you after what you've done to them."

"That sounds like a fair thing to go. And they're quite capable of dealing with me—"

"Oh, no doubt," Luke said, "I think you'd be surprised by the streak of coldness that runs in Elizabeth's veins. She'd probably slit your throat and bathe in the blood."

Helena pressed her lips together. "How can you deny them that chance?"

"It's simple." Luke drew out a gun from the inside of her jacket, and her pulse started to race. "I know they could do it. I know they could end you and sleep like babies afterward. I just don't see why they should have to when I can save them the trouble."

"You always did monologue too much, Spencer," Stefan said dryly.

"You never did appreciate the show," Luke shot back. He focused on Helena. "I'm done asking Laura and Elizabeth do my dirty work." He aimed the gun, then pulled the trigger.

The bullet exploded a hole in the front of Helena's head—her elegant features destroyed in an instant as her lifeless body dropped to the floor.

Luke stared down at it, feeling nothing as the old woman's blood seeped out, what was left of one eye remaining open. "Let them bring you back from that."

*Mykonos, Greece*

"Our theory is now that one of the Cassadines blew up the island to make their escape." Robert grimaced as he cast his gaze over the crowd of WSB agents and researchers scouring the remains of the estate—there were construction crews removing piles of stone, hoping to excavate the tunnels beneath the foundation.

"When we looked at the distance between the cottage and where the bombs were set," Elizabeth said, folding her arms, "Jason and I just don't think Nikolas could have made it all the way here and detonated them. And if they'd been remote—"

"He would have escaped with you guys," Robin said, kicking a loose piece of stone out of her way. "They've got a point, Dad. It's a mile between them, and Nikolas wasn't much of a runner."

"No, his idea of playing sports was polo or fencing. Jason doesn't think he'd be able to make that distance in less than twelve minutes." Elizabeth looked at Jason. "Right?"

"I don't know how that changes what we're looking for," Jason told Robert, "but if the Cassadines blew the place up—"

"Then there's probably not much here to find. Or whatever is here doesn't give us much of a puzzle." Robert put his hands at his waist, his scowl deepening. "Can I just tell you how much I hate the bloody Cassadines?" He looked to Laura. "Why didn't we blow up the whole family when we had the chance?"

"Well, in our defense, we didn't know Helena was part of Mikko's schemes," Laura said, "and the sons were mostly playboys. We thought they were like Tony, and you saw how dumb he ended up being—"

"Didn't Tony end up getting himself frozen to death?" Elizabeth said.

"That's what I'm saying—"

"If we could—" Robert pressed his lips together. "No sign of any messages in the cottage?" he asked her.

"No, just some of Jake's things. I was hoping we could box them up and take them with us," Elizabeth said. "He's doing okay so far, but it's early and he's just—he's excited by the changes. I want him to have some familiar things."

"Yeah, yeah, we've swept the place, so take what you want." Robert paused. "I'm sorry. It looks like this was a wasted trip." He turned away to take a phone call.

"Maybe not," Laura said. "Didn't Jake say that his nanny brought him to the gardens to meet with Nikolas?" she asked Jason and Elizabeth.

"You think he'd leave something there?" Elizabeth asked doubtfully.

"If the cottage was worth checking," Jason said, "then it wouldn't hurt to try everything." They glanced over as Robert muttered a curse under his breath, then shoved his phone back in his pocket.

"We've got a problem in Ukraine—" He dragged a hand over his eyes, digging the heel of his hand into his brow. "Luke apparently found one of our missing Cassadines, and used that one to get to the bitch herself."

"Wait, what?" Elizabeth demanded. "Luke found Helena? Which one of the Cassadines—"

"Robert—"

"Dad—"

"Luke was apparently in contact with Stefan Cassadine during this whole operation—"

"I knew he wasn't telling us everything—"

"What the hell—"

"Does he have Helena?" Jason said flatly, interrupting everyone else's anger and exclamations. "When do we leave?"

"He has her. She's dead."

Elizabeth stared at the older man, then shook her head. "No, no I don't believe that—" Not that easy. It couldn't be that easy—could it—

"He wants me to come get her body. Seems like he doesn't trust anyone else but me to dispose of her probably," Robert said.

"Well, the last three times we killed Helena, she just came back," Laura retorted. "And it was definitely Luke's turn the last time to get rid of the body. But she's dead? How? When?"

"Last night. He shot her in the head. She's dead, Laura."

"Why didn't he tell us?" Elizabeth fisted her hands at her side. "He knew we wanted her—" She closed her eyes.

"You wanted to find her to kill her," Robin reminded her gently. "And that's done now. That's good, right? Helena was the one that was putting you and the boys in danger, wasn't she?"

"Yes, but—" Elizabeth looked at Jason, and knew he understood. It wasn't enough that Helena was dead.

She'd wanted to be the one to do it.

"Robin, would you run this operation while I head to Ukraine? I want to get my

hands on that body and make sure it's really her," Robert said. "And if you'd like, I can truss up Spencer and drag him back here you so can scream at him."

"It's not worth it," Laura muttered. "He'd just tell us he was doing us a favor. That would be like Luke," she said to Elizabeth. "He should have killed her when we learned what she'd done to Lucky, but no, now he has to do it when it's not even—" She took a deep breath. "You know what, Robert? Bring my ex-husband to me. We need to have some words."

"I need to get out of here," Elizabeth muttered. She spun on her heel and stalked off towards the gardens. Jason glowered at Robert—as if any of this was his fault—then followed her because there was no way in hell he was going to let her walk around Cassadine Island alone.

"Laura, at the end of the day—"

"At the end of the day, I wanted to rip her eyes out and shove them down her throat so she'd choke on them. Now I don't even get to be in the room to watch her breath her last." Laura took a deep breath. "I'll have to find a way to be okay with that, but I will never forgive Luke for doing this. For any of this."

—

They found the garden bench that Jake had described but Elizabeth didn't know what she'd expected to find. She sat down, trying to picture her son sitting here with Nikolas —asking to go home.

"I'm sorry," Jason said. "I know this isn't how we wanted this to end."

"We could still go over Mikkos and Valentin," Elizabeth murmured, "but it's not the same. They didn't take Jake from me. They have haunted me most of my life. They're not even the ones that went after Laura or Lucky. They're not the Cassdines I want to see rotting in hell." She paused. "I mean, I'm sure they deserve it—but going after them personally when the WSB can handle it—"

She tilted her head back to look at the sky, at sun sinking beneath the horizon. "Helena took my son from me and made me live in hell for two years. And Nikolas found out the truth at some point. Luke—and Lucky—knew for months. And no one told us. No one told Laura or me. And now Luke just went—" She sighed. "I don't have anywhere to put all of this anger. I just want to scream at him, but Laura's right. He'll have worked this out in his head that he was sparing us."

"Maybe he has a point," Jason said slowly. She frowned at him. "I wanted her blood, too. I wanted revenge. And I agree with you. Something about this feels different

knowing she's off the table. It doesn't feel the same. I also—" He paused. "I've taken lives. You know that. My hands aren't clean."

"Neither are mine—"

Jason shook his head. "You shot a man going after Jake, and you made a mistake at the hospital," he added. "It's not the same. I've—" He paused. "I've killed for Sonny."

She blinked at him. He'd never spoken about his job so plainly to her before. "I know that—"

"It stays with you," he told her. "Helena might have deserved it—and I think you might have been okay with living with it, but part of me is glad you don't have to." He paused. "I know that's selfish, and it doesn't make what Luke did right—but I think he was trying to protect you."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe in a few months I'll even be glad—but right now, I just feel angry—" She gripped the edge of the bench, then frowned as her fingers slid over something. "What's this—"

Elizabeth reached under the bench and pulled out a picture. She ran her finger over it — it was a picture of her and Jake from just before the accident. Her precious baby was alive and home with his brothers, learning to play video games and get into trouble—he'd go back to school and he'd grow up and get to all the things she dreamed about—

She turned it over, then sucked in a sharp breath. "Nikolas."

"What is it?" Jason slid closer to look over her shoulder. "Is it from him?"

"If you're reading this, then something has gone wrong. I'm sorry. I should have told you, but I wanted to bring him back to you myself. I wanted to save him. I wanted you to forgive me.

I can't come home until I've fixed this. Until they're all gone. I have to make sure this never touches our children again. Take care of Spencer for me. Tell him I love him.

I kept this photo for Jake to always remind him that you were out there, waiting for him to come home. I leave it to you to remember what matters. I know you. You'll want revenge, and you deserve it.

But you also deserve a life away from this. Go home to Jake and love him. Be happy.

Love, Nikolas"

Elizabeth hissed. "That infuriating piece—" She nearly crumbled up the photograph. "How many men today are going to tell me what I deserve? What I should feel? How I should live my life?" She launched herself off the bench, the photo falling to the ground. She whirled around on Jason. "Even you. You're happier knowing that I'm not going to have Helena on my conscience—"

"That's not what I said—"

"I would have burned her alive, buried the ashes, and danced on her grave," Elizabeth shot back. "And I would have gone to sleep happy about it—better for having done it! Because I would have made sure my boys were safe—and you, Nikolas, Luke—" She growled. "You all think I'm some sort of fragile hothouse flower that can't do both!"

"Again, not what I said," Jason said, but since the other two men she was ready to set on fire weren't there, he let it go.

"The nerve of telling me that I should give up revenge so I can go home and love my son! Have a life away from this! I can do both! I would have done both!"

"I know that—"

"He had no right—none of them—" Her chest started to heave as it all set in—as it crashed in who she was screaming at. Her sobs were ragged as she sank to the ground. She stared at the photo in her hands. "Two years, she had him. Two years, and I never knew—and I thought—I thought if I could just make it over—if I could be the one to make the world safe from her—maybe I could forgive myself."

Jason exhaled slowly, then slid off the bench, crossing over to sit next to her on the ground. "I know. Because that's what I wanted."

Elizabeth closed her eyes, rested her head against his shoulder. "The accident—it was my fault—"

"Elizabeth—"

"And Helena coming after him—that was my fault. She must have thought he was Lucky's son. That was my lie, Jason. I put Jake in her cross-hairs by lying about who he was—"

"No—"



"And then for two years, she had him here, and we can only pray he'll be okay after all of that—and I just—I thought if I stopped it—" She squeezed her eyes shut. "But now I think nothing is going to take that away. Even if I'd killed her—if you'd killed her—it's never going to make those years go away."

"No, it won't." He kissed her forehead, then reached for the photo. "You did what you thought was best for Jake. We both did. And we were wrong. We have a chance to make it right. I thought—" He paused. "Last fall, I thought I was just getting a second chance to love you. To have a family. I never dreamed I'd get another chance with my son."

"I want to go home. I want to be with our boys. I need to be with them."

"Me, too." Jason got to his feet, then pulled her up. "Remind me not to piss you off," he said as they started back to the house and he put an arm around her shoulder. "You're scarier than you used to be."

Elizabeth smirked, snaking an arm around his waist, leaning into his embrace. "Damn right."

When their voices faded, and he knew they were gone, Nikolas stepped out the shadows, his face twisted in a grimace. "That wasn't the way I wanted that to go," he muttered. "But at least she's going home." He looked at the man standing next to him. "Did you have to stab her?"

"I didn't hit anything vital," Lucky muttered. "She only almost died because she refused to stay home. And I got my ass kicked, you know! Morgan almost killed me this time!"

Nikolas rolled his eyes. "Come on, we need to go meet up with your dad and my uncle. We've got work to do."

—

Laura was elated to receive news that her son was alive, but was as irritated by Nikolas's note as Elizabeth was.

"I'm beginning to think it's not just Spencer men who need to be set on fire," was all she'd say before stomping off to go talk to Robin.

Jason and Elizabeth took the first boat to the mainland and were on their way home to Port Charles by the time the sun dipped below the horizon.

She was done hunting Cassadines.

Jason called ahead to Greystone to ask if Sonny would bring the boys to the house, and when his SUV pulled into the driveway the next day, Sonny's car was parked at the curb.

"I am going to sleep for a week," Elizabeth said. She closed her eyes, resting her head against the headrest. "But when I get up, I'm going to remember that my baby is home, my boys are together, my best friend is alive, and—" She twisted her head to look at him. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"You know I had my doubts about all of this," she said softly. "When you moved in, you didn't want to do that. You wanted to get married."

"I wanted you," he said with a shake of his head. "And you wanted time."

"Time." Elizabeth sighed. "You know, before all this started, I told Laura I was scared we were together now because of what happened before. We were in love before. We felt guilty about Jake. We were lonely..."

"And now?"

"Now I know I just was too scared to trust that we'd get it right. We never have before," she continued, "and every time, it hurt so much more. I think if we messed it up this time—" Elizabeth paused. "But we're not going to."

"It's not my plan," Jason said. "But I'm not proposing anymore," he added. "When you're ready, you'll tell me."

"And if I never am?"

"Then we're just going to live together forever, raise the boys, have grandchildren—" He shrugged. "And we'll need more paperwork to file taxes."

Elizaeth laughed. "Okay. Fair enough." She pushed her door open and stepped out of the SUV. She could hear laughter and voices inside—the beautiful new voice of Jake mixed with Cameron and Aiden—and she could hear Morgan and Joss, too.

Jason frowned when she didn't move. "Elizabeth?"

"I don't want a big wedding," she said, meeting his eyes. "And I want it soon."

"Waiting time is three days," Jason said slowly, walking towards her. His arms encircled her waist as he dipped her down to kiss her. "You want to get married on Friday?"

"I thought you said you weren't proposing anymore," she teased.

"Hey, this time, you proposed to me," he said. Elizabeth laughed, then took his hand and they went inside to be with their boys. There was laughs, and hugs, and kisses—and when Elizabeth told them all about Friday—

Sonny grinned, Joss demanded to be a flower girl—and Cameron hugged her hard while Jake cheered, and Aiden smiled.

Elizabeth met Jason's eyes over Cameron's head and smiled at him. This was better than revenge, she decided. She'd been given a second chance, and she wasn't going to waste it on hatred and bitterness, but on loving her boys, her future husband, and her friends.

But she still hoped Helena Cassadine was roasting in hell.

# Scars

*September 2016*

## **General Hospital: Employee Locker Room**

Elizabeth Morgan took a deep breath and exited the bathroom, stopping short when she saw the room was no longer empty. "Oh, hey. I didn't hear you come in."

Robin Scorpio-Drake turned as she opened her locker. "Sorry, did I surprise you? I thought you were done working these night shifts." She checked her watch. "It's almost five—"

"I switched with Felix. He had a date." Elizabeth sat on the bench. "You're early for yours."

"Yeah, I have a ton of paperwork to go over, and then Patrick and I have an appointment later with Britt." Robin closed her locker. "We're going to start IVF. I mean, today. It's my first procedure."

"IVF?" Elizabeth repeated. "Oh, that's *amazing!* I didn't know you were thinking about having another baby."

"Well, we weren't but then Patrick found a new gray hair and we both realized—I mean, we always wanted more," Robin clarified. "But...things kept getting in the way."

Things like Lisa Niles and Cassadines. Elizabeth nodded. "I know what you mean."

"Anyway, I know Patrick was probably going to tell you at some point, but we were keeping it to ourselves for a bit. I mean, we're kind of at the older end, and even though my viral load is nonexistent, we thought IVF would be the safest and quickest—" Robin paused. "We're not really telling anyone except family."

"No, I completely—actually—" Elizabeth laughed slightly as she reached into her scrubs pocket and took out a white stick. "That's why I'm in here."

"Oh my God! Are you—"

"I don't know. Two more minutes." Elizabeth exhaled on a rush of air. "We've been trying for a year," she admitted quietly. "I've never had trouble getting pregnant before but I'm thirty-six—and, well—"

"Jason's forty-two. I know. It feels weird to think of us as getting old," Robin admitted. "I keep waiting to feel like an adult. You know?"

"I know! I keep looking around for the adult in charge, and it's usually *me*." Elizabeth shuddered. "It's not that I don't like getting older, I just thought I'd *feel* older. Most of the time, I don't—but this last year—every month—" She rubbed her heart. "If I'm not pregnant this time, I think we might give up."

"Hey..." Robin touched her shoulder. "You could see doctors—"

"We could. And we could do what you're doing with fertility treatments—but I just—maybe it's not meant to be. I just...the boys are getting older, and I'm not ready to be done being a mom. And Jason hasn't really had a lot of time to be a dad. I know they'll always be our babies—"

"I get it. I missed so much of Emma's first year, and then even more time with her with the Cassadines and Africa. You and Jason haven't been able to do this together from the beginning. Patrick and I are looking forward to doing everything together. No separations. No postpartum because I'll be on top of it this time—" Robin smiled at her. "And if you're pregnant, hopefully I will be soon, too. So—" She nodded at the stick. "You ready?"

### **Spencer House: Living Room**

"Aiden!" Laura Spencer's voice rose an octave as she repeated her youngest grandson's name for the third time. "Aiden, it's time to go!"

"One more minute!"

"He said that five minutes ago," Laura told Jason Morgan who just shrugged. "I told him it was time to go, that you were on your way, but—"

"Video games," Jason said. He checked the clock over her mantel. "I'll go get him if he's not done in another couple of minutes. Thanks for grabbing him after school."

"I love spending time with my babies," Laura said, wincing as she heard Cameron and Spencer arguing from upstairs. "Sometimes they even like each other." She paused as she picked up one of the toys under the coffee table. "Elizabeth told me that the papers were coming in this week?"

"Alexis got the word yesterday that it was finalized." Jason shifted. "I'm sorry, Laura. I know you were hoping—"

"That Lucky would swoop in at the last minute like his old self, and stop the adoption." Laura offered a weak smile. "Three years, you'd think I'd give up on that. The last Luke heard, Lucky was still with Nikolas tracking Mikkos. I don't think either of my sons are coming back any time soon, Jason. Aiden deserves a full-time dad, and he's got that."

"I don't blame you for wanting it to be Lucky," Jason said, even though he'd be happy to never see the little bastard again. The last time he'd been in a room with Elizabeth's ex-husband and Aiden's biological father, Lucky had stabbed Elizabeth, aiming for Jason. The injury had nearly killed Elizabeth.

"And I can't blame you for being glad Lucky is far away with apparently zero interest in his own son." Laura's lips thinned. "Every time I think I've come to terms with it—" She took a deep breath. "I think of my little boy. My sweet boy who idolized family. Helena killed that boy a long time ago." She paused. "I imagine you changed Aiden's last name."

"We did," Jason said, with a bit of regret. "Aiden wanted to be like the rest of us. We talked about Elizabeth staying Webber when we got married, having the boys share that name—"

"No, I know. Elizabeth and I talked about it, too. The Webber name never meant a lot to her. Not the way it did to me once. Her parents have never made her feel like she was part of that family. I'm glad she and the boys have you."

"They have you, too," Jason reassured her. "And maybe Nikolas will give up hunting down Mikkos and come back." Lucky could stay in Siberia for all he cared, but he'd always liked and respected Laura. She'd never once treated Cameron or Jake like they weren't her grandchildren.

"Maybe." But Laura didn't believe that anymore than Jason did. She looked up the stairs again. "Aiden! I'm only going to say this—"

"Ugh, why doesn't Cameron have to go?" Aiden demanded as the six-year-old stomped down the stairs. "How come *I'm* the baby?"

"Because you were born last and can't walk home by yourself," Jason said as his son reached the bottom of the stairs.

"What if you tell Mom, though?" Aiden asked. He sat on the bottom step and fought

with his shoelaces. "If you tell Mom I *can* walk home—"

"I agree with Mom," Jason told him. He knelt down and helped guide Aiden's tiny fingers so that he could tie his own shoes. "Cam knows the rules, and when you're fourteen, you'll get more freedom."

"But that's forever away, Dad!" Aiden huffed. "Grandma, tell him I'm grown up."

"Not a chance," Laura said. "If I had my way, I'll wrap all my babies in cotton and never let you out."

Aiden's eyes widened in horror and he looked at Jason. "You're not going to do that, are you?"

"No, but I'm tempted to." Jason pulled Aiden to his feet. "Come on, since your brothers are both out with friends, you get to pick what we have for dinner."

"Haha, suckers!" Aiden bounced over to grab his jacket and his bag. "Adios, Grandma!"

"Bribery," Laura said with a smile as she followed Jason to the door. They both watched Aiden dart down the front steps to the driveway where Jason's SUV was parked. "I don't resent you adopting him, Jason. Or his taking your name and calling you Dad. Please don't think that—"

"I don't," Jason assured her. "I know it's hard. I'm sorry it had to be this way—"

"Don't lie to make me feel better," Laura said gently. "This is the best outcome for you and Elizabeth. And the boys. They have happiness, stability, and everything I ever wanted for them." She patted his arm. "Give Elizabeth my love, and I'll ship Cameron home in about an hour."

### **Port Charles Police Department: Commissioner's Office**

Jordan Ashford strode into the office and went behind her desk, two of her detectives taking the chairs in front. "Did we hear back from DOC on the Hornsby transfer?"

"Yeah," Dante Falconieri assured her. "He's cooling his heels in protective custody."

"The ADA said it might be a few months before we get to trial. Maybe longer," Nathan West offered. "They gotta find a special prosecutor since our current DA—"

"Is an accused serial killer." Jordan made a face and sat down. "Well, at least that's

done. I have a ton of paperwork to get through—" She sighed at the pile on the her desk. "So many things fell through the cracks—"

"Bound to happen—"

"There's a bunch of new parolees and prisoners on work-release," Jordan told Dante. She unearthed a file. "It came in two weeks ago, but I put it aside. Go through the cases, see if there's anyone we need to keep our eyes on."

"I don't think there were any high profile guys or the media would have picked it up," Dante assured her, but he scanned the list of names in the folder. "Yeah, none of these are ringing a bell. Mostly some petty crimes—" He frowned. "One felony release."

"Who is it?" Jordan asked. She turned to her keyboard. "I'll check the records."

"Pled guilty to extortion and attempted kidnapping. Served sixteen years—out on parole as of last week," Dante said. "Thomas Baker."

"I got a few Thomas Bakers," Jordan said as she perused the list. "Ah—here it is." She tapped a few keys. "Baker was arrested October 1998, accused of holding Emily Quartermaine and Elizabeth Webber hostage in a photo studio." She looked at Dante. "You know Elizabeth, don't you?"

"Yeah, but this was 1998," Dante reminded her. "I didn't move here for another decade, and I never met Emily. What about the extortion?"

"Blackmail photos," Jordan murmured. "There's a note on this file to contact the arresting officer." She frowned. "Marcus Taggert. This was his case."

"Maybe he wanted to warn Elizabeth and Emily that Baker was gonna be out," Nathan suggested. "He didn't plead to a violent crime. Attempted kidnapping doesn't rate a contact from the parole board."

"It's been almost twenty years," Jordan pointed out. "Do you think Elizabeth would still care?"

"Doesn't hurt to call Taggert and get his read," Nathan said. "You worked with him, didn't you?"

"Yeah, we were partners at the DEA and he's still around to see his daughter." Jordan reached for her phone and went through her contacts. "Let's find out where Baker is. He might be holding a grudge and might not realize Elizabeth got herself married to the mob while he was in Pentonville."



## Morgan Home: Master Bedroom

Elizabeth lingered in the doorway, listening as Cameron and Jake bickered over who would get to use the bathroom first. "You have about thirty seconds before I come in there and brush your teeth myself!"

There was some silence, then a hushed, fervent set of whispers before Jake slunk out of the room, sending his mother a beleaguered glare. "I'm not a baby anymore," he muttered.

"That's how I knew it would work." She rolled her eyes and left the doorway, unfastening her watch. "Never fails," she told Jason. "Threaten to hold them down and shove a brush in their mouth, suddenly they're the souls of cooperation."

He grinned at her, sitting on the bed to take off his boots. "I told Laura the adoption was finalized," he said.

Elizabeth made a face, tossing the watch and her necklace into the porcelain tray atop the dresser. "I meant to say something," she confessed, "but it's been awkward. I know she supports it—"

"But she's not one hundred percent on board," her husband finished. He came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. She leaned back against him, closing her eyes. "She knows it was the right decision, but—"

"But it's admitting that Aiden is never going to know the boy I fell in love with." Elizabeth sighed. "It's hard," she continued. "When I was just a little older than Cameron, I had all these dreams about a family with Lucky. Remember?" She twisted. "When we talked in Jake's that first night, and I told you about wanting a baby with Lucky?"

"Yeah."

"That boy—that sweet, caring boy deserved to be a father. It hurts to let go of that. I thought I had years ago, but when I realized I was still holding onto a small piece of it when Lucky sent the paperwork to terminate his parental rights. I know Luke said he's been better, but he'll never be that boy again." She stared at the collar of Jason's t-shirt. "I don't know why I have to keep relearning that. He hasn't been that boy for nearly twenty years." She forced a smile. "Sorry. I don't know why I'm so maudlin about this. Aiden loves you, and I love that he has you."

"I know, but he and Cameron both know they're not my biological sons. Aiden's going to have questions one day. We need to be ready to answer them."

"Thank you for putting up with me." Elizabeth leaned up to kiss him, then lingered. "How long do you think we have before Cam tries to sneak downstairs for one more video game?"

"It's only nine," Jason murmured, brushing his lips down her jaw. "Maybe ten minutes before he thinks we're not listening."

"Well, not enough time for that," Elizabeth replied, "but—" She put her hands against his chest, pushing him back gently so their eyes could meet. "I've been waiting all day to get you alone."

"I can be creative in ten minutes," Jason offered, but she shook her head. She went over to the purse hanging on the back of her door. When she turned back to him, she was holding out the pregnancy test. He stared at him for a long moment before raising stunned eyes to hers. "Is that—"

"Yeah. I, um, thought maybe, but I didn't want to get our hopes up—" She bit her lip. "So I took it at work, and then Britt did a blood test to confirm—" She laughed as Jason came forward to pick her up and swing her around before hugging her tightly. "I guess you're happy."

"We've been talking about it for a year," Jason reminded her. He pushed her hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ears, then letting his thumbs slide down her cheeks. "Everything we're going to get right this time. You won't need double shifts, and I'll be here for the cravings and to take care of the boys—"

"And you'll get to hold the baby in the hospital and everyone will know—" Elizabeth sighed happily. "I was so afraid to hope—so sure I was just being selfish. I mean, we have three beautiful boys—we have Jake, our miracle—I didn't know if we'd get another chance—" She broke off when she heard a tell tale creak.

"I got it," Jason told her, kissing her forehead. He pulled open their door to catch Cameron at the top of the stairs. "No."

"Just one more game—"

"No."

"Come on, Dad!" Cameron scowled. "Spencer keeps saying that I only suck because I'm not allowed to have it in my room—"

"You don't have to go to sleep, Cam, but you know the rules. In your room at nine."

"When I'm an adult, I'm going to have all the game systems right next to the bed," Cameron muttered but he slunk back to his room and slammed the door.

"Are we being too strict?" Elizabeth wondered as Jason returned.

"He'd play those stupid games all night. We already took away the phone and tablet," he reminded her.

"I know. And he doesn't look death warmed over because he's actually sleeping at night." Satisfied, Elizabeth perched on the edge of the bed. "You sure you want sign up for another eighteen years of enforcing rules?" she teased.

"Only with you."

### **General Hospital: Hub**

Jordan stepped off the elevator and headed straight for Portia Robinson. She waited as Portia finished talking to Finn, then waved to get her attention. Portia made a face that reminded Jordan that they were *not* friends — but came over anyway.

"This isn't about Trina, is it?" Portia asked. "I told her about curfew—"

"No. I've been trying to get in touch with Marcus," Jordan said. "But he hasn't returned my calls. I thought you might know what's going on—"

"He's working a case," Portia said. "As always. Or at least, that's what he said when he canceled last weekend with Trina. You know, Jordan, the whole point of divorcing Marcus was so that I didn't have to constantly answer questions. Leave a message with the DEA—"

"Wait—wait—it's about one of his cases from when he worked here," Jordan said as Portia turned to leave. "It was before he started seeing you, I think, because it's definitely before he left the PCPD for the DEA, but this guy is up for parole and the case file said to contact the arresting officer."

Portia sighed. "He never talked about his cases—"

"Thomas Baker," Jordan cut in. "Arrested in 1998 for blackmail and holding Elizabeth Webber and Emily Quartermaine hostage. It looks like a pretty straight-forward case — do you know why Marcus would care about his release?"

"Baker?" Portia repeated. She held a chart against her chest. "I actually—it's one of the few cases Marcus checked in on when he left the department. He went to Baker's first parole hearing five—no, six years ago. Wanted to make sure he'd serve

the full twenty. I think he said Baker was suspected of another crime, but Marcus couldn't make the charges stick."

"Do you know what kind of crime?" Jordan asked. "Should I be keeping an eye on this guy?"

"Rape and assault of a teenaged girl. Marcus never got specific with me, and I knew better. I think maybe he wanted to keep the victim in the loop since she wouldn't be notified. Why is the case coming up now?"

"Because he made parole," Jordan said with a wince, "and his parole officer got him a gig here. At General Hospital." She pulled out her phone. "I'll have Dante pull the rape files from back then. Can you get in touch with him?"

"Yeah. I'll do what I can. This case—it stuck with him," Portia murmured. "He'd want to know the guy is out."

### **General Hospital: Hallway**

"Hey. Got a minute?" Elizabeth asked, catching up to Patrick Drake as the neurosurgeon started his rounds.

"For you, Webber, no." Patrick flashed her a grin. "You can have two."

"Generous." Elizabeth paused. "I don't know if Robin told you we talked in the locker room yesterday—"

"Yeah, she told me you know about the IVF." Patrick rocked back on his heels. "Crazy, right? Starting over again, but it went great yesterday. Hopefully it'll take."

"So she didn't tell you what she and I talked about?" Elizabeth asked.

"No, she said you'd be tracking me down on your own." Patrick furrowed his brow. "You good? Anything wrong? The adoption?" He scowled. "Did that little bitch mess things up—"

"No, I told you it was finalized. It's good news." Elizabeth bit her lip. "You're not the only ones starting over. Jason and I have been trying for a year, and yesterday—" She grinned. "It came back positive."

"Oh, yeah?" Patrick wrapped her in a tight hug. "Look at you, joining us on the crazy train." His grin was broad as he pulled back. "Oh man, can you be excited and terrified at the same time?" he asked as they started walking down the hall. "I used to be a lot younger."

"Yeah, but think of all the mistakes we won't make again," Elizabeth said. She slid her arm through his. "And you know, we were both kind of alone for the hardest parts. Right after they were born, when they were just babies." She took a deep breath. "I know Robin didn't want it that way—"

"But it's how it rolled out. It's part of the reason we're doing it again. She didn't get to have everything. Between the PPD, Africa, and those psychos—she missed half of Emma's life. We're making up for it, but it's not the same."

"Same. Jason's been in and out since Cam was born," she told him, "but we really just—we want that experience. Start to finish, you know? I want him to have all the moments."

"Still, we made a pretty good team," Patrick said. "The best pair of single parents in history. Those kids never got away with a single thing."

"Well, they almost managed to stow away on a plane and get to Greece," Elizabeth reminded him.

"You know, I should have been more angry about that," he admitted, "but Dante said seeing Maxie and Lulu tied and gagged up by a bunch of fifth graders was a highlight of his life. And hey—"

"They left Aiden with a remote and a Lunchable," Elizabeth finished, grinning at the memory. It had once been a terrifying one to recall—how close their precious babies came to joining the chaos in Greece, but after three years — it had become almost a legend. "Did you hear the late gossip from the ninth grade?"

"I try hard to forget that's happening," Patrick said with a grimace, "how did Emma get old enough to be a freshman?" He sighed. "What did Joss do this time?"

"She tried to make Trina miss the cheerleading tryouts, so Trina might have enlisted Cam to dump blue hair dye in Joss's shampoo." Elizabeth paused. "I don't think Emma was part of it—"

"Who do you think talked Cam into doing it?" Patrick said. "I may not acknowledge this whole dating thing, but I know your kid is a sucker for anything mine asks him to do."

"They've been dating for a year, Patrick. When are you going to admit it—" Elizabeth laughed as they turned a corner, walking straight into a pair of custodians. "Oh, I'm sorry—"

"No worries," one of the men said as they turned to face Patrick and Elizabeth. Elizabeth stared at him as the man smiled. "Don't say a word."

Elizabeth's hand slid from Patrick's arm as she forced herself to speak. "How—why—I don't—"

"Elizabeth?" Patrick asked, concerned. "Do you know him?" He squinted at the man's name tag. "You're new, aren't you? Tom? When did you start?"

"Just last week," Tom said with another smile. "Elizabeth and I go way back." He fastened his eyes on hers. "She's why I went to prison."

### **General Hospital: Hallway**

The world around her fell away. The bright, fluorescent lights, the clean anti-septic smell, the squeaking of shoes against the floor, the beeping of monitors, and the hushed voices —

All of it melted away as Elizabeth stared at the man who had been the center of all her nightmares. Her vision narrowed until it was pinpricks of light in a dark world —

There was something cold and wet against her back, and she could feel the slush of snow under her fingernails as she dug her hands into the ground, bucking wildly against the heavy weight on top her—why couldn't she scream—why couldn't she—

"Whoa, whoa—" Dimly she heard a panicked voice from somewhere far away but she couldn't breathe. She couldn't force air into her lungs—she couldn't scream, couldn't speak, couldn't—

Patrick barely spared a glance for the pair of men as one of them dragged away the new guy—Elizabeth's face was chalk white as she slid to the ground, Patrick grabbing for her just before she hit the linoleum. "Damn it," he hissed. He whipped his head around. "Can someone—"

"What's wrong?" Griffin Munro darted across the hallway, kneeling next to Elizabeth who was still gasping for air, clutching at her throat. "What happened?"

"I don't—" Patrick just stared in abject horror as the younger doctor attempted to lift her into his arms but Elizabeth began to fight wildly, kicking—and now she was screaming— "Baby, hey—"

"We need a sedative—"

"Wait, wait—" Patrick warded off a nurse who was coming towards them with a syringe. "She's pregnant," he bit out. "What's in that?"

"It's fine," another voice barked. Epiphany Johnson grabbed the syringe from the shell-shocked nurse and jabbed it into Elizabeth's arm. Elizabeth's struggles gradually disappeared until she slumped back against Griffin, her eyes closed. "What the hell is going on?" she demanded. Then she looked around the hallway. "Go back to work!" she ordered, gesturing with sharp movements. Most scattered immediately.

"But—" the nurse who had attempted to help swallowed. "Can we do anything?"

"You can go back to work." She nodded at Griffin who was rubbing his shoulder where Elizabeth had nailed him. "Let's get her into a room. Get Morgan and Laura Spencer down here."

"I'll get Laura," Patrick volunteered as Griffin lifted Elizabeth into his arms, this time without the attack. "And call Jason. Wait—" He put a hand on Epiphany's arm. "She ever mention the name Tom to you? There was a custodian here. Said she was the reason he went to prison." He whipped his around. "He's gone now, but—"

"No, but Laura will. She's known Elizabeth most of her life." Epiphany followed Griffin into the room.

Patrick pulled out his phone and sent Jason a quick text to get to the hospital, adding Liz was fine, but she needed him. Then he went to find the hospital administrator.

### **General Hospital: Administrator's Office**

Laura frowned when Patrick shoved his way into her office, even as her assistant followed him. "Patrick, what on Earth?"

"I'm sorry—but Elizabeth just—" The doctor took a deep breath. "She had a panic attack, I think. Or something like it—"

"What? Why?" Laura started out of the office, both of them ignoring the assistant who was complaining about appointments. "Cancel them," she snapped. "My daughter needs me." She went stalked towards the elevator. "What happened?"

"Things were fine. She was fine," Patrick stressed, "and then we ran into these custodians. There's this new guy—Elizabeth looked upset when she saw him and then he said she was the reason he went to prison—"

The doors opened but Laura didn't move. "Laura—"

"What was his name?" she asked, her heart pounding. No. It couldn't be. He couldn't be—

"Tom." Patrick put a hand out to stop the doors from closing. "Laura, what the hell is going on?"

"Tom." Laura took a deep breath, then stepped onto the elevator. "Tom," she repeated. "Tom Baker."

"You know who he is? Laura—"

"It's not—" Laura fisted her hand against her heart. "It's not my story to tell, but the only Toms that Elizabeth knows are her uncle...and someone who hurt her very much once."

Without a word, they stepped onto the elevator and Patrick jabbed a finger against the button. When he spoke next, his voice was tight. "Tom Baker was the man who raped her."

"She told you?"

"Yeah. A long time ago." Patrick stared blindly at the silver doors in front of him. "How the hell does that man get hired to work here without you knowing? Without Elizabeth knowing?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure as hell going to find out."

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

Jason didn't remember much of the drive between the warehouse and the hospital. He'd read Patrick's text message and had gone on autopilot. Everything shut down inside — he only had one goal.

Get to the hospital. Get to Elizabeth.

At the nurse's station, he opened his mouth to ask where his wife was, but then the second set of elevators opened and Laura and Patrick stepped out. Jason charged towards them. "Where is she?"

"I'll take you there, but Jason—" Patrick put up a hand. "She's okay," he repeated. "She's fine and so—" He slid a glance towards Laura. "Everything is fine."



"Then—"

"She saw Tom Baker," Laura said softly. "He's here in the hospital."

Jason's hands fisted. "What happened?" he demanded. "Where is she?"

"She lost it," Patrick said as he walked them both down towards the hallway. "First she went white, and then kind of fell to the floor. Griff tried to pick her up, and she went wild—" He cleared his throat. "We had to sedate her."

"Oh, God." Laura pressed her hands to her face. "Oh, God. She didn't know. If she had known—"

"I don't think she even knew he was out of prison," Patrick said. "Jason—"

"He's supposed to be up for parole in six months," Jason bit out. He'd been keeping track of the man since the day he'd gone into the system for blackmailing Emily and holding her hostage—along with Elizabeth. "I'll find out what the hell happened." And which one of his men had let him down.

"You must have flown here," Epiphany said as they approached her. "She's fine," she assured Jason. "Griffin is with her, and she's resting. Still out from the sedative," she added. "But she'll be coming around shortly."

"Okay." He was okay. This was okay. He could handle this. "You said she had to be sedated—"

"I checked," Patrick added. "They know." He winced. "Does Laura—"

"Know what?" Laura drew her brows together. "What's going on?"

"We were—we just found out yesterday—" Jason sighed, then looked at Elizabeth's mother-in-law. "She's pregnant."

"Oh." Laura's eyes brightened. "That's wonderful! I know she said you were trying—but—" she looked at Patrick. "You made sure they knew—"

"I checked it," Epiphany assured her. "Most sedatives are fine, but it's better to be safe than sorry." She nodded her head at Jason. "You better get in there. She needs to see a familiar face when she comes around."

"Yeah. Yeah." He looked at Laura. "Why was Baker at the hospital?"

"He apparently works here," Patrick said flatly.

Jason's nostrils flared. "He what?"

"I don't oversee every hire," Laura said. "But I know he plead guilty to holding Elizabeth hostage. That should have sent up a red flag. We don't hire anyone who has a felony conviction against a current employee."

"He didn't—" Jason took a deep breath. "They plead that down," he said. "Officially, I mean. It was only—only Emily's charges went forward. Elizabeth's case was dropped when they dropped the rape charges."

"Oh, Christ." Laura closed her eyes. "I'd forgotten that. I thought—But—but it was in the arrest file, and I know Taggert said he was going to keep his eye on things. He was at the parole hearing the first time. I'll call Jordan. Maybe something got lost."

"Maybe." Jason didn't want to know anymore. The man who had brutalized and traumatized his wife was out on the loose, breathing the same air—working in the same building—

That wasn't going to last.

He dismissed the three of them and went into the hospital room where he found a dark-haired doctor sitting by Elizabeth's side. One of the doctors who was studying with Patrick, he remembered. Griffin something.

"Hey. Hey." Nervous, Griffin got to his feet. "I'm glad you're here. Um—vitals are good, I mean. She'll be okay when she wakes up. I hope—" He looked back to Elizabeth before focusing on Jason. "I'll get back to work."

"Thanks." Jason dismissed the doctor and took the seat he'd vacated. It was strange to see Elizabeth stretched out on the hospital bed, dressed in the purple scrubs she wore on days when she worked on Patrick's OR team. Her face was pale, her eyes looked almost bruised against her skin. He didn't like to see her this way. In a hospital bed.

It always brought back the day Jake was born and she'd nearly died. Or when she'd nearly died from the biotoxin and he hadn't gone to see her. Or when she'd nearly drowned, then had hallucinations of Jake.

She'd spent too much time almost dying in a hospital bed.

Jason reached for her hand, rubbing his fingers over the rings he'd placed there three years earlier. He'd make sure his was the first face she'd see when she woke.

And then he'd finish Tom Baker. The man was never going to get another chance to do this to her.

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

Laura tapped her foot as she waited for Portia Robinson to get her page. Finally, the doctor stepped around a corner, frowning as she approached Laura. "Mrs. Spencer—"

"Dr. Robinson, thank you for answering my page. I apologize if I took you away from anything important," Laura said. "This isn't hospital related," she added, "but it is an emergency. I need Taggert's contact information."

Portia frowned, folding her arms across her chest. "You're the second person to ask me about Marcus this week," she said. "The commissioner was also trying to track him down. What's wrong?"

"Jordan was—" Laura hesitated. "Taggert was keeping an eye on a case that was important to my family," she said. "He contacted my daughter-in-law the last time Tom Baker was up for parole. But this time—"

"Your daughter-in-law—" Portia raised a hand. "Jordan just told me about this yesterday. Baker got out on parole and was working here. I knew Marcus was worried about some case that Baker wasn't charged with—is that her?"

"Yes. And, according to what he told us then — and what my son-in-law thought — Baker wasn't supposed to be up for parole. I need to find out what happened—"

"Of course. I don't understand how Marcus let this go," Portia murmured. She reached into her pocket for her cell phone. "He never gave me details, but that parole hearing happened right before we separated. He was relieved when Baker didn't get out. He never would have—"

She pressed a button, dialing her ex-husband. "Voicemail," she muttered. "Marcus, it's Portia again. Please get in touch with me. It's an emergency. Trina is fine, but Tom Baker is out of prison, and he's working at the hospital. I don't know the details, but you need to get in touch with Laura Spencer and Jordan as soon as possible. Please."

"Thank you," Laura said. "Is it like him to not get back you?"

"Not unusual," she admitted. "He goes undercover sometimes at the DEA, and he might be under right now. He doesn't always warn us." Portia grimaced. "One of the

reasons we got divorced," she muttered. "I'll let you know if he gets back in touch with me, and I'll text you his number."

"Thank you—"

"Mrs. Spencer—is your daughter-in-law all right? Elizabeth is a great nurse, I mean. I just—"

"She's all right." For now, Laura added to herself silently as she walked away.

### **General Hospital: Hospital Room**

Elizabeth turned her head and slowly forced her eyes open. She felt like she was swimming through a thick sea of cobwebs. She found familiar blue eyes peering at her, and she frowned. "J-Jason?"

"Hey." His fingers brushed her cheeks. "How are you feeling?"

"Confused," Elizabeth admitted. She cleared her throat and gratefully accepted Jason's help in sitting up and then the water he gave her. "What—" She looked around, realizing she was on a hospital bed. Alarmed, she pressed a hand against her belly. "Jason—"

"The baby is fine," Jason told her. He covered her hand with his own, the other sliding through her hair. "Perfect," he promised. "Do you—" He hesitated. "Do you remember what happened?"

"No—" And then she did. Everything inside her trembled. "Jason. I—I saw—he said—he was here—he said—"

"Hey." Jason edged onto the bed, taking both her hands in hers. "I'm right here. Nothing is going to hurt you. No one," he added. "Look at me."

She did, focusing on his eyes, on the feel of his hands wrapped around hers. He always made her feel safe. "Tom Baker," she said softly. "He was...I turned a corner, and he was just there. We bumped into him, and I started to apologize—" Her voice faltered. "He said not a word. That's what he said. He said don't say a word," she corrected. "But that night—the night he—" Elizabeth closed her eyes. Took a deep breath. "He hissed it into my ear. Not a word. Then he said it again that day in the studio. That's how I knew—I recognized him, I could hear his voice, I could feel him—"

"Stay with me—" Jason tipped up her chin. "Stay with me here," he ordered. "Right here. Right now. That was eighteen years ago," he reminded her. "You're safe here."

With me. He's not here."

"He's not here," she repeated. She closed her eyes. "It's over. I'm not sixteen anymore." Sixteen. Her whole world had shattered and she'd pieced it back together, painstakingly fitting the jagged shards into something that looked like a normal person.

But shattered glass was easily broken—how many times had she fractured over the years? "Eighteen years," she murmured. "And it can still hit me. It can still feel like now. How is that possible? How is that fair?"

"It's not."

"I want to go home. Can I—can you just—I want to go home."

"We'll go home. I'll get Laura to grab the boys and they can go with her for the night—"

"No, no. I want the boys. I want to go home, and I want the boys. I want our family. And our life." She took a deep breath. "I worked too hard, fought too long—he's not doing this to me. I broke a little," she admitted. "But I'm okay." Elizabeth squeezed Jason's hands. "I'm okay. Let's go home."

### **Scorpio-Drake House: Kitchen**

"Where's Emma?" Patrick asked as he found Robin making a cup of herbal tea. "Did she load the dishwasher?"

"Yeah. I think she's upstairs doing her homework." Robin gently stirred her tea. "What happened earlier today? I heard Elizabeth went a little crazy."

"Is that the gossip that reached the lab?" Patrick grimaced, leaned back against the counter. "She had a panic attack. A bad one."

Robin furrowed her brow. "I didn't know—she didn't used to have those, did she?"

"Not in the time I've known her. A few times after Jake died," Patrick corrected, "but nothing like today. It was almost like she didn't know where she is. She was almost catatonic and then Griffin tried to help her up—she started kicking and screaming." He folded his arms. " He hesitated. "Tom Baker is working as a custodian at the hospital. Laura said the parole officer got him a job there."

"Tom—" The spoon in her tea clattered to the floor as Robin stared at him with wide eyes. "Tom Baker. The man who—" She took a deep breath. "Tom Baker," she

murmured.

"Oh, right—I didn't think about it. Laura said this all went down in '98. You and Jason were together back then, weren't you?"

"Yeah, that was at the end of things mostly, but—" Robin paused. "I remember when he went on trial. Emily asked Jason not to do anything. She wanted to testify against Baker. To be as strong as Elizabeth was when she confronted him about the rape." She rubbed her arm. "Jason agreed because it was what Emily wanted and he needed her to be okay after everything that had happened."

"All I knew was that Baker didn't get charged with the attack," Patrick said. "What the hell happened?"

"The usual, I think. My uncle might know more, but you know how sexual assault cases are handled by the police—and the DA. Baker denied the confession, and it was her word against his. The DA didn't want to risk it, and the PCPD put her case in cold storage." Robin picked up the spoon, a bit more steady now. "She saw him today."

"Yeah. Elizabeth told me about this years ago," Patrick added, "and it's not like I've never seen or met a sexual assault survivor, but it was—it kills me that it can still hit her like this after all this time. It's been eighteen years, Robin."

"She was just sixteen," Robin murmured. "Barely older than Emma. I remember her back then. Lucky worked for Jason and we ran into them once in a while." She cleared her throat, focused on Patrick. "What does Laura say? Can we get him fired or let go? I mean, he attacked an employee—"

"Can't fire him without cause, and he's officially not guilty of anything against Elizabeth. If Emily were still around," Patrick said with some regret, "we might have a shot. But he didn't even get charged with holding Elizabeth hostage. They plead it down after the mistrial."

"I knew that—I just didn't realize Elizabeth's charges were left off entirely—" Robin's lips thinned as she pressed them together. "This system," she muttered. "It never looks out for women. If that ever happened to our baby—God, Patrick, it terrifies me. I know men are out there, but Baker's in the hospital. Maybe we should tell Emma she can't volunteer there any more."

"She's never alone," Patrick said after a minute. "She works with a group, and if we tell her she can't, we have to tell her why."

"And she'll tell Cam. I don't think the boys know." Robin sighed. "Fine. But I

reserve the right to change my mind."

"Duly noted."

The conversation slid into other topics about the day, so Emma — listening just outside the door as she often did after dinner because that was when her parents always talked about anything they didn't want her to hear — slid away and went up the stairs.

She went for her phone and texted Cameron.

*hey meet me tonite midnight*

*k i'll let u know if i cant get out*

### **Morgan Home: Kitchen**

Across the street, Jason was loading the last plate into the dishwasher as Elizabeth sat at the counter. "It's Jake's night to do that," she said. "I thought we said we weren't going to let him get away with forgetting." Instead, Jason had sent the boys upstairs with the rare opportunity to play video games in Cameron's room. He'd helped them unhook the game system and move it.

Elizabeth didn't argue because they'd made a pact not to do that in front of the boys, and she knew why he'd done it. With video games, they'd be less likely to pay attention to anything else.

Jason shrugged one shoulder, starting the dishwasher and turning back to her. "I thought maybe tonight we let it go."

"I'm fine," Elizabeth said as he opened his mouth. "I told you I would be. I had a freak out, but I got it under control, okay? Laura said she'd talk to the maintenance department and make sure we don't get assigned to same floors or even the same shifts if she could avoid it." She hesitated. "I don't want you worrying about me."

"Impossible." He leaned back against the counter, folding his arms. "You worry about me when I leave the house."

"That's different," she said dismissively. "You carry a gun."

"And you've been through enough," he said. "You just found out you had a sister—"

"And we don't talk about Hayden," Elizabeth said flatly. "She's gone and I don't like her. When your secret sibling pops up, you can handle that anyway you want. I'm

choosing to ignore her existence."

"Elizabeth—"

"Jason—"

"You like to pretend things are fine," he interrupted her. "Sometimes that works. And then sometimes it just makes it worse when you realize things aren't—"

"What do you want me to do?" Elizabeth demanded. "Quit my job? Hide in my room? I did all of that eighteen years ago. He stole nearly a year of my life." She took a deep breath. "Longer," she murmured. "And maybe I never really got it all back. I don't know. Can you?" She met his eyes. "You're right. It's been a long year. And before that, worrying about the Cassadines—losing then getting Jake back—I can understand why you think something like is going to knock me back. I'm stronger than I look."

"You were bleeding out from a stab wound and shot Stavros Cassadine in the head," he reminded her. "I am the last person who is going to question how strong you are."

"Then what—"

Jason hesitated. "A long time ago, Emily asked me to let Baker make it to trial," he said, shifting uncomfortably because he'd never be at ease with discussing his job with her. "She wanted to testify against him. When he went to jail, she made me change that promise."

Elizabeth frowned. "I don't—"

"She wanted him to finish his sentence so he could rot in prison, but she said when he got out — she wanted him to finish paying for what he did to you. At the time, I didn't really know you," he reminded her. "So I agreed because it was what she wanted, and honestly, even without knowing you—" He cleared his throat. "But it's different now. Emily's gone." He took a moment because admitting that never got any easier. "And I don't know if that's what you need. Or want."

"It's what you want to do, isn't it?"

"What I want doesn't matter," he told her. "But yeah, I'd like to rip him into pieces and set him on fire. For what he did to you then. For what he did to my sister. For today. For all the days in between you've had to live with it."

Elizabeth's lips curved into a small smile. "Set him on fire?" she repeated. "That's



not your usual style."

"Elizabeth—"

"What I want—what I need—is for Tom Baker not to be something or someone I think about," she said softly. "Part of me wants to tell you to go ahead because you're right. He never paid for what he did to me. Thank you for agreeing to it back when Emily asked it even though I didn't matter to you."

"But?" he prompted.

"But he's been out of my life for a long time," Elizabeth continued, "and it didn't change anything for me. It still took me years to trust myself or anyone else physically. It didn't change how it felt for Manny Ruiz to grab me the way he did when he kidnapped me." A shadow slid over her face. "Or how it felt when you did it to find Sam—"

"Elizabeth—"

"I think that was the worst of it for me. Back then—Lucky would touch me and I couldn't handle it. It didn't matter that I knew he'd never hurt me. Then," she added with a wry smile because she still carried the scar from when he'd shoved a knife into her three years earlier. "Then when you just wanted to jog my memory to find Sam—I knew you wouldn't hurt me either, and it still made me think of Tom Baker. He's taken that from me, Jason. And I don't know if I'll ever get it back."

There was silence in the kitchen then, the sound of the dishwasher gently running in the background.

"There is no justice. No way of making him pay for what he did to me. It wouldn't make me feel better. It wouldn't make it stop. It would just be revenge." She hesitated. "And maybe that would be enough. I might change my mind," she admitted. "But here's the thing about making him disappear now, Jason—" She waited for him to focus on her. "If you'd done it quietly while he was in prison, that would be one thing. The PCPD know what he did to me. What he did to Emily. He gets hurt or disappears now, you're the first person they're looking at."

"I—"

"And before you tell me that doesn't scare you, I know that. It scares me," she said softly. "Because the one thing I won't let him take from me is my family. We have three beautiful boys who love you, Jason. We have another baby on the way. We waited too long for all of this. He isn't worth the risk." She held her hands out across the counter, waited for him to take hers. "He's not worth a single minute of

my time. He spent seventeen years in prison for what he did to Emily. I'm going to make that enough for me."

"All right," he said after another minute. "But if you change your mind—"

"I know who to ask." She smiled, then slid off the counter. She wrapped her arms around his waist, and he tugged her closer. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

### **Robinson House: Living Room**

Portia held out her hand with a raise of her brows. "It's eight," she said.

"You know," her daughter began hotly, "some mothers would trust their kids."

"And some mothers," Portia replied sweetly, "know better. Did you have to talk to Carly Corinthos about what you did to her kid? No, I did."

Trina's eyes widened into pools of innocence. "I didn't—"

"What you and Emma convinced Cameron to do," Portia corrected. "I'm not saying Joss Jacks doesn't have that, and a whole lot more coming, but we don't go low in this house."

"I didn't go low. There is no low enough for her," Trina muttered as she slapped her phone against her mother's palm. "You think you're at rock bottom, and Cujo is right there with you, digging an even deeper level—"

"Trina—"

Trina stomped towards the stairs. "A little blue hair never killed anyone, God, you'd think I cut it off—"

"Don't get any ideas—" her mother called after her, wincing when she heard her daughter's door slam. "Just like her father," she muttered.

As if on cue, Portia's phone lit up with her ex-husband's name. She reached for it. "Marcus?"

"What the hell was that voicemail?" Marcus Taggert demanded. "Baker is out? Why the hell didn't I know?"

"I really feel like I am the wrong person to be asking that question, and don't you

take that tone with me," Portia retorted. "Call Jordan Ashford, why don't you?"

"Portia—"

"This isn't my problem. That's the beauty of being divorced. Hey, maybe you could return some phone calls sometime and you won't get blindsided."

"We're not doing this—"

"No, we're not. Maybe you could come ask these questions in person and while you're at it, you can visit your kid. Until then, we have nothing to say to each other." She clicked the phone off, thought about throwing it — then carefully set it back down.

She wasn't going to let that man get the best of her. Not anymore.

### **Morgan House: Backyard**

Keeping an ear out for his father, Cameron managed to get out of the house that night undetected. He shimmied up the tree to the house they'd built two years ago for Jake and Aiden to find Emma waiting for him.

"Hey." He grinned as he always did when he saw her. She was so pretty and she was dating him even though Spencer had asked her first. He was the luckiest kid in their class because she was definitely the prettiest and smartest—

Then her face registered, and Cameron's smile fell. "Emma..." He sat next to her, awkwardly putting an arm around her. He still hadn't quite figured out how to touch her without making a fool of himself. "What's wrong?"

"Did your parents say anything about your mom today?" Emma wanted to know. "About work?"

"No." Confused, he slid away slightly. "What's wrong?"

"Because mine were talking in the kitchen after dinner tonight, and I—" She fumbled with her flashlight. "I don't know I should say anything but I feel like I have to. I feel like me knowing this and you maybe not knowing this—it breaks the rules or something—"

"Emma—"

"Did you know your mom was raped when she was sixteen?" Emma asked in a rush.

## **Morgan House: Kitchen**

Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder as she opened the fridge and frowned when she caught Cameron's eye again. Her eldest son immediately broke eye contact and slumped over his cereal, scooping up the Lucky Charms like it was the most important thing in his life.

It was the third time she'd caught him looking at her—maybe even the fourth. She rolled her shoulders and retrieved the juices she needed for Aiden's lunch box and went over to the counter to continue packing his lunch. "Everything okay?" she asked Cameron.

"What?" Cameron blinked at her. "Yeah, why?"

She pursed her lips. "No reason."

"I don't care what Rocco Falconieri is doing," Jason said as he walked into the kitchen behind a sullen Aiden. "You're not going."

"You act like I'm a baby," he muttered, starting to climb onto the stool next to Cameron. He glared at Jason as his father rounded the counter and reached for a bowl to pour cereal for him.

"You still got your baby teeth?" Jake wanted to know from the other side of Cameron. "Because I think that's how it works. You start losing those, you level up."

Aiden scowled — because of course, he hadn't lost any of his teeth yet. The bottom center tooth was loose but it refused to come out. "If it comes out, can I go?"

"It's a school night—"

"That is not how it works," Elizabeth said at the same time. Jake just grinned at her, his mission of agitation completed for the morning. "No one goes anywhere on school nights."

"But Rocco is family," Aiden pointed out. "You said we gotta do for family."

"When they're in trouble. Not when they have a game system in their room and you're trying to get around the rules." Elizabeth zipped his lunch box shut, then looked at Cameron. He was usually in the middle of these morning clashes — whether he teaming up with Jake against who ever the target was that day or he was taking his parents's side just to be contrary.

Instead, he sat between his brothers, his attention focused on the bowl of cereal like

it had all the answers.

"Cameron gets to go places all the time," Aiden muttered. "He gets to stay at Grandma Laura's longer and he goes to the hospital by himself. I get locked up like a criminal."

"Aiden, cool it," Cameron said, his spoon clinking against the bowl as he glared at his little brother. "No one is locking you up."

"Yeah, I know what that's like," Jake offered helpfully. "You're not on an island, you got your own room, no crazy person is telling you he's your dad and you're gonna help him rule the world—" He was ticking these items off on his fingers as Elizabeth's mouth dropped and Jason stilled next to him.

Aiden's eyes were as round as saucers. "Whoa. Is that what it was like with the Cassadines? Do they really rule the world? Is that why Spencer is a giant—"

"Eat your cereal," Jason said, shoving the bowl in front of Aiden. "Jake—" He didn't even really know what to say. Jake had been so young when they'd rescued him from the Cassadines, and he rarely spoke about the two long years he'd spent locked up with Stavros playing his father.

"I didn't know you remembered that much," Elizabeth said finally. "Do you need—um, Grandma can talk to Kevin—"

"No, it's cool." Jake shrugged. "Aiden just doesn't get it. That's why he's the baby."

Aiden's eyes narrowed into little slits. "I am not—"

"Here's his lunch," Elizabeth said to Jason in a rush as she shoved the box towards her husband. "Cam, Jake, let's go. I'll drop you off at school."

"It's not like he can hurt me," Jake said, confidently hopping off the stool. "He kicks like a fly—"

Jason quickly put an arm out to lock Aiden in place. "Jake—"

"Someone has to make up for Cam since he's all quiet." Jake sauntered out towards the living room.

"It's not fair," Aiden muttered.

"One day, you'll get to do all the things Cam does," Elizabeth assured him. "Right, Cam?"

Cameron blinked at her. "Uh. Yeah. Sure. I didn't even tie anyone up until I was eleven, so you got time, Aiden." He slurped up his cereal. "I'll go get my jacket and bookbag."

"Not the help I was looking for," she muttered as she followed him out, hearing Aiden ask Jason who Cameron had tied up.

### **Corinthos & Morgan Warehouse: Office**

Jason usually hated to be interrupted when he was working on the books, but he was glad when Sonny knocked on the door late that morning. He hadn't been able to concentrate on the numbers or the invoices.

"You know, Spinelli could set you up with a program that would do this for you," Sonny said, nodding to the pile of paper and pencils on the desk. "What does he always say? Something about it being the twenty-first century—"

"Programs can be hacked," Jason said. "I like double checking. I thought you were at the restaurant today—"

"Yeah, I'm headed over there, but—uh, Brick said you left here yesterday like things were on fire. He was worried and called me." Sonny sat down in the rickety chair, wincing. "I'm too old for this," he muttered.

"It's fine—" Jason shook his head and reached for the pencil.

"I figure it wasn't too serious since you didn't call me, but I still wanted to check in." Sonny paused. "You didn't come back either, according to Brick—"

"I didn't know he was watching me—" Jason bit back the irritated remark. "There was something at the hospital. Elizabeth—" He stared down at the pencil, twisting the yellow wood in his fingers. "Tom Baker was released from prison."

Sonny squinted. "Tom Baker," he repeated. "Do I know that name?"

"He was the photographer who blackmailed my sister and held her hostage in the photography studio," Jason said.

"Then he's also the garbage that raped Elizabeth. I remember they were the same person," Sonny added when Jason blinked at him. "I just never took in the name. I figured you'd handled that. I didn't know he was still alive."

"Emily—" Jason rubbed his face. "She wanted it that way. Baker grabbed her and

Elizabeth, shoved them into the dark room. Lucky and Nikolas got them out, but Baker confronted them. There was a fight, and Elizabeth got her hands on the gun." He hated thinking of his sister going through that alone, of Elizabeth being shoved into a room by the same man who'd terrorized her— "Emily said Elizabeth was brave in facing him down. Confronting him. Elizabeth wanted him to get arrested. To get justice. She put down the gun."

"But now he's out—"

"Baker never got charged with the rape," Jason said bluntly. "He's out and he's working at the hospital. Elizabeth didn't know and ran into him. She, uh, had a pretty bad panic attack."

"Wouldn't be hard to get rid of him now," Sonny said after a long moment. "Make him look like he split town. Spinelli could handle setting a trail—"

"She doesn't want that."

His best friend absorbed that, nodded. "Okay. I guess I can understand that—"

"She doesn't want the PCPD to look at me. I'd be the primary suspect even if he just disappeared."

"She should know you better. Like you'd get caught," Sonny scoffed, but Jason shook his head.

"It's not that. She just doesn't want to take any chances. Not with—we just finalized the adoption for Aiden, and we're—" A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "We're having another baby. Due in May or June We're not sure—"

"Oh, man—" Sonny's eyes lit up. "That's great news. I knew you were thinking about it, but—okay, okay, that tracks. Elizabeth doesn't want the old stuff coming back. Not when you got so much going right." He tipped his head. "You're okay with him being at the hospital, though?"

"I don't want him breathing the same air as her, much less in the same building," Jason bit out. "But it's not my call."

"No, I guess it's not." Sonny tapped his fingers on his thigh. "How many guys we got working at GH now?"

"Uh, three orderlys and a few of the security guards are ours. I got two more in when Cam started volunteering," Jason admitted.

"Grab one and assign him to Baker. Just to keep an eye out," Sonny suggested. "You're not doing anything but it might help you sleep at night. We can toss someone on him when he's not in the hospital."

"Yeah. Maybe. I'll talk to Elizabeth."

Sonny got to his feet. "It's a hell of a thing," he said. "Special place in hell for rapists."

### **General Hospital: Pediatric Wing**

Emma folded her arms and followed Cameron off the elevator. "Are you really not going to talk about it?" she asked him as they headed for the nurse's station on the floor. "You just went inside last night—"

"Emma—" Cameron just shook his head. "No. I really don't want to talk about it. Let's just get this shift over with."

She sighed and they turned a corner. She scowled, then swallowed her protest at seeing Joss Jacks standing by Spencer Cassadine at the nurse's station. A few feet away, Trina was glaring daggers at the blonde—

"No one said she was working today," Trina said as Cameron and Emma joined her. "They really just take anyone in this program—"

"Hey, my dad paid for this program!" Joss said, planting her hands on her hips. "Tell her, Spencer!"

"Not a chance in hell," Spencer said politely. "Dig your own grave."

"Do you know how long it took my stylist to get that blue crap out of my hair?" Joss demanded. She turned her wounded eyes on Cameron who stared at the linoleum. "I thought we were friends!"

"We are," Cameron said, dully. "I'm sorry—"

"Sorry?"

"Hey, cool it, Cujo," Trina snarled. "You started this and you know it! You told Oscar Nero that I had head lice!"

"Well, you—"

"And that I don't shower or wash my hair because of my braids—"



Joss's cheeks were stained with red. "Okay, that was out of line—"

"Out of line? Out of line? I should have used acid, you spoiled bitch—"

Before Trina could launch herself at Joss and finish this for good, Cameron suddenly turned and stalked off in the opposite direction.

Trina and Joss both stopped dead in their tracks at his departure. "What's his problem?" Joss tossed her hair over her shoulder. "I'm the victim!"

"All your life," Trina said sweetly and Joss glared at her. Emma ignored them both and took after her boyfriend.

She knew what this was about, and honestly should have dragged him in the opposite direction when she saw Trina and Joss sharing the same oxygen. They had been like oil and water since kindergarten and it was just getting worse. They'd been bickering over Oscar for almost a month, and eventually someone was going to get really hurt.

Emma turned a corner and stumbled, her toe catching on the edge of a custodian's cart. She nearly face planted on the floor, but a hand snagged her elbow and righted her.

"You okay, little girl?"

"I'm fine," Emma said, automatically pasting a polite smile on her face as she faced the custodian behind the cart. But the man was smiling at her already, his dark eyes fixed on her in a way that made her feel vaguely dirty. She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry. I should watch where I'm going. Um, thank you."

She edged around the man and continued down the hall, feeling an itch between her shoulders as she turned another corner and disappeared.

Tom Baker straightened out the cart and smiled to himself as he continued on his rounds. He'd missed the sight of a pretty young girl flying through life, bright eyes and smiles. This one had long legs and a delicate build. Long brown hair. He'd always been partial to brunettes.

He found the puddle he'd been sent to clean and got started, then started to whistle. Oh, yeah, it was good to be free.

### **General Hospital: Hallway**

Cameron had nearly made it to the service stairs before Emma snagged his elbow and made him stop. "Hey, Cam. Come on—"

"I just really want to be alone right now, okay?" Cameron said, jerking out of her grasp. When her pretty face crumpled with hurt, he hissed. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I just—I don't know what you want from me, okay?"

"I don't want anything, Cam, I just—" She bit her lip. "I want you to be okay. I shouldn't have told you—"

"No, you shouldn't have. I don't want to know this. I don't want to think about what my mom—" His chest felt six sizes too small. "I've seen this happen on TV, you know, and I can't stop—"

"It was so long ago, Cam—"

"It doesn't matter. I just keep seeing her in my head, crying. She cried all the time when Jake was gone, and now I—" He closed his eyes. "Just leave me alone."

"Cam—"

He shoved open the door to the stairwell, and this time, Emma didn't follow.

### **General Hospital: Hub**

Elizabeth knew even before Laura reached her why she was here. As her mother-in-law approached the counter, Elizabeth put up a hand. "Before you start, I'm fine."

"I wasn't—" Laura winced. "Okay, I was a little," she admitted. "But I've been worried—"

"You and Patrick. And Robin. And Jason. I guess I should be relieved you're really the only people left that know." She felt a twist of grief for Emily and for the boy Lucky had been once. For her grandmother. Elizabeth turned back to the monitor and kept updating charts. "I freaked out yesterday. I know it upset everyone. It scared me. But once I got home, and I was with my boys, I remembered something very important."

"What's that?"

Elizabeth met Laura's eyes. "That sixteen-year-old girl crawled out of the bushes a long time ago. I worked damn hard to put it behind me."

"I know you did, Elizabeth, but—"

"I wasn't prepared to see him. That's all. I can handle this, Laura. I refuse to let him take over my life. Not again. Never again," Elizabeth said, her teeth clenched. "For nearly a year, it consumed my every waking thought. I didn't sleep. I couldn't look at anyone in the eye. I saw the man who raped me in the face of every man I came into contact with. I couldn't see a future for myself where I would be able to let anyone touch me." Her breath hitched. "That's not me anymore. I have three gorgeous, perfect boys who are a miracle. I have a husband who loves me. I have another baby to dream for. There is no room in my life for Tom Baker and what he put me through."

"Okay." Laura stepped back. "Then we'll let that be the end of it. I love you, Elizabeth. Without you these last few years, without your family, I would have been lost." She reached forward, squeezed Elizabeth's hand. "If you need me, I'm here. I just wanted to make that clear."

"Thank you."

"I didn't even get a chance to congratulate you on the baby," Laura continued. "I'm so excited for you. Both of you. I hope you don't mind if I cross my fingers for a girl."

"A daughter would be nice," Elizabeth admitted, "but I just want a healthy baby that Jason and I can enjoy together." She paused. "I have to get back to work."

### **PCPD: Commissioner's Office**

Jordan heard his voice before she saw the man, so by the time DEA Agent Marcus Taggart strode in, she was on her feet and ready. She'd already heard his angry message the night before.

"Before you say anything," she began, "it's really not my job to inform former PCPD officers of parole releases. The department did everything by the book on this Baker thing—"

"By the book?" Taggart demanded. "I called Laura Spencer. She said Elizabeth came face to face with the bastard—"

"He wasn't convicted of a violent felony against her. We weren't legally obligated to notify her," Jordan continued. "Like it or not, Marcus, this is our system. If you'd been here, maybe if Mac had still been in charge—things would be different. There's been a lot of turnover since you left."

Taggart growled. "A violent rapist gets released—"

"He wasn't convicted of rape, and—" Jordan reached for the file. "I know what the Webber statement says, but sure are you that Baker was the guy? I don't see much of an investigation—"

"Are you telling me I screwed up her case? He confessed—"

"To a terrified, traumatized teenaged girl he was trying to keep under control," Jordan said. "I called Mac after I looked at the file. He told you that eighteen years ago. No DNA, no case. He wasn't convicted of this, Marcus. And without you here leading the charge, no one knew."

Taggart exhaled slowly. "She was traumatized," he remembered his voice quiet now. "Desperate. Came in over and over again with any scrap she could remember. I dragged her in for line ups, for questioning again—there was never anywhere to go with her case. I tried, Jordan—"

"I know. You followed the leads, but it was a stranger rape, and unfortunately, she did everything wrong—" She winced. "That seems like I'm judging her, I'm not. She did what she needed to for her own sanity. It just limited the investigation."

"I know. She really beat herself up about that." Taggart dropped into the seat, the rage extinguished. "I keep attacking everyone but the bastard who did this," he muttered. "Portia nearly ripped me a new asshole—"

"Yeah, well if you call as often as you did when we worked together, she probably had a reason. No one wanted Elizabeth Morgan to be blindsided like this. I promise you."

"He's working at the hospital?" Taggart wanted to know. He straightened in the chair. "Who put him there? The parole officer?"

"I don't know—"

"Because if he applied for that job on his own—Elizabeth isn't someone who flies under the radar. I bet the whole town knows where she works," he continued.

"He'd have to be suicidal to go after Elizabeth again. Marcus—she's married to the number two guy in the Port Charles mafia. Morgan might look domesticated," Jordan continued, "but he's the suspect in three open homicide cases in the last five years."

"Yeah, how close are you to making those cases?"

"They're dead in the water," Jordan muttered. "He's good at what he does. All of them were low level operatives who were biting at the territory." She pursed her lips. "I'm trying to get surveillance on him approved based on this Baker thing."

"Jordan—"

"I don't care if Baker is the scum of the Earth. He's a citizen that I've sworn an oath to protect. He did his time. That's the system," she repeated to him. "You don't have to like it, but we will sure as hell respect it. If Baker goes missing, I want eyes on Jason Morgan. I'm going to nail his ass to the wall."

Taggert snorted as he rose to his feet. "And then you'll take Corinthos down with him. Why the hell do you think I transferred out? I got tired of beating my head against a brick wall. Good luck with that."

### **Morgan House: Kitchen**

Cameron slunk into the back door a few hours later, stopping short when he saw his mother at the stove. "I thought you were at work."

She smiled at him. "No. I had the early shift today, so I thought we'd heat up some pasta from last night—" Elizabeth tipped her head. "Your brothers are in the living room playing video games. As usual."

"I'm fine." He dropped the bookbag on the table and went to the fridge to get a can of pop.

"I saw Emma at the hospital," Elizabeth continued as she took out a bag of rolls and started to prep garlic bread. "You didn't volunteer?"

"I went, but I didn't feel like it." Cameron took a long sip of his drink. "Trina and Joss were arguing again."

"Ah, the blue hair thing?"

"Yeah. I didn't wanna listen." He stared at the butcher block surface of the counter. "Mom."

"Yeah, baby?"

He'd asked her ages ago to stop calling him that, but today—today he couldn't be irritated by it. "Mom," he said again.

Elizabeth set down the shaker of garlic powder and focused on him. "Cameron,

what's wrong? I can tell something this—"

"Emma heard her parents talking." He took a deep breath. "The other night. She told me—" His eyes burned and his throat felt too small to speak. "She told me you—you were—"

His mother's face was pale. "She told you what happened to me. When I was a kid."

"Yeah." He sucked in the breath. "That you were raped." He found the courage to meet his mother's eyes. "She's not lying, is she?"

"No. She's not." Elizabeth exhaled slowly. "When I was sixteen," she began quietly, "I was walking in the park after dark. I sat on a bench, and a man grabbed me. He hurt me. For a long time, it was hard to be okay."

"But you are now."

"I am now. I worked very hard to be okay, Cam. Because I wanted my life to be my own again. I didn't want to think about it anymore. So I got past it, and I had my boys. I built a life that has nothing to do with any of it."

Cameron took that in, squinted at his mother. She was a good liar, but he could usually tell when she was pretending. She didn't seem to be now. "Can I—can I ask you questions? I mean—"

"You can ask. I might not answer."

He furrowed his brow. "Did they catch who did it?"

"They did, but there wasn't enough evidence. He went to jail for something else."

"Oh." Well, at least he'd gone to jail. "Did—I mean, did you know Dad back then? Did he help?"

"Later, he was important. He helped me in other ways. But, no, at first it was just your grandma Audrey and—" She sighed. "Lucky. He became my best friend and took care of me."

"You said he was different before the fire. He got hurt and his head was messed up."

"Yeah, he was a very sweet boy who kept me sane for that first year," Elizabeth remembered. "I loved him very much, and when I thought he was dead, I didn't think I would survive it. I was just a little older than you. Then, I met your dad."

Between the two of them, I knew I'd be okay."

"What about my biological dad? The one that—" He gestured weakly.

"Zander? He came later. He was a friend for a while, but by that time, I had mostly put it in my past. Cameron, baby, I'm so sorry you found out this way. It's part of my history, but it isn't a story we need to tell."

"I guess not. It's just—you know, I see it on television and the movies, and it was just hard because I kept seeing you," Cameron continued, "and I didn't like thinking of you being hurt like that, you know?"

"I know."

He felt better now, talking it through with his mother. "Thanks. For letting me ask questions." Cameron paused. "But you're really okay now? I mean, it doesn't bother you anymore?"

Elizabeth opened her mouth, then closed it. "Most of the time, I don't think about it. In fact, before this week, I couldn't tell you the last time I had. Maybe sometimes when I thought about Lucky since he was part of it. I'd be lying to you, Cam, if I said it doesn't bother me. I wish it didn't happen. I wish it didn't happen to anyone."

"Is it like when we were missing Jake?" he wanted to know. "Because we have him back now and I love him but I also remember what it was like when he wasn't here and we were really sad. And like before Dad came to live with us. I remember the unhappy stuff, and sometimes it makes me sad that Jake didn't get to be with us all the time." He hesitated. "But then I think maybe I'm a better brother because of it. Because I know how hard life was without Jake, and I don't wanna be without my brothers."

"Yeah, I think it's something like that. I remember what it was like when it was still fresh and new—and sometimes that comes back and makes me unhappy. But I think I'm a better person for what I went through." She smiled at him. "You're an amazing brother, did you know that? And an even better son."

"Well, I have a pretty good mom to help me do things right." That terrible, aching feeling had dissipated. His mom really was okay. This terrible thing had happened to her—all the terrible things that had happened — and she'd come out being who she was. "I gotta go remind Jake and Aiden who rules at Call of Duty."

"You do that," Elizabeth said with a smile.

**General Hospital: Locker Room**

Tom carefully slid the combination lock out of the slot and opened it, glancing around to make sure he was still alone. Then he took out the wallet and rifled through the photos, hoping that the doctor was still old fashioned enough to carry them.

The first in his collection, he thought, as he lifted out a photograph that looked crisp and new. The pretty little girl who had run into him earlier that day beamed back at him—and what was this—

Tucked behind the pretty little girl was a photo of the girl's father with Elizabeth. Tom smiled down at the woman the vibrant girl had grown into. She really was very lovely, but old now. With children.

No, he preferred a fresher prey to hunt. Still, knowing that his pretty girl was connected to his first love?

Well, wasn't that sweet?

### **Port Charles High: Hallway**

Cameron leaned a shoulder against a bank of lockers. Emma glanced at him, then resumed packing her backpack for the bus ride home.

"Are you still mad at me?" he asked.

"No," she replied. She scowled. "Yes. I shouldn't be, I know that. I'm the one that did something wrong, but—" Emma closed her locker and looked at him. "We've always been able to talk about anything, you know? You've never left me on read. Even when you were mad at me for real."

"I know."

"And I only texted you twice. You didn't even tell me you were okay or got home from the hospital."

"I know."

"I was worried."

"I know."

She narrowed her eyes. "Are you just repeating yourself to irritate me?"



"No, but it's a fun side effect." He straightened. "I'm sorry—"

"Oh, my God, don't apologize to me." She slid her backpack strap over her left shoulder and started down the hall.

"I thought that's what you wanted."

"Didn't I just explain to you that I was the one who was wrong and should apologize?"

"I thought you were listing the reasons I was supposed to say sorry—"

"Now you're just being an idiot," she grumbled. She stalked down the steps, towards their bus. Cameron followed, feeling strangely upbeat for the first time in days.

They climbed onto the bus and Emma headed for the back, slumping into the last seat, glaring at him when he sat next to her. "I'm the one that's sorry."

"Okay."

"Because I am."

"I know you are." He cleared his throat. "Really," he added. "And once I had time to think and work things out, I wasn't that mad anymore. I wasn't even mad at all." He stared at the brown pleather seat in front of him. "I was just...I don't know. I couldn't process it."

Emma remained silent as other students gathered on the bus. It wasn't until the driver started the engine and pulled into the line of buses to exit the lot that he spoke again. "I know a lot of kids have a hard time thinking of their parents being people, you know? Like, that they exist outside of just being their mom or dad. But I never did."

"Never?" she asked skeptically.

"Mom was always dealing with outside crap and it was always messing things up," he continued, "I remember Jake getting kidnapped. Not the first time, but the second time. And Lucky being around, always making her cry. I knew when I was a kid he was screwing around on her. She tried really hard to hide it but not everyone did."

"Cam—"

"And when that stuff happened with Spencer's dad—" Cameron's throat tightened.

"I never told her, but I knew what people were saying to her. About her. I heard Lulu calling her names all the time back then. She didn't even bother checking to see if anyone was listening."

"I'm sorry—" Emma frowned. "Wait, is that why you wanted to gag her when we tied them up? I always thought that was a step too far—"

"Someone needed to make her shut her mouth," he muttered darkly. "My mom made mistakes, but I always knew she wasn't just my mom, you know? I never thought about her being my age though. She was sixteen when it happened. That's only two years older than us."

"But she's okay now."

"I asked her about it," Cameron told her. "And she told she was. Mostly, anyway. That she doesn't really think about it anymore. Lucky helped her. After, she said."

"Lucky? Really?"

"It's hard to picture him as someone that could take care of someone, especially with how much he hurt my mom. But she said it was before that fire." Cameron looked past her, out the window as the roads passed her by. "I hate the Cassadines. They destroy everything."

Emma nodded. "Yeah, I know. I really am sorry, Cam."

"Me, too. But it's okay now. It happened a long time ago, and she said the guy who did it went to jail for something else, so he can't hurt anyone else."

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

Elizabeth clenched her jaw when the elevator doors slid open and an old, familiar face stepped out. Marcus Taggert.

There was only reason the DEA agent and former PCPD detective would be at the hospital, and she really did not want to have this conversation.

"Elizabeth." Taggert's mouth stretched into a smile. "I haven't seen you in a long time."

"Not since the last parole hearing," she murmured. She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "You don't get back a lot to see Trina, I guess."

"Not as much as I want," he said, wincing. "But she's in good hands, and I know she

and your son are friends. Wild to think of that, isn't it? Considering—"

"Taggart—" Elizabeth sighed. "I know why you're here—"

"It's not what you think," he said, putting up a hand. "You're probably tired of being checked on, and I know you've got a family to handle that. Jordan said you and Laura are still close, and—" His jaw tightened. "Well, there's the husband."

"Yeah, I'm good, so if it's not that—"

"I just wanted to tell you—if you're interested—how we got blindsided by this," he told her. "I promise you — I checked a year ago and his parole hearing wasn't scheduled for this soon. I knew the PCPD wasn't going to tell you if he got out, so I've been keeping tabs on it. But I went undercover on an op last spring, and I missed something important—" He grimaced. "The New York legislature pushed through some parole reforms. It took time off his sentence, and his hearing got moved up automatically. I didn't think to look again. It's been so long—"

"And his hearings have been like clockwork, I know. He's been denied every four years since he was eligible in 2006," Elizabeth said. "I was keeping up for a while, too. And I appreciate you finding out what happened." She paused. "Really. I know that you and I don't exactly see eye to eye on certain things, but you've always been supportive with this case. I lost track of it, Taggart, because it doesn't suffocate me anymore."

She looked down at her wedding ring, twisted the slim gold band. "I'm happy," Elizabeth continued. "I have three absolutely beautiful boys who keep me busy. I have an amazing mother-in-law who's been more of a parent to me than my own. I have amazing friends. I'm having another baby—and yes, I have a husband who loves me. Tom Baker can't hurt me anymore."

"I can see that," Taggart told her. "And I'm happy for it. I am," he insisted. "I don't care who you married, Elizabeth. I remember where you started, and I know how hard you worked to get here. Congratulations on the baby. If Cameron is any indication, you're an excellent mother who deserves the peace of mind you fought for." He tapped his hand on the desk. "Let me know if there's anything I can do for you."

### **Robinson House: Backyard**

If Trina was careful in how she organized her argument, she was absolutely sure that she could convince her mother to let her go out tonight and have dinner at Charlie's with her friends.

Portia Robinson just had to be approached in just the right way, and Trina was so busy organizing her thoughts that she didn't see the car in the driveway when she got home that afternoon.

She tossed her backpack on the sofa and went to the kitchen to get some water. Would it be better if she talked about studying? No, because then her mother would want to know who was going to be there, and Spencer wasn't known for his studious habits—

Trina blinked, finally registering the muffled voices from the back patio. She leaned up to peer out the kitchen window to find her mother in deep conversation with Jordan Ashford. They weren't friends—in fact her mother had blamed Jordan for all the time her dad put into work.

Curious, Trina slowly edged up the window, careful not to let it squeak as it slid up in the casement.

"I can't believe he rushed back for this," Portia said, her tone clipped. "He never came home when I needed him—"

"That's not true, and it's not fair—"

"Please. You and I both know differently—"

"He just wanted to check on things. I told him how things are, and I'm sure he'll be leaving town soon enough." Jordan paused. "Maybe. I came over to ask you about something he told me. He said the reason he left the PCPD was because of Sonny and Jason, but he never really talked about any of that before."

"Why does it matter now? That was almost twenty years ago—"

"Just because no other commissioner has ever managed to nail them doesn't mean I'm not still trying. Did they threaten him, did they—"

Trina wrinkled her nose. It was so hard to remember sometimes that Cam's dad worked for the local godfather. Jason Morgan was so nice when she was around and was obsessed with his family.

"God, no. Nothing like that. He was just burnt out on hitting his head against the wall." Her mother sounded disgusted. "And don't you dare try to drag him back into it—"

"I'm not. I'm just looking for a fresh angle. This Baker thing—this might be something."

Baker? Trina leaned closer. Who—or what was Baker?

"What are you talking about, Jordan? How can you possibly use Tom Baker against Jason or Sonny?"

"What Baker did to Jason's wife—he's going to want revenge—"

"Are you kidding me? You're going to try to—God, I knew you were a cold bitch."

"Don't—"

"Tom Baker raped that girl when she was sixteen years old and never paid a single day for it. He deserves whatever happens to him—"

"That's not how this works—"

"No, that's not how it works in your small little mind. You're all about the job, just like Marcus, but at least he has a heart. You dumped your kid to go undercover, sending him away to Shawn and telling him you couldn't handle raising him anymore—" Trina's eyes bulged. "No wonder Tommy was going to leave you. Just like Shawn left. And Curtis—"

"Shut up."

"No, I don't think I will. You can't get Jason Morgan on any actual crimes, so you're going to, what, follow him around, and hope he takes a shot at his wife's rapist? Waiting for him to commit a crime? I hope he does. I hope he takes that evil bastard and puts him six feet under—what do you care what happens to a guy like Baker?"

"Because the system—"

"Just stop. Stop. You don't care about the system. You just want to get Jason and Sonny. That's why Marcus left the PCPD. It's what happened to Scott Baldwin. And all the others. This is why people hate fucking cops. You have zero evidence that Jason Morgan has ever committed a crime—"

"Everyone knows—"

"I'm not going to help you, and neither is Marcus. Get out. I never should have let you in the first place."

Trina winced and ducked behind the counter just as the sliding door opened and Jordan Ashford stalked past her.

Holy hell.

### **Morgan House: Kitchen**

Jason came home that night through the back door, having gone through garage, and frowned when he found the kitchen empty and Elizabeth sitting at the island with a pizza box in front of her. "Where are the boys?" he asked, hanging his keys up on a hook.

"Cameron begged to go to Charlie's with Emma, Spencer, and Trina, and I didn't have the heart to say no. I think Emma's trying to get Spencer and Trina together," she confided with a shrug, "and apparently this was crucial."

Elizabeth always did a better job of keeping up with the drama that the kids created, so Jason just nodded. "Okay—"

"And Aiden begged again to go over Rocco's tonight, so I let him. And once Jake heard I was breaking the school night rule—"

"He got in on the deal." Jason nodded and leaned over to take a slice of pizza for himself. "What made you break the rule?"

Elizabeth wiped her hands on a napkin and sighed. "I really just wanted Cameron to be okay," she admitted. "And he seemed mostly there. I thought a night out with his friends might help."

"Did you talk to Patrick and Robin about what Emma overheard?"

"No. I will, but I want to do it in a way that doesn't make them feel bad. Patrick's part of my family, and I know that he was worried about me. Plus — " Elizabeth smiled at him wryly. "I don't want to snitch on Emma. However she heard about it, she was eavesdropping and, you know, that's a time honored tradition. As her aunt, I'm duty bound to protect those methods."

Jason laughed at that, and went to grab a beer from the fridge. "Okay. You usually know better when it comes to this kind of thing."

"I do want to talk to Robin about it though, because it upset Cameron, and I'm sure Emma's trying to deal with it, too. I want her to have some support if she needs it." Elizabeth winced, pressed her hand to her stomach. "Oh, maybe the grease was a mistake."

"You okay?" Jason tensed, but she shook her head.

"No, no, just indigestion. I had a craving for pepperoni pizza, and I was starving — I ate too fast." She smiled. "I can't wait until I start showing and I can feel the baby kicking. It's my favorite part, you know? I'll never forget the first time I felt Cameron." Elizabeth pressed both hands to her belly now. "I was so scared about everything that was going on around me, and then there was this—" She closed her eyes. "There was this flutter, and I could feel him. It made everything else worth it."

He laid a hand over hers, even though there was nothing to feel yet. "I can't wait either," he told her.

"This time, it's going to be perfect," Elizabeth assured him. "You and me, from day one. Just the way it should have been with Jake." He leaned down to kiss her. "And we have the house to ourselves for a few hours," she murmured. "Cameron's curfew isn't until eight."

"Then let's not waste any time."

### **Charlie's Pub: Parking Lot**

Patrick pulled into a parking space and braked. "Okay, call me when you're ready to leave," he told Emma and Cameron.

Emma unsnapped her seatbelt and kissed his cheek. "Thanks for breaking the school night rule. You and Aunt Elizabeth are the best."

"Yeah, yeah," Patrick grumbled as Cameron climbed out of the backseat. He watched for another minute as Emma and Cameron found Spencer waiting outside, then Trina joined them.

He traded a smile with Trina's mother in her own car, then put his car into reverse, heading for home and some quiet time with his wife.

His BMW drove past a battered dark blue car that had pulled into another spot after following Patrick from Lexington Avenue.

Tom picked up his camera. He'd missed the feel of a camera in his hands. It felt like being at home. He zoomed in on the cluster of teenagers at the door, and focused on the pretty brunette. How lucky that his pretty girl not only knew his first love, but her son?

Some things were just fated.

### **General Hospital: Hallway**

"Hey—" Elizabeth caught Patrick by the elbow as he left a patient's room. "Do you have a minute?"

"For you, Webber, always." Patrick returned the chart to the door, and then joined her. "What's up?"

"It's about Emma," Elizabeth said, gesturing for them to head into an empty room for some privacy. "She, uh, found out about what happened to me when I was a kid."

Patrick stared at her, then grimaced. "Eavesdropping at the door again, huh?" He scrubbed a hand down his face. "Did she come to talk to you?"

"No, but she told Cameron, and I've talked to him." Elizabeth put a hand out. "I'm not angry with her. I couldn't be. Cameron had a lot of questions and I know he's struggling with it. I was worried about Emma. I thought you might want to talk to her. Or Robin. Or I can if you want me to."

Patrick sat on the bed, exhaling slowly. "I know I pretend not to notice that our kids are dating," he told her, "but you know, secretly, I was thrilled."

Frowning, Elizabeth sat next to him. "What do you mean?"

"I know Cameron. Hell, I half-raised him. And I know you and Jason. I know he treats Emma well, and that he'd never hurt her. Even though I don't think she should stay with the same kid she likes at fourteen, part of me just wants her to never date anyone else." He looked at her. "It's terrifying. I mean, for all parents, you know that. But there's something extra terrifying about letting a young woman out into this world."

"I know." Elizabeth pressed a hand to her still flat belly. "I worry about my boys, but I'll always worry about Emma. And Joss and Trina, and all the other girls who've come through my house."

"I'll talk to Robin. She'll probably want to say something to Emma, or maybe she'll want you to. I don't know," he admitted. He looked at Elizabeth. "I've never been able to protect Emma from most of the bad stuff. She grew up around Lisa Niles and the Cassadines. Her uncle is still in prison—" He looked at the ceiling and closed his eyes. "But this feels different."

He met her eyes. "What do I even say to her?" he asked softly. "How can you ever talk to your daughter about something like this? What would you say if Emma was yours?"



"Sometimes she does feel a little bit mine," Elizabeth confessed. "And I don't know. You want to give her a list of all the things she shouldn't do to protect herself, and it sucks. Because why does she have to worry about walking alone in a park or what boy she dates. She should never have to be scared." She looked at the wall in front of them. "The rape took over my entire existence for almost a year. It was was my every waking thought, and I couldn't imagine a time when it wouldn't be the first thing I thought about when I woke up or my last thought before I went to sleep. On the nights I could sleep."

She bit her lip. "And it was worse because for so long, I blamed myself. If I hadn't lied, if I hadn't gone in that park, if I hadn't sat down at that bench—if, if, if—" Her voice faltered. "And sometimes I blamed Lucky, even though I wouldn't have told him that. If he hadn't liked my sister. If he hadn't taken so long to notice I wasn't there—why didn't anyone even notice I was gone?" She rubbed her chest. "God. I was just a stupid kid with too much pride to admit I'd lied about having a date."

"Elizabeth—"

"I didn't deserve what happened to me," she continued softly. "But it too so long to believe that. To understand that there was nothing I could have done to change what happened that night."

She looked at him. "What I would tell my own daughter, what I've told Cameron and will tell his siblings—the world can be a dark and cruel place filled with people who want to do nothing but hurt you. And sometimes, they'll win. Sometimes you'll get hurt and it will feel like the end of the world. But it's also a world filled with good. With people like your uncle Patrick and your aunt Robin, and Trina and Spencer and Joss, and Laura, and the people who love you. It's filled with such light and beauty that if you let yourself be open to it, the dark can't win."

Patrick managed a smile. "And that works?"

"Most of the time." She paused. "I almost let the rape drown me and become the only thing that mattered about my life. I thought I'd never have a family. That I'd never find a man who loved me because I couldn't imagine being touched." She swiped at her tears. "I'd cry myself to sleep at night because I thought my life was over at sixteen and I didn't even know I'd had any real dreams for myself until I thought they'd been shattered."

She took a deep breath. "But Lucky kept me anchored to the future, and no matter what he's done in the years since, I will always be grateful for that. I fought back, but he stood next to me while I did it. And then, later Laura was there for me. Emily and Nikolas. Jason. I pieced my life back together, painfully, like a shattered window. But I always felt a bit fragile. A bit jagged, like the pieces hadn't been put

together all the way or I'd done something wrong."

"Do you still feel that way?"

"Sometimes," Elizabeth admitted. "I had that panic attack when I saw Baker, and I just—it shouldn't be like this all these years later, Patrick. It shouldn't be this thing that can rise up and choke me from all this time later." She got to her feet. "I keep telling everyone I'm fine, even Jason. I think they believe me."

"But you're not fine."

"I'm—" Elizabeth looked at him. "Patrick, we don't have to do this. I'm okay—"

"Hey." He got to his feet. "You know you can tell me anything, babe. That's how this works. You'll tell me, and it'll be easier to tell Jason. Because you have to. You know that."

"I don't want anyone to worry about me. I'm stronger than I look—" She pressed her lips together. "But the dreams are back."

"The dreams?" Patrick echoed.

"The nightmares," she corrected softly. "Jason probably knows about them. He hasn't said anything, but I know he probably knows."

She closed her eyes. "Before—before it was just reliving that night. I'm still sixteen, I'm still in that red dress, sitting on the bench—"

He took her hand, squeezed it. "Go on. If you can."

"A-and he grabs me—" Her voice broke. "I fought so hard, you know? I tried to cling to the bench—I tried to bite down on his hand, but I wasn't strong enough. I couldn't fight back. I couldn't stop it." She pressed her hands to her eyes. "The nightmares when they've come have always been the same. I've always been sixteen."

"But you're not sixteen in the new ones," Patrick said softly and Elizabeth shook her head. "It's now. And you see Baker. The way he is now."

"There should just be a point where it ends," Elizabeth bit out. "Where I get to put it in a box and move on, and I don't know why I can't—"

Patrick enfolded her into a tight embrace, kissing the top of her head. "You do put it in a box, honey. You close the flaps and you put it in the attic for months and years

at a time. When was the last time you even thought about it before Baker showed up?"

"Oh, God—" Elizabeth sighed in a rush of air. "Maybe last year? When Cameron took Emma to that dance at the middle school. Emma—I mean she looks like you and Robin, but she's a brunette, and her dress—it just—I flashed to it. But before then, years maybe."

"I think the fact that you can put it away for so long is the real victory. Because it happened, Elizabeth. It won't ever be something you can erase. But you didn't let it define you. You're an amazing nurse, the world's best adopted sister, the most generous and forgiving of women because you married Jason Morgan after all the crap he put you through, and the world's second best mother because I'm contractually obligated to put my wife first."

Elizabeth laughed, then dropped her head against Patrick's chest. "I love you, you know."

"I love you, too. Promise me you'll go home and talk to your husband, okay? Despite all the reasons I shouldn't, I actually like him most of the time. Thanks for giving me some thoughts for how to talk to Emma. We might still pull you in, Aunt Liz, so be on deck."

### **Port Charles High School: Cafeteria**

"Why are you telling me this?" Cameron demanded, setting his milk carton down with a thud so hard some of the liquid slopped out over the edge. He glared at Trina, one of his oldest friends. "What am I going to do with this?"

"Uh, I don't know, keep your dad out of prison?" Trina retorted. She looked at Spencer for some backup. "Can you explain the facts of life to this fool?"

"I've been trying most of my life," Spencer said, flashing her a grin that she only narrowed her eyes at.

"I think Trina's right," Joss said, which put the rest of the table into complete silence as everyone stared at her. "What?"

"I'm just waiting for the ground to shake," Spencer said. He actually reached down to touch the floor of the cafeteria. "Hmmm, can't tell if the linoleum is always that temperature or if hell is frozen over."

"Ha," Joss muttered. "Just because Trina and I hate each other—"

"Every day—"

"It doesn't mean I can't admit when she's right. I mean, I know it's crazy since it hasn't happened ever before—"

"You wouldn't know what being right would look like if your daddy bought it for you," Trina shot back.

Emma put her head in her hands. "Don't you guys ever get bored of this?"

"Not of watching it." Spencer unwrapped a lollipop. "The real question is—" He aimed the pop at Cameron. "What is he doing to do?"

"You overheard the commissioner of police telling your mom that she's gonna be on my dad like white on rice because she thinks this is going to be her big shot at finally taking down my dad and Sonny." Cameron grimaced. "And *this* being my mother's rape."

That took some of the fun out of the conversation as even Spencer sat back, a bit white-faced. "No one said that this was a good thing," he told his cousin quietly. "And I'm really sorry about what your mom is going through. What she went through. She's always been good to me, even when I didn't deserve it."

"Which you almost never did," Joss muttered, and Spencer glared at her.

"I almost got us to Greece," he reminded her. "It was your crazy mother tracking you that got us caught—"

"Oh, let's not re-litigate that," Emma said, waving at the two of them. "Honestly. Focus."

"Anyway," Spencer bit out, tossing Joss another dirty look. "My point is that like it or not, Trina overhearing the conversation is a good thing. Yeah, it sucks you're going to have say something to your dad because I know we all like to pretend we don't know who Sonny and Jason are."

"But this is more important," Emma said to Cameron. "The police are gonna be watching your dad even more, and if anything happens to this guy, they're gonna go after him. You know your mom doesn't need that. Not with, um, everything else."

"What's everything else? What's going on?" Joss demanded. "What don't I know?"

"Call in the military, Joss Jacks is out of the loop," Trina said with a roll of her eyes. "Ow—" she glared at Spencer. "Like you weren't thinking the same thing."

"My mom is pregnant," Cameron told them with a heavy sigh. "She just found out, and, like, I know my dad is worried because she had some miscarriages before. One before I was born, and one after me. And I think she's had other health issues. I don't know. They don't talk near the vent a lot anymore."

Emma squeezed his hand. "So it's even more important that your dad has all the information he needs to protect your mom. Even if your dad doesn't do anything, the PCPD doesn't always play fair."

"Yeah, I know. Man, I really don't want to have this conversation," he muttered.

### **Scorpio-Drake House: Emma's Bedroom**

Later that night, Emma was seated at her vanity, brushing out her hair and keeping an eye on her phone. She was hoping Cameron would talk to his father tonight, but she knew he'd probably procrastinate.

She'd have to push him on it, otherwise it was going to eat her alive.

She turned at the knock on her door, finding her mother standing there. "Hey, Mom. What's up?"

"Uh, nothing. I just—" Robin wrinkled her nose as she came in and sat down. "Listen, we need to have a conversation about something, and I don't really know how to start it. Um, Cameron and his mother talked about this, and she was worried about you—so, I guess—I just wanted to know if you had any questions about what happened."

"You mean about Cameron's mom getting raped when she was a little older than us?" Emma said, and Robin's cheeks flushed. "Mom, not saying the word doesn't make it any less horrible. I'm okay. I'm sad for Aunt Liz. After everything else she's been through with Jake and all that, this seems really terrible."

"Yeah, yeah, it is. Um, so you don't—" Robin tipped her head. "You don't have any questions?"

"You mean, like about what happened to her specifically or like, rape in general." Emma bit her lip. "I don't know. Not really. It seems really scary, but I try to do all the things I'm supposed to. You and Dad don't let me out on school nights, so that's good. And I get rides to everything. I don't walk home alone. I don't do any super sketchy on social media, and I don't talk to strangers unless I'm at the hospital." She looked at her mother. "Am I supposed to have questions?"

"No, no. I just—um, if you did, you could talk to me. Or Aunt Liz said you can say something to her. She just—she loves you, baby."

"I know. I love her, too." Emma paused. "Are you okay, Mom?" she asked softly. "You look upset?"

"Oh, just—" Robin sighed. "I knew Elizabeth back when this happened. Not well, but I was aware of it at the time. And I just, I look at you—she wasn't much older than you. It's scary, I guess. But you're right. You're responsible and you've done everything we've told you." She got to her feet. "But please. If you need anything or you want to talk about anything—"

"I know." Emma got to her feet and went over to hug her mother. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

### **Morgan House: Master Bedroom**

Elizabeth twisted her wedding ring around her finger as she went into their room that night after lights were out for the boys. Jason was sitting on the bed, kicking off his boots. "Hey."

"Hey." He got up and came over to kiss her lightly. "You okay? You looked a little nauseous at dinner."

"Yeah. I hate that they call it morning sickness," she muttered. "It feels like it happens all the damn time."

Jason smoothed his hands up and down her arm. "You should have said something," he told her. "I'll get you ginger ale or something—"

"I got it, I'm okay—" She stopped. "I'm sorry. You're right. I should have. I'm just—" Elizabeth hesitated. "I've never been with anyone at this stage of pregnancy. Or really at any stage," she admitted. "Ric was barely there with Cameron, and Lucky was in rehab, then we were separated, and well—" She met his eyes. "Even after all this time, it's still hard for me to turn to you. I'm sorry."

"I know." He kissed her again, lingering. "And we're not going to fix that overnight or even in three years," Jason said. "It's okay."

"Thank you for feeling that way. Um, there's something else." She looked down at her hands. "I've...been having nightmares."

From the way his body tensed, Elizabeth knew her suspicions had been correct.

"But you knew that."

"I'm not a heavy sleeper," he reminded her gently. "So yeah, I knew. I also knew you'd talk about it when you were ready." Jason brushed her hair back, tucking it behind her ears. "Are you ready?"

"Not really. But I just—tonight, can you hold me? I mean, you normally do," she added, "but when I wake up, um, can I—can I wake you, too? Or—"

"Anything you need." He kissed her forehead, then drew her into his arms, and she closed her eyes, feeling safe there but knowing that it wouldn't last forever.

### **General Hospital: Hub**

"I can't decide if I'm happy with the way Emma handled it," Robin said, "or if I think I didn't do it right." She pursed her lips. "What do you think?"

Elizabeth hesitated. "I don't know. Maybe she just feels like it's outside of her. I mean, when you were her age, did you think anything truly terrible was going to happen to you? Before you lost your parents," she added.

"No, I guess not. I mean, I knew people died and I'd lost Duke at that point. And other people. But even losing my parents—or thinking I did—it wasn't the same thing as when Stone told me he had AIDs or when Alan told me I was HIV positive." Robin reached for a chart. "I couldn't believe it when the results came back. Even after knowing about Stone, I still thought somehow, I'd be spared."

"Emma's been around loss and devastation her whole life, just like my boys. She and Cameron have been through a lot. And for him, it was knowing it happened to me. I think Emma just has this...distance from the whole thing. And you've raised her to be smart and cautious."

"It broke my heart listening to her list all the things she did to protect herself from people, and for me to think—well, that's good and all, but it doesn't always help. I couldn't tell her that. I wanted to believe, too," Robin murmured.

"There's a type of arrogance that comes with being a teenager—bad things are for other people. Not you. They happen to family and friends. Not you." Elizabeth tapped a pen. "Still, we should keep our eye on her. And Cameron."

### **Morgan House: Living Room**

"I don't know why I have to be here," Trina complained as Cameron practically towed her across the room towards the back yard. "You can tell him."

"He'll want to know exactly what was said, and if I have to do this, someone else has to be uncomfortable, too." Cameron grimaced. "I am definitely not doing this alone."

"Yeah, but your dad isn't going to want to talk about this with me!" Trina complained but clearly Cameron was not interested in listening. He shoved open the back door and found his father on the back porch, one eye on the grill and the other on Jake and Aiden as they played soccer.

Jason turned at their arrival. "Hey, Cam. Trina." He looked past them. "No one else?"

"Uh, no. I needed to talk to you," Cameron said. He released Trina's arm but sent her a glare. "You make a run for it, I'll drag you back."

"Ha, that's if you can catch me." She huffed and folded her arms.

Jason furrowed his brow, his eyes going back and forth between them. "Is everything okay? Should I call your mother—"

"Oh, no. No. I'm fine. Trina's fine," Cameron added. "It's just — she heard something that she told me and I guess you need to know, but she wasn't going to do it alone so I'm here to make sure—"

"Whoa, whoa, I never agreed to tell him anything. You're going to tell him and then I'm here for, like, clarification—" Trina glared at Cameron who growled. "Don't try it. I'll just tell Emma on you."

"Fine. Okay." Cameron looked back at his father. "I one hundred percent do not want to have this conversation. In fact, no one here wants to do this—"

"Cameron—" Jason began.

"But if I don't say anything and something happens, then it's my fault, and Mom's pregnant. I don't really need another brother, by the way. I now how genetics work but the ones I have are fine, so if you could—" Cameron huffed. "Never mind. Look, Trina was at her house and overheard her mom arguing with the commissioner about you."

His father's face shuttered, taking on that strange blank look at Cameron rarely saw—usually when someone brought up Lucky Spencer, his father, or anyone else associated with the Cassadines.

"Cameron," Jason said, flicking his eyes at Trina who was staring at the sky as if it



held all the answers to the universe. "This isn't—"

"Yeah, I know. Believe me. But she heard it, and I don't wanna mess it up, so we'll just tell you, and then you'll know and then it won't be our problem anymore. I very much need this not to be my problem, Dad." Cameron jabbed a finger at him.

"You're the adult, I'm the kid. I make the problems, you fix it. This is how it's supposed to be. So here's a problem. The commissioner said she was gonna be watching you and Uncle Sonny because of Tom Baker. I looked him up, and that's the guy—" Cameron swallowed hard. "That's the guy. Trina's mom was mad about it and yelled at her, but the Commissioner seemed pretty adamant. So, I just—I don't know. There you go."

Jason exhaled slowly, some of the tension bleeding from his shoulders. He looked at Trina. "Do you have anything to add?"

"Um, no, that mostly covers it. Like he said, Mom was pretty steamed and threatened her against dragging my dad into this which I didn't understand, but, uh, that really is it. Unless you want word for word—"

"No, that's fine," Jason said. He turned back to the grill, and flipped the burgers, setting them on a plate. "Thanks. Now forget all of it."

"Absolutely, one hundred percent. Erased from the brain." Cameron snapped his fingers. "Gone."

"Okay," Jason repeated. "You staying for dinner, Trina?"

"Uh, no, I'm only supposed to go do homework with Emma in the park, then straight home. Dr. Rob gets cranky when I don't get home by five. I'm still on house arrest after the hair thing." Trina glared at Cameron. "And how come you're not in more trouble? You actually put the dye in the bottle! Why was I the only one—"

Cameron winced. "He didn't know that, Treen. I had plausible deniability—" He flashed a weak grin at his father who had just arched a brow and crossed his arms. "Joss's hair looks fine now—her hair person was able to match her natural color—"

"I'll talk about it with your mom."

"And that's what you get," Trina said with a bright smile. "For making me do this. Bye!" She waved and went inside. Cameron scowled after her.

He turned back to his father. "I'm sorry, Dad. I just—I thought you should know. And if you wanted to know more—"

"It's fine." Jason hesitated. "Cameron—"

"And I'm sorry if it messes things up for you. I mean, I don't want to know anything, but I know that guy didn't just hurt Mom, but he went after Aunt Emily."

Cameron's heart lurched at the dim memory of his laughing, smiling aunt who had loved him and his mother. "They never should have let him out of jail. I don't care what happens to him. I just don't want anything to happen to you."

"It won't," Jason promised. He crossed the deck to his son and put a hand on his shoulder. "I wasn't going to do anything, anyway. Your mother wanted it left alone, so that's what we're doing. And that really is the end of it."

"Great." Cameron grinned, relieved. "So I'm gonna go make fun of Jake for letting Aiden score on him, and we'll pretend none of this ever happened."

Jason watched his son jog down the steps and over to his brother, where he said something to Jake, and Aiden cackled like a maniac. Most of the time, the boys could ignore who Jason was and what he'd done in his past. The business had slowed over the years, and he and Sonny were mostly legit these days with the odd shipment or business deal. Or idiots who thought he could come disrupt the peace Jason and Sonny had worked so hard for.

But memories were long in Port Charles, and it didn't matter how inactive Jason had been for the last few years — the PCPD was never going to stop hunting him.

### **Port Charles Park**

Emma frowned when Joss dropped down next to her at the picnic table and dragged open her backpack. "What are you doing here?"

"I know you hang out and do homework here after school," Joss told her. "And Cameron will call you first about the whole thing. I wanted to know when it happens. I figure, if I'm sitting here, you'll tell me."

Emma scowled but went back to her algebra homework, ignoring the blonde sitting across from her. It was so strange to be friends with Joss Jacks without actually being friends with her. She blamed Cameron for this. And Spencer. They'd forced Joss on her for so many years that Emma had given up the good fight.

But now that Joss was here—

"I was thinking that maybe with all this going on," Emma began and Joss looked up, "that maybe we all try a truce. I mean, other than the blue hair dye—" Joss narrowed her eyes. "Which I wasn't involved in—"

"I doubt it," Joss muttered. "Do you know how long it took to fix?"

"Other than that, and the stunt you pulled with Oscar Nero—we've mostly been getting along this year. I just—we might not like each other much, Joss, but we've always agreed on one thing."

"Yeah." Joss made a face. "And I blame Cameron for this."

"So do I. But his mom has things going on, and now the police are looking at his dad—and you know if they come for his dad, they might come for your brother's dad. Which means your mom is in the middle—"

"Yeah, though I don't think it'll take Mom that long to be involved." Joss flipped her hair over her shoulder. "So, what, we don't play pranks or something?"

"You could just not say things to Trina," Emma suggested. "Because, like, I don't like you, but I don't think you're a bad person. Sometimes you're even funny to be around. But you don't think and you say stuff that isn't okay. And it makes Trina mad. And it hurts her."

Joss exhaled slowly. "Yeah, I know," she admitted. "It's just hard. She's never liked me, and I never liked her, and sometimes I just want her to be quiet, and I say stuff — like I did about her hair, and then I'm sorry later."

"Well, you need to be sorry earlier. And you need to stop. My mom said that's what always got your mom in trouble. Being impulsive and not thinking about others."

Joss narrowed her eyes. "And my mom said that your mother's desperate need to always be right and set standards for everyone else gets her in trouble. So, like, I guess we're just like them and now we hate each other."

"Oh, you just insist on always taking the bad stuff—" Emma retorted. They were interrupted as Trina emerged from the path, a dark look cross her face when she saw Joss.

"What is she doing here?" Trina demanded.

"We're negotiating a truce," Joss volunteered. "Emma and I were just discussing how much you'll have to beg me—ow—" She rubbed her leg and glared at Emma. "Fine. Okay. I wanted to know how things went with Cam and his dad, and Emma brought up a truce because we all like Cameron even though everyone hates me, and maybe we don't fight in front of him."

Trina sat down across from the other girls with a suspicious expression. "Yeah, okay. Things were fine. It was uncomfortable, but his dad didn't ask questions and it was over in like five minutes. I didn't even need to be there, but it's done now."

"Good." Pleased, Emma sat back. "Now we don't have to worry about it. We did the right thing—"

Joss opened her mouth, then shook her head. "Nope. Not even doing it. That's me being a truce-keeper."

"This is not how a truce works—" Trina began, but then there was a rustle and they all turned towards the sound. "What was that?"

"I don't know. Maybe some kids—" Emma began, but Joss wasn't going to speculate. She shot up from the bench and went over to look.

"There's nothing here. Maybe it was a bird or an animal." She shrugged and returned to the table, where they proceed to snark and bicker for another hour before going home.

### **Morgan Home: Kitchen**

Sonny leaned over to kiss Elizabeth's cheek. "Hey, kid. How are you feeling?"

"Tired mostly," Elizabeth said, pouring herself a glass of water. "Jason's outside with boys, cleaning up dinner. I didn't know you were stopping by."

"Yeah, Jason had something he wanted to run by me in person." Sonny put up his hands when she just frowned at him. "Hey, you probably know more than I did. I'm a legit coffee exporter these days."

"Yeah, I know. Jason said things have been quiet since things with Julian and Ava Jerome calmed down." She shook her head, wiping down the counter. "Wild that he's alive, and that he's Sam's father."

"Yeah, well, we sent her running back to New York, and he's down there harassing Sam in Llanview for as long as McBain will let him." Sonny folded his arms. "I spent my whole life looking over my shoulder. It's strange I don't have to do it like I did once."

"I'm certainly not complaining," Elizabeth said dryly. "Moreno, Sorel, Alcazar, the Ruizes, the Zaccharas, the Russians—" she shuddered. "I've been happy for this break."

"Considering you brought the Cassadines with you," Sonny said with a grin, and she rolled her eyes. "I guess we're about even."

"Yeah, sure. Can you send the boys in when you go out? They need to do their homework."

Sonny did as she asked, leaving him alone on the deck with Jason as he cleaned up the grill and finished packing up the leftovers from dinner.

"Thanks for coming by tonight," Jason said. "I could have—"

"But I don't still have little kids at home," Sonny pointed out. "And you spent years coming to me." He sat at the table. "What's up?"

Jason explained what Trina had overheard and Sonny's face darkened. "Are they seriously going to use this bullshit with you? Jordan knows what that asshole did—"

"Yeah, I know." Jason sat across from him. "The thing is, I think the kids probably undersold it. Or maybe they don't know. If the PCPD is going to be watching, then they're going to be watching the hospital and Baker, too. If I send any of our guys in, it'll just convince Jordan's she's right. I can't have our guys on this."

"Yeah, they'll be treating Baker like a goddamn protected witness instead of a raping asshole—" Sonny dragged his hand through his hair. "All right, I guess we'll have to think outside the box. Maybe get Spinelli to come up with some surveillance that isn't so obvious. Christ, most of the kids work at the hospital, not just Cam. And Elizabeth."

"I don't want him near anyone, but Elizabeth wants it left alone and with this PCPD—" Jason grimaced. "I'll talk to her about it. Whatever she wants, it's what we'll do. But Cameron has been through enough. I don't want him to worry about this. It was...painful...knowing he felt like he had to tell me."

"First time I had that conversation with Michael, then with Morgan, it was like torture. At least Dante was brought up knowing what I was," Sonny muttered. "And Kristina, I guess, it was in the air. But Michael and Morgan knew things, you know? They saw things."

"Michael lived through the worst years. Cameron—I just want him—and the others—not to know a little longer. But he already knew who I was. One day—" Jason stared down at his hands. "One day they'll know more."

"Hey, my kid was working undercover to take me down and forgave me for shooting him," Sonny reminded him. "Don't worry so much. At least you can say you didn't

nearly kill any of them."

### **Baker's House: Dark Room**

Baker hummed to himself as he clipped another photo of his pretty girl in the park to the drying rack. It was almost like magic seeing her face emerge from the whiteness of the paper, with her lovely eyes worried as she spoke to the blonde who had sat with her.

His pretty Emma had so many lovely friends, and it was worth looking at them twice, but there was something about her.

Baker slid the photo a bit closer to another that he'd developed, one of his sweet Elizabeth from the day before as she'd stood in her backyard with a cup of coffee with one of her children. Pretty Emma looked just like her, with her dark hair and sweet smile. They could have been mother and daughter.

It was a shame sweet Elizabeth didn't have daughters of her own, but Baker had watched and heard enough to know that Emma was practically family to her. Maybe that was why he'd been drawn to her over the others.

One day, he'd find out how deep the similarities were, and if he'd have the same fond memories of Emma as he did of Elizabeth.

One day soon.

### **Morgan Home: Master Bedroom**

Elizabeth sank down onto the mattress, her eyes wide. "Are you kidding me? Jordan's really—" Her mouth pinched, and she looked away. "And Cameron and Trina..."

"They looked miserable about it," Jason admitted, sitting across the room to pull of his boots. "I didn't feel much better. I hate that he knows who I am."

"Jason—"

"And that he had to come warn me that the police—" Jason shook his head, sat back. "I don't want this for them. I'd get out if I could—"

"But it would mean leaving Port Charles and everyone else," Elizabeth finished. She smiled wanly at him. "We've talked about it, Jason, and I've always accepted what you do, and I don't think any of the boys are interested in going into the business. Sonny might have a battle with Morgan—" She sighed, moved to sit at the vanity

table. "But our kids, Michael and Joss, Dante and Kristina, I think we're safe on that score. None of us want this future for them."

"I hate that a choice I made before I even understood what I was giving up—" Jason paused. "I didn't care about the future. I didn't think about having a family, kids—" He stopped. "That's not the point of any of this," he muttered. "I don't know if I can add the extra guys at the hospital that we talked about."

Elizabeth's hands stilled as she reached to unfasten her necklace. "Jason."

"And I can't have anyone following Baker. Sonny called a little while ago to confirm what we suspected. Our guys at the PCPD said they're focusing surveillance. Baker's being watched. Not because of who he is," Jason said, his jaw clenched, "but because they want to tie anything back to me or Sonny. And they're watching new hires at the hospital."

"They care more about you watching a rapist than a rapist working there," Elizabeth said softly. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. "Laura won't cooperate—"

"The board is going over her head. I called Monica. They get funding for this parole program Baker's in. Anything happens to Baker on their watch, the state might pull the funding. And as far as the system is concerned—"

"He's nothing more than a blackmailing piece of a shit who served his time." Elizabeth exhaled slowly. "You have guards on me at the hospital. I want them on the kids."

"Elizabeth—"

"I'm never alone," she told him. She twisted in her seat to face him. "I'm on Patrick's team in the OR and when I'm not with him or one of the other nurses, I'm with Epiphany and Bobbie doing paperwork. Emma, Joss, and Trina—they're sent on errands all over the place. I'll talk to Laura. They need a buddy system or something."

Her hands were shaking as she tried to remove the necklace again. Jason came over behind her, brushed away her hands with his own. He handed her the chain a moment later. "Baker knows the reason he served every possible second of his sentence was because of you."

"Because of me and Taggert," Elizabeth said, tightly. "Taggert went to more of the hearings. What if he finds out Trina is his daughter?" She shook her head. "I'm too old for him now—"

"You have zero evidence that he has a preference," Jason argued. "We don't know if it was you at age sixteen or opportunity—" He grimaced as color slid from her cheeks. "I'm sorry—"

"No, you're right. You're right." She rubbed a fist against her heart. "Maybe it was just the way he talked about it," Elizabeth murmured. "He liked the hunt, and he talked about the dress I was wearing. He blackmailed Emily, remember? And we were the same age."

"I know."

"I just—I would never forgive myself if I had guards watching me and one of those girls got hurt. Or any of the girls in the program," Elizabeth continued. "Thanks to the PCPD, you're limited by just the people who are already at the hospital. I don't want Cam to be unprotected, either. But those girls—Emma, Joss, and Trina—they're mine, too. They've grown up here. They're our babies just as much as the boys are."

"I know," Jason said. He put his hands on her shoulders, gently kneading them. "All right, I'll look at what we have in place at the hospital. Get me a schedule for the program. But don't ask me to leave you unprotected."

"I'm not. I just—" She closed her eyes. "Ten years ago. After Manny kidnapped me, and I told you it reminded me of Baker, you asked me if I wanted you to do something about it. I should have said yes. I wanted to." She swiped at the tears sliding down her cheek. "But I didn't want to be weak. I thought it made me stronger to walk away from him. And now it's too late. I'll be damned if the PCPD comes after you because of me."

"Eventually," Jason said, "the pressure will be off. The PCPD can't keep up this surveillance for long. And they don't know I'm aware of it. When it cools down, all you have to do is say the word."

"Maybe by then I'll have change my mind again. I guess it's just knowing it's off the table that's making me feel this way." She smiled at him in the reflection of the mirror. "I don't want to think about Tom Baker anymore."

"Then we won't."

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

Emma sipped her milkshake, then pursed her lips as she watched Trina behind the counter. "The Homecoming dance."



Cameron tore his eyes away from his Switch and frowned at her. "What? Wait. That's not for another month, is it? Oh, man. Is it sooner?"

"No, relax, I'll warn you," Emma promised absently. "I'll make sure you remember to ask me."

"I have to ask you?" Cameron scowled. "What's the point of dating if I still have to do that? Can't you just assume we're going?"

Emma looked away from Trina, then matched his scowl with one of her own. "You have to do the work, Cam! You can't just take me for granted!"

"I kind of think that's wrong." Cameron shook his head. "We're dating. We go to movies every Saturday and I don't ask you—"

"That's different! And this is our freshman year!" Emma was positively scandalized. "This is our first Homecoming! How can you not want to ask me?"

Sensing the trap he'd walked into, Cameron decided it time to back up. "Okay, it's not that I don't want to," he said carefully. "Because, like, sure. We gotta talk logistics. You know my mom and your mom are going to spend an hour with photos, and then there's the car—and do we go with people? You know Joss is gonna wanna go and make eyes at that new kid, and Trina—" He stopped. "Oh, man that's what started this."

"Don't change the subject, Cameron Webber." Emma was incensed as she shot to her feet. "You think I don't know what you're doing?"

"Listen, I am on board with this whole get Spencer and Trina thing together—"

"No, you're not."

"Okay, I'm not. I think Spencer is a moron and Trina can do better, but you want them together, and I don't care enough—" Cameron hissed, sat back and folded his arms. "I'm gonna shut up. There's no winning here."

"You don't think I deserve to be asked out like any other girl?" Emma demanded. "We're not married, you know! You have to put in the work!"

"Well, what about you?" Cameron shot back. "How come I gotta do the work? Why aren't you asking *me*?"

"What?"

"Yeah! How come I gotta ask you! You wanna go to the dance more than me. You should ask me!" Almost gleeful because he'd found the loophole to get him out of trouble, he was sure of it, Cameron jabbed a finger at her. "This is the twenty-first century, and women are equal, right? We split the paychecks and all that crap. You know what?" He got to his feet, folded his arms. "I'm not asking you anywhere. You wanna go to Homecoming, *you* gotta put in the work, too!"

Emma was positively incandescent with fury as she snatched up her coat and purse. "You don't get it, and I'm not going to explain it to you!" She stalked out of the diner as Cameron stared after her dumbfounded.

"So, I only overheard like every other word," Trina said, coming up to his side, "but I did get enough to know you're a moron."

"Ah, shut up."

Out in the courtyard, Emma was still fuming as she headed for the bus stop. The absolute nerve of that dumb boy not to just ask her? Why was it so hard? Why did she have to do *everything*?

Still wrapped up in her rage, Emma ran straight into someone coming around a corner. "Oof! I'm sorry!"

Someone's hands went to her elbows to keep Emma on her feet. "You okay, little girl?"

"Fine, fine. Sorry—" Emma looked up at who she'd run into, then frowned. The man was average height, a bit stocky. A ski cap was drawn over his head, and he wore a much thicker jacket than most people did in late September, but there was something about him — "Sorry," she said again. "I need to watch where I'm going."

She edged away from him, then continued down the block — stopping to take out her phone and text her parents, hoping for a ride home instead of taking the bus.

Tom watched her go, smiling as he drew out the new phone he'd picked up. What a lovely thing — the photos and videos it could take — technology was a beautiful thing. He snapped a few photos of his sweet girl as she stopped at the corner, then walked away, starting to whistle.

### **Robinson Home: Living Room**

"Why I am not surprised?" Portia muttered, as she started to rearrange the magazines on her coffee table — a nervous habit that Taggert recognized. Portia

was keeping her hands busy because she really wanted to slap him.

"I came because it was an emergency, but I'm on a case—"

"You're always on a case." Portia got to her feet, folding her arms. "When was the last time you spent meaningful time with Trina, huh?"

"I don't want to—"

"A year ago, she saw you for a week. You come in for a day or two, then zip off again. She deserves more than phone calls, Marcus—" She hissed. "And you're leaving after I told you that Jordan Ashford is going to use this case to be the complete bitch she's always been—"

"What am I supposed to do?" Taggert demanded. "I warned Jordan not to get wrapped up in taking down Corinthos and Morgan. She doesn't listen to me. She never has. I was a DEA agent when you met me. You knew my schedule and you said you wanted to get married and have a family anyway. You can't blame me—"

"I thought you'd change—" Her mouth twisted. "And if it hadn't been for Jordan—"

"Don't start this shit with me—"

"Well, if you didn't want to hear about it, then you shouldn't have had an affair—"

"I never—" Taggert growled. "You know, the nice thing about being divorced, Portia? I never have to listen to this bullshit from you again. I never touched her, but you couldn't believe I spent all that time away from my family with another woman without sex." His eyes burned into hers. "I always wondered if you were so sure because you were having an affair of your own."

Portia stalked over to the door. "You can go."

"Don't have to ask me twice."

### **General Hospital: Break Room**

"Real talk," Patrick said, setting down his coffee and sitting across from her. "You've been around Jason for like, two decades, right?"

"About that." Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

"And also the Cassadines."

"Where are you going with this?"

"What I'm thinking is between the supervillains and the gangsters—" Patrick leaned forward. "You know how to get away with a crime, don't you?"

Elizabeth pursed her lips. "Patrick—"

"I'm just saying. I know Jason can't do shit about this guy, but you and me—" Patrick nodded. "Yeah. I think that's what we need to do. We'll make him disappear, you make sure the husband has an alibi. We're golden."

"You're insane," she replied, forcing a smile on her face. "You have just as much to risk as I do. As Jason does."

"Yeah, I know. Doesn't change how much I want to rip off his face or hire it to be done," he grumbled.

Her stomach rumbled, and she winced. "Oh man, I want those Doritos," she muttered, looking at the vending machine. "I have lunch packed, but I just—"

"Cravings." Patrick nodded sagely. He took out his wallet and flipped through it. He found three dollars — "Highway robbery what they charge us—" Then he stopped, frowning at the photos. "Hey, the one from Aiden's party is missing."

"The one of Emma and Robin?" Elizabeth leaned forward. "I saw you put it in there."

"Yeah, it was in there last week." He wrinkled his nose. "Probably fell out at home. I'm just used to seeing it when—" He handed her the money. "Go get the Doritos, Webber. I won't be responsible for what happens if you don't."

### **General Hospital: Waiting Area**

When Emma, Joss, and Trina stepped off the elevators doors the next day, Elizabeth was waiting for them. Joss's eyes widened. "Oh, no, Aunt Liz, what did I do now?" she groaned. She planted her hands on her hips, then glared at Trina. "What did you snitch on me for this time?"

"Cool it, Barbie—"

"You have a guilty conscience," Emma said with a roll of her eyes. "You're always up to something so you're always on the defense—"

Elizabeth hid a smirk — Joss got that from her mother, of course. Carly had spent

so much time plotting, planning, and manipulating that any time anyone looked at her sideways, she went on the attack to hide her own misdeeds.

"No one is in trouble," Elizabeth said, holding up her hands. "I just wanted to grab Emma for a few minutes. Epiphany knows you'll be late to your shift," she told Emma.

"Yeah, my mom always says no one is in trouble, and then I get grounded anyway," Joss muttered. But they continued down the hall to get the assignments, and Emma hung back.

"Aunt Elizabeth, what's up?" Emma asked. She shoved her hands into the pocket of her jeans jacket, then wrinkled her nose. "Did Cameron tell you to talk to me? Because it won't work. He was wrong, and he needs to apologize."

"Oh." Elizabeth shook her head, steering her niece towards the sofa in the waiting area. "No, Cameron didn't say anything. What happened?"

"He thinks he doesn't have to ask me to Homecoming." Emma flopped onto the sofa with all the drama a fourteen-year-old girl could muster. "Honestly! He's taking me for granted and we're not even married—"

"I—"

"And so I told him he had to put in the work, and then he got mad at me for taking him for granted, like why didn't I ask him?" Emma demanded. "Does he think I'm not worth the trouble? Don't I deserve to be asked?"

Elizabeth's hands felt clammy. Hearing Emma and Cameron arguing about a dance — God, it took her back to nowhere she wanted to go. "I think," she said carefully, "that maybe you both have a point."

"Aunt Elizabeth—"

"You absolutely do not deserve to be taken for granted, so no, I don't think it's fair for Cameron to just assume you're going to the dance together. But—" She forced a smile. "Cameron's not wrong. If you want to go so much, why didn't you ask him first?"

Emma folded her arms, then kicked at the floor. "I dunno. Maybe because I always have to do everything," she grumbled. "He's so slow. I kissed him first. And I asked him out first. I make all the plans. And he just shows up." She bit her lip. "It's okay because I like to plan things and I like being in charge. But, like, sometimes I just wanna be asked."

Elizabeth smiled, squeezed Emma's knee. "That doesn't sound unreasonable at all. And in another day or so, if you tell him like that, he might listen."

"Maybe. I never told him any of that, so maybe I should. Anyway, if you didn't know about our fight, what did you want?"

"Oh, I just wanted to check in with you," Elizabeth said. "We haven't talked since, well, since you found out and told Cameron what happened to me as a teenager."

Emma's eyes widened. "Are you mad?"

"Of course not, sweetheart. Never," Elizabeth assured her. "I just wanted to talk to you. Cameron was upset about it, and I know you told your mom you felt okay, but I still wanted to know for myself."

"Oh. Well, I guess I'm okay. It was more like—you know, you see it on television and stuff, and sometimes we see women at the hospital, and like—" Emma shrugged a shoulder. "It's weird to think of you going through it. But, also, I know you. And you're okay. Better than. You got a family and a job, and I don't know—once you get past feeling bad about it, I don't know. I didn't think about it." She frowned. "Is that okay? I mean, should I be feeling another way—"

"Absolutely not. I want you to feel whatever way you want. I just wanted to us to have a minute." Elizabeth smiled. "You're right, though. I am okay. I have an amazing family. Not just the boys and my husband, but I have your parents, and I have you. You all make my life so much better."

"Same, Aunt Elizabeth." Emma's smile was more genuine now. "I remember when Mommy was gone. You helped so much and you let me cuddle and hug you when I missed her so much. Sometimes, I pretended you were my mom. I'm glad I have her back," Emma added quickly. "But I know it was easier for me and my dad because we had you."

"We're all better off for your mom being back in our lives." Elizabeth smiled and they both got up. "But I'm even more glad that we didn't lose each other." She pulled Emma in for a quick, brief hug. "And I'm glad you're not settling for less than you deserve. Cameron might be my son, but that doesn't mean he can't be wrong. Keep standing up for what you want, baby."

"I will, Aunt Elizabeth. Thanks. It helps to hear that I'm not overreacting. At least, not a lot." Emma grinned at her. "I better get to work before Epiphany tracks me down."

## General Hospital: Patient Room

Robin fidgeted in the chair, twisting her hands in her lap. Patrick leaned over, placing a hand over hers. "Relax—"

Robin slitted her eyes at her husband. "You keep saying that, and it just makes me want to bash your head in—"

"If it doesn't take this time, we'll try again—"

"I know, but—" Robin huffed. "I'm already forty. How much longer do I even have?"

"Saw a woman in Spain get pregnant at sixty-five—"

"Shut up," Robin muttered, but cracked a smile. "I just want this so much. I want to do so much better with this baby—" She broke off when the door behind her opened, and her doctor came in.

Britta Westbourne took a seat behind the desk, setting a chart down as she did so. Then smiled widely. "Congratulations. The test came back positive."

Robin exhaled on a whoosh of hair as Patrick grinned. "I'm pregnant? It's not a mistake?"

"Absolutely not. We'll monitor closely for a few weeks to make sure the embryo has fully transferred and we'll continue some of the hormone shots—" Britt picked up a pen. "But you're pregnant."

Robin turned to Patrick, her own smile spreading. "We're pregnant."

"We are—"

"We're going to have another baby!"

"That was the plan," Patrick laughed as she pulled him up, hugging him tightly. "I love you," he murmured into her hair, still marveling after all this time that she'd come back to them. That he got another chance to be the best husband and father he could be.

"And I'll get to do this with Elizabeth." Robin swiped at her eyes, as tears slid down her face. "We get to do it together—oh, I have to call my parents. And Brenda! Brenda will want to know!"

"We can take it one step at a time," Patrick told her. "Dr. Westbourne, what do we

have to schedule next?"

### **Morgan Home: Kitchen**

Elizabeth swirled a spoon in the spaghetti sauce. "I made an appointment with the OB," she told Jason as he came into the room and headed for the fridge. "Two weeks from Friday."

"I'll be there." He cracked the top from the bottle of beer. "You hear from Robin yet?"

"No," Elizabeth muttered, staring at her phone as if it were the enemy. "Not yet. I hope the IVF took. She was so excited when she was telling me about it, and I know how much Patrick wants it, too. And it'll be so much fun to go through this together without any of the drama."

Jason leaned against the counter. "You mean like being blown up in an explosion?" he said, dryly, referring to the Metro Court Hotel hostage crisis when she'd been pregnant with Jake.

"Not to mention the hotel fire—standing outside, hoping that everyone I loved came out—" And worried that the fire wouldn't eliminate the evidence of Zander's body inside. God, it felt so strange to remember that now. She'd believed him dead at her own hands while she'd been waiting behind the police lines, a hand on her belly, knowing she'd murdered her son's father. "And they did," Elizabeth said finally.

At least that time. Then the hostage crisis at the hotel had cost Jason his father, while the Black and White Ball — "If we have a daughter," Elizabeth said, "I don't want to name her Emily."

"You don't—" Jason frowned. "I thought you would—I mean, I haven't thought about it—"

"Emily wouldn't want that for her," Elizabeth said. "But I was thinking we could find another way to honor her memory. Maybe we could name her Paige. For Emily's biological mother. And it was Em's middle name." She paused. "Unless you think that would hurt Monica."

"I don't think so. Monica always said she and Paige were close, and I think she'd understand." Jason stroked the small of Elizabeth's back. "I like the idea of Paige."

"Paige Audrey." Elizabeth paused. "I don't know why I'm picking girl's names," she muttered. She turned down the heat. "What do you think about Drake for a boy?"

Jason shrugged. "Sounds good to me. You know that doesn't matter to me. I mean,



it matters—" He paused. "It's a name. You put some letters in order, and then you write it on a piece of paper. The person makes it their own. I know how important Patrick's been in your life."

"I can just hear Steven now," Elizabeth muttered, "asking where his namesake is. I keep telling him Cameron and Jake have middle names from our side of the family—" She rolled her eyes.

"And that's why we only visit your brother for Thanksgiving," Jason reminded her. "It was nice when he lived here, but we like him in Memphis better."

"Drake Morgan sounds distinguished," Elizabeth decided. "Or like a name from a soap opera." She checked her phone again and made a face. "Still nothing from Robin. Ugh, I hate waiting—that reminds me—" She pointed the phone to Jason. "You need to talk to Cameron. If I do it, he'll think I'm taking Emma's side."

Jason scowled. "What did he do?"

"Lets Emma plan all the dates and do all the work, then threw a hissy fit when she told him she wanted to be asked to Homecoming." Elizabeth poured a glass of water. "Typical guy. Makes the girl make all the first moves, then pretends it was his idea—"

"I never did that," Jason said, slightly insulted. "Did I?"

Elizabeth peered at him. "Uh, who showed up at who's penthouse in the middle of a blackout?"

"Yeah, but I kissed you," he reminded her. "And then after Sonny's last wedding—I kissed you then, too—"

"Because I asked you to dance." Elizabeth's eyes sparkled. "I create the opportunities for you to make a move, and then let you think it was your idea—"

"Oh, yeah?" Jason grinned, then reached out to snag her arm and pull her flush against him. "Is that how it was?"

"Absolutely—" She smirked. "But it was nice of me to let you think it was you—"

"Sounds like we made a good team—" He leaned down to kiss her, sliding his fingers along her jaw, then through her hair. "Any complaints about how it turned out?"

"Not a one," Elizabeth said, fisting her hands in his shirt, still smiling as he kissed her again. She really did have the best life — and she wasn't going to let anyone or

anything mess this up for her—especially not memories from before.

### **Kelly's: Courtyard**

"I have about thirty minutes before Dr. Rob sends out the dogs," Trina told Emma as they headed towards the doorway. "Why did I have to come anyway?"

"Neutral third party," Emma said. She stood on her tiptoes to peer inside the diner, then found Cameron sitting at table with his cousins, Michael and Morgan. "He needs to see that I'm not thinking about him or waiting around."

"But you are, and you're making me do it, too—"

"Yes, but he doesn't need to *know* that! Honestly, Treen—"

Emma turned away from the window at the sound of footsteps behind them, freezing when a man walked into the courtyard. He stopped, too, then smiled at them.

"Hello, ladies. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Trina scowled. "No. And who asked, anyway? Go about your business."

The man's smile dipped slightly at Trina's attitude, but then brightened again as he looked at Emma. "Have a nice evening. Stay out of trouble."

He went past them into the diner, and Emma swallowed hard. She rubbed her arms — they felt itchy all of a sudden, like she had insects crawling all over her.

"Adults are so weird," Trina complained, drawing Emma's attention back to her. "Right?"

"I've seen him before," Emma said. "Um, at Kelly's. A few days ago—" And somewhere else, hadn't she? She couldn't pick it out just yet, but— "Let's go home before your mom starts calling and demanding to know where you are."

She wanted to be as far away from Kelly's as possible.

### **Morgan House: Backyard**

Cameron was determined to end this fight with Emma, even if he wasn't entirely sure what he'd done wrong. He'd invited her over to hang out in the backyard while he baby-sat his younger brothers (to remind Emma that she liked what a good brother he was), made sure to have her favorite soda and snack ready.

He was going to fix this. Somehow.

Emma sat stiffly across from at the patio table, her arms folded. "Well?"

"Uh." Cameron shoved the drink closer. "You want some Dr. Pepper? I also got you Takis. You know, the purple kind—"

Emma pursed her lips—not a good sign—looked down at the soda and bag, then back at Cameron. "You said you wanted to apologize."

He coughed lightly. "Uh, yes. I was wrong. And I'm sorry." He flashed her a bright grin. "Did you get your dress for Homecoming—" He glanced over his shoulder when the back door opened and Jason stepped out. "Oh, hey, Dad. You're home early."

"Yeah. Your mom wants a burger. On the grill." Jason went to light the gas. "So that's what's for dinner."

"Oh, one of those cravings." Cameron turned to Emma, confident that he'd taken care of everything. "Mom's been cranky lately. On Monday night, like in the middle of the night, she woke up and was eating ice cream."

"Which you wouldn't have known about if you'd been in your room sleeping," Jason said idly. "Instead of playing video games in the living room."

Cameron hunched his shoulders. "Uh, yeah."

"Your mother is having a baby. She's literally creating life," Emma said flatly, the tone indicating that perhaps he hadn't done an adequate enough job of apologizing. "Men do nothing but complain—sorry, Mr.Morgan," she said as afterthought. She got to her feet. "You have no idea why I'm mad, do I?"

"I do, too." Cameron stood. "You wanted me to ask you to the dance, and I didn't. I'm fixing that. You'll go, right?"

Emma's cheeks flushed, her eyes flashed, and she whirled around. Then she was gone, the kitchen door slamming behind her.

Cameron sunk back into his seat, glared at the Dr. Pepper and Takis. They were just mocking him because they hadn't done a damn thing except make Emma angrier—he slid a glance at his father. "Hey, Dad."

"Yeah?" Jason closed the grill and came over to sit across from him.

"You used to mess up with Mom a lot, right?" Cameron brightened. "Like all the time. She used to cry a lot."

Jason stared at him, and then Cameron's grin faded. "I mean, Mom messed up, too, sometimes."

His father sighed, then sat across from him. "Everyone messes up," he said, pushing the snacks aside. "It's normal. Yes, I made your mother cry sometimes. And she hurt me, too. That's a relationship. It doesn't matter how much you love or care about someone, it's impossible to go through life and not cause pain."

"Yeah, okay. I guess that's realistic. It's just—" Cameron gave up and cracked open the Dr. Pepper. It was his favorite, too. "We were all fine one minute, and then the next nope. It's all about this stupid dance. She's mad because I didn't ask her. I just assumed we'd go together."

"Why?"

"Well, it's just—we're dating, right? You and Mom are married. You go to stuff sometimes. Does she wait for you to ask her? Like when Dante's mom got married. You and mom went together. Did you ask her?"

"No. She—" Jason squinted. "No. She told me when it was."

"Exactly. Because you're married. Why can't things just be understood in a relationship, you know? Why do I have to magically know that sometimes I'm supposed to ask." He shoved the other soda at his father, hoping he'd drink it, and then it'd be like two guys hanging out. Jason accepted it, popped it open and drank. "Did you and Mom used to argue about this stuff?"

"No," Jason said after a moment. "But sometimes she was hurt when I didn't always say what I was thinking. She'd assume what I was thinking — and be wrong — and then she was upset."

"But that's her fault for assuming and not asking, right?" Cameron pointed out. "Wouldn't it have been easier if Mom had just asked? Like, if Emma wanted me to ask her, and that's the problem, she could have just told me. But now I'm in trouble because I didn't know there was a rule." He huffed. "Why can't she just tell me why she's mad so I can fix it?"

Jason opened his mouth, then closed it. Cameron felt the sweet sting of victory. "I'm right, aren't I? If Mom asked you, you would have told her. If she gets upset then, okay. But it's not your fault if she created a whole argument out of nowhere—"

His father hesitated. "Well, that's not really it, but—" Jason paused. "I know you're not right. And that I was wrong," he continued, "but I can't really remember why. Your mother explained it better."

"Mom knows?"

"Yeah. I don't know if I was supposed to say that—" Jason scrubbed his hand down his face. "Okay, listen. Sometimes we have to do things that don't make sense. I'm pretty straightforward. Logical. You're like that, too. You like things to just be said straight out. No guessing."

Cameron tightened his hand around the soda can. He liked the idea of having something in common with his dad. Even better, like maybe Cameron had this trait because they'd been a family, and this was something that was theirs. "Yeah. That's all I want. Why am I wrong?"

"I don't know. You are," Jason added. "But—" He sighed. "Maybe you both are. She's not wrong for wanting to be asked, but you're not wrong for wishing she'd tell you why she's really mad."

Cameron perked up. "So, like, she owes me an apology, too." He got to his feet, chugged the last of his soda. "Thanks! I knew I was right."

"Uh, that's not—" Jason winced as Cameron went into the house. Damn it. He'd understood what Elizabeth meant when she said it, but Cameron had made sense, too. He was just going to turn the whole mess over to her. She would fix it.

### **General Hospital: Hallway**

Patrick opened the staff locker room door for Elizabeth. "After you, madame."

"Thanks. I'm so excited for you guys," she said as they headed for their lockers. "I've loved Cameron and Emma growing up together, and the idea that we get to do it again—"

"And that we've got built in baby-sitters." Patrick rubbed his hands together in glee. "Grandparents, brothers, sisters. This is much better than when we were doing this alone."

Elizabeth laughed, and spun the dial on her locker. "Have you heard about Cam and Emma's fight?"

"They're fighting?" Patrick frowned. "I knew she was upset over something, I just figured it was Joss again."

"No, that's been quiet since the blue dye fiasco." Elizabeth pulled out her street clothes. "It's not that serious. Cam didn't ask her to the Homecoming Dance because he assumed they were going to go together."

Patrick wince. "Rookie mistake, man. You hate to see it. I blame Jason. He doesn't remember being a teenaged boy. Number one rule — you never assume when it comes to occasions where a girl's gotta buy a dress." He sighed, pulled open his locker. "That explains her rotten mood."

"I told Jason to talk to him, but you know," Elizabeth smirked, "I'm not sure Jason doesn't agree with Cameron's stance. He thinks Emma should have just told him she wanted to be asked."

"That defeats the purpose of being asked in the first place." Disgusted, Patrick opened the locker. "And there's no way Jason doesn't agree with the kid. He's too logical. Are you sure there's emotion in there?"

"Ha—" Elizabeth tugged off her scrub top, then pulled on a sweater. "I just thought if I tried to explain it, Cam would think I was taking Emma's side."

"You are."

"Yeah, but he doesn't need to know that. If Jason tags me in, and I mess it up, you're on deck."

"Got it—" Patrick stopped abruptly. "That's weird. The picture from Labor Day—" He tapped the inside of his locker where he'd taped photos. His wedding day, a picture of Emma as a toddler, a shot of Emma and Cameron dressed as Rapunzel and Flynn Rider with Aiden as a pumpkin — and there had been a group shot from the Labor Day barbecue at Patrick's house with Patrick, Robin, Robert, Anna, and Emma.

"Maybe it fell off and got swept up by the janitor." Elizabeth looked around the staff room, checking the other aisles. "I don't see it. I'm sure Robin can just print another one—"

"Yeah, I guess. It's the second picture that's gone missing in the last few weeks," Patrick admitted. "I should start paying attention." When she frowned, he continued, "Last week. The picture in my wallet? The day I bought you Doritos."

"Oh, yeah. That is weird."

Patrick closed his locker. "You doing anything for dinner?"

"Jason's grilling — I made him," Elizabeth said. "You ready for Robin's cravings?"

"Can't wait."

### **Morgan House: Kitchen**

Elizabeth hung her keys up on the hook, smiled at Jason pulling out a bag of buns from the cabinet. "Hey."

"Hey." He paused, pulled her in for a kiss that lingered.

"Mmm, what was that for?" she asked, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I missed you." Jason kissed the tip of her nose, then winced. "And I talked to Cameron."

"Oh, no."

"Yeah, it didn't go well." Jason sat at the island. "He takes after you. You talk in circles until I agree with you, and I don't know how I feel about being manipulated by a fourteen year old."

Elizabeth laughed, went to the fridge to grab some tomatoes to slice for the burgers. "It's also just possible you agree with him. Cameron thinks Emma just have just told him she wanted to be asked, and it's not his fault if she gets mad because she didn't tell him what she wanted."

"Uh—yeah." Jason nodded. "That sounds fair to me."

"Me, too."

"Then—"

"Because I'm a thirty-six year old woman who has has a lot of life experience, and I know that sometimes—" She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the counter, their eyes meeting. "Just because someone doesn't say something, it doesn't mean they don't feel it. But I had to get hurt a lot of times to get here. Cam and Emma—they're just learning these things."

"But you still think Emma's right," Jason said slowly. "That Cam should have asked?"

"I think—" Elizabeth paused. "I think she's not wrong for wishing Cameron thought

this dance was a special occasion. That it means as much to him as it does to her. They're freshman. It's the first year in high school. And it's a real dance. Not like the middle school stuff. She's starting to feel grown up. And mature. And all she wants in the world is the boy she's crazy for to think she's special. To treat her that way."

Jason tipped his head. "And not asking her makes her think she's not."

"Yeah. It's not just the movies on a Saturday night or grabbing dinner at Kelly's. It's their first formal dance since they started dating. And she's probably bought a really pretty dress, and thought about her hair, and—" Elizabeth took a deep breath. "I was the same. And I wish I could tell her that it's not that serious. That it's just a dance, and that Cameron has proved how much he cares in other ways. But she's just a girl, Jason. And maybe it's wrong not to want her to have this sweetness as long as she can. Robin and I—we didn't get to have that. Not really."

"You did all that for your dance, didn't you?" Jason asked. "The dress, the hair—"

"Yeah. I searched for hours—" Elizabeth laughed again, but it was a little derisively. "I knew Lucky thought we were just friends, but I thought — if I find just the right dress, he'll change his mind. I'll look so beautiful and better than Sarah, and he'll fall in love with me." She swiped at a tear. "He only saw the dress after it was torn and dirty."

"Elizabeth—"

"I'm fine. I am. I didn't—maybe it's why I understand Emma so much. I wanted that dream. I wanted to matter to someone. I had the dress box in my lap when Lucky came to tell me he was going with Sarah. I was crushed. Embarrassed. Humiliated. I lied to cover it up."

"Maybe you're just a little worried that this is all over a dance," Jason pointed out gently. "And you're feeling protective of Emma because of that. You don't want her upset enough to lie and not go."

"That's part of it, I think." She exhaled slowly, put the sliced tomatoes in a container. "But I think it'd be a good lesson for Cameron to learn. Being in a relationship doesn't mean you get to stop taking care of each other. Look at you—you were at work, and all I did was mention I had a craving for a burger. It's the little things that matter, Jason. Because when you don't do the little things, they pile up and explode into one big problem. Today, he doesn't think it's a big deal to not to ask her to a dance. Sure, he's got a point. It'd be easier if Emma explained this to him. But maybe she can't. Maybe it's too big and it hurts too much to put in words."



Jason rounded the corner to take her in his arms. "Hey." He brushed at a tear sliding down her cheek with his knuckle. "You're right. Cameron might not be wrong, but I don't want him making the same mistakes I did. It took me too long to say what needed to be said, to do what needed to be done, and you shouldn't have had to wait for me to figure that out."

"I should have been able to find the words. I didn't try hard enough. I let the pain and hurt swallow me whole." She rested her forehead against his chest, and let him put his arms around her. This would always be her safe place. The one place in all the world where nothing could hurt her. "I'll talk to him."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah, I can do it now." She kissed him, cupping his face. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

### **Lexington Avenue: Driveway**

If anyone had told Jason Morgan after his accident that he'd find happiness in the small details of life, he'd have rolled his eyes and flipped him off. The man he'd been then had wanted to live fast and dangerous, the adrenaline pumping through his veins as he crept up on an enemy or took turns too fast.

Not that the adrenaline didn't still flow just fine these days, but Jason also liked the little things about living in a house and raising a family. A wife who loved him (all the parts of him, including his job), three wild and rambunctious boys who never remembered their chores, and the swirling excitement that he'd get to do it all from the beginning. In just under seven months, a new baby would come home that would start the chaos all over again.

It was the third time in as many weeks that Cameron had forgotten to take out the trash, but Jason decided that he wouldn't bother to remind him. He'd gone upstairs to sulk after dinner, and they'd heard him strumming on the guitar he'd gotten a year ago for Christmas. Jason knew something about heartache and that he hadn't quite hit the mark on their talk earlier, so he and Elizabeth split up — she went talk to their son and Jason took on the chores.

As Jason settled the cans at the edge of the driveway and removed the plastic tops to store in the garage, he saw a car zip down the street and slide into the driveway directly across. He smiled faintly. Robin had always driven just a bit too fast.

"Hey!" The brunette waved at him, stepping out the car. She glanced back and forth

down Lexington Avenue to assure herself there was no car on its way, then crossed the street. "I haven't seen you since Elizabeth told me the news." She hugged him tightly. "Congratulations!"

"You, too." He held on for just a moment longer, then drew back.

"Seems crazy to me," Robin said. "How far we've all come. Remember? When we were kids and neither one of us thought there'd be kids in our future? You're about to add number four, and I'm on to two—"

"You always wanted it. I'm glad there's a way for you to have it."

"You, too. Especially—" she sighed. "With how things Michael ended." Robin wrinkled her nose. "Sorry, I'm just feeling nostalgic, I guess. Looking through Emma's baby things. Did you hear our kids are having their first fight?"

"Yeah, and it's not over yet," Jason admitted with a wince. "I tried to help today, but I'm not sure I did any good." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "I don't think I was supposed to agree with Cam."

"But you do," Robin finished with a grin. "So do I, actually. Patrick was horrified when I told him, but—" she shrugged. "Cam's a boy. A great kid, but still just a boy. He doesn't get the dance thing, and Emma should have just told him how much it meant to her." She tipped her head. "But I am fascinated that *you* agree."

"Why not?" Jason shrugged. "She's mad. Cam doesn't know why. She should tell him."

"I just think it's funny that you, Jason Morgan, want someone to use their words," Robin teased.

"Ha," he muttered. He sighed, looked back at the house, at the light shining from Cameron's room. "Elizabeth explained it to me, and it made more sense. She wants to feel special, and it's not the same if you have to tell someone you're special."

"Oh. Well, yeah, from that perspective." Robin nodded. "Emma's...she's a dreamer. I think I've forgotten what that's like. I'm too serious for that kind of thing."

"You had your moments."

"So did you." Robin smiled at him again. "It's nice, isn't it? After all we've meant to each other, that we get to stay friends. I'm glad we got here."

"Me, too." He kissed her cheek, and they both returned to their respective families.

## Morgan House: Cameron's Bedroom

Elizabeth knocked lightly on her son's door. "Cam, you got a minute?"

"Yeah," came the glum reply. She edged the door open, then closed it after herself. Cameron was hunched over the side of his bed, the guitar in his hands. "I was trying to write something to tell Emma I was sorry but it's not working."

She sat next to him. "I talked to your Dad."

"Yeah, I felt better after I talked to him, but then I thought about telling Emma she was wrong—" Cam winced, looked at his mother. "I don't know a lot about girls, but that's probably not a good idea." He made a face. "You're on her side, aren't you?"

"Well—" Elizabeth hesitated. "Yes and no. I understand your point of view, Cam. I do. It's hard to know you've hurt someone and not understand why. Because then you're sorry, but you can't really apologize. How do you stop yourself from repeating the mistake if you don't get it?"

"Yeah. But if you're on her side, can you maybe tell me why I'm wrong? Because I'm okay with being wrong." Cam unhooked the guitar and set it on the stand, then sat cross legged on his bed. "I don't care anymore. I just don't want her to be mad at me or break up with me. That would be the worst."

"Well, before I give you my perspective, let me ask you something to see if it confirms what I think." Elizabeth tucked one leg underneath her body and turned so that she faced Cameron. "Was the fight the first time Emma mentioned the dance?"

Cameron screwed his face up, thinking over the question. "We talked about it when school started and we got the fall schedule. I was looking at the soccer schedule, and she said something about Spirit Week. It was going to be fun because it was our first high school dance—" He stared his mother, then put his head in hands. "Oh, shit." Then winced. "Sorry, Mom."

"No, I think it's an oh shit moment."

"She didn't mean our first dance because, like, chronological. But, like *our* first dance. Couple first. She was telling me it was special but like, I didn't hear it."

"Well, you did, baby. You're remembering it now. You just didn't make the connection."

"Crap. I'm an idiot."

"You're fourteen."

"But I'm still an idiot!" He groaned and flopped back on his bed, his arms spread out at his sides. "Prettiest girl in the entire grade picks me and I can't even ask her to the dance right."

"Cam—"

"No, listen." Cameron sprang back up, his blue eyes hot. "Listen. Maybe I'm a kid, but I love her. And I know that means. I know what love is, and I love Emma. But I hurt her, and she's really mad. Why didn't I just see it?"

"Because you're just a kid," Elizabeth said gently. "And you weren't wrong to think maybe she should have told you. But she's just a kid, too." When he scowled, she added, "And I don't doubt that you love her. But love isn't easy. It doesn't run smoothly, you know? You're going to hurt her again. She's going to hurt you. It's just being human. You didn't see it, and she couldn't explain it because you needed to have this fight. It's how you build life experience."

"I don't get it."

"Well, if Emma decides to forgive you," Elizabeth said gently, "will you ever, in your life, forget to ask her to a dance?"

"No!"

"Lesson learned. And Emma might think to be more clear in the future. Maybe," Elizabeth added. "That one's a harder lesson. Because she wanted to be special to you, baby, without being having to tell you."

"She is!"

"And I don't doubt it. But sometimes we don't see our own worth," Elizabeth told him. "I wasn't always sure your dad loved me. And he wasn't sure I did. We didn't know how to show it, and we didn't always say it when it mattered. I'm sure you show Emma in a lot of ways how you feel about her, but she might not see it. And she shows you in lots of ways you might not realize."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Your birthday party last year. We were going to do something at the house, but Emma said we should have it at the soccer field so you could play a game. She

knows how much you love it."

"I didn't know that." Cameron frowned. "She never told me that."

"Because it's not a scorecard. Not at first," Elizabeth admitted. "You do things for each other that maybe they don't notice. But they feel it. She saw how much fun you had. It was all she needed. Your dad? Left work early today to grill because I mentioned I had a craving. And he took out the trash for you."

"I forgot—"

"It's the little details. They add up, and they make someone feel loved. But if you ignore them, it creates a debt. And that adds up, too. Your dad isn't much for grand gestures, so I used to think that meant he didn't love me. But his love was always in the details. And that's so much better. The every day stuff to make you feel special."

"Yeah." Cameron exhaled slowly. "You're right. It would have just been a small thing. Hey, Emma, you want to go to the dance with me? Just a question. But I didn't do it, and it just got bigger." He looked at his mom. "I love her, Mom. I don't want to hurt her. It's not a stupid crush or whatever."

"I would never be one to knock first love," Elizabeth told him. "First love can, and does, last forever. It's just harder. People who fall in love at your age still have so much life to live, so much growing to do. And if you don't grow together and in the same direction, it's harder to harder hold on to. I've been there, baby. And holding on to something that doesn't fit who you are can hurt so much."

"You're talking about Lucky," Cam said. "Because you guys got together when you were my age."

"A little older, but yeah. If that fire hadn't happened, I like to think we would have grown together. But it took us too long and caused too much damage to see that we hadn't. I want you and Emma to be happy. Whatever that ends up looking like."

"Now that I know what I did, I won't do it again." Cameron looked more confident. "I can fix this, Mom."

"I have no doubt. I'll leave you alone to work on that." She squeezed his hand. "I love you."

"Love you, too."

She left him scribbling in his notebook and went down the living room where she found Jason explaining for maybe the millionth time that the night they'd been able

to play video games upstairs had been the exception, and not a rule change.

"Ugh." Jake flopped onto the sofa. "This is like prison."

"You'd better never get arrested if you think that," Elizabeth said, passing behind the sofa, and ruffling Jake's blond hair. She grinned at Jason. "Dad can tell you about that when you're older."

Jason left Jake and Aiden arguing who would take the first turn and followed her to the kitchen where she was pouring herself some water. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. He's writing her a song to apologize," Elizabeth said. "And he's sorry about the trash."

Jason shrugged, sat at the island and took the beer she handed him. "It's fine. I ran into Robin. He'll remember next week. Probably."

"Probably not." Elizabeth came around the island and stepped between his legs to put her arms around his neck. "I love you."

"I love you, too." He tipped his head. "You okay?"

"Just reminded of all the ways you show me how me how you felt. I was afraid when we got back together," she admitted. "That it wouldn't last. But we're still here."

"I'm exactly where I want to be," Jason told her. He set the beer aside and drew her closer. "I don't blame you for needing time to believe that."

"Well, I do." She kissed him, long, lingering, sliding her fingers through the nape of his hair. "How long before bedtime?" she murmured, his hands stroking her spine.

"Too long," he admitted. "But we're pretty good at pressing pause."

"Good. Because I have plans for you later."

### **Scorpio-Drake House: Backyard**

The next day, Cameron walked his brothers home from the bus stop, a few steps behind Emma who ignored him and flounced off across the street.

"Man, you really screwed up," Jake said, watching her go.

"Shut up," Cameron muttered. He took them into the house, and went upstairs to get his guitar. If this didn't work, he was going to ask his mother for a script

because he didn't know what else to do.

Patrick opened the door, eyed the guitar, then nodded. "Excellent choice. She's upstairs."

As Cameron started up the stairs, Patrick called up. "Hey, leave the door open!"

Emma was at her desk and turned with a scowl as Cameron knocked. "What?"

"I figured it out." Cameron came in and set down his case. He took out the guitar, and her eyes widened. "I, um, don't really know how to say it, but I did this. So I hope it explains it."

He strummed a few times, then started to sing.

*You're my light when I'm lost  
You're my warmth is dark  
I feel you after the sunlight is gone  
You always bring me back home  
When I'm lost on the road  
My heart is wherever you go  
Because you are  
My north star*

He didn't look at her, couldn't, so he just stared down at the guitar, until it was over. Then he looked up. Emma was staring at him, tears streaking her cheeks.

"Oh, crap. I made it worse—"

"N-No—" Emma's lips trembled. "Did you—is that—I mean, did you write that?"

"Uh." He unhooked his guitar and set it down. "Yes. Last night. For you. Mom—I mean, I get it now. You told me the dance would be our first high school dance. I heard it when you said it, but I didn't, like, *hear*, you know? But I get it. And you need to know you're special. And I didn't show it. But I am now. I think. I hope. I tried." He smiled, but it felt a bit lopsided because it was pounding so hard.

Emma flew across the room and hugged him so hard that Cameron had to take a step back. So relieved he was almost dizzy, Cameron hugged her back. "You'll go to the dance with me, right? I wanna take the prettiest girl, and that's you."

"I'll go. Will you—will you play it again?" Emma asked, drawing back her eyes shining. "I wanna hear it again."

"Anything."

Outside, in the hallway, Patrick edged away and pulled out his phone to text Elizabeth and let her know the crisis had passed. It was painful to admit his little girl was growing up, but, oh man, if she had to fall in love and leave him, then Patrick was grateful it was with someone who treated her right.

## **Baker House**

That same night, across town, Tom Baker whistled as he reached into his pocket and drew out the photo that Patrick Drake had once hung in his locker. Pretty little Emma and her family. Shame he didn't have one of her with his first sweet girl, but there was always time for that.

And eventually, soon, he'd get to have that first taste. He'd been thinking about it for years and just hoped it would live up to the first time.

## **Morgan House: Front Lawn**

When she'd shown up in Port Charles nearly twenty years earlier, Elizabeth had felt completely in the world. Her parents barely noticed her, her siblings didn't understand her, and the best Audrey had ever managed was gentle disapproval. Today, standing on the sidewalk outside the home where she'd raised her boys, surrounded the family *she* had created, it was hard to remember that brittle, rebellious girl.

She lifted her phone to zoom in on Cameron shyly sliding a wrist corsage onto Emma's wrist, then watching as Emma twirled, showing off the soft pink dress with the sweetheart neckline. A few steps away, Portia was adjusting the spaghetti straps on Trina's sleek purple dress while the teen sent discreet looks to Spencer, who was grimacing while his grandmother adjusted the knot on his suit.

And off to the side, just slightly apart, Carly stood with her daughter. Elizabeth's heart had skipped a beat when Joss had stepped out of the car, her blood red dress not a far cry from another dress worn on a night like this.

No one but Elizabeth would make the connection. There were few left who remembered that dress. Audrey had passed away, Lucky might as well be in another universe, and it had been a crumpled pile of fabric when Bobbie had come to the Spencers house that night.

"You good?"



Elizabeth jerked to attention when Patrick bumped her shoulder. "What?"

"You're just staring—" Patrick followed her gaze. "I feel a little bad for her," he admitted. "I know Joss struggles to make friends, and Spencer and Trina aren't really going together, but—"

"But," Elizabeth murmured. She exhaled in relief as Jason approached Carly and Joss, and Joss's plastered smile became more genuine. "Emma looks beautiful," she told Patrick, looking back at their kids.

"Cam cleans up nice, too." Patrick exhaled slowly. "He wrote her a song, Webber. Just for her." He folded his arms. "I'm still not sure I want to let her out of the house, but if she has to date someone, I'm glad it's someone like Cam. He'll be good to her, and maybe she'll have high standards the next guy will have to work hard to meet."

"You never know," Elizabeth teased. "Maybe first love will be forever this time."

"Maybe." He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Okay, let's get the group photos done so we can hit the road."

The teens complained but it was mostly good-natured, and Elizabeth was sure to encourage shots of just the girls to make sure Joss didn't feel left out, and only Cameron and Emma took photos as a couple.

"All right, Elizabeth and I are the drop off," Patrick said as they moved towards the cards. "And—"

"Robin and I are picking up," Jason confirmed. He opened the door so that Emma could slide into Patrick's backseat, along with Cameron.

"Call if you want to come home early," Elizabeth said, her stomach twisting as Trina and Spencer argued over who was going with Elizabeth and Joss. Trina won — and went with Cameron and Emma. Joss's eyes dimmed a little, but she got into the car anyway.

Jason watched as the two cars pulled out of the driveway, wondering if he should have gone with Elizabeth. He knew the dance was weighing on her mind — it wouldn't have if Tom Baker hadn't shown up all those weeks ago and brought back the nightmares.

"Maybe I should have driven Joss," Carly said, standing at his side. He frowned at her. "She's having a hard time. You know, Emma and Trina only tolerate her

because of Cam." She sighed. "It's my fault."

"They're just kids," Jason said, putting an arm around her shoulders. "And they get along better than when they were kids."

"I guess. And it hasn't been that bad this year. Not like middle school," Carly added. "But I'm just—I feel like I set all the wrong examples for Joss. I don't have any female friends, so she couldn't even see what it looked like." She forced a smile. "Maybe I should have been nicer to Elizabeth."

"Well, yeah, but that's for other reasons," Jason said, and she smiled. "Joss is a good kid—"

"But she goes after what she wants and doesn't always look to see who she's stepping on. It's me all over again, Jase, and I'm just worried. I don't want her to be like me. I want her to know she's enough, just the way she is." She exhaled slowly. "But you're right. It's better than it used to be." She flashed him a smile, then poked him in the stomach. "Congratulations, by the way. I haven't seen you since you told me about the baby."

"Yeah, we wanted to wait a little while before we told a lot of people," Jason said as they walked towards the house, following Jake and Aiden in. "But she's out of the first trimester, so the worst miscarriage risks are past us."

"You have to tell me everything."

### **Port Charles High School: Parking Lot**

Elizabeth backed her car into a space so that she was facing the doors. She was only meant to do a drop off, but Joss had been so quiet in the car that Elizabeth didn't feel right just leaving her. Instead, she was parking and watching the entrance. She didn't want another girl with sad eyes to be broken.

There was a rapping against her passenger side, and Elizabeth smiled faintly. She unlocked the door and Patrick slid in. "Hey."

"Hey. You, uh, wanna tell me why we're staking out the dance?"

"Joss," Elizabeth murmured. "I've been thinking so much about this dance. About Cam and Emma fighting about going — it's brought back some memories." She looked at him. "For me. The Valentine's Day dance. It happened that night. I asked Lucky to go as friends, hoping he'd see me in my dress and realize it was me he wanted all along. But then my sister asked him."

She stared straight ahead as the sky, pink and orange when they'd arrived, sank into darkness, the streetlights illuminating the parking lot. "He came over to tell me that he was going with her. Like it wasn't a big deal."

"Asshole," Patrick muttered. "He had to know you weren't asking him as friends. I mean, guys are dumb, but we're not that dumb. If a girl asks you to do go somewhere as friends, she's testing the waters."

"I can't be angry at him. He'd fantasized about Sarah for months, and had a chance finally." Her fingers tightened around the wheel. "He went after it. But I was so embarrassed and upset, I made up a date to the dance. And I didn't go. And tonight, I watched another girl feel like she wasn't wanted hide her misery." Tears burned at her eyes. "I always felt out of the place. A changeling in the Webber household who didn't fit the mold and could never meet the expectations my parents set for me."

"Their loss."

"It is. It absolutely is. They're missing out on so much. Not just because I turned out just fine without them, but my boys are special, and would have made their lives so much better." Elizabeth sighed. "I guess I was scared Joss might want to leave and walk home. Which seems silly—"

"It absolutely does not."

"I'd never forgive myself if something happened to her. Or any of them. Not just Cam. They're all mine. Trina has been in and out of my house since she was a kid. Her dad took such good care of me during my rape investigation. And Emma—you know how much I love her. Spencer—he's lost both his parents and there's so much anger he tries to hide. But Joss — she's the one that reminds me the most of who I used to be. She's just like her mother, too."

"You're comparing yourself to Carly?"

Elizabeth smirked. "That's one of the reasons we couldn't get along for long. Too much alike. I just got broken at an earlier age. I was selfish, petty, and spiteful. Without the rape, I would have grown up to be a self-centered, vindictive woman who couldn't make friends—"

"I don't believe that for a minute."

"I never did make friends that well," Elizabeth said. "Emily, Nikolas—they were Lucky's friends first. Jason," she murmured. "He was the first friend I made that was all mine. You were the second."

Patrick reached for her hand. "Hey. Quality over quantity. And you and me, we're platonic soul mates, you know that right? Robin's the love of my life and it's a miracle I get to keep her. To have more kids with her. But you kept me moving through losing her. You helped me raise Emma when I thought I'd screw it up."

"Best friend I ever had," Elizabeth said, turning to smile at him. "You don't have to stay."

"Nah, I'm with you. Joss reminds me of me, too," Patrick said. "You're not the only one who was a selfish teenager who didn't make friends well. We'll just tell Jason and Robin that we'll take the Kelly's drop off and they can pick up the kids there. I'm sure Laura and Portia will be relieved to have the break."

"Let's do that."

### **Port Charles Hotel: Gymnasium**

The fast beat of Little Mix slid into the slow strands of Ed Sheeran, couples began to gravitate towards one another, and Joss edged her way from the dance floor, her throat tightening as she watched Cameron draw Emma into his arms—and then Spencer hold out a hand to Trina.

And her current crush, Oscar Nero, asking Molly Bainbridge to dance. Joss wandered over to the punch table. It wasn't like she wanted to date Cameron or Spencer — the passing crush she'd had on Cameron in grade school had mostly been because he'd always been nice to her. Probably because his mother made him.

*So honey now  
Take me into your loving arms*

She lifted the punch to her lips, sipped it and winced at the sugary sweetness.

*'Cause honey your soul can never grow old, it's evergreen  
Baby your smile's forever in my mind and memory*

She didn't even want a boyfriend, Joss told herself, even as she wistfully watched the other couples swaying to the music.

*But baby now  
Take me into your loving arms*

She'd been so excited for this dance, so sure that she'd pick out this dress and that every guy would want to dance with her. She was pretty, wasn't she? And she was trying harder to be nicer. Emma had been right — the truce with Trina made things

easier.

But a truce didn't change a decade of rivalry or erase some of the things Joss and Trina had done or said to one another. And she knew they still really didn't like each other. And Emma and Trina *were* popular. People liked them.

And nobody, except for Cameron and sometimes Spencer, liked her.

*I'm thinking out loud  
That maybe we found love right where we are*

Finally the song changed into an upbeat Justin Timberlake, and Joss went back to the dance floor because you didn't need a partner for these songs.

### **Kelly's: Parking Lot**

"Thanks for the ride," Cameron told his mother as he held the door open for Emma. "You're going home this time, right?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said with a roll of her eyes. The group had been mystified to find Elizabeth and Patrick waiting for them after the dance, and Cameron had complained that maybe his mom didn't think he was old enough to go to a dance.

So this time, Elizabeth promised — and she'd promised Jason, too, who was worried about her for other reasons. So she watched the kids head into the courtyard, then followed Patrick out of the parking lot and away from the diner.

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

Everyone who had joined them at Kelly's after the dance had someone with them, Joss realized. Or maybe the other groups of kids were just evenly divided. Even Nancy Ohlendorf had a date. Joss huffed as she sat at the table. When girls who liked other girls found a date more easily than she did, that just reminded Joss that *she* was the problem. Not that she wasn't happy for Nancy and Julie. She just wanted someone to sit with. To talk to.

She sipped her soda, picked at her French fries, smiling when she was supposed to. But she just wanted to go home. Her house was too far away, but her grandmother's Brownstone wasn't, Joss decided.

She got up from the table and went for her coat, her throat tightening when she made it all the way into the courtyard without anyone coming after her. She waited for a moment — but no one came.

They hadn't noticed she was gone. Wasn't that a kick in the face? She lifted right out, didn't she?

Joss turned and headed towards Elm Street, the street quiet with only her footsteps echoing. She dragged her coat more tightly around her, tears burning at her eyes. Her phone wasn't even vibrating. No one, not even her best friend, knew she was gone.

Your best friend should always notice, Joss thought bitterly, but Cam had been so worried about Joss—

There was a crack—and Joss stopped. Turned to look at the broken lot across the street where the sounds had come from. Then she heard footsteps. Heavy ones. She swallowed hard, straight ahead, and started to walk more quickly. Two more blocks until she got home Two more blocks.

The footsteps were closer now, and Joss was scared. What if she turned around and someone was right there—

There was a honk of a car horn, and then a car was siding to a stop. Joss stopped, recognizing it. "Aunt Liz," she said breathlessly. "You came back."

"I had a feeling you'd need me," Elizabeth told her. She flipped the locks. "Get in."

Joss yanked the door open, then took a moment to sweep her eyes around the surroundings. There was no one at all. She must have just been more nervous than she'd thought. She slid into the passenger seat, and flashed a smile at Elizabeth. "How'd you know?"

"I just did." Elizabeth squeezed her hand. "One day, you're going to look around and you're going to be surrounded by so many people who love you that you're not even going to remember tonight," she told her. "You are a great kid, Joss, and you deserve the world."

As Elizabeth's car disappeared down the road, Tom stepped out from the scraggly bushes, grimacing. He'd been so close.

Then he smiled. The pretty blonde with the sad eye was special to Elizabeth, too? Well, well, well. There were just so many options to choose from.

### **Elizabeth's Car**

"It was stupid," Joss said, her voice a bit tired and dull. "We were only going to be there for like an hour. Maybe two. I could have stuck it out."

Elizabeth remained silent, listening to the teenager punish herself enough for the both of them.

"It's just...everyone had a date or a best friend, you know? They were all paired off. And it's not like I want anyone to be miserable. I don't." Joss paused. "Okay, maybe I enjoyed Cam and Emma fighting more than I should have. Mostly because he called me, and we hung out a few times." She looked out the window. "We don't do that anymore. Just us. We were best friends. And now we're not."

Elizabeth made the turn to Carly's house, and Joss sighed again. "And I know that makes me a bad person. That I wanted my best friend to be sad and alone because I am—"

"It does not make you a bad person. It makes you human." Elizabeth drew to a stop in front of Joss's house, switched off the engine. "I know what it's like to be in a crowd of people and feel completely alone. I give you a lot of credit, Joss, for going in the first place."

"Really?" Joss frowned. Looked at her. "Why?"

"Because I didn't. I couldn't. When I was your age, and the boy I liked went to the dance with my sister, I couldn't face it. I wasn't brave enough to go alone. We were supposed to go as friends, but I was so..." Elizabeth smiled ruefully. "I was so hurt and embarrassed that I had gone all out on this night. I'd bought a new dress, and I'd had these silly little day dreams that when he saw me all dressed up, he'd forget all about Sarah. I lied to him. I told him I had a different date, and then I just didn't go at all."

"You think it's brave I went to the dance alone?" Joss asked skeptically. "It's pathetic—"

"It's brave," Elizabeth repeated. "And you stuck it out as long as you could. Were you going to walk all the way home?"

"No, just to Grandma Bobbie's. Is that...um, is that how you knew? Why you came back?" Joss wanted to know. "Because I looked miserable? Did everyone else notice?"

"I can't answer that, but I just—I worried what might happen if you couldn't stand it and walked out. You matter to me, Joss. You've been such a good friend to my son. I've watched you grow up, and I know it's been hard. But you're a great kid. The next time you just want to get out, when you just want to walk away—" Elizabeth held up her cell phone. "Call me. No questions asked."

"Thanks, Aunt Liz. I was only a few blocks away from Grandma's, but—" Joss shivered. "I heard these footsteps—probably nothing but my own mind," she added, "but it was scary. I'm glad you came to find me."

"Always. And if you don't call me, call your mother. You know she'd show up in a heartbeat for you."

"Yeah, but then she'd go to war against someone. Sometimes it's not worth the drama." Joss grinned at her. "But yeah, you're right. Next time, I'll make sure I have a ride. Bye, Aunt Liz."

### **Morgan House: Master Bedroom**

Elizabeth was still thinking of Joss when she got ready for bed, the teen's words echoing in her mind as she rubbed lotion into her hands.

Footsteps. Joss had heard footsteps behind her. Had she just been imagining things? How many times had Elizabeth heard people who weren't there? In the days and weeks after, she'd been haunted by sounds that didn't exist.

Behind her, the door opened and Jason came in. "Hey." He came up behind her at the vanity table, dropped a kiss on top of her head, his hands warm on her shoulders. "Everyone's home."

"Did Cam have a good time?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yeah," Jason said, sitting on the edge of the bed, kicking off his shoes. "He walked Emma to her door."

"Good." Elizabeth looked down at her hands, still rubbing in lotion that had long ago dissolved. "Did he even notice Joss was gone?"

Jason frowned. "What?"

"Did Cameron notice Joss left Kelly's?" Elizabeth twisted on the stool. "Because her phone never rang the entire time I drove her home."

"I didn't ask," Jason admitted. "I knew you'd picked her up—" He tipped his head. "She's all right. You were there."

"Yeah, I guess. I just—" Elizabeth sighed, twisted her wedding ring. "It was so much the same," she murmured. "A sad, miserable girl feeling left out. Walking in the dark. I suppose I wanted to know—Lucky noticed. I never came to the dance,



and he noticed. He went looking for me."

Tears stung her eyes. "I don't know what would have happened if he didn't find me. I didn't know where I was—I was so outside myself—" She rubbed her arms. "A complete mess. I never found my coat—my shoe was broken—I don't know how Gram didn't see. I used to hate that he knew. In the beginning. When I didn't want anyone to see me. I hated that he knew. But now, even after everything we've been through, thank God he found me. I don't know if I would have survived. I might have just stayed in the park."

"Hey," Jason said softly. He reached for her hand, and drew her to sit next to him. "It's okay."

"I used to have nightmares about it," Elizabeth confessed. "Laying in the snow, letting it numb everything, and just drifting away. I was so cold, it didn't hurt yet. But I heard my name. I heard his voice. And I started to crawl towards it." She squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I don't mean to keep going back—"

"You never, ever have to apologize," he said roughly, bringing her hand to his mouth, kissing the inside of her palm. She smiled at him, even as the tears slid down her cheek. "Ever. You're right. If you'd stayed there all night, you might have died. So, yeah, Lucky gets the credit for finding you. For helping you that night. But that's where it ends. You know that, right? Because *you* heard his voice. *You* made the decision to go towards it. Not him."

She sighed, leaned her head against his shoulder. He put his arm around her, held her close. "I know. I just—and you know, I don't think about it anymore. Or at least I didn't until a few months ago. But that feeling—laying in the cold, waiting for it to make everything go away—I never lost that."

"I know." He tipped her chin up. "I've been there, too. Remember? You dragged me out of the snow. Made me open my eyes and drowned me in soup."

"I—" Her eyes widened. "I didn't even—"

"I was nearly dead when you found me. I don't feel the cold," he reminded her, "but I can still freeze to death. If you hadn't come that morning, if you'd been even a day later, I would have."

"It's just...I don't want to think about any of these things anymore. I don't want to be that girl, crawling out of the snow. I want to be stronger. And before you tell me I am," Elizabeth added, "I know. But it can come back so fast. In a moment, and tonight, it just felt so real again. If anything ever happened to Joss, to Emma, or Trina—or even the boys—" She shook her head.

"It didn't. You took care of Joss just the way you take care of everyone." He brushed his mouth against hers. "Let me take care of you."

"You always do."

### **Port Charles High: Library**

Cameron dropped his books next to Joss's and sat down. "You've been avoiding my calls since Friday night," he declared. "And you skipped the game on Saturday."

Joss wrinkled her nose and went back to her geometry homework. "Sorry I got busy."

"I texted you when I saw that you left. I was worried," he added. "I almost went looking for you."

"It's fine. I just went home early. Your mom was still hanging around and picked me up. No big deal."

"Joss—" Cameron scowled. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. I just—I was like the fifth wheel all night, and it kind of sucked. I thought it'd be fun to go alone," Joss continued, "because I figured Spencer and Trina were solo, too. So it wouldn't be weird. But I guess Emma was right about them, because they got all paired off, and I just..." She tapped her pen against her notebook. "I didn't mean to worry you."

"Joss—"

"It's fine," she repeated, this time with an edge to her voice. Then she forced a smile. "I'm glad you and Em are okay again. I know she still totally hates me, but we've got a truce going mostly, and I know you, like, worship her. I just...I need to find that, and then we'll be good."

"You're still my best friend, Joss."

"Sure." Joss jerked a shoulder. "Now let me finish my homework before homeroom, okay?"

### **General Hospital: Cafeteria**

Elizabeth eyed the food on her tray with suspicion. "Why did this look better before I bought it?"

Patrick rolled his eyes, took her salad and switched it with his burger. Then, noticing Robin's arched brow, took the salad and switched it with Robin's chili. "There. Everyone's happy now."

Robin sniffed, but snagged the dressing packets from Elizabeth's tray while Elizabeth took the ketchup from Patrick.

"This is why I keep him around," Robin said.

"Same." Elizabeth grinned at him, then her smile faded. "I've been thinking about the kids."

"The dance was fine," Patrick reminded her. "And everyone got home safely—"

"No, I know. But I'm worried about Joss. I know she and Emma haven't always gotten along," Elizabeth continued. "And some of it's been deserved."

"Emma gives as good as she gets. The blue hair dye might have been in defense of Trina, but I know my daughter came up with it. And the pool party last summer—" Robin stabbed a fork at Patrick. "You know Emma started that fight."

Patrick frowned. "Who was arguing with you?"

"I know we can't force them to be friends. I don't want that. I guess—" Elizabeth ripped her French fry apart. "I don't know. I keep thinking that she's going to end up like me, and that's not fair. I'm just overreacting, I guess."

"Parallels, I told you," Patrick said. "And you were right to hang out. Joss probably would have been fine, but you were there, and she'll remember that. They're kids, Webber. Teenagers. We were horrible, but we turned out okay."

"I just want them to be okay without trauma," Elizabeth told him. "Your mother died, and you spent ten years being a man whore before Robin slapped you upside the head."

Patrick made a face. "I don't know why she's getting all the credit—"

"And I—" Was raped and grief-stricken. "Well, we know what I went through."

"They're going to get hurt, Liz," Robin reminded her gently. "And our kids have had plenty of trauma already. Cam lost Jake for two years, Emma lost me. Joss has Carly for a mother. Trina's parents are always at war. And Spencer is an entire mess. People get hurt. It's a fact of life. All we can ever do is hope that we gave

them all the tools to get through it. So far, I think we're good."

"What she said—" Patrick said. "And they've got something we didn't get. Family who gives a damn. No drunks for a dad, no dead parents, no parents off helping other people and forgetting they've got kids—we're right here. To annoy them and ground them. So don't worry. We got this."

### **PCPD: Commissioner's Office**

Jordan scowled at the latest surveillance report, then looked up at the detective who delivered them. "How is it possible that it's been two months since Baker got out and he's still alive?"

"Uh—" Nathan West squinted. "Clean living?" When Jordan's scowl just deepened, he rolled his eyes. "I don't know, Commissioner. Maybe Morgan and Corinthos just aren't interested in revenge. If they'd wanted this guy dead, they would have done it. He spent all those years inside, didn't he? Alive and kicking."

"Maybe Morgan just wanted the satisfaction of doing it himself." Jordan shoved away from her desk and started to pace. "I can't justify the expense much longer," she muttered. "If they don't make a move—"

"We know that they're criminals," Nathan said slowly, "but this is personal. When was the last time either of them were accused of committing a crime for personal gain?"

"Oh, don't give me that—" Jordan whirled on him.

"I'm not saying they're good people," the detective said, holding up his hands. "I'm saying they're not idiots. You start letting personal grudges take over, it's the start of the end. I grew up watching mafia movies. They've been in power a long time, Commissioner. You don't survive all those hits without some sort of intelligence."

"Luck," Jordan muttered. "Just luck." She dragged her hands through her hair. "All right. I can authorize this for another month. Maybe. But I'll have to pull the guys watching Baker himself. Keep the others on Jason and Sonny's guys and at the warehouse. We don't need to watch them both. Baker has to report to parole every week, and he wears an ankle monitor. We'll know if he gets grabbed or goes anywhere he shouldn't."

### **Port Charles Park**

Elizabeth avoided this area of the park like the plague and had for years, but today, as she headed towards Cameron's soccer's practice, she took the path towards the

fountain at the center of the park.

It was different in the daylight, she thought. In the fall, with the harvest color leaves flooding the tone path, laying in the water of the fountain. The stone bench covered in a blanket of them.

She slid her hands over the slight bulge of her belly, her pregnancy just beginning to show. She couldn't wait until the baby quickened inside, when she could feel the flutters and kicks. Being pregnant was mostly a miserable experience, but when the baby was inside of her—

They were safe. Protected. No one could hurt them.

She didn't want to think about it constantly. Had always hated when Jason used that terrible word. He'd wanted her safe from the dangers of his life when she wasn't even safe from the danger of the real world. It was nothing more than a four letter word.

She exhaled slowly, then went past the bench, took another turn, then another—then stopped when she saw a movement. When she saw someone in front of her taking a turn. Elizabeth walked in that direction, moving slowly, careful not to step on any leaves.

And just in front of her around, the curve, she saw him.

Tom Baker, crouched behind a bush, his camera in his hands. Her heart began to pound and she looked in the direction he was pointing his camera. She couldn't see what he was looking at, but she knew there were tables there.

Knew that kids from the high school sometimes hung out there to do homework while practice was held on the field attached to the park.

Elizabeth turned and ducked down another path, one that would wind around towards the other side of clearing.

The only teens there today were hers. Trina was laughing, showing Emma her phone while Joss sat across from them, concentrating on her homework.

Tom Baker was watching her girls. With a camera.

She didn't think through the next step, didn't even register what she would do until she was already in the clearing. "Hey, girls!" she said brightly, hoping she sounded somewhat normal. "It's getting too cold to hang out here, isn't it?"

"Definitely by Thanksgiving," Joss said, looking at her in relief. "But we like to hang until Cam and Spencer are done—"

"Well, I'm here to pick them up, and we've got plenty of room for you guys." Elizabeth avoided the bush. Didn't want to tip her hand. "Come on. You can come to my place. We'll get pizza or something for dinner."

"Sounds good to me," Trina declared, standing up. "I'll text Dr. Rob in the car. Thanks, Mrs M."

"Thanks, Aunt Liz," Emma said, shoving her things into her bag. "You're the best! I didn't want to walk home anyway."

"You really are," Joss said, smiling shyly at Elizabeth. "Thanks."

Elizabeth waited until the girls had gone ahead of her, then followed them.

She never looked back.

Morgan Penthouse: Bedroom

Elizabeth didn't know how she'd managed it, but she got the girls to the soccer field, found Spencer and Cameron, got them all back to the house where they were going to spend the rest of afternoon — and never let on that everything inside of her was on fire, her brain practically screaming.

Tom Baker had been in the park watching the girls. Her girls. Every single one of them had grown up in front of Elizabeth's eyes — from Emma, the daughter of her best friend, to Trina, the daughter of the man who had worked so hard to get Elizabeth justice, to Joss, the daughter of Jason's closest friends —

The girl with the sad eyes who had walked home alone after a terrible dancing in a red dress — who had talked about hearing sounds.

Had they just been in her head or had Elizabeth prevented something terrible?

That night, as she sat in her bedroom, rubbing lotion into her hands, listening as Jason did the usual sweep of the boys' rooms for their phones and tablets—she debated her next step. She hadn't called Jason in a panic, urging him to come home. She hadn't called the police.

She'd done nothing but ensure that the kids were safe with her, then tucked away at home later. She'd watched Emma cross the street, had texted Portia and Carly to be sure—

And now—

Jason came in, closing the door behind him, setting a tablet on the dresser. She forced a smile. "Who's the culprit tonight?"

"Jake. Said he wanted to try out a drawing thing, but—" Jason shrugged as he exchanged his jeans for a pair of sweats. "I told him that's why we got him a sketchpad and art supplies for his room."

"I was thinking we might—um—with Cam in high school, maybe—" Elizabeth's stomach was jittery—she pressed against it, and he frowned.

"Are you okay? Are you—"

"No. No, it's fine." She exhaled slowly. "No pain. Just a bit unsettled. I—" She twisted on on the stool to face him. "Maybe we should adjust the rules a little. Cam's in high school. And we have to start trusting them at some point. And it would give Jake and Aiden something to look forward to."

"Yeah, we can do that—" He tipped his head. "What's wrong?"

"I—" It was on the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed it. "I guess I've still be thinking about Friday. Um, I haven't asked in a while — but is the PCPD still looking at you and Sonny?"

Jason scratched the back of his neck. "Uh, yeah. We actually just a got a call from our guy today. I was going to tell you. Jordan's getting some pushback on the budget. It's been two months since she started all this surveillance, and nothing to show for it."

Her chest eased a bit. If Jordan was going to dump the surveillance, then—

"She's dropping the guys watching Baker," Jason said with a scowl. "And keeping them on me and Sonny. I guess she figures there's a better chance of getting us on something—" He shook his head and went towards the bathroom. She heard the water running a moment later.

Elizabeth went to the doorway of the ensuite bathroom. "Is there a better chance of that?"

"No. You know Sonny and I aren't really in it the way we used to be. Not a big market for Russia anymore, so we don't really do shipments out of the warehouse." Jason turned to her, his brows creased. "We're mostly in Miami—you don't usually

worry about that."

"The PCPD doesn't usually breathe down your neck." She folded her arms. "And you don't like talking about it."

"No, I don't." Jason paused. "Is something wrong?" he asked again.

If she told him now, Baker might be dead by dawn and she wanted that. She wanted to hand this over to him so it could stop be her problem. So that there was no chance that Baker would slither into her dreams and haunt her—

But the PCPD were still watching Jason and Sonny. Still waiting for them to make a mistake. And they weren't watching Baker. Telling the PCPD wasn't going to get her anyway — even with surveillance, they hadn't noticed Baker stalking her girls.

No, this was her problem to fix and she knew exactly how to do it.

"Just my mind working overtime," Elizabeth said. She wrapped her arms around his waist. "You'll tell me if it changes, won't you? About the PCPD? I don't like the idea of them watching you and Sonny this way. You're with the kids so much—"

"I promise." He dipped his head, kissing her as his hands slid down her bare arms, then up again. "I love you."

"Love you, too."

### **General Hospital: Parking Garage**

The next day, Elizabeth clocked out of her shift early, getting Epiphany's promise to cover for her. Right after Baker had been released from jail and begun working at the hospital, Jason had given Elizabeth enough information to avoid him — including the information that Baker took a bus to work and would only work the night shift, thanks to intervention from Laura.

And once, weeks ago, without telling anyone, she'd followed Baker on that bus route, driving behind the bus, trailing him across town, to the rundown neighborhood. She'd wanted to know where he lived so she could avoid it. And now she would use all of that information to destroy him.

The shift change was at seven that night, so Elizabeth wanted to be ready. She wasn't driving her car — she'd rented one that morning in case Baker or anyone else knew her license plates. Maybe they could run it later and tie it to her, but it wasn't all that likely. She was across the street and a few houses down, waiting.



At 6:30, Tom stepped out of his house, locked the door, then strode down the street. Elizabeth waited until the bus would have left the stop to be sure he hadn't missed it. The night was inky dark and the street had few lights illuminating it.

Still, she was cautious. She had a winter coat she rarely wore, in a dark green, and a matching hat which she used to tuck her hair up and away. She left her car, walked around the block to a cluster of trees that backed up to the cluster of houses. She'd studied the map on her phone, poring over the satellite views —

Then she crept through the backyard—the stingy six feet of space—to the back door. One of the benefits to marrying Jason Morgan had been lessons in lock picking — she'd been kidnapped enough, he'd told her, she needed to be able to get out of places.

The house was dark and bare — the kitchen where she stood was small, the tile cracked and stained. One lamp had been left lit in the living room, which she reached through an arch. There was one bedroom in the back of the house, and a bathroom. Though her hands were gloved, she kept them in her pocket as she walked around the small space, studying the layout. Becoming familiar with it.

She'd need to be able to get in and out of it within minutes if this would work — if alibis were to be established and hold.

In the bedroom, there was a single twin bed with a ratty mattress and a thin comforter that was little more than a scrap of fabric. Remembering that Baker had once been the photographer to the stars — he'd been Brenda Barrett's go to choice when she'd been the Face of Deception — he'd fallen so far it brought her a bit of joy.

But it wasn't enough. Across the bed was a dresser and a bulletin board where a mirror might be. A bulletin board with pictures scattered across it. Her heart seized. Emma was in most of the photos — a pretty, young brunette. And there were photos of Elizabeth—her stomach lurched at the thought of Baker watching her without being noticed. And a photo of Joss. Outside of Kelly's the night of dance.

He'd been there.

She left the photos, though she'd wanted to set fire to the house. No, it was important that those photos were found just the way they were. So that when the PCPD finally found his rotting corpse, it would be in the same room where he clearly plotted his next crime. So that they would see their own failures.

Elizabeth believed in the system some of the time, but in her experience—when she'd really needed it, justice was nowhere to be found. And justice could never

truly be delivered by bureaucrats in their suits in robes.

Justice was in the blood and brain matter that spurted when she'd murdered Stavros Cassadine after he'd tried to kill Jason. In whatever manner Luke had killed Helena — though it would never be enough suffering.

The only justice in the world was the justice you made for yourself.

And Elizabeth had every intention of making sure that this time, Tom Baker would pay.

She left the house, having timed her visit. No more than five minutes. It was three more minutes to the car. Everything would have to be meticulously planned if this was going to work.

And she wouldn't be able to do it alone.

### **Drake House: Living Room**

"Hey." Patrick grinned as he stepped away from the door. "I thought you were working today."

"Sorry to bother you on your day off," Elizabeth said. "I asked Epiphany for the day off, but I volunteered to work the morning shift on Thanksgiving to make up for it," she told him.

"Oh, man, you must have been desperate. Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Robin and Emma are gone, aren't they?" She followed Patrick into the kitchen. "And Anna still does those sweeps for electronics?"

Patrick paused as he poured himself a cup of coffee, then looked at her, the humor fading. "What's wrong?"

"First, answer me."

"Yes. Mikkos Cassadine is still out there. Anna doesn't think he cares about us, but—" He leaned against the counter. "You're scaring me. Have there been threats?"

"No." Elizabeth took off her coat, laid it over the back of the chair. "Not from the Cassadines. Patrick, I'm about to ask you to do something. If you can't or won't, it's okay. But I need your promise you'll never tell anyone about this conversation." She swallowed hard. "I'm not telling Jason, so you can't tell Robin."

His eyes were dark and sober. "You know whatever you need, I'm here."

"The night of the dance, when I found Joss—" Elizabeth's throat tightened. Was she really going to do this? Drag her best friend into this nightmare? "She told me she'd heard sounds. I thought she'd made it up."

Patrick's shoulders straightened. "But she didn't."

"I don't think so. Monday—this Monday. Just three days ago—" Her chest ached. "I went to the park to get the kids. The boys were on the soccer field, and the girls—they were studying. Like they always do."

"Elizabeth—"

"He was watching them," Elizabeth said softly. "He didn't see me. At least I don't think so. But he was watching them. From behind the bushes."

"He." Patrick exhaled slowly. "You mean—"

"Tom Baker. The man who raped me. He was watching the girls. Our girls. *My* girls. Joss, Emma, and Trina. But I didn't know. I wasn't sure. So I waited for him to go to work, and I broke into his house—"

"Jesus Christ—"

"He has photos, Patrick." She swallowed hard as he focused on her like a laser. "Of me. He said it that first day, didn't he? He said I put him in jail. I didn't. Not alone, but I did it. There are photos of me. But not just—he has photos of the girls. Of Emma. Trina. And Joss—he was there at Kelly's, in the parking lot that night. She wasn't wrong. He was following her."

"Oh man—" Patrick shook his head. "Why aren't you telling Jason?"

"Because the PCPD are watching him. They want to use this as a way to get to Jason and Sonny—Patrick, they've had men watching Baker and they either know about this and are ignoring it or they're missing it. I don't care. If Jason goes after him — I won't take that risk."

"You—" Patrick paced to the double doors that opened out to the backyard, staring blindly at the pool, long since covered up for the season. "Because he might get arrested and put in jail."

"Baker's coming after the girls because of me. This is my problem to fix. I won't risk my husband or our life together. Besides—" She took a deep breath. "We work in

medicine, don't we? We know how to end a life."

"We." Patrick turned to her, his expression unreadable. "You're asking for my help."

"Yes. I know—" Tears spilled down her cheeks. "I know it's a terrible thing to ask. But I can't—I can't let it happen to them. I can't let one of those girls go through it—I was so broken, Patrick—Shattered. All these years later, it's still—it's still there. It still haunts me. It sneaks up and chokes me when I least think of it—I can't let it happen to them."

"No," he murmured. "No we can't." He took a deep breath, then met her eyes again. "I'll take care of the how. You've run around the Spencers, Cassadines, and the mobs enough to take care of the rest of it. The when, the alibis, the whatever else we need to pull this off."

"Yes." She stepped towards him. "Patrick—"

"I saw you that day—at the hospital, when he spoke to you. I saw the way it broke you into pieces." His voice was rough as he continued. "And the police have been following him? There's no way he could take pictures of the kids and them not know. Or they're too stupid to notice. That's not a system I want to take my chances on. Not wit the sanity and safety of my little girl at risk. You're right. We can do this. We have to do this. Together. There's no way I'm letting you do this alone."

He jerked out a chair. "Let's get started."

### **Pozzulo's Restaurant: Back Office**

Jason shoved his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket. "You sure you're okay with Frankie taking the Miami run this weekend?"

"Yeah, yeah." Sonny leaned back. "I told you—you don't need to be doing that crap anymore. Let the younger guys do the runs."

"I don't mind in the summer," Jason said, with a shrug. Once a month he did a weekend in Miami, overseeing a shipment as it passed from Cuba and went to Venezuela. He usually took Elizabeth and the boys to the island and made it a vacation. But— "It's just—I wanna stick close right now."

"Yeah? This Baker stuff still bothering her? I know it's pissing me off. You hear what our guy at the PCPD said about the surveillance?" Sonny got to his feet, went over to pour himself a cup of coffee. "Actually dumping the tail on that asshole and keeping them on us—is that what's wrong?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Just—" Jason squinted, unsure how to articulate it. "I guess it was the dance. It stirred a lot of things up. Especially since Joss took off and tried to walk home on her own." Sonny scowled at him. "Yeah, Carly said she's having some issues. You know she's like her mother. Doesn't really make friends that easy."

"Yeah, I know. Michael was saying something about it. Glad she got Cam, you know he'll stick. But she was gonna walk home? All the way to Carly's?"

"Elizabeth found her before she got far, but it's just—she's not telling me, but I know it's bothering her. More than just the surveillance."

"Look, it's just rotten luck Baker got out this year. The kids are about the same age Elizabeth was—" Sonny shook his head. "It's gonna be in her head. All you can do is be there when she needs you."

"I know, but—"

"You like to fix stuff," Sonny finished. "But this isn't something that gets fixed. Even if we take care of Baker when the dust settles, it doesn't turn back time. You, me, all the money in the world doesn't get us back to that night and stop her from going to the park. She'll deal and put it away. You know she's stronger than the both us. You'll get through this and in a year when you got a cranky infant keeping you up at night, you won't even think about any of this."

### **Scorpio-Drake Home: Living Room**

Robin felt the sofa next to her give way, but she didn't look up from her laptop, keying in a few more edits on the medical article that was due at the end of the month. She heard a NASCAR race on the television—

"Did you need something?" she asked Patrick sweetly as he sipped from the bottle of Rolling Rock. "Is there something wrong with any of our other televisions?"

"You weren't there." Patrick flashed his dimples, and instead of melting, she just narrowed her eyes.

"What do you want?"

"Always so suspicious. I can't just hang with my wife?" He wiggled his brows. "Emma is at Trina's tonight. Neither of us have to be at work—"

"Uh huh. Cut the crap."

"You know me so well." The dimples flashed again, but then Patrick took a deep breath. "Thanksgiving. You said you wanted to invite Sonny because Michael was doing something with his girlfriend's family, and Morgan's away at college."

"And because Sonny's a good cook and it'll give Jason to talk to—"

"I thought maybe, in the spirit of cooperation and kindness—" Patrick paused. "We could extend the invite list. You know Portia has the evening Thanksgiving shift, so we've got Trina—"

"Patrick—"

"I've been thinking about Joss," he cut in. "I told you about the dance. About her feeling left out and walking home."

"Oh—oh, absolutely not." Robin shook her head. "You are not asking me to invite Carly to Thanksgiving. Patrick Drake—"

"Hear me out—" He held up a hand and she closed her mouth. "I'm not asking you to be friends with Carly. I'm not even asking you to be friendly with her. Jason will be here, and Elizabeth gets along with her more—"

"And what am I supposed to do until you and Elizabeth are done work? And how did you end up copping an overnight shift on Thanksgiving morning?" Robin wrinkled her nose. "You both should have more seniority than that—"

"We both traded away a holiday ages ago. I think she's covering Felix, and Griffin needed to get to the airport early—that's not the point—" Patrick took a deep breath. "You have legitimate reasons to dislike Carly. And if you say no, it's cool. I get it. It's just—I know Elizabeth has been messed up over this Baker stuff—and then Joss walking home from the dance—"

"Right." Robin sighed. "It upset her, I know that. And I know Carly's worried about Joss. I overheard talking to Jason after you guys left with the kids. It's just..." She paused. "She and I have stayed out of each other's way for a long time, and it suits us. I was almost relieved when Emma and Joss didn't hit it off. I can live with seeing her sometimes for Jason and Elizabeth's stuff. But you're asking me to invite her into my home."

"I know. I know it's a big ask, and I don't do it lightly. I promise." Patrick was quiet for a long moment. "I think of our little girl, you know. Of Emma feeling left out and taking a walk. I want to hope someone is there for her. That someone will notice. I want to protect her for as long as we can from the world. No one was there for Elizabeth until it was too late. It kills me, Robin, to think of her all these years

later, still tormented by it."

"And you think inviting Joss to Thanksgiving with kid who already make her feel left out will help," Robin said, her tone skeptical. "It's a sweet idea, but I don't think shoving her down their throats—"

"It'll be a lot of people. Laura, Spencer, your parents, Mac, Felicia—" Patrick shook his head. "I don't know. I guess it's a stupid plan."

"I like Joss, I do. And I know she's had a harder road because of Carly." Robin made a face. "And I guess if all those people are here, Carly won't really have anyone to spend Thanksgiving. I don't mind her eating alone, but it probably won't make Joss feel better. All right. But I'm not talking to her."

"Understood." Patrick put an arm around her shoulder, drew her close for a kiss, then rested his hand on her belly, just beginning to curve. "How are you feeling?"

"Amazing. I can't believe we get to do this again." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "You know, you're right. Emma's gone all night—let's go do something more fun."

"I could get my race cars out," Patrick offered as Robin tugged him off the sofa.

"Not exactly what I had in mind, Dr. Drake."

## **Parking Lot**

The next afternoon, after Robin buried herself in the study working on her article, Patrick drove across town to the run down lot of a drug store that looked like it had seen better days. He parked his car next to the dark blue sedan in the lot, got out and slid into the passenger seat of the other car.

Elizabeth handed him a ski cap and he tugged it over his dark hair. Then she put the car into drive and drove the two blocks to Baker's street, parking across the way and a few houses down. "I've been coming for three days. It's like clockwork," she told him as they watched Baker lock up, then amble down the street towards the bus. "He gets home around 7:30 and goes right to sleep."

"Do I want to know how you know that or is it going to make me mad?" Patrick wanted to know.

Elizabeth smiled grimly. "I went back after the first time. I left a camera in the bedroom. Just to know." She handed him a phone and showed him the app. "And thanks to Spinelli, I have an encrypted phone. I know how to delete this so it never

shows up anywhere."

"Thank God you married a mobster," Patrick said taking in the view of Baker's room, the camera trained on the bed. "I still want you to stay in the car—"

"No. It's a two person job." She took the phone back. "Did you get your hands on the records?"

"Yeah, the security at the hospital is pretty crappy. Baker had a physical as part of the hiring process. He had heart issues in prison. He's being treated for arrhythmia — they're trying to hold off on a heart attack." He stared straight ahead at the back of a rusted Mercedes. "I thought about something that would trigger a heart attack but there's no guarantee it would finish him off."

"And we don't know how long it'll be before he's discovered. He works Tuesdays-Saturdays. I'd say we do it on a Saturday morning, no one knows he's missing until Monday morning—"

"But Thanksgiving is the only day we can make sure of the alibis. We have small window between leaving the hospital and when we're expected at the house—" Patrick paused. "But since we decided to have a huge dinner with literally everyone—"

"Including three former police commissioners—stroke of genius on your part—"

"It'll be hard for anyone to say exactly when we get there. Only Jason and Robin would know for sure, and—"

"Spousal privilege keeps them in the clear. Plus, Jason and Sonny will be seen by at least a half dozen people the entire day." Her hands tightened on the wheel. "Jordan can't come near them. And we both know she's not even going to think of us."

"No. But that's why we've got the alibi." He sighed. "It has to be Thanksgiving. All we can hope is that follows up on a missed shift. The longer we have between time of death and the autopsy, the better off we'll be."

"So you have an idea on the how?" Elizabeth looked at him.

Patrick leaned into his pocket and pulled out a small bottle. She took it, read over the label. "Succinylcholine," she murmured. "It'll paralyze his respiratory system. How did you—"

"You're not the only one getting lessons from Spinelli. Let's just say it's untraceable. The only caveat is that they can test for that. It's just not going to show up on any



normal tox screen. You have to go looking for it. Jordan might."

"Maybe."

"And if we can get at least twenty-four hours, we got a better shot of the sux not being traced in the tissues. An autopsy will probably come back undetermined or, best case, the heart issue will get blamed."

Elizabeth exhaled. "So you're all in." She looked at him again. "If you want to pull out, I won't think less of you, Patrick. You know that, don't you? I love you. But—"

"I think about that day you saw Baker again," Patrick murmured. "I've known you for years. I've seen you collapse from grief. I've seen you angry. I've seen you broken. But I've never seen you that way. And it's been almost two decades. He's watching the girls. Waiting for the chance. He might have taken it from Joss. I think of any of those kids being broken for twenty years—" His mouth was grim. "The justice system isn't built for this. Some things can't be forgiven. We're doing this protect them, sure, but I'm doing this to protect you."

Her eyes stung with tears. "Patrick—"

"Because I think when he's gone, when you know he's gone and maybe you get a hand in seeing it done you'll be able to sleep at night." He took the bottle from her and tucked it back in his pocket. "And that will be all I need. So, yeah, I'm all in. When we do this on Thanksgiving, you stay behind me. You're pregnant. If I had my way, I'd do it on my own—"

"I've been through worse pregnant, but yeah. You'll go first and you'll be ready if the injection does wakes him up before the drug takes affect. I'll do it between his toes," Elizabeth decided. "They never look there." She switched the engine back on. "Let's go. I need to trade this car back in. I'll get us a new one for that morning. Nothing to track back to us. I'm buying one in cash, and then I know how to get rid of it."

"I bow to you, the woman married to the master criminal."

Elizabeth smirked as she turned away from Baker's street. "Please. Luke taught me how to get a car clean and dump it afterwards. I led a very interesting life before I married him."

### **Scorpio-Drake Home: Backyard**

Sonny checked the temperature on the deep fryer, then stepped back with a grin on his face. "Always wanted to try one of these." He accepted the bottle of beer Jason offered.

"I'm just glad Dad's making one in the kitchen if this one gets burnt to a crisp," Robin said as she stepped out from the double terrace doors. She folded her arms, drawing her cardigan sweater more tightly around her torso. "I know you don't feel the cold," she said to Jason, "but you can still freeze to death."

"Fryer's keeping us warm," Jason offered. He glanced down towards the patio, and the teens clustered around the electric heater. "And I wanted to keep my eye on them."

"Mmm. Patrick said there was more tension than usual. Not pranks or anything, just a general unhappiness." Robin peered over the railing, watching as Emma and Trina talked to each other enthusiastically, their hands flying. Cameron was showing Jake something on his Nintendo Switch, and Joss was staring down at her phone.

"You can't force kids to like each other," Sonny said. He bumped Robin's shoulder. "But thanks for trying. Even if you had to invite Carly. Never thought I'd see the day.'

"Me either," Robin muttered. She straightened as Joss said something to Spencer, and Trina narrowed her eyes. None of the adults could hear what was said, but there was no mistaking the expression on Trina's face or the flushed cheeks on Joss. Cameron set his game aside, but it was too late. Joss was already on her feet and dashing across the yard towards the house.

"Mayday," Sonny said.

Joss charged up the stairs and into the house. Robin winced, started to follow but Jason held out a hand. "Let me try."

"I guess. You always talked sense into Carly. To the extent anyone could," Robin added as Jason went inside. He closed the door behind him and set the beer on the island counter.

"Did anyone see where Joss went?" Jason asked Robert and Mac, busy working the second turkey.

"Uh, towards the front of the house," Mac said.

Jason found her in the entry way, shrugging into her jacket. "Joss—"

"Don't even start, Uncle Jase. This was stupid. Okay? Just stupid. I didn't even want to come—" Joss looked at him, her blue eyes shimmering with tears. "I get it.

And I'm tired of pity invites."

"Okay, but—"

Joss yanked open the door, and lit out, running down the front walk. Jason grimaced, jogged to catch up with her. "Didn't you promise not to walk anywhere alone?" he called as Joss reached the sidewalk.

"Oh—" Joss stopped, closed her eyes, and huffed. "That was after dark. And I was just imagining those sounds, okay?" Her lip trembled. "Don't make me go back. Please."

"I won't," Jason said carefully, wishing Elizabeth was here. She'd know what to say. "If you really want to go home, I'll take you myself. It's too far to walk—"

"Emma hates me, and her mom hates my mom, so I know I only got invited because Aunt Liz made her parents do it—" Joss folded her arms. "I know I pulled some nasty pranks on Trina, and I shouldn't have tried to make her miss the cheerleading tryouts or tell Oscar that thing about her hair, but I was just so mad at her—"

"Joss—"

"Like, Trina and Emma just walk into a room and everyone loves them. They don't even have to work at it. Do you know how how annoying that is? I'm pretty. I'm rich. I'm supposed to be the popular one—" Joss sucked in breath. "God, I hate myself. Emma's right. I'm just a spoiled entitled princess who couldn't make friends if someone tied a meat chop around my neck."

Jason frowned. "Is that what she said?"

"The princess part. I added the rest of it. They only put up with me because of Cameron. I used to be able to count on Spencer, but now he's dating Trina, so I'm the fifth wheel, and it sucks. I don't want to be here anymore, okay?" Tears were streaming down her cheeks, and Jason didn't know the first thing to say to make her feel better. "I hate it. I hate them, and I hate my mother, because let me tell you, being her daughter hasn't helped either."

"Joss—"

"I want to leave. Please. I want to go home."

Jason opened his mouth to say something, but Carly stepped up behind him, putting a hand on his shoulder. Next to her stood Cameron, a distraught expression

on his face.

"Thanks for the invite, Jase. Really. Tell Patrick when he gets home I appreciate it," Carly said. "But Joss and I are gonna head out."

"Joss, don't go—"

"Don't worry about it." Joss forced a smile on her face, swiped at her tears. "It's fine. You'll have more fun when I'm not here."

"That's not true—"

But Joss just followed her mother to the car, leaving Jason and Cameron the sidewalk. Cameron exhaled slowly. "I didn't even realize they were fighting," he told his father. "We were all fine, and then I looked away to help Jake with the game—next thing I knew—"

"I know." Jason put a hand on his shoulder. "Let's go back inside. Grandma Laura's watching TV with Aiden in the living room, and she's probably ready for a break from the puppy parade."

### **General Hospital: Locker Room**

When the clock struck noon, Elizabeth and Patrick were already in the locker room, changing from scrubs to street clothes. She checked her phone, showed it to him. He nodded grimly. As expected, Baker was still asleep, and would be for at least another three hours if he kept the schedule they'd carefully monitored.

Elizabeth sighed when a text flashed on the screen. "Joss and Carly already made a run for it," she told Patrick. "The girls got into a fight."

Patrick winced. "I was really hoping that wouldn't happen."

"Me, too—" Elizabeth got to her feet, then braced her hand on the locker, pressing her other hand to her abdomen. "Whoa."

"You good?" Alarm flashed over his face. "Do you need something? I can go get Britt—"

"No, no—" She exhaled slowly. "The flutters," she murmured. "It's the first time I've felt the baby."

"Oh." Patrick shoved his hands in his pockets. "You know, we can cancel our plans—"

"No. No." Elizabeth let the moment wash through her, the sensation of the life growing inside her. This baby was going to have everything she could offer — a world safe from Baker. "No, let's go."

They had a small window of maybe a half hour before anyone at the house realized they were late. From this moment on, there would be no speaking. Only carrying out the plan they'd carefully orchestrated.

Nothing could go wrong.

### **Scorpio-Drake Home: Living Room**

Cameron tried to distract himself by watching the Puppy Bowl with his youngest brother who was positive that this was the year he'd convince their parents he was old enough for a dog.

Just like he had been for three years.

But he couldn't get Joss's face out of his head, and the way she'd run away. Cameron had only heard part of the words Emma had flung at Joss — the spoiled princess part — but there had to be more for Joss to flip out. They were always sniping at each other, weren't they? Why was it suddenly different? Joss had been moody for a few weeks, ever since the dance—

"I'll be back," he told Aiden when he saw Emma through the archway to the kitchen. "Hey."

"Hey." Emma bit her lip. "You never came back," she said, pitching her voice low so her grandfather and uncle didn't hear her. "Where's Joss?"

"Don't tell me you actually care," Cameron found himself saying, then winced when Emma narrowed his eyes. "We need to talk."

"Yeah, fine." Emma led him up the backstairs to her room, leaving the door open a few inches. "Look, it wasn't my idea to invite her, so don't be mad at me—Trina is tired of putting up with her—"

"You know, I get why Trina and Joss have their issues. Joss has said and done some stupid thing. But not lately—"

"Oh, then I guess everything's forgiven—"

"But Joss is still my best friend. Okay? Outside of you," he added. "And she's always

been there for me."

"One time she tried to steal her dad's plane—"

"How about when Deenie Masterson turned me in for cheating on that science test last year? When Mr. K found that cheat sheet on the floor, and she blamed me—"

"Joss got up, made a scene, and demanded a lawyer." Emma made a face. "She's good at making a spectacle of herself—"

"What did she do today that was so bad?" Cameron wanted to know. "You called her a spoiled little princess. What did she even say?"

"Trina was talking about her dad being out of town and missing him. Joss, like always, decided make it all about her." Emma rolled her eyes. "Talking about how she understood and missed her dad. Like it's the same thing! Trina got mad—"

"Dude, Joss's dad lives on a different continent—"

"And Trina just reminded her that Joss's dad chooses not to be with her," Emma said with a shrug, "and Trina's dad is doing important work. Joss got mad at her, and I told her to stop being a spoiled little princess and just be glad we let her in the house after all the crap she pulled—"

Cameron stared at her blankly. "Trina said what? Are you serious? You don't even think it's messed up that she told Joss her dad didn't want her—"

"Oh, come on, Joss's dad worships her—"

"You wouldn't get it," Cameron retorted. "You never had a parent abandon you—and don't bring up your mother. She didn't walk away from you, okay? And she fought hard to come home. My dad didn't. He didn't want me. And Joss thinks that all the time about her dad, so yeah, I think it's a shitty thing to say when Joss was probably just trying to find something they had in common."

"Oh, come on! Why do you always see the best in Joss?"

"Why do you always see the worst?" Cameron shook his head and started for the door.

"Cam, wait—" Emma reached for his arm, but he shook her off.

"No, I'm pissed. You co-signed something really mean. I spent years wondering what I did to make my dad—Lucky—stop loving me. And sometimes I still think—"

He stopped, took a deep breath. "It messes with your head when someone who is supposed to stick doesn't. I got lucky, okay? I got a new dad and it's great. Joss doesn't have that. I don't care what pranks or crap she pulls with Trina, it's mean to say what you guys did, and I don't like either of you right now."

Cameron stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

## **Parking Lot**

This time it was Patrick who bought the car in cash, using the instructions Elizabeth had given him. If anyone ever noticed the strange cars on the street, the descriptions wouldn't lead to the same person - and Patrick had used a wig to buy it so they wouldn't even have the right hair color.

They parked the car at a drug store halfway between Baker's house and the hospital, far enough away that it wouldn't be tracked. They parked their own car on opposite sides of the lot, then went to the car. Patrick slid into the driver's side, Elizabeth into the passenger. They exchanged the coats and hats they'd worn from the hospital, for a different set — deep maroon for Elizabeth and navy blue for Patrick.

"Twenty minutes," Elizabeth said. "That's the window. We have to be back in this parking lot in twenty minutes."

"Got it." He put the car into drive, then they traveled in silence. He wished it was dark for the cover of night, but broad daylight would have to do. Most of the people on the block worked, he thought. And they were parking a block away, walking through the cluster of trees. It wasn't perfect, but it was the best they could do.

Waiting for perfect meant another day Baker could plot to hurt one of their girls, and Patrick would gladly go down for this if he knew he'd kept them safe.

They got to the woods, and made their way towards the spot that backed up to Baker's house. His hands were in his pockets, wrapped tightly around the bottle and accompanying syringe.

Then they were at the edge of the woods, Baker's dumpy, run-down rental house in front of him, the back door six feet away. "Last chance," he murmured.

Elizabeth slid out the lock picks from her pocket. "Let's get this over with." She showed him her phone with the other hand showing Baker still asleep.

Show time.

## **Scorpio-Drake Home: Emma's Bedroom**

Trina knocked on Emma's open door. "Hey. You never came back down—" She paused. "Are you crying? What happened?"

Emma sniffled, swiping at her tears. She shoved herself off her bed. "I'm fine. Let's go downstairs—"

"No, did you and Cam have another fight?" Trina folded her arms. "What did Joss tell him? Because if she made it sound worse—"

"I don't know what she told him," Emma said, "but it's not—" She drew in a shaky breath. "I don't know. Do you think we were fair to her today?"

Trina shifted, staring at the ground. "I don't know. We've been mean to each other since kindergarten—"

"Yeah, I know."

"But—" Trina winced. "The thing about her dad might be a low blow. I'm a kid of divorce, too. And Spencer gave me attitude about it. I just—Joss is always talking about her dad and how rich and important he is—" She closed her mouth. "Which might be her way of explaining why he's never around."

"I just—Cam talked about how his dad—his mom's last husband—just left him. You don't remember him, I don't think."

"No, but I know the story. He's Aiden's bio dad, but Jake's dad adopted Cam and Aiden, so it's all legal." Trina leaned against the door frame. "And I know Spencer's sensitive about the dad thing."

"I'm not saying we have to be best friends with her," Emma said, "but you guys haven't pulled any pranks on each other since the blue hair dye. I don't really know why I snapped at her today."

"Me either. And I feel bad that she left like that. She must have been really upset. And like, yeah, my dad does really important work, but—" Trina pressed his lips together. "Sometimes it's like that work is more important than me. So if that's what Joss feels about her dad, I guess maybe we got something in common."

"We'll call her and make it right," Emma said with a nod. "I know we can."

## **Baker House: Kitchen**



The house was silent as Patrick and Elizabeth crept inside. She closed the door, keeping the handle twisted until the door was nestled inside the frame, then releasing it so that there was no sound of tumblers clicking.

They'd done a test run during one of Baker's night shifts a few days ago to time themselves. Just one. Any more than that, they risked getting caught.

She looked at her phone one more time — Baker was still asleep, resting on his stomach, the thin blanket shoved to the side, his face turned towards the camera. Elizabeth nodded, then Patrick took the lead.

They kept their arms at their side, their hands were gloved, and they'd taken off their shoes before creeping out of the woods. It had added maybe a minute to their time, but Patrick didn't want shoe prints from the mix of dirt and snow. It had to look like no one had been in the house.

Patrick rounded the corner out of the kitchen, then down the short hallway connecting the living room to the one bedroom and bath at the other end of the house. Mercifully, the bedroom door stood partially ajar — though during their test run, Patrick had oiled the joints on both doors to avoid any creaking.

He paused outside the bedroom door, looked back at Elizabeth, then at the door — carefully pushing it open.

### **Scorpio-Drake Home: Backyard**

Robin stepped out onto the deck. "How's the turkey going?" she asked Sonny. "It hasn't exploded yet, so that's a good sign."

"Ye of little faith," Sonny replied good-naturedly.

Robin smirked, then looked at Jason. "Hey, did you hear from Elizabeth yet? I thought and Patrick would be done at noon. He promised he'd come right home so I wasn't on my own with Carly—and he doesn't know she left—" she added when Sonny opened his mouth.

Jason checked his phone. It was nearly twelve-thirty, maybe ten or fifteen minutes after they could have expected them to be home. "She didn't call."

"Maybe they got called into an emergency surgery," Sonny suggested.

"Yeah, that's true. Still—" Robin made a face, looked back at the teens. "Cameron didn't come back out?"

"No, he's inside with Aiden." Jason followed her gaze. Emma and Trina had returned to the group around the electric heater, but it was more sullen.

"I'm sorry Joss got hurt," Robin said. "But maybe it's for the best. If they don't get along, we can't force it—"

"Joss gets along fine with Cameron," Jason said without thinking, and Robin's eyes narrowed.

"So, it's my kid that's the problem and not Carly's?" she asked coolly.

"You know, I think it'll be more comfortable inside with the former commissioners," Sonny muttered, ducking between them and disappearing inside.

"That's not what I said," Jason shooting Sonny a dirty look just as the mobster slid the door closed. Coward. "I just said Joss has no issue with Cameron."

"Which is something she gets from her mother. Carly always managed to make friends with the guys, but I never met a woman who could stand her—"

"Joss isn't her mother," Jason cut in sharply and Robin's cheeks flushed. "And Carly was friends with a woman. Sonny's sister. And she and Elizabeth get along fine now—"

"Which means it's me and my kid who are the problem—"

"You're putting words in my mouth," Jason said, trying to find the patience. "I know Carly isn't for everyone. I know that you have legitimate issues with her that go back a long time. And no, I don't think we should try to force Emma or anyone else to be friends with Joss."

"Then why bring up Cameron if you agree with me?"

"Because it's—" Jason took a minute. "Elizabeth and Carly couldn't stand each other. But they figured out how to be civil because of me. Cameron and Joss have been friends since they were kids. I don't see how it's different—"

"You wouldn't. You've had a blind spot to Carly since the day you met her, and it looks like your son picked up your bad habit of expecting everyone to put up with someone just because they—" Robin closed her eyes. "I don't want to fight about this. I don't even know why we are."

"You don't have to like Carly. No one said you did. I just don't see what's so wrong with Joss that justifies making her cry." Or making her feel so left out she walked

home alone.

"Maybe it's just striking a nerve," Robin said slowly, "listening to you talk about my daughter having to put up with someone she doesn't like because her boyfriend does." She looked back out over the yard. "I'm sorry."

"No, I am. Because I forced Carly on you back then, and I never really apologized. I messed up, and I hurt you," Jason told her. "I'm sorry."

Robin smiled then, a bit more genuinely. "It's silly, really, for us to get involved with their problems. I would have been mortified if Uncle Mac was fighting my battles for me behind my back."

"I don't remember being a teenager, but I don't think I'd like it either."

"I'll go get Sonny and tell him it's safe to come back out. I don't want this thing exploding on my deck."

Baker House: Bedroom

The room was dark, lit only by the weak November sunlight filtering in through the grimy windows, but Patrick and Elizabeth had practiced this too many times in their minds and in conversations.

Patrick drew out the bottle of succinylcholine and syringe. He stuck the needle inside the top, drew out the dosage required and handed it to Elizabeth. He returned the bottle to his pocket and went to stand at the top of the bed while Elizabeth went to the foot of the bed.

She gently drew back the blanket where it covered Baker's foot. It was long, skinny, the big toe sticking out like a finger. Her heart was pounding. It was the first time she'd been this close to him since that day at the hospital, when she'd been catapulted back to that horrible moment, to being on her back, the freezing snow and ice seeping into her back, spreading through her limbs, numbing her, strangling her throat she couldn't even scream—

The sight of him, the way his voice sounded — it had brought back her worst nightmare. Pandora's Box had been blown to smithereens and every terrible thought and feeling was pouring out. She couldn't shove them all back in again, and maybe she'd never get that before feeling back.

But it would be better. She would exist in a world where she and every other girl walking alone would be safe.

Her heart might be pounding, but her fingers were steady as she leaned down, angled the syringe between Baker's toes. She plunged the needle in, his foot jerking just slightly. Then Elizabeth depressed the plunger, watching as the medication left the syringe and entered his body.

Patrick waited with baited breath at the end of the bed, ready to leap into action if Baker did more than jerk his foot—but nothing.

The succinylcholine was a quick-acting drug, which made it perfect for this, really. Elizabeth watched as Baker's chest stopped rising. They waited a full minute, then Patrick pressed two fingers to Baker's neck. He looked at Elizabeth, nodded.

It was done.

Tom Baker was dead.

Elizabeth slid the used syringe into her pocket. It, along with the clothes they wore, would be burned at some point. But for now, it was time to go.

On their way out, Patrick stopped, his eyes falling on the photographs across the room, pinned up. He'd recognized them that first day — the missing photos from his locker. From his wallet. His little girl on the wall.

Elizabeth touched his arm, and he looked at her, the rage simmering beneath the surface. She tilted her head. They were on a tight schedule if their alibis were to hold.

After another moment, Patrick turned his back, leaving the evidence behind so that all the world would know that while someone had died here today, nothing of value had been lost.

### **Scorpio-Drake Home: Front Step**

Still a bit unsettled after the argument with Robin, Jason stepped out to the front of the house, scanning the street. He and Robin had been distracted from the question where their spouses were.

It was twelve-forty-five. A half hour later than he would have thought Elizabeth would be home from work. He wasn't really that worried—after all, she was Patrick's go-to surgical nurse and it wouldn't be the first time they'd worked overtime.

He took his phone out, and looked at the find app, expecting to see Elizabeth's phone at General Hospital. He frowned. It wasn't — it was in a shopping center.

Curious, he called her.

"Hello?" her voice, a bit breathless. "Jason?"

"Hey. I was just wondering what happened."

"Oh—" Elizabeth laughed. "I got the weirdest craving while I was clocking out. I wanted this brand of pickles. You know those bread and butter ones you hate?"

"Yeah—"

"Patrick offered to come with me, and then we got distracted in the store, because I wanted candy, but they were out of Starbursts, and I couldn't decide what would taste right with the pickles."

"Candy," Jason repeated. "With pickles."

"Mmmm, when I was pregnant with Jake, all I wanted was Starbursts soaked in pickle juice. I can hear you making a face from here—shut up, Patrick, it's disgusting but I love it."

Jason's chest eased. He hadn't been around for any of those pregnancy cravings, but he'd be here for these, and he'd make sure the house would be stocked with the disgusting combination. "I would have gotten those for you—"

"It's fine. We're leaving now, and we'll be home in like five. I love you."

"I love you, too."

### **Scorpio-Drake House: Living Room**

Patrick hung up his coat and turned to Robin with a grin. "So, I hear Carly made a run for it. You get all the good karma and none of the blame. It's a good day."

"Very funny." She frowned when a pack of Starbursts fell from his coat pocket. He stared at for a long moment, then scooped it up. He ripped off the top and popped a pink one in his mouth. "I thought they were out of those. That's what Jason said."

"Elizabeth spent forever in the candy aisle trying to find the big bag—" He wagged the little package. "I got the last one up at the register. Don't tell her, though. There wouldn't have been enough."

Robin furrowed her brow and he returned her gaze with a bland expression. Be cool, he reminded himself. You've got nothing to hide. You were once a master of saying

nothing to women and getting away with it.

"Stealing candy from a pregnant woman." Robin shook her head, then held out her hand. "I'm gonna need a penalty."

"She finds out, I'm coming for you," he warned, dropping a yellow in her palm.

In the kitchen, Elizabeth twisted the cap off the jar of pickles and poured some of the juice into a glass tumbler. Then she set it aside and dug back in the white the plastic bag for a bag of gummies.

Crowded around the kitchen island were a crowd of men who were appalled when she dropped several pieces into the glass. "I know pregnancy cravings are bad," Sonny said, slowly, "and listen, Carly and her pickled turnips—it violated some laws. But that is disgusting."

Elizabeth pursed her lips, glared at him, then looked at Mac and Robert. "You have an opinion to offer?"

"Nope," Mac said. "I learned from Felicia not to argue. Or judge." He winced as she plucked one out and ate it. "It's a choice."

"I'm taking my appetizer somewhere where I'll be appreciated." She picked up the glass and went to the dining room where Anna and Felicia were laughing about something.

"They bring new life into the word," Robert said solemnly. "It is not for us to understand or question. But merely to support."

After leaving Patrick the kitchen, Robin went outside to find Jason checking the deep fryer. "Hey. I have a question for you."

"No, I can't explain what Elizabeth's eating. Don't ask me to try." He'd buy her whatever she craved, but even his stomach had rolled when he passed through the dining room and watched her eat the pickle juice soaked candy.

"Oh. No. Not that. She said they went to a drug store right?" Robin asked. "That's why they were late?"

Jason frowned, looked at Robin more closely. "Why?"

She pulled out a crumpled receipt. "This was in Patrick's pocket. They bought the candy ten minutes ago."

"She said—" Jason took the receipt, studied it. A bag of gummy bears, a jar of pickles—and Starbursts. "I thought they were out of these."

"Patrick said he grabbed the last package, and not to tell her. But it's all on the same receipt —and it's not one of our cards."

"No, it's Elizabeth's—" He looked at Robin. "Why did you check his pocket?"

"I don't know. He just seemed weird. And trying to hard not to be." Robin bit her lip. "It's strange, isn't it? I don't think they were at the drug store the whole time."

"What do you think was going on?" Jason handed the receipt back. "There's no reason for them to lie—"

"It makes sense. Elizabeth got a craving at work, and Patrick tagged along. But then he takes the candy she specifically told you she was looking for. And you said she ate it with Jake. But Emily used to tease her about the gummy bears in pickle juice."

He couldn't answer that. He hadn't been there. He didn't know what she'd craved. "Robin—"

"I think she panicked when you called. And she said the wrong thing." Robin looked at the receipt. "I don't know why, but I think they're lying."

"To hide what?" Jason demanded. "I trust Elizabeth—"

"And I trust my husband. They would be the last people to have an affair. But that doesn't mean they can't be hiding another secret."

"I think," Jason said after a long moment, "that you're overthinking this. Elizabeth probably misspoke on the phone—"

"So Patrick lied to me about it, not wanting me to tell her he had them? Jason—"

"You two look serious," Sonny said, sliding open the door. "We're not fighting again, are we?"

"No." Robin forced a smile. "No. We're not. How's the turkey? It hasn't exploded yet, so that's a good sign."

### **Morgan House: Master Bedroom**

He'd brushed Robin's concerns off and had actually managed to forget them entirely

as they finished cooking dinner and sat down to eat early. Sonny's deep fried turkey had turned out better than anyone had expected, but most of the food had disappeared by the time people started heading home.

They brought the boys home, but there was no bedtime. It was a holiday which meant all three boys would be up until dawn playing video games in the living room.

Elizabeth poured mouth wash into a cap and swished it around her mouth. After spitting it into the sink, she smiled at Jason who was already stretched out in bed, one of his travel books in his hands. "There. Pickle juice gone."

"I wasn't going to ask—" And then Jason remembered the strange conversation with Robin, and the receipt. "You know, Patrick got the last pack of Starbursts and didn't tell you," he said.

She flicked off the light, and crawled across him to her side of the bed. She flashed him a confused smile. "I bought them for him—" Elizabeth pressed her lips together. "Oh. I wasn't thinking when I talked to you earlier. He was trying to convince me the Starbursts would taste better, and I guess I just—" She shrugged and picked up the remote from her nightstand. "I got mixed up."

"Oh." He fell silent, looked back at the page in his book, but his attention was unfocused. She hadn't sounded confused on the phone, and Robin had seemed pretty clear about Patrick's words.

But what was the alternative? To believe she was lying to him? Elizabeth never lied to him.

Elizabeth leaned back against the pillows, and he let it go, letting her relax and watch one of her shows, and he went back to his book again. Trying to focus.

"I felt the baby today," Elizabeth said, and that got his attention. Jason set the book aside. "Not like—kicking. Obviously—" She took his hand, rested it against the gentle curve. There was nothing yet, and he was a bit disappointed. "It was just a flutter really. But it'll be soon." She sighed happily. "And I think maybe I might be further along than I thought," she continued. "Because I'm bigger now than I was with any of the boys at four months."

"We can find out next week," he told her. He leaned over, kissed her. "Mmm, no pickle juice at all."

"I told you I'd take care of it." She wound her arms around his neck and drew him over her. And he stopped thinking about Starbursts and receipts altogether.



## General Hospital: Nurse's Station

"You know what I think is actually going to kill me?" Patrick asked Elizabeth the next morning as he stepped up inside the hub and reached for a chart. "The fact that we thought of everything except the cover story."

"I panicked," Elizabeth muttered. "I swear to God if this falls apart because I said Starbursts instead of gummy bears, I'll deserve the prison sentence." She clicked away at the keyboard, irritated with herself. "I distracted Jason, I think. What about you?"

"Maybe. It's hard to tell with Robin. She's sneaky." Patrick leaned against the counter. "Uh, how you feeling this morning? I mean, we're good, right?"

"Do you mean did I wake up feeling guilty?" she murmured, keeping her voice low but resisting the urge to whisper. Low conversations about patients were normal. Hushed whispers were suspicious. "No. You?"

"You'd think." Patrick shrugged. "I'm off to my rounds."

He disappeared down the hallway, then Laura stepped off an elevator a few minutes later, her brow furrowed.

"Hey. You okay?" Elizabeth asked. "You look upset."

"Not upset. Concerned." Laura leaned across the counter. "And I wanted you to hear it from me."

Oh, damn it. Had they already found Baker? They should be fine, Elizabeth told herself. It was twenty hours. She'd wanted forty-eight, but—

"There's a possibility Tom Baker has jumped parole," Laura cautioned her. "He didn't report for work this morning."

"Oh." Elizabeth tightened her fingers around her pen. "How—Maybe he's sick."

"Maybe. I spoke to his supervisor to see what we should do." Laura said. "He has to miss an appointment with his parole officer. and that's not until Monday. Unless you want me to—if he violates parole—"

What would look less guilty, Elizabeth wondered? Encouraging Laura to push for contacting the parole officer and finding Baker's body sooner? Or holding off to give the body a chance to sit longer, making cause of death harder to determine?

How would she have answered if she didn't know exactly where Tom Baker was?

"I'd feel so silly if I asked you to push and he's just at home with the flu or something. I mean, he lives alone, right? Maybe he's just too sick to call out. You call his parole officer, and he finds him at home, I'll just—" Elizabeth exhaled slowly. "I don't want to live my life in fear. And I don't want to think about Tom Baker. No special favors. If he violates on his own terms, that's his problem."

"All right. You let me know if you change your mind." Laura patted her hand and walked away, leaving Elizabeth unsure if she'd made the right decision. Too late now, she thought, and went back to work.

### **PCPD: Commissioner's Office**

"No, no, I told you. I'll handle this myself. Yeah—I've been waiting for this." Jordan hung up the phone and looked across the desk at Nathan West. "Get the surveillance report on Morgan and Corinthos for the last few days—" She got to her feet, tucking her gun in the holster at her back and clipping the badge to her belt. "That was Baker's parole officer. He missed his appointment today and he hasn't been to work since Thanksgiving."

Nathan furrowed his brow. "I'll pull the report, Commissioner, but if they saw a crime—"

"I never expected to catch them in the act." Jordan jerked a shoulder and went towards the door. "All I have to do is put them in the area."

Nathan pulled out his cell phone to make the call, but he wasn't sure why Jordan was so confident—they'd need a whole lot more to put someone away than being in the area where a crime was committed.

### **Port Charles High School: Hallway**

Joss pulled her algebra book from the shelf and tossed it in her bag. She slammed the locker shut, then jumped at the sight of Emma and Trina right next to it. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

"Sorry—" Emma elbowed Trina. "Go ahead."

"Um, about Thanksgiving—" Trina began.

"No, don't bother. I'm not interested in another truce that's only going to last until you get annoyed with me again." Joss slung her bag over her shoulder. "We've been

irritating each other since the sand box. You don't like me, and I—" She paused. "Well, you don't like me. We don't have to keep pretending—"

"No, just wait—" Emma snagged Joss by the elbow. "I feel bad because we did totally call a truce, and Trina was just saying that we haven't pulled any pranks since the hair dye—"

"Which you deserved—"

"Because I told Oscar Nero that crap about you—yeah, well, I only did that because of what you told him," Joss reminded her, and Trina made a face.

"Wait, what did you say?" Emma frowned. "Treen?"

"I—" Trina hissed. "I told Oscar that Joss's mom is, like, a crazy person. Like, certifiably insane. Um, that she's done time in a mental institution. Which isn't really a lie—"

"Trina—" Emma scowled. "That's almost as bad as Thanksgiving—"

"I know I did a lot of things when we were kids—I said things," Joss corrected, "that I didn't know were hurtful. And you're never really going to like me because of it, Trina. I get it. I'm not looking for you to like me. We're not friends."

"It's been pointed out to me," Trina said slowly, "that we're not kids anymore and we shouldn't be acting like it."

"I'm not looking for us to be okay," Joss said. "I just—I just want it to be civil. When Cam's around. He's my best friend. I don't want to lose that."

"And you shouldn't. Cam was really pissed about last week. He was right. We were totally out of line, and I'm sorry."

"Me, too," Trina offered.

"Okay." Joss nodded. "Um, thanks, I guess." The warning bell rang. "I gotta go, or I'm gonna get detention again." She headed to class, but felt a bit lighter. Maybe things were going to be okay.

### **Baker House: Living Room**

Jordan knew as soon as they got inside the house—the smell of sewage permeated the small, one-story house.

"Call for CSU," Jordan told one of the officers, then nodded to Nathan. "Let's go." She headed towards the smell, across the living room, and down the short hallway—the bedroom door had been left open—

They could see Tom Baker sprawled on his back, simply laying as if he were asleep. Nathan approached the bed, coming around Jordan. He tapped the exposed foot—and it moved. "Body's out of rigor," he told Jordan.

"Looking at least twenty-four hours—" Jordan clicked on her flashlight, moved it around the room. "And judging by the smell and the missed shift on Thursday evening—" Her light stopped on the wall opposite of the bed. Her flashlight illuminated several photos pinned up. "What are those—"

Nathan went to take a closer look, his jaw clenching. "That's Maxie's little cousin, Emma. And Carly's kid, Joss. Hell, that's Morgan's wife." He turned back to Jordan. "And there's another girl I've seen around Emma—"

"Trina," Jordan murmured. Marcus's little girl. Pinned up on the wall of a man suspected of rape. She exhaled slowly. "He's got pictures of teenaged girls—"

"And one adult woman." Nathan stepped even closer. "Shit, Commissioner, he was stalking them—" He turned back to Baker. "No signs of foul play—if Morgan did this, why did he leave the photos up?"

"To make sure we knew what he was," Jordan murmured. Her stomach twisted. Oh, God. Had Tom Baker hunted girls connected to Elizabeth and Marcus? "I don't care what it looks like. We treat it like a murder until the autopsy comes back."

She looked back at the body. "We work it until we know the truth, Nathan. We don't pick the victim—"

"No, but he sure hell did," Nathan retorted.

"Detective—"

"Yeah, I got the message. We don't pick the victim. We just find the answers."

### **Greystone: Living Room**

Sonny closed the double doors behind Jason and turned to his partner, his face somber and pale. "I got a call from the PCPD—"

"What's wrong? You look like—" Jason stilled. "Is it one of the kids? Morgan—"

"No. No. Nothing like that—" Sonny shook his head. "Baker's dead."

"Baker—" Jason stared at him. "I don't—what are you talking about?"

"Parole called in a welfare check after a missed appointment. Baker hasn't shown for work since Thursday evening. Thanksgiving," Sonny clarified. "They found him in his house."

"What happened?" Jason's chest tightened, and he thought of the strange conversation with Robin—

"No signs of foul play," Sonny said. "So it might be natural, but she's gonna look at us hard." He smiled faintly. "Aren't we lucky we've got a good alibi for the entire day? Jordan can ask a couple of former cops, WSB agents, and commissioners about us."

"Yeah," Jason said slowly. "Lucky for us."

"I thought you might want to tell Elizabeth yourself. I didn't think she should hear it through the grapevine."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll make sure to get to her." Jason left then, and pulled out his phone as he left the house. But it wasn't Elizabeth he called—

He had a feeling she wouldn't be surprised.

"Jason?"

"Robin. Where are you?"

"At home. Why?"

"Stay there. I'll be right there."

### **Scorpio-Drake House: Living Room**

Robin hadn't seen Jason this unsettled in a long time, but as her ex-boyfriend paced the room, she started to get worried. "Jason—"

"Thanksgiving. Who's idea was it this year?" he wanted to know. He stopped, looked at her. "I mean, Elizabeth and I usually go to Sonny's. You've never invited Sonny here. "

"No, I guess—" Robin tipped her head. "It was Patrick's, I think. He said it would be

funny to have Sonny here with my dad and Uncle Mac, and I figured why not—Jason, what's going on?"

"Tom Baker is dead," he said flatly. "I don't have the details yet, but apparently it was some time on Thanksgiving. The PCPD has had me and Sonny under surveillance since Baker was paroled—"

"Wait a second—" Robin put up her hands. "What are you saying—"

"Elizabeth and Patrick arranged for Sonny and I have to alibis. She knew Jordan had pulled people from Baker—that they were still watching us—we just talked about it. And they were late—"

"I—" Robin shook her head. "It's a coincidence, okay? How was he killed?"

"No signs of foul play," Jason said. Instead of reassuring her, the news sent a shiver down her spine, and she closed her eyes. "Yeah. That's what I thought."

"Jason, are you telling me you think your wife murdered Tom Baker and that my husband helped? Do you hear yourself? Elizabeth is pregnant—"

"She was bleeding out from a stab wound to the gut in the middle of the woods on that damn island, and managed to get to my gun and blow out Stavros Cassadine's brains," Jason said, and she closed her mouth. "And your husband operated on her in the middle of a flat with a first aid kit. He's done brain surgery by flashlight. I know who my wife is and what she's capable of—"

"If she's under threat," Robin reminded him. "What's the threat? Baker's been out for months! Do you really think she's been waiting all along—"

"No. But something happened—it had to." Jason scrubbed a hand down his face. "You knew they were lying, Robin."

"Yes, but—" Her voice faltered. "Jason. What exactly are we talking about here? I mean, if it's true—" She folded her arms. "What are we supposed to do?"

"I'm going to make sure it goes away," Jason told her, and she bit her lip, nodded. "So far you and I are the only ones that know anything was a little weird that day. I think we were the only ones who noticed they were late."

"Right. And we couldn't testify against them even if we wanted to." Robin bit her lip. "Do we ask them about it?" Did she really want to know?

"They lied to us last week, so I don't think they're planning to bring us in—" Jason

grimaced. "I need to know what happened so I can make sure they're safe. You can—you can do whatever you need to. I just—we need to be on the same page. If anyone asks about Thanksgiving—"

"Nothing happened," Robin said softly. "Except some teenage drama. It was a great day."

"Good. Thank you—"

"No, thank you for—I don't know. For whatever you're going to do. I don't need to know about it, but thank you."

### **Morgan House: Driveway**

Elizabeth locked her car, frowning at Jason's SUV parked at the curb. He was usually at the warehouse for a few more hours—

Then she saw the door open across the street, and Jason step outside — say something to Robin before turning towards their house. Their eyes met, and her insides tightened. He knew something. Even from this distance—

And then a car turned around the curve and slid into the space behind Jason's SUV. Jordan stepped out, followed by Nathan.

Baker had been found.

"Well, this is good timing," Jordan called as she came up the front walk, a manila folder tucked under her arm. Jason was crossing the street. "I was hoping to talk to both of you."

"What's going on?" Elizabeth tightened her hand around the strap of her purse. "Nothing happened to the kids, did it—"

"No, no. Hello, Mr. Morgan," Jordan said coolly. "Have a few minutes for some questions?"

"Do I need to call Diane?" Jason wanted to know, already bored with the conversation. He stepped up next to Elizabeth. To Jordan, he would appear to be stone-faced, but Elizabeth knew her husband—she could feel tension and tightness radiating—

"Well, why don't you listen to my questions and you can make that decision?" Jordan offered. She opened the folder, and Elizabeth's stomach twisted. "Tom Baker. Died sometime Thursday — preliminary autopsy says maybe the afternoon."

No cause of death just yet, but I thought we'd find out where some interested parties were—"

"So you came right over to the house of the woman he raped as a teenager," Elizabeth said. She folded her arms, took a deep breath.

"He was never convicted of that crime," Jordan retorted. "So can I get an alibi or—"

"Thanksgiving," Jason said. "You can ask about twenty people," he told her. "Give or take. Robin and Patrick invited us over. So my sons saw me all day. So did my mother-in-law. Robin's uncle and dad. Her mother—"

Jordan's mouth tightened. "You were with Mac and Robert Scorpio—and Laura Spencer and Anna Devane."

"So was Sonny. He deep fried a turkey. There were a lot of kids there, too. You can ask them. Elizabeth had work until about noon—but she saw me all afternoon." Jason lifted his brows. "Any other questions?"

"Just one." Jordan flipped to another photo — Baker's wall. "Did you know he was talking your wife and teenage girls close to her?"

Jason stared at the photo, the muscles in his cheeks twitching as Elizabeth digested the horror of what Jordan was asking—

"Wait, wait—" Elizabeth reached for the photo, finding it no trouble to find the horror and disgust she'd lived with for days. Weeks. "This is me—that's my girls—Jason—" Her voice broke. "He was watching all of them?"

Jordan hesitated. "I—"

"How could this happen? How could someone on parole take all these—" Elizabeth shoved the photo away. "How could no one have seen him do it?"

Jason put a hand at her waist, and she closed her mouth, still shaking. Because her fury was *real*. How could Jordan have not known? "We're done here. You have my alibi. Any thing else, call Diane."

Morgan House: Driveway

Jason watched as Jordan and Nathan climbed back into the car and drove away, but he didn't look at his wife. Couldn't.

He'd gone to Robin, they'd discussed the possibility, but until this moment—until



Jordan had showed them the photographs of what had been on Tom Baker's wall—photos of his wife. Of Joss. Of Emma and Trina—he realized he hadn't truly believed it.

Baker had been stalking his wife and young women close to her for months. And Jason hadn't known. Couldn't have known, thanks to the PCPD tying his hands—but Elizabeth—

She'd found out. She'd learned the truth, and she hadn't told him. She must have. He and Robin had wondered what had triggered Baker's death after all these months—

When the car had disappeared, Jason's chest eased a bit. He looked down at Elizabeth whose gaze was still trained on the horizon where Jordan's SUV had turned. Her face was pale, and she'd crossed her arms tightly. "Elizabeth—"

"You told me they had guys following Baker," Elizabeth said, her voice still shaky. "From the moment they learned what he was and what he'd done to me, the PCPD had eyes on him." A tear slid down her cheek. "They missed it. They didn't know. Those photos—" She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Nothing happened." Jason drew her against him, holding her tight. He knew they needed to have a conversation about Baker—about why she'd done this on her own—why she hadn't trusted him—but it wasn't his priority right now. "Nothing. Everyone is safe. Including you."

"They could have kept men on him," Elizabeth said, fisting her hands in his shirt, looking at him. Her eyes searching his. "But they were watching you instead. Jordan wanted you and Sonny more than keeping those girls safe."

He squinted slightly—and thought now of that conversation when the surveillance had been pulled on Baker. He swallowed hard — she'd used him for information. Another reason Baker had only recently died. There had been no one watching his comings and goings.

The yellow bus from the middle school turned a corner, stopping a block away—the normal bus stop. He cleared his throat. "Jake's home. Aiden and Cam will be here in a bit."

"I'm going to go wash my face." Elizabeth swiped at her eyes. "Wait—" She frowned. "Jordan never said how he died. Just that there was no cause of death."

"Yeah. Maybe it was natural causes," Jason said. "I'll have someone find out." And he'd try to think of the right way to ask his pregnant wife if she and her best friend

had planned and carried out the murder of her rapist. He exhaled slowly, watching her go inside. He should just ask her straight out, but she'd already lied to him. Would she keep lying?

He watched as Jake raced towards the house, their bright, beautiful miracle on his way home from school. Thought again of that day in Greece when Elizabeth had killed Stavros Cassadine. She was capable of anything when it came to protecting the people she loved.

"Dad! Dad!" Jake was breathless as he approached. "I did it! I got an A in math! You promised I could have the Playstation in my room for the whole week—"

Jason pushed Baker's death out of his head and reached for the paper from the triumphant student.

Inside, Elizabeth had gone upstairs to splash water on her face. She looked at herself in the mirror. Jordan had come to ask those questions even after she'd seen the photos. If she kept coming after Jason, if Jordan tried to break Jason's alibi, she'd make sure the entire world knew about those photos. She'd worked too hard to protect him from this—she'd even lied to him—

She'd be damned if Jordan was going to screw it up for her now.

### **PCPD: Commissioner's Office**

Jordan was seething when she stormed back in the office. "An alibi," she muttered. "A perfect alibi—"

"Maybe it was the heart problems," Nathan offered as he closed the door. "There's a history in the file. He wasn't in great shape. CSU says no signs of forced entry—"

"They're missing something—"

"Like we did?"

Jordan turned to the detective. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Nathan flipped open the file and held up the one of Baker's room. "Elizabeth Morgan had a good question. Baker was on parole. How did he manage to take all these photos of teen aged girls? We had surveillance on Baker for weeks. You're telling me he did this under their noses?"

Jordan scowled. "We don't pick our victim—"

"Say you get evidence that Morgan did this," Nathan interrupted. "You're going to want motive, right? The rape of his wife. A jury is going to see those photos. They're going to think whatever happened to Baker isn't so bad. Because at least they stopped him before another girl got attacked."

She hissed. "And you agree with them, don't you?"

"You rolled a dice, Commissioner," Nathan said. "You thought Jason or Sonny might take this opportunity to go after Baker. You waited for two months. And when the budget was strained, you didn't keep the guys on Baker. He's dead two weeks after we pull his surveillance. I think, judging by the photos in his room, maybe we got lucky."

"We don't pick our victims—"

"I hear you, and I'm going to investigate. We'll canvass the neighborhood. We'll go over the house, but Commissioner — I'm telling you — no jury in the world would convict this guy. You don't even have a cause of death."

"They're smart. They waited for Thanksgiving, surrounded themselves by family and former cops—they must have hired someone." Jordan shook her head. "I'm not giving up."

"Like I said, we'll run out the leads. Maybe we'll get lucky."

Nathan took the case file and returned to the squad room. He opened the file again, looked at the close-ups of Baker's photographs. He'd do the job, but he really didn't care if Baker was dead.

Justice came in all forms.

### **Morgan House: Master Bedroom**

Elizabeth rubbed lotion into her hands, watching Jason from her mirror as he changed. He'd been quiet all day, and she wondered if he suspected something. Or if he was worried about her because of the photographs.

She'd kept the truth from him because he never would have let her take care of this. He'd have insisted on doing it himself — and the PCPD was watching. What if they'd watched one of the men who worked for Jason? No, she couldn't take that chance. And she'd kept lying because Jason couldn't know anything until the body was discovered.

But she'd slipped up on Thanksgiving, and now she worried that he'd started to pull

at the threads.

"I nearly killed Baker when I was a kid," she found herself saying. Jason stilled, standing at the dresser, his back still her. "At the studio. After he'd locked Emily and I up. Lucky and Nikolas got to us—but Baker got there before we could leave."

She stared down at her wedding ring, twisted it. "There was a fight, and the gun was just on the floor. I grabbed it, and I held it on him. I didn't shoot him. I could have. Self-defense. Being held hostage. Protecting others. But I wanted him arrested. I wanted to see him go to jail and pay for what he'd done."

He turned and their eyes met in the mirror. "But he didn't get charged with your attack."

"No. I was stunned. Devastated when Taggart told me there wasn't enough evidence. He'd confessed to me, but then said I was just a scared little girl who didn't understand what he'd said. It'd be my word against his." She exhaled slowly. "Not only was he not going to get charged with it, but my case was being put on the shelf. They were going to stop investigating. I'd done everything wrong from the moment that night started. I lied. I went to the park. And I took a shower—"

"Hey." Jason came around the bed, sat on the edge. "You did the best you could—"

"Lucky told me not to shower. He told me to stay right where I was. He was going to get help. But I could—" Elizabeth's throat tightened, and she was back in the terrible night, curled up in that chair, sweet Foster's head resting on her knee. What a lovely dog he'd been— "I could still smell him. I could feel him—" On her. Inside. She shook her head to clear it. "But you know what I regret more than that shower?"

"What?"

She met his eyes again in the mirror. "I should have killed him then." Please. Her eyes begged him. If he suspected anything, please, she wanted him to understand. What she'd done had been justice, long overdue.

"Emily wanted to testify against him," Jason reminded her quietly. "She wanted to be brave like you—"

"Emily would have understood. She killed her rapist, too."

He nodded. "Yeah," he said finally. "She would have understood."

"I'll never know," she murmured. Then she closed her eyes, her shoulders began to

tremble. "I'll never know if it would have helped."

"Elizabeth—" Jason tugged her off the stool and next to him. "Hey—"

"The nightmares — they used to come all the time, and then they'd go away, but never forever—they never went away forever—but if he'd died years ago—if I had shot him then—I'll never know—"

He rocked her in his arms as she continued to sob for the girl who'd been lost all those years ago, and still hadn't found her way home.

Later that night, when Elizabeth had finally fallen asleep, her eyes red and puffy, Jason slipped out of bed and went downstairs to the back deck where a man waited.

"I got copies," the man said handing over the manila folder. "So far, the case is a dead end. Looks like natural causes—"

"Autopsy won't be final for a few days," Jason murmured. "The photos in the bedroom?"

"I got those, too. From CSU—"

Jason found them — the photo of the girls in the park. Elizabeth at the hospital. And photos that looked like posed candids—of Emma with her family. Baker had focused most of the photos on Emma—a pretty brunette around the age Elizabeth had been.

But there was one of Joss that made his blood run cold. Standing in Kelly's courtyard, in that red dress the night of the dance. Baker had been there that night. He'd been the noises she'd heard. How close they'd come that night to devastation.

"Let me know if the autopsy comes back," Jason said. "If it says anything other than what the prelim does."

"You got it."

The man melted away and Jason went into the house, into the room at the back of the house that served as an office. He stored the file in the lockbox in the closet. So far Elizabeth had gotten away with it. The crime scene was clean, no signs anyone else had been in the house.

He wondered what the plan was — to lie to him forever? Or was there a moment when he was to be told?

Jason rubbed his chest, thought of how to handle it. Should he just make sure it went away and hope she'd tell him in her own time? It hurt, he finally admitted, that she'd hint around it and not tell him straight out. She'd all but told him that night. But she wouldn't say the words.

Did he wait until the PCPD found something or should he push her now to get rid of anything before it *could* be found?

There was no easy answers. He went back up stairs to lay beside his wife, but he didn't sleep.

### **General Hospital: Roof**

"I know you don't feel the cold," Robin complained as she joined Jason the next morning, "but did we really have to meet up here—"

"Did you say anything to Patrick yesterday?" Jason asked as he handed her a copy of the autopsy report.

"No. He'd heard about it at work and mentioned it." Her lips twisted in a smile. "Like it was gossip he was sharing. I think I'm concerned he's too good at this." She skimmed the autopsy, nodding. "History of heart arrhythmia," she murmured. "Did you see this?"

"Yeah. I thought that might be something."

"Heart arrhythmia means it could be natural," Robin admitted. "It can be fatal if it's not taken care of. Massive heart attacks. He could have died in his sleep—" She scanned the notes. "No defensive wounds. Body looks clean. Um—there are drugs that could have done it—but there's no sign of injection. So either it was missed or it was ingested." She squinted, then looked at him. "But unless the labs come back with some sort of poison, there's no way this gets marked as anything but natural or, at worst, undetermined."

"The labs they sent out—can you tell anything from that?" Jason wanted to know.

"Uh—" She flipped through the lab order. "Pretty standard tox screen. It'll pick up most things." She handed it back to him. "Honestly, Jason, if it weren't for Thanksgiving, I might write this off as a natural death. The heart was in really bad condition, and decomposition over three days in a closed up house — it'll make it hard to see if that was the cause." Robin bit her lip. "That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"I guess you didn't ask Elizabeth about any of this, did you?"

"No. I didn't. I wanted to, but—" Jason's mouth tightened. "Baker was watching the girls," he confessed. "He had photos of Elizabeth, but a lot of them were Emma. Some of Trina. And one of Joss at Kelly's after the dance."

"Oh my God—" Robin brought her hands to her face. "He was there that night—"

"Elizabeth said Joss heard sounds. If she hadn't followed—" Jason shook his head, looked out over the city. "I don't care that she did this," he told Robin. "I just—"

"She lied to you." Robin closed her eyes. "But the pictures—it explains why Patrick agreed." She touched Jason's arm. "I'm telling you that unless the tox screen comes back with a poison or there's something on the scene, they're in the clear. If Elizabeth lied, you know she had a good reason."

"She's pregnant, Robin—" Jason bit out. "And she went into that house—"

"And came back out. She was protecting her girls—" Robin thought of her daughter. "And if she did do this, if she did this to look after Emma and keep her safe, there's no way in hell I'm going to be angry about it. She did what had to be done."

### **PCPD: Commissioner's Office**

Taggart stared at the photos, took a deep breath, then raised his burning gaze to Jordan. "This is my daughter."

"Marcus—"

"You had surveillance on this guy, didn't you?" He slapped the evidence photos back on her desk, and she flinched at the slap they made against the wood. "You told me you were watching Baker—"

"I was—"

"Then how did you miss him stalking my daughter? Damn it, Jordan—"

"I—"

"He was doing time for blackmailing a teenage girl over photographs he took of her! And your guys let him around more teens with a camera?" Taggart stabbed a finger at her. "And they did nothing—"

"They—" Jordan sank into her seat, stared blindly at the surveillance report, then

raised her eyes to Taggert. "No one was ever in danger. No one, okay? I made sure of that—"

He stared at her, and the horror crept into his eyes. "You didn't miss it. You saw it. They saw him taking pictures of those girls."

Jordan swallowed hard, nodded. "I knew why he was doing it. He was following girls who were connected to Elizabeth Morgan. I thought he was focusing on Emma because she looks like Elizabeth did back then—" Taggert turned away from, and Jordan got back to her feet. "But nothing happened, okay? I just—he was careless about it. I knew they'd tell an adult. I knew it'd get back to Morgan—" She put her hands flat on the desk, leaned forward. "Listen to me, Marcus. I was right! Elizabeth saw Baker in the park a few weeks ago. And now he's dead. She ran right to her husband—"

Taggert turned back to Jordan. "What? What do you mean?"

"Before we pulled the surveillance on Baker—my officer saw Baker in the park taking photos of the girls. And saw Elizabeth Morgan hurry into the clearing, and get the girls out. She looked worried. We waited to see what would happen—" She gritted her teeth. "I was wrong. I thought Morgan would do the job himself because it was personal—"

"You had a cop in the bushes watching Tom Baker take photos of my daughter—he could have gone after Trina because of me, Jordan—" Taggert clenched his hands into a fist. "You put those girls at risk—"

"They were never—" Jordan took a deep breath. "They were never at risk, Marcus. You have to believe me. If Baker had made a move, they had orders to stop it. But there's no crime against being in public and taking photos. I just—"

"You decided it was worth the risk to get Morgan, and with him, goes Corinthos. You know, I wasn't always proud of myself when I worked here—I was narrow minded and I lost objectivity." His eyes burned into hers. "But I never put an innocent kid at risk to get someone. And what did it get you, Jordan? Baker's dead and there's no leads. You can't even prove murder." His mouth stretched into a grim smile. "And Jason Morgan is alibi'd by three former police commissioners. The fucking irony—"

Jordan hissed. "I know he did it—his wife is pregnant. There's no way he was going to keep Baker living once she found out about the photos. About the stalking."

"You gambled and you lost, and for this—" Taggert stabbed a finger into a photograph of Emma and Trina in the park. "You deserve it. And when the press



finds out about this—and they will—you already told me Elizabeth knows Baker was stalking the girls. You think she won't go to the press if you keep going after her husband?"

"Tom Baker did his time," Jordan said coldly. "You either believe in the system or you don't. You don't get to pick and choose—"

"Why not? You did. You decided the risk was worth it. You chose to let Tom Baker stalk teenagers so you could get this department's holy grail. And that's why you lost. That's why I lost. Why Mac and everyone else who ever went after Morgan and Corinthos. You made it personal. You deserve whatever comes next."

### **Kelly's: Diner**

Trina dropped her books down with a thud next to Joss and flopped into a chair. "I am going to fail algebra," she said with a huff. "There's not a prayer in the world—"

"You are not." Emma rolled her eyes and reached for the green folder in Trina's stack to retrieve the quiz. "You have to stop rushing."

"Why does there have to be letters?" Trina demanded of Joss. "Weren't numbers good enough?"

"Apparently not," Joss began, but then stopped when she saw Emma's face pale as she scrolled through her phone. "Emma?"

"I was—I was gonna look up this math app, but—I got this notification from the news—" Emma raised her eyes, looked at Trina. "A few weeks ago, last month, I think. There was that weird guy in the court yard."

"Yeah?"

Emma handed her phone to Trina and her eyes widened. "But look at the story, Treen—"

"What's going on?" Joss asked, and Trina showed her the phone. "Tom Baker, former photographer to the stars, found dead," she read. "Tom Baker—" She pursed her lips. "Wait, why is that name familiar?"

"It's the guy who hurt Aunt Liz," Emma said. "Dad said it was the guy who blackmailed Cam's aunt, Emily. The one who died. So I looked it up. Tom Baker. But he's the guy who I saw outside. And I saw him at the hospital."

Joss took the phone to look more closely at the picture. "I saw him a few times at

the hospital. And in the park," she realized. "Weird."

"I didn't even know he was out of prison," Trina said. "But he's dead now."

"Good," Emma said. "I know it's bad to want people dead, but people like him don't get to live."

"No." Joss stared at the face of the man who had hurt Cam's mom, the same woman who had waited all night for her after the dance. And found her on the street. "People who rape women deserve to die."

### **General Hospital: Ultrasound Room**

Elizabeth laid back and forced a smile at Jason, who returned it. But it was lined with the same heavy tension that had been there for the last week. Since Tom Baker's body had been discovered.

She was going to tell him. She'd always planned to do it eventually, but now that it was over, she found herself struggling with how to start the conversation. She and Jason didn't talk about these kinds of things. He never talked to her about what he did as Sonny's enforcer, and she didn't ask. She knew he'd taken lives, and had made her peace with it.

But what she'd done — it was different. It had been murder. Cold-blooded, premeditated murder. It was one thing for him to get his own hands dirty, and maybe he hadn't minded when she'd killed Stavros — but it had been the heat of the moment.

Now that it was safer to tell Jason, she was starting to have doubts that he'd see it the way she had. That he'd understand she'd only lied to protect him. To protect the boys. And he'd be furious, she admitted, that she'd put herself—and their unborn child at risk.

"Hey," Jason murmured as the ultrasound technician came in. "You all right?"

"Good. Just nervous. I don't know why," she admitted. "I've been through this a few times—" But never quite like this. She and Jason had never done this together. And she regretted that it was tainted by the tension. By the secret. God, why had she lied on Thanksgiving? Why had it been so important for her to keep the secret until the discovery of the body?

"Are we ready?" the technician asked with a bright smile. "Dr. Westbourne will be here in a minute to read the image, but we're going to get to started."

"Ready." Elizabeth tugged up her sweater, and flinched as the cool gel was spread across the curve of her belly. Then the ultrasound wand started to move gently across. Elizabeth watched the screen, smiling as the sounds of the baby's heartbeat came across. Then frowned—because it sounded different than any of her other children. She looked at Jason who was tilting his head, a bit confused as well.

Britt Westbourne came in, a wide smile across her face. "Good morning. Sorry, I'm just a bit late—let's take a look—" She tilted the screen, then raised her eyebrows. "Well—"

"There's something wrong, isn't there?" Elizabeth said, her voice tight. "I can hear—"

"Nothing's wrong," Britt reassured them both. "It's just—" She gestured at the screen. "You're hearing double. There are two heartbeats."

Elizabeth stared at the doctor for a long moment, the words not processing. "What—"

"Two heartbeats," Britt repeated gently. "Twins." She pointed again. "One heart, and there's the other."

"Twins," Jason echoed, and even he seemed a bit flustered. "That's...there are two of them. They're—" He stopped, took a deep breath. "There are two of them?"

"Looks like it. I'd wondered after your last appointment," Britt told Elizabeth. "You were measuring a bit bigger than I'd thought, and I'd heard an echo. But I wanted to be sure. Congratulations!"

Even after they'd left the office, Elizabeth couldn't quite find the words. They stood by the elevators, and she stared at the sonogram. "Twins."

"Two," Jason echoed. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, we, uh, wanted to do it all over again."

"Yeah, but twins—they usually run in the family," Elizabeth said. She peered at him curiously. "I don't remember any twins on my side—"

"Well, I never knew my biological mother," Jason pointed out. "Maybe—" He shook his head. "This is—it's good news," he decided. "It's just—"

"Scary," Elizabeth confirmed, and he smiled in return. "Terrifying. But—kind of amazing." She pressed a hand against her belly. "Two babies. At once. We're going to be so outnumbered."

"It'll be okay." He drew her in for a tight hug, and she clung to him. "Jake and Aiden already offered to share a room. You raised three great boys—"

"You've been here for three years, Jason." She drew back. "You get some of that credit. We raised them. And now we get to do it again. Not many people get to say they're almost doubling the number of kids in one shot, but here we go."

"Yeah." Jason stared at her for a moment, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. "We have some time before we have to be home for the bus. You wanna take a ride?"

"You don't even have to ask."

### **Scorpio-Drake House: Living Room**

Robin's smile was nervous as she came in from the front hall. "Hey. I didn't realize you'd be home," she said to her husband. "Didn't you have a surgery?"

"Got canceled." Patrick flipped through the television channels, his feet propped up on the coffee table. "Thought I'd relax a little."

Robin sat next to him, biting her lip. "Um, we haven't really—I mean, we've been running on crazy schedules this week," she said finally. "And I didn't want to say anything around Emma, but—"

Patrick frowned, put the television on mute to focus on her. "What's up?"

"Tom Baker was found dead," Robin said, watching his face intently. Nothing changed, but maybe there was something, just a twitch around his eyes. "The PCPD already questioned Jason, but lucky for us, you and Elizabeth suggested we do Thanksgiving here. So he's got a lot of people who saw him."

"Yeah, I saw that in the paper. About Baker," Patrick added. "Did you hear an update or something? Do they know what happened?"

"Uh. No. I think they're waiting on a tox screen, but the papers said there was a history of heart trouble." Robin smiled nervously. "Seems kind of..anti-climactic, doesn't it? He gets out of prison, stirs everything up, and then just...dies in his sleep—"

"More than he deserved," Patrick bit out, and she stopped, frowning at him. "He deserved worse," he clarified. "When I think about how Elizabeth handled seeing him again—it's not right. He should have been eaten alive by lions. Or wolves."

"Yeah, I guess. But people don't always get what they deserve," Robin pointed out. "At least we don't have to think about him hurting anyone."

"No. We don't." Patrick turned back to the television, flipped through the channels again, and Robin settled back against the sofa cushions, wondering if maybe she was just going to have to ask him straight out if he'd murdered Tom Baker.

There should really be Hallmark cards for these kinds of things.

## **Vista Point**

They'd been together for four years, and married for nearly three—and every single week, Jason had made sure that he'd taken Elizabeth out for a ride on the cliff roads—short, long, fast and reckless, or a bit more restrained—it was something they'd shared since the beginning, and he thought that it might be a way to resolve this terrible tension.

He'd waited for her to come to him, sure as the days passed without further word from the PCPD, that she would confide in him, that she'd want him to check and be sure that the crime had left no trail—

But after today, after looking at the screen—seeing and hearing the heartbeat of the two children they were going to bring into this world—Jason couldn't stand the secrets hanging between them anymore.

So he took her on the cliff roads, took the turns faster than maybe he should, considering Elizabeth was nearly four months pregnant—but he wanted her to be relaxed. And he wanted her to remember who they were. Who he was.

Jason parked the bike at Vista Point, the highest point in Port Charles, and she eagerly went to the overlook, leaning over the guardrail to breathe in the clear, fresh air. "This is probably one of my favorite places," she murmured, tilting her head up to the sky. "I love it here."

"Me, too." Jason leaned against the guard rail, his back to the harbor, their shoulders brushing. "I need to ask you something."

He could feel her tense next to him, her body stilling. "What?"

"Tom Baker." Jason straightened, then touched her shoulder, turning him towards her so that their eyes met. "You and Patrick. On Thanksgiving. You killed Baker, didn't you?"

Elizabeth exhaled slowly. "Yes," she said softly. "I killed him. Not Patrick. He was

just there if anything went wrong. I did it. I gave him the injection. And I watched him until he stopped breathing. And I'm not sorry."

Vista Point

He'd expected her to deny it. To continue lying, or maybe to discover that he'd been horribly mistaken and there was some other explanation for all of this—

Instead his wife had lifted her chin and stated the truth bluntly, the light in her eye suggesting that she wasn't looking for forgiveness. She'd murdered someone—she and Patrick Drake had plotted to kill someone and had actually gone through with it—and lied about it.

Jason clenched his jaw, took a deep breath. "You injected him," he repeated. "You."

"Yes. Patrick was there in case the injection woke him, but I did it. Succinylcholine," Elizabeth said. "It paralyzes—"

"I know what it does," Jason bit out, and she closed her mouth. She wasn't really going to explain how to kill someone without a trace, was she? But then he took another deep breath. "There are tests for that—"

"You have to test specifically for the metabolites which isn't part of any standard tox screen," Elizabeth said. She folded her arms. "And it's even harder to detect in a body that's begun to decompose." She finally broke eye contact, looked back over the harbor. "It'll be weeks before we know if they tested for them, before the tox screen comes back—"

"They didn't," Jason said, and she looked back, furrowing her brows. "It was a standard tox screen. I made calls," he added, a bit irritated with himself when she just frowned. "As soon as I found out he was dead. I knew."

Elizabeth exhaled carefully. "I didn't want to lie to you," she said. "But if I'd told you, you'd have insisted on handling it yourself—"

"Yes—"

"And I knew Jordan was watching you. Not me, just you and Sonny. You told me that. And she'd never suspect you'd let me do it. I made sure you and Sonny were safe—"

"I don't need you to protect me—" That was his job, damn it. "Did you know about the pictures? Why didn't you—"

"No. Not the pictures. But—" Elizabeth rubbed her chest. "Not long after the dance, I saw Baker in the park. He was watching the girls. It terrified me," she murmured. "But you were still under surveillance. And I didn't know what Jordan was watching. If she'd found other ways into your organization. I broke into his house—"

Jason closed his eyes. "You—"

"I am not some amateur," Elizabeth cut in sharply, and he focused on her again. "I watched him first. I understood his schedule. I know how to pick a lock. I went into the house, and I saw the photos. And I realized she had to know. Those photographs—she had to. There were too many."

He'd find out if Jordan Ashford had been aware the girls were being stalked—  
"There were pictures of you."

"I know." Her voice faltered a bit, and some of his fury faded. "I know," she repeated. "I saw them. He followed Joss that night, Jason. My worst nightmare. He wasn't going to stop until someone stopped him. I should have done it two decades ago. I went inside to see if I could. And then I went to Patrick. We bought cars in cash and I got rid of them both, just the way Luke taught me—"

Jason grimaced, but acknowledged the information with a nod. "What else?" Was there a trail he needed to handle—

"Patrick and I went to the drug store so there'd be a receipt if anyone asked. We made sure the window was small if anyone looked into us, but I knew Jordan wouldn't. She didn't even check with the hospital to see if we were scheduled. We burned the clothes we were wearing—"

"The succinylcholine?"

"Patrick knows how to work the system at the hospital," Elizabeth said. "It's an outdated med dispensary. We're always off on the count. The only mistake I made was the one I made with you." She huffed. "Starbursts," she muttered, obviously disgusting with herself, and Jason had to admit that she'd thought of almost everything. And he knew that she'd left no trace behind in the house. Jordan would have found it by now.

And still — "You lied to me. And you let Baker walk around for two more weeks—what if he'd gone after the girls?" Jason demanded. "I could have handled it—"

"Maybe." She swallowed hard. "Maybe. But you wouldn't have let me do it. You

would have made me stay home."

Jason shook his head, turned away from her, his hands at his waist. He was so goddamn angry—the blood was pounding in his head, in his chest, everything felt like it was going to explode — "You're pregnant—"

"And if I hadn't been, you would have let me be part of it?" she demanded caustically, and he scowled. "No. You would have just taken care of it. Like you offered when he first got out. This was mine—"

"And Patrick's—"

"Because he'd follow me," she retorted, and he fell silent. "He wouldn't try to protect me. I lied to you because there's no reasoning with you sometimes. I can handle myself, Jason. I've carried three other children. I know what I can handle. I've been in car accidents. I've been held hostage. I've nearly died giving birth—"

"Elizabeth—"

"And you heard Britt. I'm perfectly healthy. All I did was drive to a house, pick a lock, and shove a needle inside the monster plotting to hurt more girls. If I hadn't been there that night, Jason, we'd be picking up the pieces of Joss right now. But you wouldn't have let me do what needed to be done."

"No, I wouldn't have," Jason snapped. "You think you've got everything, including me, handled. But what about Patrick? Do you think Robin is happy about any of this? You think she doesn't know? As soon as she found out Baker died on Thanksgiving, she knew—"

"Years ago, when I was furious that Luke had killed Helena first—before Laura or I could even get our hands on her—you told me that you were relieved." Her eyes burned into his. "Because something like this stays with you. You were glad I didn't have to."

"Elizabeth—"

"And I warned you then. I told you who I was. What I knew I could do. I would have strangled that evil bitch with my bare hands and danced on her grave! Did you think I was bluffing?"

"No—" Mystified at how the argument had turned, he just shook his head. "No—"

"You were glad that my hands were clean. It was fine to kill Stavros in the heat of the moment, but you don't want me to get dirty. Like you."



"That—Okay, that's what I said then, but—"

"And it's how you feel right now. You're angry that I did this. That I didn't just plot a murder, but that I actually went through with it." Her eyes glimmered with tears. "I killed him, and then I shared Thanksgiving dinner with my children. And the only reason you even know is I slipped up with my cover story. I'm sorry I'm such a disappointment—"

"You're twisting this around," Jason interrupted. "I'm angry because you put yourself at risk without telling me—that you lied to me about it when you damn well know that I had the connections to get it done without a trace—"

She swiped at her eyes, and laughed bitterly. "You don't even hear yourself, do you? I didn't need your connections, Jason. I have my own. I killed *my* rapist—"  
Elizabeth flattened her hand against her chest. "I killed my monster. Not yours. Helena was mine. Stavros was only aiming at you because of me and my history. It's okay for you to take care of crime in your world without discussing it—but I can't do the same?"

"I'm not arguing about this anymore." Jason went past her, heading for the parking lot, irritated. She just didn't understand—

She followed him back to his bike, took the helmet he offered, just staring at him with sadness in her eyes—and a hint of disappointment. "I didn't want to lie to you. But it was the only way—"

"We'll never know because you didn't trust me."

"Would you have let me into that house, to be the one to kill him?" Elizabeth asked. "If I told you it needed to be me?"

Jason opened his mouth, then closed it, troubled by the question. He didn't know the answer. He climbed on the bike, and without another word, drove them home.

### **Scorpio-Drake House: Kitchen**

Patrick studied the menu in his hands. "How many pizzerias does one town need?" he wanted to know when Robin came through the door. "This is the third new flyer in the last month—"

"Did you kill Tom Baker?"

The question fell out of her mouth before Robin even knew she was going to ask it.

Her husband froze, then lowered the menu, their eyes meeting.

"You can tell me," Robin hurried to add. "Even if you—if you didn't do it alone—I'm your wife. I can't tell anyone what you said even about someone else—"

"I've got a passing familiarity with spousal privilege," Patrick said, finally finding his voice. "Yes. I didn't do the final deed. But I secured the means, drove to the house, and went inside. I watched it happen. And then I came home. That makes me just as liable."

They stared at each other for a long moment, then Robin bit her lip. "Did you know about the photos?"

"No. I didn't. Not until I saw them. He was watch Emma, Robin. He was watching our little girl. And he was there the night of the dance." A muscle ticked in his cheek, and his Adam's apple bobbed. "If Elizabeth and I hadn't hung out that night, if she hadn't doubled back—it might have been Joss. It might have been any of them. But he stole photos of Emma from my locker. They're both pinned on that board."

Her hands were shaking as Robin dragged them through her hair, digesting that news. "He was stalking her, then."

"He must have seen her around Elizabeth. Knew Emma was special to her. And—"

"And Emma has superficial resemblance to Elizabeth," Robin finished, her stomach lurching. "Oh, God. Our baby."

"The system didn't protect Elizabeth. I couldn't take the chance. Not with Emma. Not with any of those girls." Patrick folded the menu and set it on the counter. "I understand if you think less of me. If it changes how you feel about me—"

"No. No." Maybe it should, Robin thought. But she'd seen rape victims over the years, and she had some sense of how Elizabeth had struggled. The thought of her precious baby being shattered that way— "No, I'm glad he's dead. We'll—we'll let it go. We'll put it away." She closed the distance between them, his eyes staying on her hers. "I can let it go."

"Okay." He cupped her face in his hands, his thumbs fanning out over her jaw. "I'm sorry I had to lie to you."

"You're not very good at it."

"I didn't—" Patrick stopped. "If you know, then—"

"Jason and I know. Or suspected. I don't know if he's asked Elizabeth yet. He said it looks like the PCPD doesn't have anything yet, but he'll make sure it goes away."

"I should tell her he suspects. We didn't want to lie, but Elizabeth—" Patrick hesitated. "There just wasn't another way."

"No. I can see that, I guess." She kissed the corner of his jaw. "Thank you for protecting our daughter."

Greystone: Study

Sonny offered Jason a drink, but the younger man just shook his head and stalked across the room to glare out the terrace doors. Sonny poured himself a bourbon and took a seat, considering the situation.

"What's the part that's making you the most angry?" Sonny wanted to know. Jason turned to him, a scowl etched into his expression. "The lie or the crime?"

"Damn it—" Jason clenched his fists. "My wife just admitted to committing murder, and you want to me to pick which part makes me the most angry—"

"How many men have you killed to protect Elizabeth and the boys?" Sonny asked idly, and Jason stared at him. "There was that guy who set the bomb all those years ago. It's why you left and went to Puerto Rico. And the one who kidnapped her. A few Russians. Some Cassadine guards—"

"Sonny—"

"Your wife," Sonny said slowly, "saw a threat to her family and she eliminated it. Just the way you've done over and over again."

Jason's shoulders slumped and he sat on the sofa. "She thinks I'm angry because she got her hands dirty," he muttered. "I said something a few years ago about being glad she didn't have to be the one to kill Helena—that her hands were clean—" Sonny winced. "She was angry at me then, but I didn't realize she'd held on to that. I'm not—this isn't about that."

"It's a little about that," Sonny said, and Jason's scowl returned. "You hated when the violence touched her. When it came near your family. But you always hated it more than she did. And every single time she tried to show you she could handle it, you ran as far and as fast as you could in the opposite direction."

"I—" Had done exactly that, though he hadn't seen it that way. "Maybe."

"She knows who you are, Jason. Always has. She never flinched from any of this." Sonny leaned forward. "She lied to you because she didn't want you to realize that she wanted to be the one to kill Baker. She was scared you'd flinch from *her*. And then you did exactly that."

"My face changed," Jason murmured. Sonny frowned, and his friend looked at him. "I don't care that she killed him. I don't. I'm glad he's dead."

"I'm a little impressed with her, honestly. She ever decides to make this a second career—" Sonny winced when Jason glared at him. "Kidding."

"It's not funny."

"It's a little bit funny." Sonny got to his feet. "You're glad Baker's dead. And maybe Elizabeth got some satisfaction from doing the deed. Some closure. The girls are safe. And, cherry on top, Elizabeth pulled off what might be the perfect crime. Go home. Tell her you love her and that you understand. Because you damn well know about taking a life to protect others."

"Sonny—"

"And tell her I appreciate the alibi. I enjoyed having Diane tell Jordan that she should ask a trio of former commissioners where I was all day." Sonny sipped his bourbon. "We'll make sure the case gets buried, Jason. Go home to your wife and family. You have a woman who'd kill to keep you and the kids safe. We should all be so lucky."