

Chapter 2

*Step by step, heart to heart, left, right, left
We all fall down
Step by step, heart to heart, left, right, left
We all fall down like toy soldiers
Bit by bit, torn apart
We never win, but the battle wages on for toy soldiers
- Like Toy Soldiers, Eminem*

Tuesday, May 16, 2006

Kelly's: Courtyard

After another month of consideration, Carly Corinthos decided that yes, she did indeed deserve the Nobel Peace Prize for Friendship. She lifted one toddler, then the next onto the bench just outside the courtyard, and dug in her purse for baby wipes.

"The next time Grandma gives you ice cream before Mommy picks you up," Carly said, attacking her three-year-old's face and erasing the remnants of the chocolate from his mouth. "What do you say?"

Morgan smiled, a dimple flashing in his cheek just like his father. "I say tank you. Just like you said, Mommy." He looked at his partner in crime, younger than him by six months. "Cam? What you say?"

Cameron Webber nodded solemnly. "Yes, Aunt Car. We say thank *very* much. Mommy taught me."

Carly pursed her lips because yes, that was technically true, and yet — "You're lucky you're cute," she muttered. She cleaned Cameron's face. "I return you like this to your mother, she's gonna think I let you roll around in snacks all day." She started to work on their grimy little chocolate covered fingers, dimly registering the bell over the front door jingling.

"I don't care! I don't care what you say! I hope she gets what's coming to her! I hope he did hit her! That's the least she should get—"

"Maxie!"

Carly straightened, seeing a red-faced, sobbing Maxie Jones with her sister, Georgie, Dillon Quartermaine, and Lulu Spencer.

"If she hadn't been there with her *lover*," Maxie spat, "Jesse would be alive!" She dashed away, under the arch that led out to the street entrance of Kelly's. Her sister ran after her.

"Maybe I'm wrong, but I feel like Jesse would still be alive if he hadn't decided to call Elizabeth a whore," Dillon observed, and Carly smirked, her presence still not noticed.

"Dillon—" Lulu whacked him in the chest. "You can't say that."

"It's true—look, Jesse was an asshole. Why can't we say that?"

"Because he's dead. You're not supposed to speak ill of the dead—"

"But you're not supposed to *lie* about them either." Dillon shrugged. "Maybe if he minded his own business, he'd still be here to keep being a misogynistic dick. Karma's a bitch."

"Dillon!"

"Chill. I'm not gonna say that around Maxie. I'm not an idiot. Let's go."

Dillon and Lulu disappeared after the sisters, and Carly just made a face. She didn't really care for Elizabeth Webber, but Jason had picked her and—she looked down at the confused toddler with his bright blue eyes, curly brown hair, and his mother's mouth.

"Aunt Car, what's a soggy dick?" Cameron asked, furrowing his little brows.

"Oh, damn. I'm gonna be in so much trouble," Carly muttered. "Let's just get dinner and pretend that didn't happen."

"Maxie—wait—" Georgie

Brownstone: Living Room

"Thanks for making time for me, Bobbie." Mac slid a notebook out of his pants pocket. "I just had a few questions."

Bobbie closed the double doors that connected her living room to the main entrance of the Brownstone. "You said it was about Lucky."

"Yes. Elizabeth filed assault charges over the weekend, and I'm looking into it—" At Bobbie's surprised expression, Mac lifted his brows. "This is the first you're hearing

about it?"

"No. No. I didn't think she was going to—" Bobbie pressed a fist her chest. "Did it happen again? Oh, God."

"Again?" Mac tipped his head. "Can you tell me what you know?"

"Not a lot. Elizabeth didn't really get into details with me," Bobbie admitted. "I saw the bruises, and when I asked about it, she didn't really deny it. But I've spoken to Luke about it, and he's talked to Lucky."

"When did you notice bruises for the first time?"

Bobbie hesitated. "I think it was just before Manny Ruiz kidnapped Elizabeth. She had a bruise—" She gestured at the side of her face. "She told me it was from tripping on a rug, but I, uh, I've been a nurse too long not to recognize the signs."

"But Elizabeth wasn't saying Lucky hit her. Not at that time."

"Abuse victims frequently lie about how they receive their injuries." Bobbie paused. "I know she and Lucky were arguing a lot. He was refusing to look after Cameron, forcing Elizabeth to take unpaid time off from work or pay overtime for daycare. I picked up the slack then, and now I babysit most days. I cut back at the hospital to look after Cameron—and Morgan," she added.

"But Elizabeth has never told you outright—"

"She called me the night before the kidnapping. She sounded upset," Bobbie said. "I had Cam with me that day, and she wanted Lucas to bring him to her grandmother's house. She didn't want Lucky to pick him up. Lucas saw her. Said she looked like hell. Crying, favoring her shoulder — and he wasn't sure, but he thought he saw a cut on her face. You can ask him."

"I will—"

"You're better than this, Mac. You've worked with domestic abuse survivors. You know that they lie about their injuries. You know that they rarely tell anyone until they're forced to." Bobbie pressed her lips together. "Why are you refusing to see it?"

"I think," Mac said slowly, "that it's possible Elizabeth is trying to make her divorce and custody case look better. She's accused Lucky of physical assault and drug abuse. That's not going to read well in family court. She wouldn't be the first woman to exaggerate fights to make herself look better."

Bobbie stared at him until he dropped his eyes. "No. I don't believe you. You've known Lucky and Elizabeth since they were teenagers, Mac. You work with Lucky. You're not going to tell me you didn't see the anger growing? His frustration at the injuries—" She faltered. "Is this about Jason?"

"No, but—"

"Because I think it's deplorable if you're telling me that you don't believe her."

"It's not that I don't—" Mac took a breath. "I have pictures. Dated before the kidnapping. I have Robin's statement. I know there was something physical. Lucky says it was pushing and shoving. He never hit her. And he says she started it. He pushed her back, and she hit a wall." He lifted his hands. "It's a he said, she said situation. Alexis can't take the case, and I have to think most ADAs are going to pass on it. You've got a cop with a clean record—"

"And a nurse with a sterling record. She's never been arrested—and had the charges stick. Her record is cleaner than Lucky's," Bobbie retorted. "You can ask anyone who works with her. She's not a liar—"

"I have asked people who work with her. Outside of Robin, Patrick, and Epiphany, no one else noticed any bruises or changes in her behavior. Several coworkers say that she's ducked out on shifts, that she leaves early, comes in late. And this all started when her name started getting linked with Jason Morgan again—"

"That's when the day care issues started," Bobbie interrupted. "Lucky started to go to double physical therapy sessions, remember? He told Elizabeth over and over again to solve her problems." She shook her head. "I can't believe this, Mac. This is a textbook case of a woman dealing with an increasingly erratic and angry husband who took his frustrations out on her face. And her arms. And her shoulders. I can't believe—" She fisted her hands. "I can't believe you're so blind—"

"I have to look at all the facts—"

"All the facts that support Lucky's accusation of an affair—which by the way, isn't an excuse for abuse. Did you ever hit Felicia?" Bobbie demanded, and Mac scowled. "Do you think it gives me pleasure to accuse my nephew of these things? All you want to do is make sure there's enough evidence for an ADA to use as an excuse to kick the case. Because a jury isn't going to care what happened to Elizabeth if they think she was having an affair."

"It's unfortunate—"

Bobbie stalked over to the double doors, threw them open. "I don't care if she was

dancing naked in the streets, having an orgy with every man who walked by. Nothing gives Lucky the right to put his hands on her. And if you can't find someone brave enough to take that position, you should get out. We're done talking."

General Hospital: Cafeteria

Emily glared at someone over Elizabeth's head, dropped her tray on the table with a clatter, then sat down. "People need to get a hobby," she muttered.

"I'm trying to remember that someone will have another scandal to take over," Elizabeth said, pushing her salad around the plate. She stabbed her fork in Emily's direction. "I mean, you should actually thank me. If it weren't for my sleazy affair, you'd still be on the hook for Sonny."

"Haha, very funny."

"Only because it's true." Elizabeth grimaced, then squirmed in her chair. "It is what it is, Em. Epiphany's going to keep me in post-op where there aren't a lot of other nurses. At least until I start scrubbing in later this week. I can't wait for my first twelve hour surgery. No one to stare at me."

"You're right, though. Someone will be caught in the supply closet and this will all be a bad dream." Emily twisted the cap from her Snapple. "So, um, outside of the idiocy of others, how are you doing?"

Elizabeth leaned back, considered the question. "I'm okay. It helped to tell you and my grandmother what's been happening. To actually leave, to have Cameron out of it — I feel like I can breathe. I wish I'd done it weeks ago. Months," she corrected. "But sometimes you need to make a mistake first before you can fix things."

"I get that. And I'm sorry if I didn't make you feel safe enough to tell me what's been happening. I haven't been a very good friend lately. I don't want to mess this up again, Elizabeth. You are too important to me." Emily reached across the table, squeezed her hand. "You've got my full support. No matter what happens."

"That really does mean a lot. I appreciate it."

"Um, what *does* happen next?" Emily asked, lowering her voice. "Did Justus start the paperwork?"

"Yes. We're waiting to hear on the restraining order, and he filed for divorce yesterday." Elizabeth set down her fork, her appetite gone. "I'm gonna stay with my grandmother for a while, I guess. Jason said it's easier to secure the house than it is

the apartment since Gram is letting the guards actually come on the property." She rubbed her throat. "Can't believe Jason has finally managed to get my grandmother's approval."

"Sometimes you need the shock of truth to see what really matters. My brother's life—the one he chose for himself—it's not ideal by any means. But you and I are both proof that danger can find you anywhere. The worst things in *my* life had nothing to do with who my brother is." Emily sighed. "But it's good that Audrey is letting Jason protect the house. I'll feel better."

"Yeah. Yeah, um, I don't know if Lucky's even going to try anything now. I hope not. But after he destroyed the apartment and Cameron's—" Her throat tightened. "After that, I don't want to take any chances. And thank God for Bobbie—and Carly," she added with a grimace. "She's really stepped up to help me with Cam. I wouldn't feel safe with him daycare right now."

"Carly does pick her moments, doesn't she?" Emily said. "She wields a mean sickle though—" She patted her side where the scars of Carly's attack during her psychotic break still lingered. Elizabeth snorted. "No, it's good that Carly is putting Cam first. He's great with Morgan, and it'll make all of this easier on him."

"Yeah, definitely." Elizabeth waited a long moment. "What happens after this week, I don't know. I hope that Luke can get Lucky into a rehab. Maybe if he can get clean — I don't know, his anger will just...find a different target, maybe. Or it'll go away. I don't know. But it would also be nice to just have him gone for a while. So I can breathe. Think."

"I hope so, too. I can't believe we didn't realize how dependent he was on the pain pills—but that's how it works. A doctor prescribes them, and you use them the way you're told to. And you keep using them until you can't function without them. I remember when my dad went through this — he was addicted for almost two years before we realized it." Emily shuddered. "It wasn't like me — that was quick, I guess. Scary. Intense. But I got out of control really fast and into rehab. And Dad's been clean, too. Rehab can work."

"Yeah. I hope it does. For everyone that loves Lucky. But even if he gets clean—"

"Oh, no. That's definitely not what I'm saying. My mom stuck by my dad because they're not normal," Emily said. "And also my dad never got violent, you know? Irritable, angry. But not violent. And they'd been getting divorced and remarried for decades by then, so—no one should be suggesting you wait out rehab." She arched a brow. "Especially since, uh, you and my brother..." she trailed off.

Elizabeth exhaled slowly. "We have the worst timing," she muttered. "We never

seem to be on the same page at the same time."

"I thought—"

"No, I mean—" she grimaced. "It's so hard to explain, and sometimes I feel like my brain and my heart are constantly at war. There's this piece of me that's screaming — this is your chance. You're both available. You love him. He loves you. He loves Cameron, and Cameron loves him. Take advantage of the moment. Jump in. Don't look back. I just—" Her shoulders slumped. "My brain cuts in before I can do it, and reminds me that I'm still married, and I was married on Friday, so I can't just walk out of one relationship into another, and that Jason deserves someone who can be there, one hundred percent, and that's not me. I don't know when it can be. And I feel like I'm sending mixed signals—"

"Jason's not going to ask for more than you're ready for, Elizabeth. You know that."

"I do. I do. But knowing it and feeling it are two different things. I— after the carnival shooting, we—I mean, it was a bad night, and we had a fight about the danger, and I was feeling reckless and stupid—and we—" She closed her mouth.

Emily nodded. "Ah. I get what you mean now about mixed signals." She tipped her head. "Was it a mistake?"

"No. Yes. No," Elizabeth said. "No. It wasn't. It was..." She bit her lip, met her best friend's eyes. "Amazing. And everything I wanted it to be. And so it's making me want to go a hundred miles an hour. But I can't. I can't. Because if we mess it up this time, we won't get another chance. And Jason was engaged, like, five minutes ago. Shouldn't we wait? Isn't that smart?"

"I wish Nikolas and I had waited," Emily said. "After I divorced Zander. I have so many regrets about how I handled that. I don't know what would have changed, but maybe I just would have been in a better frame of mind for everything that happened after that, you know? I don't know. You're always going to have regrets, Elizabeth. It's part of life. There's always a road not taken."

"Yeah. I just—I've hurt Jason so many times, Em. He hurt me, yeah, but I've constantly chosen Lucky over him, and I hate that it feels like I'm doing that again—"

"Elizabeth." Emily shook her head. "You're not choosing Lucky. You're choosing yourself. Do you think Jason can't see the difference?"

Tears stung her eyes, and Elizabeth swallowed hard. "I know he does, but—"

"Hey. Babe. You need to hear me. You just left your physically and emotionally abusive husband on *Friday*. It's been four days, and barely that. You told almost no one what was happening — in fact, did you *willingly* tell anyone before Sunday?"

"No. No. I didn't. Um, Robin and Bobbie—they saw the bruises. And—" Her throat closed.

"Exactly. There's no handbook for how you're supposed to feel. The man you loved, the man you married, who you trusted to be a father to your son — he hurt you. Probably in ways you're not even ready to talk about. Do you think you're supposed to put it away because Jason's in love with you? You and I both know that whatever happened with Jason these last few months happened because you were already unhappy with Lucky."

"I kept thinking—God, I kept *praying* that he'd go back to work and it would just go back to the way it was before the train accident. The day we got married. It was special, and it was a dream, and I wanted it so badly." Elizabeth swiped at her cheeks. "I wanted it to stop. I wanted him to stop being angry and blaming me, but I knew. I knew. He didn't love Cameron. And I just—how could I have let myself stay in that situation, Em? How did I go back? I did it with open eyes. You told me—"

"You weren't ready to close the door. And no amount of rational thinking, or common sense from friends can make you ready. Some women never get there, Liz. You know that. They start to think they deserve the way they've been treated. And you did. You thought that because you fell in love with Jason, you deserved Lucky's hatred. The abuse."

"I hate it. I hate it." Elizabeth rested her elbows on the table, fisted her hands and rested her forehead against them. "How can you have the training, the knowledge, and still become a statistic? How is it possible? I know this. I knew it then. Why did I think it would be different for me?"

"Because he's Lucky," Emily said, and Elizabeth closed her eyes, stung by that simple truth. "He's Lucky, and we both miss the boy he used to be. That sweet, tough kid who stood by us both and offered us friendship that made us feel loved and accepted. He was my first friend in Port Charles. He was your first boyfriend. I want him back, Liz. I miss him. But people grow up. And sometimes the flaws we overlooked become their defining personality. Lucky was a sweet kid. But he was also arrogant. And dismissive. And smug. You felt that sting more than once, I know you did."

"Yeah. Yeah. Before—before the rape. I wanted him to like me, and he just kept seeing Sarah. He wouldn't *see* me. Until—" Until she crawled out of the bushes. "I know, Em."

"But you didn't before. You thought we could have him back. But he's gone. The boy we loved so much — he's not coming back. And I don't like the man he grew up to be. Neither one of us is obligated to keep being in his life because of his kindness a thousand years ago. So if you're taking a step back with Jason because you can't handle moving forward, that's not choosing Lucky."

"I'm choosing myself," Elizabeth said, echoing Emily's earlier words. "Okay. Okay. I can—I can work with that."

Brownstone: Living Room

"You summoned me, Barbara Jean?" Luke said, sauntering into the room. Bobbie sighed, closed the doors behind him. "What's going on?"

"Has Mac been to see you?"

Luke's smile faded. "Yeah. He came by earlier. Elizabeth told me she was filing charges. I gave it to him straight. It's the least I owe her for talking her into going back in the first place."

"Good. Because if you'd lied to him, Luke—" Bobbie looked at her brother. "That would have been it for you and me."

Luke grimaced, looked away. "Yeah, I get that. Uh, Liz told me about the other thing. The drugs. Did you—did you know?"

"No. Not until Audrey called me, warning me about Lucky's visit to her house. What are we going to do about that?"

"I made a few calls. I think we can get him into a good rehab," Luke said. "He's gotta agree unless they can stick drug charges to him or make it a condition of whatever deal he negotiates with the DA for the assault—"

"There's not going to be any charges." Bobbie folded her arms, went to look out the window. "Mac barely believes there was abuse. Lucky told him it was mutual pushing and shoving, and Liz hit a wall. That gives him the cover he needs—"

"We don't know—"

"The minute Jesse Beaudry died standing too close to Jason, Elizabeth lost whatever sympathy the PCPD had left for her. And judging by how she was treated after Manny Ruiz brutalized her, there wasn't much to begin with. You will never get that department or the DA's office to believe that a brother in blue is an abusive

drug addict — they'll look for someone to blame. You know this, Luke. Cops protect their own. They look for a reason. Jason gives them a reason."

Luke grimaced. "I can't stand that he's a cop. They're assholes. Always have been. And I know what you're saying, it's just—"

"I think we both thought Mac would be different. And maybe he personally believes Elizabeth. But it won't matter. You and I both know that Jason's telling the truth. That Elizabeth was targeted because of Lucky, and Jesse was collateral damage. But that won't stand up in a court of law. So if we're going to get Lucky clean, we're not going to have the law helping us force it."

Luke dragged a hand down his face. "Yeah. I don't know what leverage we can use, but yeah, we're gonna have to force it." He shook his head. "Hell of a thing, isn't it? To think that boy grew up to be just like the rest of the Spencer men. He was supposed to be different." He closed his eyes. "All right. Let's talk strategy. How do we get this done?"

Carly's House: Backyard

Jason stepped out onto the back deck, immediately grinning when he saw all three boys taking turns jumping through the sprinkler. It had become a familiar sight seeing Cameron tagging along after Morgan, both of them trying to keep up with the older Michael.

"Hey—" Carly came up the deck stairs, a towel in her hand. "I wasn't expecting you, was I?"

"No. Elizabeth called. She's going to be stuck at work late, so she asked if I could take Cam to Audrey's for her." Cameron slipped on the grass and fell, still giggling. "Thanks, Carly. For letting him to stay here so much."

"Well, don't give me all the credit. Mama does most of it, and Leticia picks up the slack. I grab a few hours when I can—" Carly looked out the yard. "They're normal, aren't they? It's hard to believe that we somehow got them to this point. With everything my boys went through last year between being kidnapped, me losing my damn mind, losing Courtney—" She sighed, and Jason squeezed her arm. "Anyway. I look at them, and I think maybe I did an okay job."

"You're a great mother."

"Not always, but I'm trying to be. I like Cameron," Carly said. She glanced at him. "Are we still not taking questions on our relationship status?"

"It's complicated—"

"Because Lucky was hitting Elizabeth?"

Jason closed his mouth, looked at her. "How did you know that?"

"Oh, God. So it's true." She looked out over the yard again. "Did he hurt Cameron?"

"No, no—"

"Good. Good. I didn't think—Elizabeth strikes me as someone who probably would have packed it up the first time he laid a hand on the kid. But she took it herself." Carly exhaled slowly. "You know, my adopted mother Virginia—she, uh, wasn't that kind. Frank Benson didn't really care who he hit — if they were in his way—" She jerked a shoulder. "I was glad when he finally left."

"Carly—how did you—"

"Maxie Jones," Carly told him. "Said she didn't care if Elizabeth was being hit — she was the reason Jesse was dead. I overheard her arguing with her friends. Um, I just—does Elizabeth know it's common knowledge? Or that it will be?"

"No. No. I don't know," he qualified. "Maybe. She said the gossip was bad at the hospital yesterday, but I thought it was still..."

"About you and her."

"Yeah."

"Well, it still is, but the abuse is sneaking." Carly used the towel to wipe at her damp arms. "It's amazing. A man can commit the crime, but somehow it's still the woman's fault. I hate that. She was having an affair, so I guess she deserved to be hit. Like, are you kidding me? Assholes," she muttered.

"We weren't—" Jason stopped, closed his mouth. "It wasn't—"

"Jase?"

"We just—I can't explain it." Didn't want to explain it. Didn't know how.

"I know we joke about what a terrible friend I am, and how you don't trust me to stay out of your personal life—" Carly touched his shoulder. "And sometimes it wasn't a joke. I know I've never been supportive of Elizabeth." She wrinkled her nose. "Or almost any other woman in your life. But I love you. And you know you

can trust me."

Jason didn't say anything for a long moment, unsure if he really wanted to get into it. Finally, he said, "Four years ago when Sonny faked his death, Elizabeth walked out and I always thought I knew why. When I found out she thought I was in love with Courtney — I realized she didn't know—she didn't know I felt about her. And—" He met Carly's eyes. "And it messed me up. More than it should have. I needed her to know. And after that —" He looked back at Cameron. "After that, it just spiraled. And before I knew it—"

"Well, it got rid of Spanks McCall, so I'm in favor," Carly said, and he rolled his eyes. "What? I can't find the joy? Jason. Hey. So what if you and Elizabeth were flirting hard with the line and slid over it a few times? You're human. You're allowed to make mistakes."

"But it's being used to call Elizabeth a liar," Jason said tightly, and Carly sighed. "Or make excuses for what she went through — he destroyed Cameron's bedroom, Carly. Broke his toys. If she hadn't left him, Cameron was going to eventually be next."

"And then you'd have dumped him in the Pine Barrens, and we'd all be happy," Carly muttered darkly. Jason's smile was a thin one, so she wasn't too far off. "People are going to be terrible. I'm sorry for Elizabeth. I am. I don't have to be her friend to think she's getting a raw deal. But she's got people who are going to listen and believe her. So focus on that. And don't get arrested for beating the shit out of a cop, you got it? I mean, I'll bail you out, but it's probably not a good idea."

"I'll keep that in mind." He kissed the top of her head. "Thanks."

"I can occasionally be a good person. It's just a lot of work. Let me go round of the boys before they turn into prunes."