

## Chapter 1

*I look ahead to all the plans that we made  
And the dreams that we had  
I'm in a world that tries to take 'em away  
Oh, but I'm taking 'em back  
All this time I've just been to blind to understand  
What should matter to me  
My friend, this life we live  
Is not what we have, it's what we believe*  
- It's Not My Time, 3 Doors Down

*Sunday, September 28, 2008*

### Studio

*When your dream came true, you should probably feel a bit more happy.*

The thought slithered into Elizabeth Webber's mind as she rifled through the papers Jason Morgan had given her, which included her renewed passport, first class tickets, and—

She wrinkled her nose, looked up at him. "Power of attorney?"

"Uh, yeah—" Jason rubbed the back of his neck. "We're going out of the country and neither of our legal next of kin will be there—"

"And we're not exactly related to each other," Elizabeth finished. Though they would have been, she thought wistfully, if he hadn't backed out of their engagement six months earlier. As soon as that thought occurred to her, she shoved it right back out. It had taken a lot of hard work to get Jason even back to the point where he was considering renewing their relationship in private—

And she wasn't going to think about any of that either. They'd bought tickets, she'd taken the vacation time, arranged for the boys to be looked after —

She and Jason were finally going to Italy, just like they'd always talked about. She should have gone seven years earlier when he'd held out his hand, when they'd both been younger and less jaded by life.

Because even as she scribbled her name at the bottom of a legal document stating she had the right to make medical decisions for Jason in the event he became incapacitated, part of her still expected something to go wrong.

It always did.

"The flight starts boarding at six," Jason told her, "but I won't be able to get to the airport until around five-thirty. As long as the ceremony goes as planned."

Elizabeth nodded, tucking the papers in her purse. "Right. Did you add in extra time? Sonny's weddings never go the way they're supposed to. Especially church weddings."

Jason winced at the reminder of Sonny Corinthos's aborted wedding to Brenda Barrett over a decade earlier. "This one should," he said. "Sonny's out of the business, no one's making threats."

"It'll be a shame to miss it. I had good seats for the last one," Elizabeth said. "Even if I did have to steal them." She folded her arms. "Sonny invited me you know, but I got the invitation when we were..." Broken up? How to describe the twists and turns of this last year. "Anyway, it's fine. I'll just wait in the first class lounge until you get there."

"Yeah, I'll get through security pretty quick. I have to go to Puerto Rico once a month, so I have pre-clearance." He hesitated. "I didn't realize he'd invited you."

No, of course he wouldn't. The cream colored envelope had arrived in July when rumors had still flying about Jason's relationship with Claudia Zacchara, and he'd been avoiding Elizabeth like the plague. She had stared at the invitation far longer than necessary, tracing her fingers over the slightly raised lettering. Would their invitation have looked like this, she'd wondered, if not that phone call?

How many minutes of pure happiness had the world allowed her between the moment he'd asked her to marry him and the world had shattered?

"He came by when I sent my regrets," Elizabeth murmured. She turned away from Jason, heading to the sink to sort through old paintbrushes. "Said he hoped I'd change my mind." She cleared her throat, looked back. "It's not like it matters. We wouldn't have sat together." Jason would never have allowed the public demonstration of their relationship. She should be fortunate he was even allowing anything in private.

Jason opened his mouth, but then closed it. "I'm sorry," he said finally, his voice a bit rougher.

"No, it's fine. I understand why it has to be this way," Elizabeth said briskly. "And I told you—" She leaned up on her toes, brushed her mouth against his, letting their eyes meet. "This is better than nothing, and this time tomorrow, we'll be landing in

Italy."

"I can't wait." He caught her arm as she started to pull back, tugged her in for a deeper, lingering kiss, his thumb brushing her throat, shivers cascading down her spine. "I have to go," he said, stepping back, his expression lined with regret. "If I'm going to be out of reach for a week, I need to make sure some things are in place."

"I know. I have to get home to the boys before dinner. We're transitioning Cameron from his sippy cup to a real glass, and Jake into a booster seat. It ends up being a mess—" She smiled, and this time it almost felt genuine. "I'll see you at the gate tomorrow."

### **Shadybrooke: Lulu's Room**

Johnny Zacchara leaned back, grinning as his girlfriend checked her image in the mirror over the dresser. It was good to see her smiling and taking some sort of interest in her appearance. Since her testimony in the trial only a few weeks previous had left her teetering on the edge of another breakdown, he'd worried.

But nothing kept Lesley Lu Spencer down long, and he'd been acquitted of those charges. A few more weeks of rest and therapy, Lulu would be officially discharged. There was still a legal battle ahead of them—Scott Baldwin wouldn't rest until *someone* paid for the murder of his son, Logan Hayes—but Johnny was confident that his lawyer would be able to take care of everything. Ric Lansing had managed to get him acquitted—surely he'd be able to convince a judge Lulu wasn't responsible for her actions.

"I wish I'd been in the offices," Lulu said, flopping back on the bed and reaching for one of the editions of *Crimson* he'd brought her. "I bet Kate tried on a dozen dresses—it would have been fun to be there for it."

"You'll get to see the final choice tomorrow," Johnny reminded her, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. "And we'll have a great time at the reception."

"Yeah," Lulu said, smiling at him, then the corners of her mouth dipped, and her hazel eyes became unfocused, almost glassy. Johnny's pulse picked up as he left the chair where he'd been sitting and perched next to her. He reached for her hand, squeezing it. Lulu blinked, then looked at him. "What?"

He swallowed. "Nothing," he said. What good would it do for Lulu to know she was still drifting in and out? She was terrified that she'd end up like her mother, sitting in the same catatonic fugue state for the last six years. Laura Spencer sat just down the hall in another room as beautifully decorated as this one, but she might as well have been in a cell for all that she knew.

"It'll be great for you to be around your friends again," Johnny said. "Maxie said Kate is letting her have the pick of the closet for tomorrow. And you know Maxie will take care of you."

"Yeah, Maxie never could stand to be around someone not dressed fashionably. Remember when I started working at *Crimson*?" Lulu said, her eyes sparkling. "She tried to force her way into my room at home and clean out my closet." She laughed, and his chest eased. There she was. His bright, beautiful, sparkly Lulu.

"I like that sound."

Johnny twisted on the bed to find Lulu's brother, Lucky, and his girlfriend, Sam McCall, in the doorway. Lucky made a face when he saw who was already in the room—there was no love lost there.

"I was just remembering Maxie's horror at my closet," Lulu said. "Hey. I didn't know you guys were coming by today."

"Nikolas told me he was letting you sign out for a few hours tomorrow," Lucky said, the humor sliding from his eyes. His jaw clenched. "I wish you were going anywhere but that wedding."

"I think," Sam said, squeezing past Lucky and through the doorway, "it's nice. Maxie and Spinelli will be there, so you'll be with friends. And Johnny will be there to look out," she said. She touched Lucky's arm. "Everything will be fine."

"It's a mob wedding," Lucky muttered. He folded his arms. "If there aren't bullets, there will be heartbreak."

"You're just jealous because you're not invited to this one," Lulu said, trying to tease but the spark had faded again. She stared down at the pages of *Crimson*, tracing her fingers over a perfume ad. "I remember arranging the meeting for this ad," she murmured. "It was the first really big project Kate gave me. She only hired me because Sonny asked her to. I didn't even think I'd like it. But I do. And Kate's given me direction. When I get out of here—because I will get out of here," she added, her expression fierce, "I have a career waiting. I want to go, Lucky. I want to see Kate be happy."

"I won't let her out of my sight," Johnny pledged.

"You think that reassures me," Lucky said dryly, "but it doesn't." Sam pinched his arm, and Lucky sighed. "But fine. It might do you some good, Lu. I just worry."

He worried because his mother already lived down the hall, so Johnny didn't really take his concern personally. What kind of hell was it to wonder if your mother's condition was genetic and that your little sister might disappear, too?

As someone who came a criminally insane psychopath, Johnny really couldn't blame Lucky Spencer for being overprotective. He'd spent most of his life protecting himself from his own father while worrying he'd be just like him one day.

### **General Hospital: Locker Room**

Patrick Drake frowned when he saw Elizabeth come around the row of lockers. "I thought your vacation started today. Do we have to discuss the meaning of the word again?"

"Ignore him," Nadine Crowell said. She clipped her badge on her scrub top, then tied her sunny blonde hair into bouncy tail. "He wouldn't know how to stop working if it bit him in the ass. I'm so jealous," she told Elizabeth. "I can barely bring myself to eat alone in a restaurant, but you're going to Italy all by yourself. It's inspiring really."

Elizabeth smiled weakly, then opened her locker. "I just wanted to grab my emergency clothes and wash them. I'm doing one more load of laundry before I head out tomorrow. I promise, I'm not even planning to look at the charts or check on my patients—"

"I'll personally escort you to the elevator," Patrick said.

"Have a great time," Nadine said, then disappeared around the row of lockers. A moment later they heard the door close.

"Not that I'm against independence and sisters doing it for themselves as it were," Patrick said, leaning against the lockers and watching her throw the two sets of emergency jeans and tanks into her tote bag. "But Italy's a pretty big first solo trip. You don't wanna start small, like New York City?"

"I've been dreaming of Italy for years." Elizabeth paused. She closed the locker. "And I'm not going alone."

Patrick furrowed his brow, straightening. "No? Look, Webber, I know I've been preoccupied with being put in charge of this place and you know, Robin refusing to marry me, and that pesky detail of my first child being born in like a month, but I feel like you dating someone seriously enough to go out of the country is a big deal. I have to meet him first—"

"You have." Elizabeth met his eyes. "It's Jason."

"Jason," Patrick repeated. His brows drew together. "Jason Morgan."

"Yes."

The neurosurgeon and newly minted Chief of Staff scowled and crossed his arms. "And why am I only learning about this today? I swear to God, I overheard Maxie and Spinelli talking about signing him up for a dating service—"

"Oh, God—" Elizabeth winced.

"And there was the lawyer, Sorcha—Sasha, whatever. And Claudia Zacchara—when exactly—"

"None of those were anything other than rumor. And Spinelli reading into things." Elizabeth bit her lip. "You know Jason and I have been close for years."

"I vaguely remember getting arrested because of him, yes. And it was your idea—"

"We both thought of it at the same time, stop distracting me."

"And I know you guys were, uh, very close that same summer. You testified about it last year—" Patrick pressed his lips together. "Uh, you didn't happen to commit any crimes, did you?"

"What? Perjury? Yes." Elizabeth winced. "Jason and I have been kind of...quietly seeing each other since last year. Since—" Her throat tightened the reality hit her again, as it did from time to time. "Since we lost Emily."

"You've been together for a year," Patrick said slowly. "I repeat—why am I hearing about this now?"

"Because I wanted to tell someone who cares about my happiness, and Lucky doesn't. He had to know where I was going and how to get in touch because of the boys."

"Your happiness which includes being some dick's secret booty call?"

Elizabeth's fists tightened around the straps of her tote bag. "That's not what it is—" Even though there were times last year when it felt like Jason had only made time for her long enough for one or two rounds in the bed before he hurried away for something else— "It's not like that. He's taking me to Italy—"

"Is it your idea to keep it quiet?" Patrick wanted to know.

"At first, yes," Elizabeth admitted. "The divorce had only been just made final, and I knew Jason was nervous about the danger—"

"So nervous that Spinelli lives with him and Maxie walks in and out of that place like it's her home?" Patrick retorted. "So nervous that he lets Carly hang around? Yeah, okay."

"Patrick—" She wanted to be angry with him, wanted to deny it. But it was the same thoughts that drifted into her mind, late at night, when she laid alone in her bed, and wondered. "I love him. And this is enough for me. Okay? I've spent half my adult life loving him, and I get to have this."

"I want you to be happy, okay? I do. It's just—" Patrick shook his head, drew on his white lab coat, adjusted the collar. "You should demand more from the people who love you, that's all."

She'd tried to demand more from Jason but after Michael, he'd never be able to offer it. So Elizabeth had told herself she'd settle for whatever Jason *could* give. That hadn't changed. She'd fought so hard just to get to this moment, to this trip. "I promise you, Patrick, that this is enough for me. I'm happy."

"Okay. You know where I stand, and that's enough for me." He kissed her forehead. "I love you, you know that, right?"

"I do know." He'd been a better brother to her than her own biological one, or even the brother she'd acquired through marriage. "And thank you. For caring."

"Have a great time. Just—" Patrick paused. "You matter, Elizabeth. And you deserve to have the world. So if you think this is good enough, I'm not going to argue. I just think he's luckier than *he* deserves to be."

"I had chances to be in the open with him, to have the family I want," Elizabeth admitted, thinking of the proposal in the elevator. "I turned my back on those. Now I get to have at least one of my dreams come true. I'm going to Italy tomorrow with the man I love. That's more than enough for me."

### **Shadybrooke: Hallway**

Lucky closed the door behind him as he followed Sam into the hallway. "I'm not happy," he declared. Sam sighed, wound her arm through his as they started towards the elevators.

"I know."

"I think she should stay here until she's not losing time anymore. How many times did she just drift while we were having a normal conversation?" Lucky demanded.

"Twice that I saw."

"Johnny saw it, too. I saw it in his eyes. But he just waited and she came back. What happens if something goes wrong tomorrow?" Lucky said. He stopped in front of a room. He stared at the door so hard that his vision nearly blurred. "What if the next time something terrible happens, she drifts so far we can't drag her back?"

"Is that what happened with your mother?" Sam asked softly.

"I wasn't there for most of it," Lucky admitted. "Dad took her on the run after her stepfather died. He wanted to protect her from the cops — but Dad said she was already confused. Didn't know what year it was—thought they were getting married. She kept slipping in and out the whole time, and then Scott—" His mouth twisted. "Scott kept badgering her, forcing her to relive the moment she bashed Rick Webber's head in—and Mom just disappeared." He swallowed hard. "We got her back for a little while two years ago, but it wasn't enough."

He knocked on the door, but opened it without waiting for anyone to answer. No one would. Inside, the room was decorated like a bedroom with a brass bed and a flowered comforter set between two oak nightstands, a matching dresser on the other side of the room.

Photos of the Spencer family dotted the dresser—of Luke and Laura before kids came along, of Lucky as a child, of Lulu. And the boys — Jake and Cameron — grandchildren Laura had never really met. She'd only seen Cameron briefly during the weeks she'd been awake.

They had filled this room like his mother was going to come back to them at any minute, as if she were a normal patient.

But Laura Webber Spencer wasn't a normal patient. She sat in a rocking chair looking out the window, dressed in a pair of trousers and a gray sweater. Nikolas paid for someone to take care of her like this. To exercise her muscles, to wash and dress her each morning as if this was the day Laura Spencer would rise from that chair and go back to her life.

And every day, they put her to bed because she was still locked away inside her mind.

Lucky left Sam in the doorway and went over to crouch in front of his mother, to take her hand in his. "Hey, Mom," he said softly. "It's me. Just came by to make sure they're taking good care of you."

Her eyes, the beautiful blue eyes his father always waxed poetically about, were glassy, unfocused—

Empty.

Lucky swallowed hard. "I'm doing good," he told his mother. "I'm thinking about taking the sergeant exam sometime next year. And the boys — they're growing fast. We can't keep Cameron in shoes. I remember when Lu was that age."

He felt Sam cross the room, drop a hand on his shoulder. "Hi, Mrs. Spencer. We met a few years ago at Kelly's. Just for a moment," she added. "So it's okay if you don't remember."

Lucky smiled, then got to his feet. He kissed his mother's cheek, then went to the door. In the hallway, he leaned against the wall. "I can't stand the idea of Lu ending up like that," he said roughly. "I'd rather slit my wrists—"

"She won't. She's got the best care—"

"We've kept my mother here because we wanted her close, but Shadybrooke isn't the answer." Lucky straightened. "If Lulu doesn't start getting better, we'll need to think of something else. I'm not letting her slip away. I didn't do enough for my mother. I never did enough for her. I'm not making the same mistakes again."

"You won't. And whatever happen, I'll be right there," Sam promised. She leaned up to kiss him. "We're in this together, remember?"

"I remember."

### **Coffee House: Office**

Jason scribbled his own name at the bottom of the power of attorney agreement and made a note to drop it off with Diane on his way to the penthouse. There were a thousand things that needed to get done before he had to leave for the church the next day—

And they had to be done before the church because his window to make the flight was so small—

He looked up when there was a knock at the door, then it opened. Cody Paul, his

second-in-command, and Francis Corelli, head of security stepped in. "Hey, you ready for us?"

"Uh, yeah." Jason slid the paperwork back in the manila envelope. "Did you get a chance to check the security at the church?"

"Spoke with Father Coates," Francis said. "Sonny wanted us to cut back on the guys at that door checking invitations — said it sent the wrong look to Kate's people, so that's out. Other than that—"

Jason grimaced — it had been hard enough to get Sonny to agree to let Jason's guys handle security in the first place, but Jason had been determined. Sonny might be out of the business, but that had been true that terrible day in the warehouse—

His fist tightened as his side as he remembered the phone call. The day they'd sent Michael to live in a hospital hooked up to machines, knowing he'd never open his eyes again. He took a deep, bracing breath. Looked at Francis again. "Okay. And security at the Spencer house?"

"Have to be careful with that one," Francis reminded him. "Spencer's still a cop, so Dougie is going to take the day shift, Vinnie the night. They'll try to stay on the kids, but—"

"But there's not much they can do." Another situation Jason couldn't really control. Lucky had refused extra security — the whole point of Lucky raising Jake and Cameron, of staying in their lives, was to keep them out of Jason's.

But there would always be the chance that someone would find out where Jason was—and who was flying with him. He'd wanted to fly private, but Sonny had the jet for the honeymoon, and Jason hadn't been able to get a charter. Once Elizabeth had been granted the vacation days, they couldn't change the trip. He hated leaving the country knowing the boys weren't as safe as they could be—

"You know," Cody said, breaking into Jason's thoughts. "If, uh, things were more public, you could probably talk Spencer into letting a guard hang out closer—"

Jason clenched his jaw, glared at him, and the younger man fell silent. "Do what you can," he told Francis.

"Yeah, no problem."

"I won't contact you unless it's an emergency," Cody said. "I can handle pretty much anything that comes up," he continued.

"I'll keep my eye on the kid," Francis said, and Cody shot him a dark look. The "kid" was maybe five years younger than Francis and Jason, but no one ever let him hear the end of it. It was the same attitude the guys had had when Jason had started—Reinaldo hadn't even wanted to leave Jason alone in the penthouse without a guard.

"And anyway, he's done this longer than you, and Sonny left you holding the bag for everything when you were here a year," Francis reminded Jason. "We can handle a week."

"Yeah. I know." Still, the discomfort itched at him. Things were quiet, but they didn't feel *calm*. There was a difference — quiet could just mean everyone was holding their breath before all hell broke loose—and Jason had nearly canceled this trip a dozen times since planning it—

But Elizabeth had already put up with enough, he reminded himself. He'd made her promises of forever, then took them back. He'd been cold and angry with her, wishing she'd give up. But she hadn't, and she was still here, six months after another child had lost his life due to the world Jason lived in. He could never say Elizabeth didn't know and accept the risks. She did, and she still wanted him.

She deserved this week. She deserved Italy. She deserved far more than any of that, but this was all he could give.

"All right." Jason got to his feet. "I need to drop some paperwork off with Diane," he told them. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Got it, Boss."

When Jason had left, Cody looked at Francis with a bit of confusion. "Does he really think no one knows who's going with him? Vinnie and Dougie are good guys, but people are going to notice he's on the Spencer kids."

"Hell, the little one already looks like him," Francis muttered. He checked the messages on his phone. "You haven't been around this long enough, but it's easier to just smile and nod when Jason does dumb shit like this. The world has known about Elizabeth Webber since she was eighteen. He lives in denial. It's our job to smile and nod, and keep her and the kids safe. He wants to be a moron, that's on him."