

Chapter 1

*Light up, light up
As if you have a choice
Even if you cannot hear my voice
I'll be right beside you dear
Louder, louder
And we'll run for our lives
I can hardly speak I understand
Why you can't raise your voice to say
Run, Snow Patrol*

Monday, May 5, 2003

Venice, Italy

Palazzo Barzizza: Foyer

Jason Morgan opened the front door and set the bag of groceries on the table just inside, wincing when the old, heavy door creaked. He passed through the living room, out to the terrace, hoping that the sound hadn't woken her. Since she'd been released from the hospital almost two weeks earlier, Elizabeth hadn't been able to manage more than a few hours at a time. When she'd finally drifted asleep earlier that morning, he'd gone out to run errands.

He rested a hand on the arch that separated the terrace from the living room, his chest easing when he saw her curled up on the chaise, still peacefully sleeping. He should probably wake her — the sun would grow more intense as the world rotated towards night, and she burned so easily—

But he didn't have the heart. Or the courage. Everything he said since the accident seemed like the wrong thing—since she'd woken and he'd had to tell her because he didn't want some strange doctor or nurse she didn't know to be the one.

There were dark, deep half moons beneath her eyes, her pale skin nearly translucent. The bruises had faded in the month since the accident, but the evidence of her injuries remained in the cast that encompassed her entire right hand and stretched just below her elbow. She couldn't write. Couldn't draw. Couldn't sketch. The accident had stolen everything she loved about herself, everything that had given her beautiful eyes that spark—

And it was his fault. He was the reason she was like this, existing instead of living. He'd been driving and had walked away with nothing more than bruises and scratches, all long since healed.

He stepped back inside the house, resolving to wake her in another twenty minutes if she didn't on her own. He retrieved the groceries, then unpacked them in the kitchen—passing the studio just off the living room, taking advantage of the view of the water. The door was closed now, as it had been since they'd left for Rome. She hadn't stepped foot inside since she'd come home. What was the point? She'd asked in that dull flat tone he hated so much that he'd stopped asking questions.

Before the accident, before Rome, it had been so different.

Their home in Venice overlooked the Grand Canal, and for the first few weeks after their arrival, Elizabeth had filled page after page in her sketch pad, soaking in off all the sights. She'd dragged him all over the city, to the Piazza San Marco, the glass market on on the island of Murano, then toured all the other small islands in the area.

Then, after the New Year, they'd gone to Sicily because he'd never been, and she'd painted so much on the island, he'd had to arrange for the canvases to be shipped back to Venice because they couldn't carry them all.

She'd worried more than once that she was ruining his travels, his escape from Port Charles, but Jason had reassured her that he was having fun—that his joy came from being with her.

He went back the living room, to the terrace, just to be sure she wasn't starting to burn—but she'd already woken, though her position hadn't changed. She was still curled up, her casted arm held against her chest.

"I went to the store," he found himself saying. Elizabeth looked at him, her expression blank. "If you're hungry."

"I'm all right." Her voice was rusty, and she cleared her throat, sat up. "Um. How long did I sleep?"

"Maybe forty minutes." A month ago, he'd have sat on the edge of the chaise, lifted her legs to rest in his lap. She'd have smiled at him—

Today, he stood under the arch, the sounds of Venice swirling around them.

Elizabeth got to her feet, swayed slightly, and instinctively he reached out to steady her, his hands brushing her hips. Startled, her eyes flicked up to his. "I'm okay—"

"I—" He stepped back, his hands falling back to his side, though he itched to hold her, to sweep her hair off her face and promise it would be okay.

But he didn't want to make promises he couldn't keep.

She opened her mouth, but then a sound drew their attention. Below them, on the sidewalk, a postal worker was getting back into the delivery barge, moving onto the next residence. He could see a manila envelope sticking out of the gilded box on the front of the house. They rarely received mail—

"I'll get it," Jason said, heading to the entry way. He opened the door, retrieved the delivery — it was just the one envelope with a return address in Rome.

The world—the sights, sounds, and smells—fell away as he registered the street number. The name on the address label.

"What is it?" Elizabeth wanted to know. She'd wandered in from the terrace, still holding her arm against her chest. "Jason?"

"It's—" He couldn't form the words. How could he tell her? His fingers tightened around the edges. "It's from Rome." He looked up, met her puzzled expression. "Doctor Marini."

She was so perfectly still, she might as well have been made from stone. Her eyes filled, tears clinging to her lashes. She dropped her gaze to the envelope. "Burn it. I don't want to see it."

"Okay." But he still stood there, as frozen as she was.

She sucked in a harsh breath, the sound stark in the otherwise empty room. "No. Don't." She closed her eyes, and somehow, seemed to shrink into herself. "Don't," she said again. "I just—I don't know what to do."

"We don't have to do anything."

"Would it—" Elizabeth opened her eyes and met his gaze. "Would it be better to ignore it? Is that what I'm supposed to do? Throw it away like it never happened? Would that make it easier?"

"I don't know." He wish he could answer even one of those questions—he'd give anything to be able to make this easier for her. For himself. But he couldn't.

"I want—" She stepped forward, stretched out her hand, her fingers resting on the manila. "Should we keep it? Maybe one day, it won't hurt so much." The tears slid down her cheeks down—one splashed on his hand. "I don't know."

"I'll put it away," Jason told her fervently. "And you can decide later. When you're ready."

"Will I ever be ready? It just—" She swiped at her cheeks, impatiently. "It feels like I'm standing in the middle of an empty room, screaming, and there's no one to listen. Nothing can fix this. Not burning it, not forgetting. Not sleeping. It's just there, like this—" Her voice broke, her shoulders started to shake.

Jason set the envelope on the table, intending to reach for her, hoping that somehow this would be the moment where he could finally do something more than just hurt her—

But if it had ever existed, it was over. Elizabeth stepped away, folding her good arm around her waist, closing her eyes. "Put it away," she murmured. "Or watch it. I don't care."

"Elizabeth—"

She brushed past him and hurried up the stairs to the second floor. A moment he heard a door close.

Jason exhaled slowly, picked up the envelope. He ripped open the side and drew out the letter, the photograph, and the DVD. The letter was handwritten — an apology from the office for not sending it sooner and hoping that everyone was happy and healthy.

The DVD was encased in a plastic case with nothing more than Elizabeth's name scrawled across it, and the date of her appointment.

The photograph was actually a print, a black and white scan. He stared down at it, remembering that day in the office, the bubbly excitement and light in Elizabeth's eyes as she'd held his hand, listening to the doctor explain what they were seeing.

And he'd watched the heartbeat of their unborn child, listening to its pulse, the sound more beautiful than any he'd ever heard.

The heartbeat that was gone now. Killed when their car had flipped into a ditch, nearly crushing Elizabeth to death because it had landed on the passenger side. A single car accident, the investigator's side. Jason couldn't remember the crash, couldn't remember anything other than a drive full of excitement and dream spinning—

And then pain. Blood. Crying—his own—as he'd fought to get Elizabeth out of the car before the flames engulfed him—pleading with her to wake up, to just open her

eyes—

Jason swallowed hard, put the contents back into the envelope. He opened a drawer, slid it inside.

Palazzo Barzizza: Master Bedroom

She pressed her forehead against the heavy wooden door, squeezing her eyes shut, wishing away the world.

But it wouldn't go. Not for long. There were stretches of time when she could almost pretend it wasn't real. Every morning, she woke in this beautiful room, slept in a bed that was nearly a century old. Looked out her front door at the historic canals of Venice, and her bedroom the back garden. She had Italy at her fingertips — the entire world, she corrected gently — they'd already been talking about going to France for a few months —

And she had an amazing person in her life, a gorgeous, kind, thoughtful, and generous man who loved her. Whose eyes had been shattered since she woke up in that sterile white room—she'd known even before he said the words—it was in those eyes and the way he'd breathed—

He looked at her everyday as if she were delicate. Fragile. And she couldn't even blame him—

Elizabeth traced her fingers over the cast that hid her healing forearm. The cast that had kept her from processing this grief the way she always had—in her art. She couldn't draw or paint. She could barely move her fingers back and forth. The pain was unbearable, it kept bubbling up when she least expected it—

She'd almost felt all right today. Almost. Her arm felt heavy and useless, and her chest still a bit tight from the surgery, the scar still healing. But there had been that moment out by the chaise, when Jason had forgotten for a minute, and he'd touched her. And she'd wanted to reach out to him, just hold him—

And then the mail. That envelope with its fresh reminder. If they opened it, she knew what was inside. The DVD she'd asked the doctor's office to send to Venice when it was ready — they were cutting their trip to Rome short so they could go home and make plans.

She'd known about the baby for just a week. Not long at all in the scheme of things. She'd had manicures that lasted longer, but the baby had been a reality longer than that—she simply hadn't known. Two months along, the doctor had predicted. Due in late October. Jason had teased her suggesting maybe she'd share a birthday with

the baby.

She covered her abdomen with her uninjured hand. Two months, and she hadn't known. A week, and then it was all over.

Nothing was getting better here. There would be reminders every time she walked down the hall — on that fateful road trip between Rome and Venice, she'd started talking about what room they'd choose for the nursery in the beautiful palazzo he'd rented. Across the hall, she'd decided, even though she was sure she'd change her mind a thousand times—

Elizabeth opened the bedroom door, stared across the hallway at that room. Almost in a trance, she pushed the door open, twisting the knob. It was empty, so empty she could almost hear her breathing echo.

She felt like this room, hollowed from the inside out, and she didn't know how to stop it.

She didn't hear the footsteps on the stairs or in the hallway, but knew he was behind her. The air changed, and her breathing wasn't the only echo.

"I need to make a change," Elizabeth said finally. She turned to face him, forcing herself to meet his eyes, to confront the pain in them. "I—I know you might not want to go back yet, and we talked about maybe the fall, but I need to go home. You don't have to go if you don't want." She held her arm against her, dropping her eyes because she'd seen him flinch, the flex of his hands into fists at his side.

"It's just—" She bit her lip. "Being here is making it worse, and I don't—I can't be in this house anymore. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I know you spent all the money for the year, but—"

"I don't care about that," Jason said roughly. He swallowed hard. "I don't," he repeated. "We'll go home. You should have Bobbie. Gia, Emily, Courtney—whoever you need. Whatever you need."

But what did he need? The question was on the tip of her tongue, but she didn't know how to ask it. She'd done it once, and he'd just turned it around. He needed her to be okay, but that couldn't be the answer. It wasn't fair to put that on her. Just like this entire trip, he'd centered it on her, and it was suffocating—because if she wasn't okay, he couldn't be okay, and that was too much pressure to be responsible for both them—

So she didn't ask it. She nodded. "Um, I guess I'll start packing what I want for the plane, and—"

"I can get someone to take care of the rest. Ship it to Port Charles. If you're sure we're done in Venice."

Elizabeth looked out the window, over the gardens. She'd wanted their child to begin life here in Italy, in this house where so many of her dreams had come true. Where she'd been happiest. A baby conceived in love and warmth and sunshine deserved nothing less than the best, and it felt like that was here—

"With this house," Elizabeth said finally. She finally flicked her gaze back to him. "It's—it's too much. I can't come back here. I'm sorry."

"I'll make the arrangements," he promised. "As soon as possible. We'll go home."

Port Charles, New York

Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

"We should go to the beach."

Sonny Corinthos barely heard the request as he refilled his tumbler with bourbon, watching the dark liquid fill the clear space. She'd been asking to leave town for a few days now, so eventually he'd have to pay attention, but he had to stick close to Port Charles right now. He winced as he took a long sip, the liquor burning his throat. A mistake one February night, and he'd locked himself all up again.

He really was an idiot.

Slender arms wrapped around his waist, dark hair brushing the sleeve of his suit jacket, and he had just one moment of wishing it was another woman behind him. Which wasn't fair to either woman, he thought.

Not that Brenda would know. She'd been dead nearly five years—

"Did you hear me?" Now she'd begin to pout, and Sonny would have to apologize. He set the tumbler on the minibar and turned, flashing her a smile, knowing the dimples were winking in his cheeks.

"I heard you."

Samantha McCall arched one dark slim eyebrow. "Well? The beach? We could be on the island before dinner—"

"A few weeks," he said, softening the refusal with a long, lingering kiss. She grasped

the lapels of his jacket, sliding it off his shoulders.

"Next week," Sam murmured, her busy hands moving to the buckle on his belt.

He nearly gave in to both the demand and the destination of those talented fingers—but Sonny stopped. He kissed the inside of her palm. "I have a meeting," he reminded her. He stooped down, grabbed the jacket. "Remember?"

"You know, this wasn't exactly the life I was promised when you asked me to move in," Sam reminded him as Sonny straightened the cuffs of the jacket.

He'd only asked her to live with him because it was more convenient that way, Sonny thought. Rather than having to wait for her to show up or heading across town to her hotel—but he knew she'd thought differently. Had maybe expected a diamond ring.

Sonny was done with impulsive proposals. Done with marriage. As soon as he realized he was being scammed—

Which reminded him of the meeting—Sonny checked his watch. Late again. That was starting to get annoying.

He strode to the door, yanked it open, then scowled when his lawyer was on the other side, his hand raised to knock. "Finally."

"Apologies. There was some traffic downtown," Ric Lansing said, smoothly. He strode past Sonny, set his briefcase on the desk. "I brought those documents you wanted." He flicked his eyes past Sonny. "Ms. McCall."

"Ric," Sam said, almost with a sneer. She had no love lost for his lawyer—not since she'd walked in on Ric attempting to convince Sonny that the woman was little more than a con artist trying to fleece him. Not really a great first impression. She flicked her eyes to Sonny. "I'll be upstairs."

Sonny dismissed her as soon as she was out of sight, turned to his lawyer. "Ironclad, right? No room to wiggle around and make other demands?"

"No. It's very clear." Ric handed it to him. "But you can review it first. Is she getting her own attorney?"

"I didn't ask." Sonny scanned the contract, then handed it back. "Looks good," he replied, as the phone rang. He reached over to grab the receiver. "Hello?"

"Sonny?"

Sonny closed his eyes, turning away from Ric so that the lawyer didn't see him. The voice sounded like it was a million miles away, but it was familiar. One he hadn't heard in nearly six months. "Jason."

"I need—" There was a pause. "I need a favor."

"Anything," Sonny said immediately, not caring if it was as simple as shipping something to Italy or arranging for the overthrow of a dictator—if Jason needed something, Sonny would get it for him.

Finally an opening—a road back to where he'd been last year. To get his best friend back. "What is it?"

"I—Elizabeth and I are coming back, but the only flights I can get for a few weeks have layovers. I—I don't want her to deal with that."

Sonny's hand tightened around the receiver, but he swallowed the question. Don't push too hard. Don't scare him off. "Just tell me what airport, and I'll have the jet there tomorrow."

Puerto Escondido, Venezuela

Alcazar Compound: Terrace

It was late that same night, and Zander Smith found himself invited up to the big house for dinner. It had been six months since his arrival in Venezuela, and he wasn't any closer to completing his objective than he'd been in December.

He sipped the glass of rum that had been handed to him when he'd arrived, grimacing at the taste. He'd never been a big fan of hard liquor, but Luis Alcazar was inordinately proud of this label—he made it himself in the distillery somewhere on the estate.

"My apologies," the man in question spoke from behind him. Zander turned to find Luis in one of the arched doorways, a cigar in his hand, his own portion of rum in the other. "I see Estrellita has taken care of you."

"Yes." Zander raised the glass, sipping it. "Thank you for the invitation. What's the occasion?"

"A bit of movement finally in the next stage of our plan." Lorenzo joined him at the railing, listening to the waves crashing beneath them, the compound perched high above it. "I've had a call from some friends in Italy."

"Italy?" Zander repeated. "What's in Italy?"

"No one anymore," Luis murmured. "You were right last summer. The way to Sonny Corinthos is through Jason Morgan. He's proving very hard to kill."

"You're not kidding," Zander muttered.

"Alas, I nearly had him a month ago." Luis puffed the cigar, exhaled a stream of smoke. "But he has nine lives. Escaped with nothing more than a concussion. The girlfriend, however, nearly died."

Zander's chest tightened at the mention of Elizabeth. He usually dismissed thoughts of her, but sometimes he remembered nights at Kelly's, watching as she and her best friend sipped hot chocolate and laughed. Her best friend, Emily. If Zander had ever loved anyone more than himself, it had been Emily.

And it was Emily he thought of Alcazar spoke of dismissively of Jason's girlfriend's near-death experience. Had she worried? Had she cried? Someone had been there to comfort her, he hoped—

"They're returning to Port Charles."

Zander frowned. "How is that a good thing?" he wanted to know. "Wasn't it better to have him on another continent?"

"You'd think," Alcazar murmured. "But if I can't kill him somewhere else, I'll need to change strategy. I've been a bit stalled on that front. An artistic block, if you will. Unsure the best way to take Sonny Corinthos apart, bit by bit." He tapped the ashes of his cigar against the railing. "We'll talk and maybe you'll help me think."

He gestured for Zander to follow him inside the house, into a large sumptuous dining room. They weren't alone.

Already seated next to the head of the table was a slender woman with dark hair and dark eyes. She looked at him, her eyes a bit empty. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in real life—

Because he'd only ever seen her in photographs before. In magazines. He cleared his throat, looked at Alcazar who was smiling.

"My darling," he said to the woman. "I've brought you a treat. Zander Smith. He used to live in Port Charles. I thought you might enjoy trading stories. Zander," Alcazar said, drawing Zander's attention. "I'm sure you recognize my better half."

His smile was silky as he continued, "Don't you?"

It was a test. Would he deny it when Alcazar already knew the answer? And what would he do with this information?

Zander nodded slowly. "Of course," he said, a bit stilted. "Emily talks about you often," he told the woman. "I, uh, knew her. You were close with the family, weren't you?"

The woman smiled, and now there was warmth in her eyes. "I loved them like my own. You have to tell me everything. How is Emily? I haven't seen her in ages."

No, of course not, Zander thought. Brenda Barrett had been dead for years. And yet, there she sat, alive and well. He'd been dispatched to the compound as a mole for Hector Ruiz, eager to learn why Alcazar had played a cat and mouse game with Sonny the previous summer.

Zander took a seat across from Sonny Corinthos's former fiancée.

Well, mission accomplished. Now what?

Chapter 2

*I'm alive but tell me, am I free?
I got eyes but tell me, can I see?
The sky is falling, and no one knows
Well, it shouldn't be hard to believe
Shouldn't be this difficult to breathe
The sky is falling, and no one knows
- Sky is Falling, Lifehouse*

Tuesday, May 6, 2003

Port Charles, New York

Brownstone: Front Step

Bobbie Spencer's expression was already sour when she opened the door to Sonny the next morning, her mouth pinched, her brows knitted. "Carly's not here."

"I'm not here to speak to her." Would prefer to avoid Carly Benson for the rest of his days, though the universe seemed to determine to shove the toxic blonde in his face. "I was hoping to see you."

Bobbie folded her arms, arched her finely plucked brows. "You and I have nothing to say to one another," she said. "So—"

"It's about Elizabeth."

Bobbie closed her mouth, grimaced, then stepped back, holding the door open. "I haven't heard from Jason or Elizabeth in more than a month," she admitted as Sonny hesitantly came into the foyer. "Neither has Gia. Or anyone else. I've left messages—" She closed the door, then looked at him. "I find it hard to believe you know more than I do. You weren't exactly their favorite person when they left."

Sonny nodded, accepted the criticism. He wasn't to be forgiven for faking Jason's death without his permission, and allowing Elizabeth to believe him missing for several weeks, and dead for another. "No, but if something had happened—"

"That's why I didn't worry. You'd at least be told about *that*," she said. "So what's going on?"

"Jason called last night. He asked for me to send the jet to Italy. They're coming home."

Bobbie's lips parted in surprise. "Coming—they only left in December. I thought they'd be gone so much longer. Elizabeth talked about traveling in the summer when I talked to her."

"I know. That's why I wanted you to know. The jet is picking them up—" Sonny checked his watch, considered the time difference. "Early tomorrow morning. It left this morning. They'll be here tomorrow around two in the afternoon."

Bobbie folded her arms. "She didn't call me," she murmured. "Or Gia. Gia would have mentioned that." She focused on Sonny. "You spoke to Jason. How did he sound?"

"Not great," Sonny admitted. "He only asked me for the jet because he didn't want Elizabeth to deal with any layovers. I don't know — I just — I know how much you love her. And how much you mean to her."

Bobbie snorted. "And there wasn't some small piece of you that wondered if maybe we did know she was coming home, and we'd know why. Even if I did," she said flatly, "I'd never tell you."

"That's not—"

Bobbie reached past him, pulled the door open. "You've given me the news—" She cut off what was likely to be a scathing send off by sighing. "Carly."

Sonny stepped around the door to see his ex-wife making her way up the stairs, a hand resting on the curve of her belly. Carly's brown eyes flashed when she spied Sonny standing behind her mother. "Did you come to see if I signed your *contract*?" she demanded.

"Contract?" Bobbie asked.

Sonny slid his hands in the pockets of his trousers. "It's a fair agreement, Carly," he said, almost bored by the sentiment. Carly pushed past her mother, and Bobbie reluctantly closed the door.

"Fair? You think that piddling amount of money is fair compensation for what I'm going through?" Carly tossed back her hair. "No. You're going to double it, *and* you're going to buy me a house, and—"

"Have your lawyer talk to mine," Sonny said pleasantly. "And let me know how the doctor appointments are going."

"Damn it, Sonny, you're not going to walk out on me—"

Sonny opened the door, looked back at the bane of his existence. Feeling sorry for himself months ago, and she'd come over at the wrong time — wasn't that how the story had gone all those years ago? "I'm sorry, Carly. There's no wedding ring this time. Last time I did that, you nearly got me arrested." He smirked. "Twice. "

"Sonny—"

He pulled the door shut behind himself, and headed for the car. He had things to do before Jason came home, and Carly wasn't on the list. He would let the lawyers handle it.

Wednesday, May 7, 2003

Venice, Italy

Marco Polo Airport: Departures

Jason saw the stewardess assigned to their gate gesture, and got to his feet. "It's time to board," he told Elizabeth, holding out a hand. She grimaced, but took his hand and let him pull her up. She was still having trouble with her sore ribs, so he made sure he was gentle.

"Let me—" He picked up her carry-on, a tote bag with a long strap. "I've got it—"

"I can—" Elizabeth pressed her lips together, took a deep breath. "I can get it. I'm mostly healed, Jason. You have to let me do things for myself."

His fingers tightened around the strap, and he swallowed hard. "Yeah. Yeah. Sorry." He started to loop it over her shoulder, but made himself stop. He just handed it to her, and ignored when she placed it on her shoulder, wincing from the pain.

He exhaled slowly. Reminded himself to take his cues from her. She wanted to go home. He was taking her home. He didn't want to go back yet — wasn't sure how to face Sonny or Carly. Or anyone still angry over Jason faking his death in the fall — though he hadn't been started that lie.

He just hadn't ended it right away.

But it didn't matter if he wasn't ready to go yet. Elizabeth needed to be there, and if he sent her on her own—

That would be the first step, wouldn't it? They'd separate. And then she'd be in Port

Charles without him. Surrounded friends and family. And maybe she'd never come back.

So he was going home.

He followed a step behind her as they walked down the flight tunnel towards the plane. He was ready if she stumbled or fell — she wanted to believe she was healed, but it had only been two weeks since she'd left the hospital. Two broken ribs. A collapsed lung—

His own chest felt tight from the memory of waking in the hospital, listening as a doctor with a thick Italian accent related her condition — still listed as critical — she was still in surgery—they hoped for the best—

They boarded the plane, and Jason swept his eyes around the familiar cabin, the sofas tucked against the walls of the plane, and then the flight chairs for takeoff. "Over here—"

"I can see that," Elizabeth snapped, and he dropped his arm, his cheeks heated. She closed her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay—"

"No. No—" She shook her head, and tears shimmered in her eyes when she looked at him. "It's not. I'm sorry. Let's just—" She bowed her head. "I can't stop it. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," he repeated, but he meant it this time. He was hovering, he was smothering her. He knew that. He was trying to do whatever he could to help her feel better, but maybe—

Jason cleared his throat. "I don't have to go. If you want me to stay here. I don't—" He had to force the words out. "If you don't want me in Port Charles."

On a shaky breath, she sighed, looked at him. "I don't know what I want," she said softly. "I don't know what's going to help. I wake up every day and tell myself today I'll be better. And I don't know how to make that true, Jason. I can't—"

It wasn't an answer to his question, and now he stood there awkwardly. He wanted to hold her, to reassure her, to find the words — he'd always been able to find the words before, but now when it mattered the most—

"Excuse me, Mr. Morgan?" He turned to the flight attendant at the door. "We need to close the flight tunnel—"

"Yeah, okay." He nodded, looked at Elizabeth. She swiped at her tears. "Yeah, go ahead." He'd go home. She hadn't told him she wanted to go home with her — but she hadn't told him to stay, either.

So he made the choice for himself. "Yeah, close the flight tunnel. We'll get ready for takeoff."

Kelly's: Dining Room

"So, I tell him—" Gia Campbell swirled the straw in her milkshake. "I tell him that if he ever wants to see the ladies again, he better not cancel one more date without *at least* an hour's notice." She snorted. "Imagine canceling on me after you're already supposed to be there?" She leaned in, scowling. "Doesn't he know how lucky he is?"

Behind the counter, sorting through receipts and ledgers, Courtney Quartermaine smirked, then glanced up at her best friend. "Apparently not, but you'll make sure to tell him."

"Damn right." Gia made a face, then sighed. "He really does fill out a double-breasted suit like no one else—it's his only redeeming quality. And his smile," she allowed.

"Why do you even care, Gia? You don't even like him that much."

"I like him enough," the former model shrugged. "He's rich, charming, and good in bed. What's not to like? Girl, not everyone wants to find true love. Been there, dumped that." She tipped her head. "You know, you and Elizabeth found like the last two good ones out there. Figures. Snapped the brothers right off the market."

Courtney's smile was tense. "Yeah, perfect true love." She turned away, went to the coffee pot.

Gia narrowed her eyes. "What's that tone? I don't like that. Does someone need a reminder of who he has to deal with if he screws up? Because I'll cut a bitch—"

Courtney's smile was more genuine when she turned back, a bit sheepish. "No, no. AJ's fine. It's fine," she repeated when Gia wasn't convinced. "It's just—" She paused. "The family offered AJ a spot at ELQ. Like...the company. Not just handling some interests down at the waterfront. But like...the corporate headquarters."

"Ah. That's good, right?"

"Sure. It just feels like—" Courtney hesitated, unsure. "I don't know. It feels like we had a plan and that we matched. Like, I don't know if we would have actually made it if we hadn't had that silly, cramped apartment or we weren't both working blue-collar jobs. Like I'm a waitress, he's a forklift operator. It's—it's level, you know? It's like you and Ric, right? You're studying to be a lawyer, he's already a lawyer. There's an even playing field. But AJ—he'll wear suits. And he'll go to an office every day."

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's just...I don't really fit in with his family. They're great. I mean, they've backed down and accepted me, which is great."

"Yeah, you're using words like fine and great, but—" Gia narrowed her eyes. "Courtney."

"It's me being insecure. I know that. I know that. AJ and I worked so hard, and we love each other. And I love being Michael's stepmother, and AJ's on his way to another year of sobriety. I just—" She met Gia's eyes. "What if he starts being corporate again and he goes to dinners and parties with these women who are well-dressed and classy. I'm from Atlantic City, Gia."

"Someone say you're not classy? Because—"

"Let's just drop it. Okay? Please?"

"I'll drop it." But she wouldn't forget it.

"Hey, ladies." Bobbie smiled as she came out of the kitchen. She squeezed Courtney's arm. "How's business?"

"Same as ever. The night deposit is in the safe," Courtney told her.

"Good, good. I came by because I had some good news, and I know Gia comes here for lunch. Elizabeth is coming home."

Gia raised her brows. "You heard from her? Because I was thinking of getting on a plane so I could go yell at her—" She huffed. "Girl goes to Italy and thinks she can ghost the little people—"

Courtney rolled her eyes. "She's in *Italy*, Gia. It's so romantic and she's there with the man she loves and money is no object—like, she was never going to call every day."

"I'm not asking for everyday." Gia made a face. "Would every *other* day kill her?"

She frowned, looked at Bobbie. "Wait, you said Elizabeth is coming home. Is it like a quick stop? Is Jason going somewhere else?"

"I don't know how long it is, but Jason's coming home with her. Sonny sent the jet to get them." Bobbie hesitated. "Sonny seemed a little worried. Said Jason didn't sound right on the phone. But if it were serious, they wouldn't ask for the jet. Or handle it alone, right? Don't you think?"

"I guess." Gia furrowed her brow. "I mean, like I said, the last time I talked, they were leaving to spend a few weeks in Rome, and Elizabeth still seemed excruciatingly happy." She stabbed her fork in her salad. "Bitch."

"You don't think they broke up?" Courtney said, anxious. "They're coming together, aren't they?"

"I don't know—"

"First of all, Jason worships the ground Elizabeth walks on," Gia cut in. "So we can discount the usual reasons for a breakup. Cheating, being taken for granted, ignoring, treating like shit—" She ticked them off on her fingers. "None of those are ever going to apply to him."

"Well, there are other reasons for breaking up. Growing apart, wanting different things—"

"You think I don't hear what you're laying down, Quartermaine, but I do. We'll circle back to you because I got questions." Gia focused on Bobbie. "You think maybe someone is sick?"

"Maybe. Gia, do you have Emily's number in California?"

Gia narrowed her eyes. "You think we're friends? You think I can just pick up a phone and dial a number?" She wiggled her shoulders. "Look, we agreed to be roommates so Emily didn't have to go to the mansion when she moves home. She's not actually a friend—"

"You are so melodramatic—" Courtney accused.

"Well, damn, I can't keep going around and making friends! I have room for two. That's you and Liz. In fact, I hope they did break up because then Emily wouldn't have to be my roommate—"

"Gia, no one is going to think you're a nice person because you have Emily's phone number," Bobbie said, exasperated.

"Yeah, don't worry. Your reputation as a malcontented bitch—not in danger."

"I'm gonna seduce your husband—" Gia flicked a drop of water at Courtney who threw the remains of a straw wrapper at her.

"Ladies," Bobbie said dryly.

"I have Em's number — or it's on AJ's phone, anyway," Courtney said. "I'll get him to call and let her know. She's not coming home for another two weeks or so anyway."

"Well, my job here is done," Bobbie said. "I'll see you at home," she told Gia.

When the older woman had left, Courtney wrinkled her nose. "Do you think something serious is going on?"

"I don't know, but I find it hard to believe that Jason did anything dumb enough to warrant a break up since we last talked to her. After what she went through last fall, he's not an idiot."

"He didn't fake his own death, Gia. That wasn't his idea—"

"Yeah, well, he sure as hell didn't stop it, either," Gia retorted. "He didn't know, okay. But then he found out that not only was he supposed to be dead, but the entire world—including Elizabeth—believed it, and let it continue for another, what, week? Nah. He stays on my shit list until I'm ready to check him off."

"Whatever. Maybe she did something. She's not perfect—"

"Why are you so determined to think they broke up?" Gia challenged. "Why are we switching roles? You're the pretty princess who believes in fairy tales, and I'm the one who thinks the only good thing about men comes in their wallets and in their pants. Get it straight." She frowned. "How bad are things with AJ?"

"They're *fine*." Courtney huffed and went to take an order. Gia scowled, but decided to let it go for now. She'd get to the bottom of it. She always did.

Port Charles Airport: Private Hangar

Sonny exhaled a sigh of relief when the landing stairs were fit to his small private jet, and the door was opened. Jason appeared briefly at the top of the stairs, then went back inside— Jason was in one piece, that was good—

And then Elizabeth stepped out in front of him, holding onto the railing at the top of the landing stairs with one hand and the other—

She had it clutched against her chest, a white cast covering her from forearm to her palm. And she looked thinner, paler than he remembered. Not like someone enjoying the spring in Europe.

Jason and Elizabeth exchanged brief words from the top of the stairs, and there was something in their body language that made Sonny straighten, knit his brows together. A tension. Not the ease he was used to—

What the hell had happened?

Jason looked irritated as Elizabeth continued her descent — a very slow, careful descent with Jason hovering behind, his hands ready if she stumbled.

When they reached the bottom, Elizabeth took a deep breath, swayed slightly. Jason reached out to steady her—but let his hands fall before they actually touched her.

Oh, yeah. Something was definitely wrong.

"Sonny." Jason frowned as they approached. "I wasn't—"

"I wanted to make sure everything went well. Always better when you do that in person." Sonny cleared his throat. Gestured to the limo where a guard was waiting to open the door. "I can sit up front if you want—"

"It's fine," Elizabeth said. "I'm just tired, and I—" She hesitated, looked at Jason. "I didn't even think. Where are we staying—"

"I didn't—" He exhaled. "I could call Jake," he said. "See if there's a room available, but I don't know if that's a good idea—you need your rest and it's not quiet—"

"I'm fine," Elizabeth said, lifting her chin. "I don't even need that much quiet anymore—"

"But—"

"I have a solution," Sonny interjected, hating the way they were speaking to each other — hating that there was something broken here, and he didn't have the first clue how to fix it. "Alexis moved out of the penthouse before you guys left, and we cleaned it out. It's empty. A few basic furnishings. We've kept it for emergencies, but it's there."

"That would be great, Sonny," Elizabeth said. Then she hesitated, looked at Jason. "Or we can—"

"No, the penthouse is fine. It's—it's fine." Jason looked back at the plane. "I need to get our things—"

"I'll take care of that. The limo is for you guys. I'll take care of your luggage and follow in the second car." Sonny gestured towards the door. "So—"

"Thanks." Elizabeth went towards the guard, who opened the door.

"If the penthouse is too close," Sonny said, catching Jason's arm. "If you don't want it, we can find something else. I just—"

"No. No. It's fine."

"Jason, I'm not trying to pry, but—" he looked back towards Elizabeth who was wincing as she ducked into the backseat. "Is she okay? What happened to her arm?"

"There was an accident," Jason said after a minute. "She's healing. Uh, if you could—she's not ready—" His expression was pained. "It would be easier if you didn't ask questions."

"No, yeah, whatever you need. Promise." Sonny stepped back. "You both look exhausted. Head to the Towers. I'll take care of everything here."

"Thanks."

Sonny watched as Jason climbed into the car, then the limo drove out of the hangar. Well, whatever he'd expected — it wasn't *that*.

Puerto Escondido, Venezuela

Alcazar's Compound: Terrace

Tucked into the hills where the country jutted out into the Caribbean in the state of Falcón, an ordinary visitor might think Luis Alcazar's compound was a tropical paradise with its own beach, gorgeous views of the blue-green waters, and complete privacy.

Brenda Barrett was hardly an ordinary visitor, and the tropical paradise was her prison.

There were nights when she considered walking to one of the cliffs that overlooked the sea and just casting herself to the waves below — dying the way her friends and family believed she already had. The sweet oblivion of death seemed a better choice than her continued exile within this compound.

But she wasn't sure even death would free her from this torment. Luis would just send a guard to fetch her body and build a shrine to it.

She rubbed her arms as she walked along the terrace that wound around the main building of the compound, the tiles cool and smooth beneath her bare feet. She had hope for the first time in nearly two years — hope that there was a way out.

Luis never brought anyone to see her, not anymore. Not after her last attempt to flee his clutches had ended so badly. But this new man — Luis had brought him to dinner. Allowed him to speak of Brenda's past, a world she often pretended had been a dream because it made it easier to keep breathing.

He'd told her so many lovely things, full of news about the people Brenda had loved so much. And reminders that the world had moved on in the more than four years since her mother had steered her car over the edge of the cliffs near Vista Point.

Robin was back in Paris, completing her medical degree. Sonny had somehow married and divorced that terrible bitch, Carly Benson. Emily had been in an accident, but she was all right now, in college in California. Lois was living her best life, continuing on with L&B records and touring the world—Jason had fallen in love with little Lizzie Webber and they'd gone away to Europe together. That last tidbit had stuck with Brenda for a long, sad moment. She'd known Lizzie Webber as a sweet, tough girl in love with Lucky Spencer. She'd grown up — was mature and old enough now to date Jason.

How life had continued despite Brenda's absence — how it would continue even if she never escaped. No one in Port Charles had even the smallest inkling that Brenda was alive, confirming her worst thoughts. Outside that moment in Paris, which by now Jax had surely written off as a trick of the eye—

No one was looking for her.

The sound of voices drew Brenda's attention and she wandered closer to the windows. Luis — and Zander Smith. She lingered just to the side of the window, wondering about Zander. With his connections to Port Charles — was he truly Alcazar's man? He'd dated Emily, he'd said. And she'd seen the warmth in his voice when he spoke of her. He'd loved her.

Someone who had loved Emily — could Brenda trust him? Could he be an ally? She

was so afraid to hope. To wonder.

But desperate enough to try anything.