

Daughters

by Melissa (LissieLove)



*Fathers, be good to your daughters
Daughters will love like you do*

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This story was written between 2005-2014.

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I'm just saying.

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Dedication

This novel is to my own family and friends as they inspire me. This is also dedicated to anyone who read this over the years and hoped for an ending.

Background & Time Period

Daughters is an alternate universe story. A lot of the GH canon is the same, but I've tweaked things here and there, usually relationships and specific history. Elizabeth and Patrick are twins, children of Noah. Dillon has always lived in PC. Patrick, Robin, Elizabeth, Lucky and whatnot all grew up together. Nikolas's history is the same, I just figure he came to PC a bit earlier than he did on the show.

Chapter One

*Fathers, be good to your daughters
Daughters will love like you do
Girls become lovers who turn into mothers
So mothers, be good to your daughters too*
- Daughters, John Mayer

Saturday, December 15, 2005

General Hospital: Nurse's Station

Lately, more often than she liked to admit, Elizabeth Drake wished that she were an only child. For the majority of her life, she had not minded her older brother—older by exactly eight minutes which Patrick had never allowed her to forget. But these days...she would have been happier to have been a foundling left on a doorstep, freeing her from her brother *and* her father, who only agreed on one thing—why she should stay far away from Jason Morgan.

"You're infuriating," the brunette muttered as she shoved her brother out of her way. "How we shared the same womb for nine months without killing one other is beyond me."

"Ellie, I don't think you're trying to see this from your brother's point of view," Noah Drake began, hesitantly.

"Of course you'd take his side," Elizabeth rolled her eyes. She shoved a chart into a slot and slammed her pen down with irritation. "Why can't you *ever* once take my side?"

"Because I'm the favorite," Patrick stated ironically. "Or, more likely, because Dad's sucking up to me." He leaned his elbows on the surface of the counter and towered over his shorter twin.

"Patrick, I wish you could just let things go," she said, exhausted by her entire life. "Aren't you tired of being a jackass all the time?"

"It's so nice that some things never change."

The hesitant voice caused all three Drakes to turn around to find Robin Scorpio standing at the counter. Beside her, Elizabeth could feel her brother tensing up. "Robin," Elizabeth said before he could say something awful. "You're...you're not in Paris."

"Nope." Robin slid her hands in her pockets of her jeans. "I was going to let you know before I got back, but...I just accepted a position in the pathology department starting immediately."

"Fabulous," Patrick muttered, and Robin flicked an uncertain gaze at him. "The bright lights of Paris too much?" he all but snarled at her.

Robin took a deep breath, as if bracing herself or finding a well of patience. "I just wanted to be back home, with my family...and friends..." She looked at Elizabeth with some hesitation. "I think we've discovered what a crappy long-distance best friend I can be."

Elizabeth glanced between her brother and his ex-girlfriend with some trepidation before smiling brightly. "Robin, please tell me you don't have any plans right now because I have a break and I absolutely *have* to escape these two."

"Do you want to grab some coffee?"

"God, yes." Elizabeth tossed a dirty look at her twin and her father before following her friend to the elevators. "Thank God you're coming home—" Elizabeth's voice was cut off when they stepped into the elevator and the doors slid shut.

"Great, just what I need," Patrick muttered, tapping his pen restlessly. He glanced at his father, before clearing his throat. "I have a consult—"

"Patrick, are you ever going to talk to me when you're sister's not around?" Noah asked, slightly exasperated.

Patrick paused as he stepped down from the station. "The odds aren't good. You can take my side over Ellie's all you want, it's not going to change things. The only thing we have in common is we both don't want her hanging around Jason Morgan."

General Hospital: Cafeteria

Elizabeth and Robin sat in silence, each stirring their respective drinks—Robin, coffee, and Elizabeth, hot chocolate. Finally, Elizabeth cleared her throat. "So, when did you get in?"

"Yesterday." Robin shifted in her seat and sipped her coffee. "I was going to call, but...to be honest, I wasn't sure you'd talk to me."

Elizabeth pursed her lips for a long moment. "I'm thinking about it, but honestly, with the way you and Patrick imploded, I'm not surprised you cut your ties."

"But I shouldn't have with you," Robin said softly. She reached over and gripped Elizabeth's hand. "You were my best friend, not just the sister of my boyfriend. And I'm sorry."

"It'd be easy to hold a grudge, but I already have enough people in my life that aren't on good terms, I'm not in market to add more." Elizabeth shrugged. "So why now?"

"I don't know," Robin hedged. "It just felt like I'd stayed away long enough." She bit her lip. "So what were you guys arguing about?"

"Jason Morgan." When Robin raised her eyebrows, Elizabeth continued. "After he woke up from his accident two years ago, he tried to deal with the Quartermaines, but I guess he just lacked Jay Quartermaine's patience, and you know, Edward and Alan, even Monica, just kept pushing at him

until he just walked out on them.”

“Emily wrote me a bit about it. She said that he really only talks to her and Lila, and occasionally Dillon if they cross paths. Sometimes, he says hello to Monica, but that’s rare.” Robin eyed her best friend. “And she said that you had been a major help to him. You were there when he woke up, and he’s really depended on you for friendship.”

“That’s all true,” Elizabeth admitted. “It gave me something to think about other than...my own life.” She sipped her hot chocolate. “But after a few months of parking cars at Luke’s club and keeping the books for the Haunted Star, Sonny Corinthos gave him a job at the warehouse.”

“Hence the Drake men being agitated,” Robin murmured. “Is that all Jason’s doing for him?”

“As far I know for sure.” Elizabeth sighed. “But from what I can glean from Jason, there’s...an opportunity to take on some more responsibilities. I think he’s acted as a courier, like Lucky used to do when we were in high school. Nothing overtly illegal, but maybe...” She shook her head. “I mean, we’re just friends, so it’s not a big deal.”

“Are you really just friends?” Robin pushed. “I mean, if he’s anything like Jay—”

“He’s not,” Elizabeth said quickly. “I mean, not in the ways that matter. Jay was sweet and compassionate, and he had that boundless patience with his insane family, which is probably where Emily learned it. But Jason Morgan...he’s...” she hesitated, searching for the right words. “He doesn’t let anyone close. He still has that patience, but you have to earn it.” Her words began to tumble from her lips as she grew agitated. “And the Quartermaines, my father, my brother...they look at him, and they see someone who’s less than they are, someone who’s brain damaged and isn’t a whole person—I hate the way people talk about him, especially when they talk about him to his face like he’s not even there or he can’t understand—”

“Ellie...” Robin held up a hand. “Whoa. I’m not insinuating anything. I haven’t even met Jason Morgan. But, honey, if he’s hanging around Sonny Corinthos...” Her eyes widened. “I mean, we grew up on stories about him and the mob—”

“I know,” Elizabeth groaned. “I know. But he offered Jason a honest job, and Jason really wanted to prove himself. I told him to be careful, but he didn’t want to make judgements about Sonny based on what other people said. It’s hard to disagree with that. Sonny’s always been real nice to him, and he’s been polite to me—”

“You’ve met him?” Robin interrupted. “Do Patrick and Noah know this?”

“No,” Elizabeth said shortly, “And if you’re really serious about us putting the last three years of radio silence behind us, you’re going to keep it to yourself. I’m not an idiot, but Jason considers a Sonny a close friend. I’m not about to lose my friendship with Jason over something like this—it’s too important to me.”

“Fine. I just...wanted to know what was happening.” Robin sipped her coffee. “Are you sure you’re

just friends?” she asked.

Elizabeth’s cheeks flushed. “Yes!”

Robin looked like she wanted to press the subject, but thankfully they were interrupted when Lulu Spencer stalked up to the table, an irritated intern hot on her heels.

“Explain to me again why I have to do this?” she demanded. “Ellie, please tell Emily that I do not do bedpans.

“Lulu,” Emily Quartermaine sighed, aggravated. “You’re a volunteer. You do whatever you’re told. And it’s not even my responsibility to worry about this.” She collapsed into a chair next to Elizabeth and then did a double take as she realized who her co-worker’s companion was. “Robin!” she squealed. She jumped back to her feet, and yanked Robin up, hugging her. “When did you get back? How long are you here?”

“Yesterday,” Robin said, drawing back to take a much needed breath. “I’m starting in the lab tomorrow.”

“Good, reinforcements,” Lulu said. “Maybe you can help.” She sat in the fourth seat and stole a sip of hot chocolate. She wrinkled her nose. “How much sugar is in here?”

“Lulu seems to think that just because we’re going to be sisters-in-law that I can pull strings with the hospital and get her off bed pan duty,” Emily informed Robin.

“You’re not only marrying my brother, you’re marrying the hospital’s biggest donor!” Lulu remarked. “If you can’t pull strings, you can?”

“How did you end up on bedpan duty?” Robin asked curiously. “I remember you had to do something pretty awful to get that punishment.”

“Oh, sure...” Lulu rolled her eyes. “Well, it started with me getting suspended from school because I missed like two measly days—”

“An entire week,” Ellie murmured to Robin.

“So my parents decided I needed to be grounded and I had to start taking responsibility, so I’m stuck bussing at Luke’s afternoons after school and volunteering here on the weekends. So, as to the bed pans, well the terror on sneakers hate me—”

“The terror being Epiphany Johnson,” Elizabeth said wryly “She’s head of the nursing program, and Lulu has been irritating her since the day she started here, haven’t you, my love?”

Lulu stuck her tongue out at the nurse. “Epiphany is being as unreasonable as my parents. I was late like five times. Who isn’t late once in a while?”

“Five times in two weeks is not once in a while, Lulu.” Emily sighed. “Your parents and Nikolas

wanted you to work here and the club so you could get a little experience, a little responsibility. And keep you out of trouble.” She raised her eyebrows. “It’s not working out so well, since you’re still dating Ellie’s idiot cousin.”

“I’d argue that,” Elizabeth mused, “but he’s a Drake male, and therefore, an idiot.”

Robin frowned. “What’s wrong with Will?”

“Well, Lulu only became interested in him after he started fighting anyone who looked at him wrong,” Emily sighed.

“That is not true,” Lulu said hotly. “Or well...it’s not entirely true. He’s very cute, you know. And he’s funny.” She propped her chin on her fist. “But don’t worry. He told me he loved me last weekend, so I’m breaking up with him.” She smiled brightly. “Let’s not talk about that anymore. Let’s talk about how excellent it is that Robin is home.” She looked at the woman in question. “How happy have you made your father and uncle? I mean, every time Robert comes in to harass my dad, he mentions you and how proud he is.”

Robin sighed, allowing the change of subject. “He still thinks I’m going to hop a plane back to Paris. I think he’s thinking about putting a lock on my bedroom.”

“Well, at least your father’s not a recovering alcoholic who spends most of his time sucking up to your brother,” Elizabeth muttered.

“Or doesn’t disappear for months on end without word,” Lulu pointed out.

“And your father hasn’t threatened to disown you for marrying a Cassadine,” Emily sighed.

“This is all true, but at least none of your fathers are retired WSB agents,” Robin remarked. “Believe me, it’s no picnic.”

“Fathers,” Lulu said, mournfully. “Who needs ‘em right?”

Chapter Two

*Oh, you see that skin?
It's the same she's been standing in
Since the day she saw him walking away
Now she's left
Cleaning up the mess he made*
- Daughters, John Mayer

Wednesday, December 21, 2005

General Hospital: Nurse's Station

Robin twirled the gilded invitation in her hands. “So Christmas Eve at the Haunted Star.” She glanced over at Elizabeth, who was studiously making notations in her chart. “You going?”

“Never miss it,” Elizabeth replied. “Em and I only won enough money to pay our bar tab last year, so I’m ditching her.” She set down her pen and eyed Robin. “How much do you think my brother and father are going to explode when they find out I’m going with Jason this year?”

Robin set the invitation on the counter and blinked at her. “You’re going to have to enter Witness Protection, Ellie. They are going to freak—”

“Well, I don’t care.” Elizabeth folded her arms across her chest, and set her lips in a mutinous line. “Jason’s amazing with numbers and I want to have a good time.”

“Uh huh...” Robin tapped her fingers on the chart in front of her. “So, is this like a date?” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. “What happened to just friends?”

“We are completely platonic.”

“Right,” Robin drawled. She pressed a finger to her chin and pretended to look confused. “Tell me, has he filled out working for Sonny? I remember Jay was relatively well-built, but I imagine all that heavy lifting has led to some...changes.”

Elizabeth’s cheeks blazed with color and looked back at her charts. “He looks healthy,” she mumbled.

Robin smirked and came closer to Elizabeth. “I remember Jay had the most beautiful blue eyes. Patrick was lucky I saw him first. Does he still have those eyes?”

“And the most beautiful smile,” Elizabeth said without thinking.

“Whose smile?”

The third voice broke the two out of their fun. Robin wrinkled her nose. Not once since she'd returned the week before had she and Patrick had a decent conversation. He was still bitter about the way she'd broken up with him, though she didn't understand it. They'd both been unhappy before she'd left. "No one—"

"Wasn't talking to you," Patrick held up a hand. "I have decided that the best way to preserve the peace is just to pretend you're not there."

Robin narrowed her eyes. "Well, that sounds good to me, you son of—"

"Patrick," Elizabeth interrupted. "Don't you have rounds?" She raised an eyebrow. "Go be a doctor."

Patrick saw the invitation Robin had discarded on the counter in front of him and raised his eyes back to them. Suspicion filled his dark eyes. "Ellie, who are you going to the party with? Emily?"

"Um..." Elizabeth hesitated, which was clearly all that Patrick needed. He closed his eyes and started to shake his head, as if bitterly disappointed in her.

Robin wasn't sure if she should leap to Elizabeth's defense, or stay out of the argument. Maybe Patrick had a point—if they could just ignore each other for a while, he'd get used to seeing her around the hospital...and then they could lean to co-exist. She just wasn't sure how long she had before she had to tell everyone the truth.

"Robin." She snapped to when she realized Patrick was looking at her, almost beseeching. "Can you please explain to my sister that hanging around criminals is a bad thing? Your parents are in law enforcement—"

"I am just..." She held up her hands in surrender. "I don't want to get in the middle of this." She picked up her charts and cast her friend an apologetic look. "I'm going to do my rounds." As she stepped out of the station, she heard Patrick muttering something. She whirled around. "What the hell did you just say?"

"I said go ahead and run," Patrick repeated, the anger bleeding from his words. "We know you hate hanging around when things are tough. So go do what you do best—"

"You're such a bastard—" Robin stopped and closed her eyes. Without another word, she stalked away. She wasn't going to get caught up in another Patrick Drake tirade and remind herself why she'd left Port Charles in the first place.

Harborview Towers: Sonny Corinthos' Penthouse

The rumors about Sonny Corinthos were generally correct. He lived in a penthouse in the most expensive and posh building in downtown Port Charles with windows were made of bulletproof glass and armed guards at his door. He had a smile that was equal parts wicked and charm and a dimple that set many hearts a flutter. There was a crackle of danger around him—something that told the casual visitor that while he might *seem* completely focused on you, there was a part of his mind

that was planning his next criminal activity.

He was, after all, the notorious crime lord in the area, controlling all of Port Charles and the surrounding areas. He controlled the drugs (of which there was little), the prostitution (a lamentable but necessary enterprise), the gambling (only Luke's casino was exempt out of friendship) and of course, the smuggling of contraband through their warehouses located on the docks. He ran Port Charles with an iron fist and the *only* reason that Commissioner Robert Scorpio hadn't brought him down yet was through the legal expertise of Sonny's brother, Ric Lansing.

But for all of his crimes and all of his dangerous tendencies, Sonny was a good man. A family man, wildly in love with his wife Brenda and a loyal friend to those he took under his wing.

He liked to think of Jason Morgan as his friend, as someone to look out for and protect. He'd given Jason a legitimate job parking cars at Luke's but he'd seen that the younger man was hungry for something more. Not for power or for violence like some men in their business, but for a sense of self-worth—something that been stolen when AJ Quartermaine had crashed his car and sent his brother into a coma that eventually wiped his memory.

And so, against his better judgment, he gave Jason a few courier jobs. He'd cautioned Jason not to tell anyone that he was moving up in the organization and Jason had agreed, even keeping it from his only friend, Elizabeth Drake. His loyalty to Sonny would always come first and that was the first lesson he'd learned in this business.

And now, Sonny was standing in the living room of his penthouse, sipping bourbon and preparing to give Jason an even more important job. Despite his age and his inexperience, Jason had keen instincts and he could spot a liar and a cheat from a mile away.

"Ruiz is going to be at the Haunted Star on Christmas Eve," Sonny remarked. "He received an invitation from Luke at my request." He sipped his drink. "I need a public meeting so that if it becomes necessary, I can say we had a friendly relationship."

"Will it become necessary?" Jason asked, not out of disrespect but genuine curiosity so Sonny answered him. Hector Ruiz had long been one of Sonny's associates, part of the network and Ruiz had run the drugs in Port Charles since even before Sonny came to power.

"If he continues pushing the drugs to the kids, then yeah," Sonny nodded slowly, "it'll be necessary. I would like you to be present at this meeting. I want your opinion on Hector Ruiz and whether you think he's going to make a play for the territory or if he's just overstepping his bounds."

Jason hesitated and rubbed the back of his neck, feeling uncomfortable now. "I was already going," he admitted. "Elizabeth asked me."

Sonny nodded. "Good, good. It's only going to be fifteen minutes out of the evening. Just make sure she doesn't know."

"I can't—" Jason shook his head. "I *won't* lie to her."

The one drawback to Jason Morgan was his inability to lie. Or his refusal to be anything less than brutally honest. It was, in fact, the only flaw. Sonny pressed his lips together in disapproval. Honesty would not get him far in this business but neither was he going to stamp out what could be a useful trait in some instances. "You don't have to lie. Just don't answer the question."

Not understanding that piece of advice, Jason chose not to pursue the topic. "Is that everything?" he asked.

"Yeah, yeah," Sonny checked the clock on his desk. "Brenda will be back from the club any minute so we're done for now." He grinned. "Picking Elizabeth up from work? Again?"

Jason shifted and looked away. "She likes the motorcycle," he admitted. "And it's going to snow this week so I figure we should get one last ride in before that."

"She's a nice girl," Sonny remarked.

"I guess."

Knowing that Jason wouldn't elaborate beyond the point—more because he couldn't explain the friendship between himself and the nurse, Sonny didn't press and Jason left, somewhat relieved. He'd do almost anything for Sonny, but talking about his friendship with Elizabeth was one of the few subjects they hadn't broached much.

It was an odd friendship, to be sure. Born from the days he'd still been in the hospital and she still a nursing student. She had known Jason Quartermaine and had been friends with him, as well as Jason Quartermaine's adopted sister Emily. But after the first few visits, her smile hadn't been so sad and he stopped thinking that she was pretending he was the guy he used to be.

She had been supportive when he'd chosen to move into a room above Jake's, a seedy bar on the docks rather than returning to Jason Quartermaine's room at the Quartermaine estate. And she hadn't tried to talk him out of working for Sonny, even though Jason could tell Elizabeth was uncomfortable with the idea. And she wasn't afraid to be seen with him, wasn't afraid to join him for motorcycle rides, no matter how fast he took the curves of the road.

He had long ago grasped the concept of best friend and had fit Sonny into that slot but whatever he had with Elizabeth was different and harder to define. He wondered what she'd say about them. If they were best friends or something more—which led to thoughts that, quite frankly, he wasn't ready for.

General Hospital: Break Room

Emily tossed a book of invitations onto a stack of other wedding books. "I changed my mind," she remarked. "I think we should go to Vegas."

Robin laughed and set her medical journal aside. "Well, Vegas has its charm. But Nikolas being a prince and all, I don't think he's going to see it that way."

Emily huffed. "You make a good point. But planning a wedding when your own family hates the groom is the opposite of fun." She bit her lip and looked down.

"Edward still holding on to that?" Robin asked.

"Yes," Emily admitted. "He offered to pay at first, but he kept changing his mind and resetting the date, and refused to make any decisions, so I knew he was just using it keep me from Nikolas. It's a complete nightmare, Robin."

"Ah, yes, a complete nightmare. Marrying the man of your dreams and becoming a princess," Robin said dryly. "You poor girl, I should send flowers. Edward loves you, he'll come around."

Rather than discuss her grandfather's threats to disown her if she went through the wedding, she forced a smile on her face. She rolled up one of her bridal magazines and smacked Robin with it. "You're no help. You're supposed to commiserate with me."

"Is that my line?" Robin replied with a laugh. "I didn't get the script change." She shrugged. "Just tell Lila."

"I don't want to burden my grandmother with more of Grandfather's shenanigans," Emily sighed. "She's still heartbroken about the rift with Jason. She's the only one he bothers to talk to in the family but he can't come around with the family constantly hanging about. I wish things were different." Her eyes filled with shadows and she looked away. "I wish it was like it used to be. Before the accident, before AJ started drinking and you and Patrick were happy and Ellie and Patrick's mom was still alive." She shook her head. "Nothing feels the same anymore."

"Yeah," Robin murmured, "they seem to be okay though." She shifted in her seat, probably uncomfortable because she'd left for Paris mere months after Mattie Drake had succumbed to cancer after a long sickness, which Emily had never understood but to each their own. "I didn't think Noah would ever be okay again."

"It was rough," Emily admitted. "I'm sure Ellie's told you, but Noah was drinking for about a year—worse than AJ's addiction ever was."

Robin frowned. "No, she never said anything about it. She was upset for a while about how I left, I guess. But Noah looks good now—"

"Well, it hit rock bottom before it started to get better," Emily remarked. "Patrick moved out and refused to talk to Noah. And then Ellie was left to hold the family together because those two are so damn stubborn. Anyway, Noah was in a car accident and the judge sentenced him to mandatory rehab. He's been supposedly sober ever since, so he and Patrick are trying to get back to normal. They only agree on on subject--terrorizing Ellie."

"I didn't know any of that," Robin said softly. "But I had my own stuff going on. I wouldn't have been able to come back."

Emily's eyes narrowed. "What kind of stuff?" she asked curiously.

Robin's eyes cleared and she shook her head. "I have to do another set of rounds before my shifts over. Don't let Edward get you down, Em." She stood and shoved her medical journal into her locker before exiting the room.

General Hospital: Parking Lot

Elizabeth emerged from the building, rubbing the side of her face and tugging her jacket tight over her scrubs. She had been too tired to head to the locker room after her shift and change.

From beginning to end, it had been an extraordinarily hellish shift. She'd lost two patients on her floor and had had to inform each of the families. And then she'd found Robin and Patrick arguing bitterly over one of Noah's cases—Robin was advocating drug therapy and Patrick, of course, surgery. Elizabeth had attempted to mediate but Patrick had told her to go away and too annoyed with him, she'd obeyed.

Lulu had tried to plead with her to step in Epiphany and get her off bedpan duty and had been irritated when Elizabeth was unable to help and to make matters worse, Emily's grandfather had shown up for a meeting of the board of directors and had started an argument with Nikolas Cassadine in the lobby, which she'd just escaped from.

She just wanted to go to her tiny apartment, draw a bath and soak in it for the rest of her life. And maybe find a new family and set of friends that were less stressful.

She started towards the parking spot where her beaten up Volvo was situated and stopped dead in her tracks. All her exhaustion, her misery and her plans for the evening evaporated in an instant.

Jason was there, and he had his motorcycle. Elizabeth couldn't help the smile that stretched from ear to ear.

He held out a helmet. "Cliff road or home?" he asked.

Not caring that they'd planned on going on the ride later, that she'd wanted to go home and shower first or that she had briefly entertained thoughts of canceling altogether, Elizabeth grabbed the helmet and shoved it over her hair, fixing the strap. "Cliff road," she said immediately.

She'd figure out how to get to work the next morning later.

General Hospital: Lobby

Emily collapsed on the couch and buried her face in her hands as she listened to Edward Quartermaine berate Nikolas Cassadine for his latest decision in how funding for the hospital would be distributed. Too much free care, Edward had barked. Too much charity.

Nikolas calmly took all that Edward had to offer before reminding the board member that the Cassadine family had bailed General Hospital out of an embarrassing bankruptcy and now Nikolas had the final say in all financial decisions. That had been the agreement Stefan Cassadine and Steve

Hardy had brokered a decade before.

Nothing angered Edward more than being reminded he had no real control and that set off another tirade about the untrustworthiness of the Cassadine family in general. Emily managed to tune most of the specifics out but when Edward had blustered that it'd be a cold day in hell before Nikolas married into their family, Emily leapt up.

"Grandfather, that's enough. Really." She planted her hands on her hips. "You don't have any say in the matter. I'm twenty-five years old—"

"You deserve better than this pack of loons," Edward cut in. "My dear—"

"If you don't knock it off, Grandfather, I'm going to tell Grandmother you're harping on Nikolas again," Emily threatened. "You know how she hates that."

Edward shut his mouth and glared at his youngest grandchild. "Emily Paige Bowen-Quartermaine—"

"Oh, shut it, Grandfather," Emily rolled her eyes. "I have had it up to here with the way you treat Nikolas. He has been nothing but perfectly respectful to you and you continue—"

"Emily," Nikolas interrupted calmly, placing a hand on his fiancée's forearm. "This isn't necessary."

"I'll see you at home, young lady," Edward said gruffly. "Nikolas—"

"Yes, I know—I'm a spendthrift and I'm far too generous with everyone's money," Nikolas nodded. "Message received, Mr. Quartermaine."

Edward walked away and when he was on the elevators, Emily let out a sigh of relief. "I'll talk to Grandmother about reining him—"

"It isn't necessary," Nikolas repeated. He framed her face in his hands and kissed the tip of her nose. "The Quartermaines have just as bad a history with my family as the Scorpios and the Spencers. Your grandfather will never forgive my family for what happened to his sister."

"It's so unfair," Emily protested. "We weren't even born yet!"

"I know," Nikolas nodded. "But this isn't something we can change." His hands slid from her face down her arms until he grasped her hands. "But it is something we're going to have to live with. Are you ready for that?"

"Well..." Emily pursed her lips. "Are our families magically going to get along if we break off our engagement and spend the rest of our lives miserable?" she asked, trying to keep the mood light.

Nikolas grinned and shook his head. "Probably not."

"Well, then we should probably stick to Plan A," Emily decided. "At least, then we get to be happy."

"Marginally happy," Nikolas corrected. "Cassadines don't do happy."

"Bowens do," Emily nodded firmly. "And since you're also marrying into that family, then you have a responsibility to live up to that."

"You know how seriously I take responsibility," Nikolas remarked soberly. He leaned forward and brushed his lips over hers. "Too tired for dinner?"

"Too tired for dinner anywhere more fancy than Kelly's."

General Hospital: Lab

Robin rubbed her eyes and slid another slide under her microscope. The door to the lab swung open. "Are those my results for Ren Lewis?" she called out, not glancing up.

"Ren Lewis needs surgery, but no," Patrick remarked, sitting at the stool across from her work station.

Robin looked up now and sighed. She was too tired to think about going another round with him today. "I thought you were done for the day after that last surgery? Are you here just to plague me?"

"I like to stick around," Patrick remarked, ignoring her second question. "You never know when they'll need a surgical intern." He reached for the file she was working on. "This guy's liver is almost nonexistent."

"Yeah," Robin sighed. "I have to let Monica know that in the morning when she comes on shift." She coughed. "This guy basically drank himself to death." She watched him as she said it, hoping he might mention his own father's problems.

"Hmm..." Patrick tossed the folder aside. "Takes all kinds. I like a good beer now and then but..." he shrugged. "Some people just don't know any better."

"When you sees something like this..." Robin shook her head. "It makes you wonder what would make a person—" she closed her eyes and stopped. "I heard about Noah. And what he went through."

"That's over with," Patrick shook his head. "He says he's sober and it doesn't matter anymore."

Robin didn't believe that but she didn't want to push. "Be that as it may," she said slowly, "I do want to apologize. I—I didn't know things were so bad here. I wouldn't have been able to come back but —"

"You chose to leave, Robin," Patrick said shortly. "And you chose not to talk to anyone here except your parents. So don't blame Ellie for not confiding about our dad."

Stung, Robin could only shake her head. "No—I didn't—I know I cut myself off—" she sighed, frustrated. "I just wanted say that I was sorry, okay?"

"Why pretend you give a damn?" Patrick responded. "You didn't care enough to stick around after my

mother died. You just took off to Paris with no warning and never bothered to keep in touch—"

"Why stick around?" Robin cut in sharply. "You wouldn't talk to me. You didn't want to deal with anything. And—" she shut up abruptly, remembering that she'd never told anyone about that night. "It was a long time ago, Patrick. I'm sorry I brought it up."

"Why you'd even come back?" he demanded. He stood and shoved the stool in roughly. "You abandoned me, you left Ellie high and dry and you waltzed around Paris for three years while our lives fell apart around us and now you come back like nothing's changed? Go to hell."

"You don't know a damn thing about my life in Paris," Robin snarled. She shoved her files aside and stood as well. She stalked around the workstation and jabbed a finger at his chest. "You think I was high on life and living it up? Well, screw you, Patrick!"

She whirled around and started putting her materials away. She had to take deep breaths to keep the sobs from bursting through her chest. She'd locked it away all day, she'd thought being home, being away from it all would change things.

But it was still nearly midnight and on December 22, 2005, it would be exactly one year since her entire life had shattered.

Patrick frowned and watched her hands shake as she put away her slides and her research. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"Just go away," Robin said shortly. She reached for a folder and in her haste, she knocked over a box of glass beakers. It careened to the floor and all the little tubes flew out, shattering into shards.

Robin sank to knees and started to clean them up, not even realizing that she'd started to cry. Stunned, Patrick joined her and reached for her hand. "Robin, we can call maintenance—"

A particularly jagged shard pieced through her skin and Robin hissed in pain. "Damn it—"

Patrick reached for her hand and that's when Robin really lost it. She scrambled back on her knees and nearly fell over trying to get away from him. "No, no, don't touch me!"

"Fine." Patrick stood and glared at her. "I'm sorry I disgust you, Robin. I'll go find a janitor to clean this mess up." He turned and stalked out of the lab, the sound of Robin's soft sobs ringing in his ears.

Spencer House: Living Room

Lulu gingerly stepped past the front threshold, carefully closing the door behind her. She winced when the floorboards on the landing squeaked. She started for the stairs but then a light snapped on to reveal Laura Spencer sitting calmly on the couch. Crap. Could this day get any worse? Wasn't it bad enough she'd just had to fight with Will Drake for nearly an hour about breaking up? Maybe she shouldn't have had sex with him first, but she thought it would put him in a better mood.

And as if the night couldn't get any worse, there was her mother. Waiting for her.

Lulu sighed. "I know what you're going to say but Dillon was helping me with—"

"Dillon called at six o'clock," Laura interrupted. "You left your history book at the Quartermaines."

Damn it. Why did Dillon have to be so damn responsible and reliable all the time? Lulu let out an impatient huff. "Okay, so I wasn't with Dillon. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal, Lesley Lu, is that you have a curfew," Laura responded. "And each time you break it, we move it back fifteen minutes. Pretty soon, you won't be seeing the light of day."

"Lucky never had a curfew," Lulu grumbled, folding her arms across her chest and glaring at her mother. "It's not fair."

"Lucky didn't need a curfew," Laura replied. "We trusted Lucky to be home and to tell us where he was going, what he was doing, who he was with." Laura cast a look over Lulu's rumpled clothing and messy hair and sighed softly. Her little girl had been so sweet and loving and somehow, she'd morphed into this angry girl. "Lu—"

"If you think for one second that Lucky and Elizabeth weren't out doing the same exact thing I was tonight, then you're more naïve than I figured you'd be," Lulu said shortly. "I'm seventeen years old, Mom. I'm not a child."

"No, I don't suppose you are." Laura felt a thousand years old all of sudden. She stood and snapped off the light, sending the room into shadows and darkness again. "Go to bed, Lesley Lu. We'll discuss this in morning."

Lulu watched her mother go up the stairs and sighed again. She was forever disappointing her family. She wasn't cool enough for her father, wasn't obedient enough for her mother and wasn't old enough to really be involved in her brothers' lives. When would be who she was already enough?

Just wait until they found out she was pregnant and had just broken up with the father.

Vista Point

Elizabeth tugged off the helmet and sighed happily. "When you picked me up a few hours ago," she began, "I was so tired and all I wanted to do was sleep for like the rest of my life."

"You should have said something," Jason said immediately. "I would have taken you home."

Elizabeth hopped off the bike and leaned out over the railing. Vista Point over looked the entire town of Port Charles and she could even see clear out to Spoon Island, the night was so clear. "I'm going hate the snow," she sighed. "We won't be able to take the cliff roads until winter's over."

"Price you pay for living in upstate New York," Jason replied. He set the kickstand on the bike and joined her at the railing. "So rough day then?"

Elizabeth turned and leaned against the railing, her back to the view. "Well, we started with a round

of Patrick vs. Robin and then kind of spiraled from there." She glanced at him. "Have I ever told you the history between my brother and Robin?"

"Only that there is one," Jason replied. "You never liked to talk about her much."

"Hmm...well, that's because she left town like three months after my mother died," Elizabeth admitted. "I was so angry about it for a long time but I know Patrick took Mom's death really hard, so I tried to shove it down and forget about it. I mean, you know what happened with my dad but Patrick..." she looked away and shook her head. "Patrick and Jason Quartermaine were best friends," she said after a long moment. "I don't think I told you that before. They were pre-med together and were almost as close as brothers. And they had a lot in common."

Jason liked the way Elizabeth spoke about Jason Quartermaine, liked that she referred to him as a separate person, as someone who didn't exist anymore. She understood that he was a different person now and reminders that he'd once been someone else were uncomfortable. "So I guess he took the accident pretty badly."

"Yeah...it was one thing after another for a while. Mom got sick and then she died," Elizabeth said softly. "My father started drinking and then Robin left for Paris. Then Patrick lost his best friend and Dad's drinking just got worse..." she exhaled softly. "But he was once a very sweet, funny and open person. I know you might not believe that but he resents you for not being Jason Quartermaine. He resents that you didn't wake up and remember everything that came before." She shook her head again.

"Anyway. Patrick and Robin dated for, like, ever. They got together junior year in high school and for six years, it was Patrick and Robin, Robin and Patrick, you know? But after Mom died, he just...he shut down. And whatever happened between him and Robin happened because of that, I can tell you that much. I used to blame Robin for leaving me at that moment. I mean, I still had Emily and for a while, I still had Jay. But Robin was like my sister." She paused. "She was my sister."

"But she's back now," Jason said.

"Yeah. And things are different. Patrick's never going to be that guy again but it's just so hard seeing him and Robin go at it because it used to be so different." Elizabeth sighed wistfully. "It all used to be so different. When my mother was alive and when we were just kids..." she laughed. "When the worst thing in my life was breaking up with Lucky at Senior Prom. I miss that, sometimes."

Elizabeth coughed and smiled at him, a little embarrassed. "I'm sorry to whine like that. You must think I'm so pathetic."

"You sound like you had a bad day and you wanted to vent a little," Jason corrected. "Nothing wrong with that."

Elizabeth's smile deepened. "I didn't let myself admit that I was angry at Robin before. So...thank you."

"All I did was listen," Jason shrug.

"Sometimes..." Elizabeth glanced up at him, her cheeks flushing a little, "Sometimes that's all you need to do. You're a good listener, Jason. You just let me ramble until I come to my own conclusions and that's nice." She straightened. "So what did you do today?"

Jason shrugged. "I went to the club, did the books for the warehouse and the club. Met with Sonny. Did some work. And then picked you up."

Elizabeth nodded. "How's Sonny?" she inquired.

"Fine, fine." Jason hesitated. "Brenda came in as I was leaving. She, ah, wanted to know if you wanted to come over for dinner before the party at the Haunted Star. She and Sonny are going."

Dinner with Jason's best friend and his wife. Elizabeth pursed her lips. With anyone else, she might have thought it meant something—that he was taking her to meet two people she knew was important to him, but more likely than not, Brenda had cornered him and he hadn't known how to say no.

So she smiled at him. "Sure, sounds like fun."

Chapter Three

*I'm doing the best that I could.
Trying my best to be understood
Maybe I'm changing slowly
I get out, turn around
- Dead Wrong, The Fray*

Thursday, December 22, 2005

Kelly's: Diner

Robert Scorpio's hair had long ago turned to gray, which he blamed mostly on his daughter and his line of work. There were lines around his eyes and his mouth, giving away the fact that this man had seen more than his fair share of years. Robin stood in the doorway to diner for a long moment and just stared at her father, drinking in the changes.

His head was bent over a newspaper, his mug of coffee sitting in front of him. It would be black, with no sugar. And it would be strong. She'd learned that the hard way when she was twelve and trying to pretend that she was grown up enough to stay home alone. She'd associated coffee with maturity and adulthood because no kid she knew drank the beverage.

With one sip of her father's strong, bitter brew, Robin understood why. And she'd given up using that tactic to prove her maturity.

He never ate a big enough breakfast, a fact that she'd fretted over when she'd gone through her nurturing phase (a phase that had also coincided with home economics class). She'd liked cooking and for three months, she made a big breakfast for her father. He never ate it, choosing instead some rye bread toasted so lightly it was barely warm. She'd eventually given up but kept sneaking vitamins into his lunch—which she also packed. That had continued right up until the day she'd moved out to live in a small cramped apartment with Ellie and Patrick.

Her parents had divorced when she'd been only seven and while she and Anna were extremely close, Robin had grown up in Port Charles with her father while Anna had returned to London and to the World Security Bureau. Robert had stayed beyond to raise Robin in the vicinity of his brother Mac and his family. They'd forged a special bond, father and daughter, and the only thing that had broken it was Robin's silence while in Paris.

But that part of her life was over now, Robin told herself. She was home and she was going to live her life to the fullest. She was going to mend the fences she had broken and somewhere during the process, she was going to find peace again.

"So how long did you know I was there?" Robin asked as she approached the table.

Robert folded his newspaper and set it aside with a brief smile. "You stood in the courtyard for an additional ten minutes, so fifteen altogether."

"Good to know those skills aren't slipping," she replied, taking her coat off and setting it on the chair next to her father, choosing to sit across from him.

"Your mother called," Robert said, gesturing for the waitress to come take their order. "She's worried about you."

The corner of Robin's lip quirked up into half a smirk. "Divorced for eighteen years and you guys still use the same code. Mom said the *same* thing to me when I stopped in London before I came home." She studied the menu for a brief moment before ordering the same breakfast she'd always ordered. Rye bread, lightly toasted with strawberry jam.

Large breakfasts weren't her thing either. She ordered orange juice though—she never had acquired much of a taste for coffee.

"When either one of you remarks that other one feels a certain way," Robin began, "it's because the two of you have discussed it and are going to gang up on me. Mom's worried that I worked too hard in Paris. And you're worried...?"

Robert pursed his lips for a long moment and met Robin's eyes directly. "You've been back a week and you're already working long hours."

"I like my job," Robin answered. "Anything else, Dad?"

"Now that you mention it, your mother and I were also a little worried about the fact that you didn't call for two years," Robert said idly, but there was a strain of disappointment and anger beneath the tone that Robin recognized—from her mother.

"I wrote," Robin said softly. "There—there are things about those two years that I have to tell you, Dad. And hopefully they'll answer your questions." The waitress brought their identical breakfasts and she sipped her orange juice. "But I don't want to ruin the holidays. So can we just table that until after the new year?"

"If I say no, will it make a difference?" Robert asked dryly.

"No," Robin replied with a brief smile. "Now. I want to know everything that's been going on." She pointed a finger at him. "And Ellie happened to mention that you've been dating, so I want details." She wrinkled. "Not too many."

"Elizabeth Drake, as usual, has been spending too much time worrying about everyone else," Robert muttered. "But with her family, I don't suppose I can blame her. Can I just say...that despite everything else, I am so *relieved* you and Patrick Drake are done with?"

Robin blinked in surprise. "You and Mom liked Patrick. We were—we were all friends. You, Noah, Mom and Mattie. You guys are the reason that I was friends with Ellie and Patrick at all and you and

Noah got a kick out of it when Patrick and I started dating."

"That was nine years ago," Robert said stiffly. "Things have changed. People have changed."

Robin pressed her lips together. "Dad—"

"Let's not talk about the Drakes anymore," Robert suggested. "Let's talk about something else."

"Why does Lulu get to see you before me?"

The familiar voice was a welcome interruption and Robin all but leapt from her chair to embrace yet another childhood best friend. "Lucky!"

"Hey, Ladybug," he hugged her tightly and drew back. "You're still short."

"And you still look like you cut your hair with your eyes closed," Robin shot back good-naturedly. She eyed her father. "Are the Spencers also on your list or is it still okay to associate with them?"

"The father's a loss," Robert sighed with a good natured smile, "but I suppose Junior's decent enough."

Lucky frowned and looked back and forth between father and daughter. "Clearly, I've missed something."

"Nothing important." Robin kept her hand on his arm. "Do you have a second to speak outside?"

"Ah..." Lucky nodded. "Sure."

"Dad," Robin said, grabbing her coat, "I'll be right back." Robert nodded—as if he'd had a choice and she started for the courtyard, Lucky following her. Once they were alone, Robin bit her lip. "So I just...I wanted to thank you again for coming last year."

Lucky nodded. "No problem." He shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels. "Are you doing okay today? I mean, with it being the one year and all. I wanted to find you—"

Robin smiled faintly. "I had a bit of a meltdown last night but I'm doing okay, I guess. As well as can be expected. I just—it meant a lot to me that you came all the way to Paris." Her eyes became distant and Lucky knew she wasn't in the present with him anymore. After a moment, they cleared and she turned her smile back on him.

"Have you...told anyone?" Lucky asked quietly. Robin shrugged and looked away. "I know I'm only repeating what you already know, but Rob, you *gotta* tell them. Your parents at least."

"I know," Robin bobbed her head in agreement. "And I'm going to. I just—I want to wait until after the holidays. I just want one last Christmas, you know?"

"Hey..." Lucky held up his hands. "It's your call, Ladybug. You know I'm here for you."

"Thanks." Robin tugged her jacket a little tighter and sighed as she saw Patrick enter the courtyard and hesitate at the sight of her. "Lucky, do me a favor?"

"I'm gone," Lucky nodded, going back to the diner.

Robin bit her lip. "I'm sorry," she offered weakly. "About the scene in the lab last night."

Patrick nodded stiffly. "That's fine. It's probably better if we don't talk too much about—" he shrugged. "Anything."

"Patrick..." Robin sighed. "I don't want it to be like this between us," she said. "I want us to be friends —"

"Well, I'm sorry, Robin, but I don't exactly have any openings," Patrick interrupted. "Especially not for someone who cut and run when things got a little difficult and didn't bother to come back until things were all clear."

"That's not—" Robin growled in frustration. "You don't understand, Patrick. You *can't* understand what it was like that last year we were together." She dug her fingers into her hair and closed her eyes. "You were gone. The guy I'd grown up with, my boyfriend, the person that I loved, you weren't *there* anymore—"

"My mom was sick, then she was dying, and then she was dead," Patrick retorted. "I'm so sorry that I didn't feel all sunshine and happiness—"

"You're an idiot," Robin muttered. "You never talked to me, you never opened up. And the longer it dragged on, the more miserable the both of us were. And I know that losing your mom was hard—I loved her too—"

"I'm not talking about this anymore," Patrick sliced a hand through the air as if cutting a string. "It's over, Robin. It was a lifetime ago."

"Patrick—"

"Save it, Robin. We're colleagues, but that's as far as it goes." Patrick brushed past her and nearly ripped the door open in his haste to get away from her.

Quartermaine Mansion: Dillon's Bedroom

Dillon Quartermaine pressed the stop button the DVD that he and Lulu were watching and glanced over at the pensive blonde seated on the bean bag chair next to his. "Dude. You probably don't even know the title of this movie."

Lulu flicked her hazel eyes his way and frowned. "Ah...something black and white."

"Mmm-hmm," Dillon nodded. He tossed the remote aside and maneuvered his chair until he was facing her. "You came over this morning and you wanted a distraction. We've been watching movies

for six hours, Lu. You wanna tell me what you needed a distraction *from*?"

"Nope." Lulu reached for the remote but Dillon blocked her. "C'mon, Dillon. Does a girl need a reason to spend time with her best friend?"

"When that girl begs said friend to break his already made plans with other friends because it's an emergency," Dillon nodded. "Absolutely, she needs a reason. Lu, how long have we been friends?"

A faint smile spread across her lips. "Since I pushed you down in the sandbox when we were five."

Dillon frowned. "That's not quite the way I remember it but, yeah, it's been like twelve years. Have I ever proved myself untrustworthy?"

"There was that time you told my mother that I pushed you in the lake," Lulu grumbled.

"I was seven and you pushed me in the lake because I made fun of your bathing suit," Dillon said defensively. "It was a cheap shot, Lulu and you know it. Now, come on. I'm not kidding here."

Lulu exhaled slowly. "Okay, so I've known about this for a while, but I don't...think I'm going to be able to ignore it anymore." She got to her feet and started to pace the large room that Dillon passed off as his bedroom, although it was both a rec room and a bedroom, what with the entertainment center in the corner and his film editing equipment on the opposite side. "I was looking at a calendar a few weeks ago, and I realized that something wasn't quite right."

Dillon nodded, though he wasn't sure where she was going with this train of thought. It was true that they'd been practically inseparable since the age of five (though he was almost sure it had been *him* that had done the pushing in the sandbox). They were unlikely friends since Dillon was from the wealthiest family in the city and Lulu was from a more middle class family. The fact that her father was Luke Spencer had driven Dillon's mother Tracy into forbidding the friendship more than once. But Dillon and Lulu had ignored that and Tracy had long ago given up separating the two.

They were each other's constants, in a world that changed on the whims of their parents. Lulu had been there for Dillon during each of Tracy's three divorces and Dillon had been Lulu's rock when Laura had been diagnosed with breast cancer three years ago. They'd seen each other through boyfriends and girlfriends but their relationship had never been more than that of friends.

There was little that Dillon wouldn't do for his best friend but he'd been worried about her for the last year or so. She'd used him as an alibi more than once so she could go out partying with her boyfriend Will Drake. Lulu stayed out all night, drinking and smoking and doing God knows what else. He knew she was just trying to make her mark with her parents but he was worried that she'd get herself into some sort of trouble that she couldn't talk herself out of.

He watched her continue to pace and wondered if that day had finally come. "Lu—"

"How do you feel about kids?" Lulu asked, suddenly. She whirled around to face him with an overly large, bright smile on her face.

"Ah, they're—they're okay," Dillon fumbled. "For being what they are."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Lulu nodded. Dillon felt the twisting of a knot in his stomach. "How would you like to be a father?"

So *this* is what a panic attack felt like, Dillon thought idly as his chest squeezed and breathing was no longer an option. He started to gasp for air and Lulu pounded on his back. When his lungs were functioning again, he sputtered, "What?"

"I realized that I'm—" Lulu coughed. "Well, I'm late."

He almost asked for what but then remembered the line from about a thousand movies. He lunged to his feet. "Dude, Lu—"

"So, I went to the store and I bought a test," Lulu continued, ignoring his outburst. "And I took the test and it was positive and my parents are going to kill me—"

"Lulu—"

"But you know, I can't—" Lulu's eyes were wide with panic. "I need you, Dillon. I need you to help me. Please." She shook her head wildly. "I can't tell Will. You know I can't."

Dillon held up a finger, and took a deep breath. He could do this. He could absolutely do this. He had a lot of experience dealing with Lulu's insanity, and he ignored most of her crazy plans. Of course, there had been one time Emily and Nikolas had get them from St. Paul in the middle of winter, but for the most part, he kept her sane.

"Let's just...back up." He opened his hand, palm facing her, as if the action would magically restore reality to this situation. "You want me to pretend to be the father of your baby, which means I would have to tell the *world* this nonsense. This world, which includes my mother, your father, your brother, my grandfather, and that's before we even get to the babydaddy, who would take me apart if he *thought* I touched you."

Lulu scowled and folded her arms. "Well, if you're going to be reasonable about all of this," she huffed. "I guess there are some drawbacks to this solution."

"Drawbacks, she says," Dillon remarked conversationally to his Vertigo movie poster. "As if my own self-preservation was a drawback." He turned back to Lulu, who just rolled her eyes. "I get you're scared, Lu. Believe me, I'm not even actually in this problem, and I'm flat terrified. But if we have learned anything living in Port Charles, this close to the Quartermaine family, paternity lies are a mistake from the moment they begin."

"This is true," Lulu sighed. She flopped back on the bed. "I remember when Carly Roberts tried to tell Tony Jones he was the father of her kid, only to discover it was some random guy in a bar. Tony went nuts and kidnapped the kid. So...yeah, paternity lies are bad."

"Exactly," Dillon nodded. He joined her on the bed, and they stared up at the ceiling as they so often

did. "Why don't you want to tell Will?"

"Because I'm a fucked-up mess, and I figure a kid only needs one of those as a parental figure." Lulu sighed. "He's just so angry all the time, and then he talks about being in love with me, but he's just... he's a Drake, Dillon. I mean, Patrick is mostly okay, but even he drove Robin to Paris for all those years. Drake men destroy everything they love, with alcohol and anger."

"You have a point," Dillon acknowledged, because though Will had been a good guy most of his life, and he'd even been casually friends with his fellow senior, he knew that his parents' bitter divorce had triggered that destruction gene Lulu referenced. "But saying *I'm* the father is not the answer."

"Well, what is?"

"It's also not my question to answer, Lu." He turned his head to face her, and she did the same. "But whatever you decide, I love you and I will support you. You're my person, Lulu Spencer, and I'm yours."

"God." Lulu sighed and closed her eyes. "Life would have been easier if I thought of you as an actual guy. We'd be perfect for each other."

"We'd murder each other in a week."

Kelly's: Parking Lot

Jason pulled the motorcycle to a slow stop and turned off the engine. Elizabeth slid to the ground and tugged off the helmet, letting her dark brown hair fall to her shoulders. "Thank you so much for the ride."

Jason took the helmet from her and set it on the back of the back. "Sure, it's no problem. Do you want me to have your car looked at?"

Elizabeth bit her lip and considered it but finally shook her head. "No, I don't know how I'd explain the absence of my car to my father and he'd just...explode if he knew you were involved at all." She shrugged. "I'm trying to keep things status quo, you know? With...his drinking."

"I understand. I'm sorry your family has a problem with our friendship," Jason remarked.

Elizabeth shrugged, resigned to the situation. "One day they'll realize I'm a grown woman who can make her own decisions. But I'm still struggling to keep them together, I'm not looking to shake things up more than I have to." Her lips curved into a shy smile. "Thanks for coming to my rescue."

Jason opened his mouth to respond but a familiar BMW pulled into the parking lot and Noah Drake stepped out of the car. He narrowed his eyes at the sight of his daughter standing so close to Jason Morgan. He stepped up behind her and put a firm hand on her shoulder. "Elizabeth." He nodded to Jason. "Jason."

"Dr. Drake." Jason glanced at the severely uncomfortable brunette and exhaled slowly. "I'll see you

around, Elizabeth." He started the engine and pulled out the parking lot.

When the roar of bike's engine was just a distant sound, Noah pursed his lips and looked at his daughter. "Are you *trying* to send me into an early grave?"

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "You're being ridiculous," she muttered. She bit her lip to keep the ugly words from spilling out of her mouth. After all, up until a year ago, *Noah* had been doing a damn fine job of driving himself into that grave.

Up until a year ago, she'd been unable to have her father and brother in the same room with each other. And up until a year ago, she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her brother smile.

It wasn't much different now, but it was better, which meant it could only continue getting better. Elizabeth would continue to bite her tongue to keep her family from hitting rock bottom again. She had no intention of giving her friendship up to make Patrick and her father happy, but neither would she toss it in their faces more than necessary.

So instead of saying what she wanted to say, she linked arms with her father and pulled him into the restaurant. "My car wouldn't start this morning, so Jason gave me a ride. How would you like to have lunch?"

"Well, that's a coincidence. I'm meeting Patrick for lunch," Noah said with a faint smile. "We can make it a family affair."

Her family wasn't perfect and there would always be times when Elizabeth would want to rip her hair out but she knew their hearts were in the right places. And that almost made up for all the rest of it.

Port Charles Mall

There were few things Dillon Quartermaine hated more in life than shopping at the Port Charles Mall this close to Christmas. Maybe spiders.

Definitely spiders.

He frowned at the list Emily had scrawled for him, dictating the store from where she had ordered their grandmother's gift. With her insane schedule at the hospital, she was unable to pick it up, and was therefore sending her innocent cousin to do it for her. After all, he owed her for coming to get him and Lulu in St. Paul.

That caper was going to haunt him for the rest of his life. As was typical of Lesley Lu Spencer, the light of his life and the bane of his existence. And now she was in the biggest trouble of her life, and he'd been unable to fix it for her.

He wasn't sure this *was* fixable.

"Damn it, Emily," he muttered. Was this a C? Maybe it was an L. Frick his life.

“Yo, Dillon!”

Oh, no. No. No. No. No. No.

Could you scream in your head? Dillon thought so, because he was giving himself a headache as he heard Will Drake call his name. *Act natural, act cool. You don't know anything. You know nothing. If you run, he will catch you. He's taller than you.*

When he thought he had cleared the panic from his expression, he turned to find the tall senior loping towards him from the food court. It was a shame Will had turned out to be a self-destructive drunk, since the old Will would have known exactly how to fix Lulu's situation. Dillon frowned when the lanky teen drew closer, because for first time in months, Will didn't look drunk. He looked... painfully sober. Crap.

“Uh, hey, Will.”

Will stopped in front of him, and slid his hands in the pockets of his khakis. “Hey. Um...” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Have you...talked to Lu lately?”

Was this a trick question? “Yes,” Dillon said, because the fewer lies you had to tell in this life was always better in the end. “Um. I know...she...” He coughed. “Yes, well. I've seen her.”

“Yeah, she dumped me.” Will cleared his throat, and Dillon realized they were both nervous as shit. He brightened a little, because he could relate to anxiety. “And, she's, ah, not returning any of my calls or texts, so if you could...”

“I can tell her something,” Dillon agreed. Because after all, if Lulu was going to get out of this mess, *this* bastard was going to have to be involved, because once Will was involved, Dillon could stop being in the middle of it, and he might live another day. Or two. Until Lulu got in another mess. Frick his life.

“Um...” Apparently, Will hadn't been expecting Dillon's response, because now he looked away and squinted. “Um, tell her that I figure she's got a point about the drinking, but I don't see the point in knocking it off since she just gave me *another* reason to drink.”

“Oh.” Well, wasn't that a cheerful message? He hated people. He really did. “I...if it's all the same to you, maybe I don't tell her that. Since it...won't really...” Dillon gestured helplessly, “it won't really get her back. If, ah, that's what you wanted.”

“I do,” the boy admitted. “But I don't want *her* to know that.” He squared his shoulders. “You know. Because that would be desperate.”

“Right.” Well, what the hell was the point of this nonsense then? “So...maybe I just tell her I saw you, you asked about her and you said hi?” Dillon suggested.

“Maybe you could tell her to stop being such a stubborn—” Will closed his mouth, which was good because Dillon didn't want to have his ass kicked today and if Will Drake insulted his best friend,

Dillon was going to have to throw a punch.

And that would be all he'd be able to do, because then Will would kill him. The boy was taller *and* a wrestling star. Dillon...was neither of those things. "I could maybe tell her she should call you." He coughed again, and wished he could disappear into thin air. Like magic. In a movie. "Maybe I tell her you were at the mall, flirting with...someone. You know, let her know you're not waiting around."

Will hesitated. "Wouldn't that just piss her off? Lu's not like other girls."

No. No, this was true. Dillon looked up in the air, because now he had no idea. "So...should I tell her *anything*?"

"Um...something would probably be good." Will rocked back on his heels, and sighed. "Are you guys going to the Haunted Star party on Christmas Eve?"

"Always possible," Dillon remarked. "Maybe I don't tell you'll be there?" he suggested. "In fact, maybe I don't tell her this ever happened."

Will nodded. "I like that." He hesitated. "You know why Lu broke up with me?"

"Um..." Dillon paused. Because in addition to the drinking, which hadn't fazed Lulu at first until it was a constant presence, she'd been freaked out because he'd started talking about the future. Of course, now he knew why Lulu freaked about the future, and as usual, she'd made the situation immediately worse by tossing the future to the curb. "She mentioned it. But you know...Lu's a drama queen. In the best possible way, but still...melodrama is her middle name. Play it cool, Will. Don't..." He hesitated. "Don't, like, get drunk and try to get her back. It'll only annoy her."

Will scowled, but looked away, because they both knew it was more than a possibility. "Yeah, whatever. I'll see you at the party, maybe."

Chapter Four

*I'm not angry it's never been enough
It gets inside and it tears you up
I'm not angry but I've never been above it
You see through me don't you
Angry, Matchbox 20*

Saturday, December 24, 2005

Elizabeth & Patrick's Apartment: Living Room

Elizabeth tapped her foot nervously and watched her brother read the morning newspaper. It was already five o'clock—Jason would be picking her up in an hour but her annoying brother didn't seem to be making any movement to get ready for the party that night. She did *not* want Patrick to be here when Jason came to the door.

"So which nurse are you harassing tonight?" Elizabeth asked brightly.

Patrick didn't even spare her a glance as he flipped to the sports pages. "I'm going solo. Easier to pick the ladies up that way."

Elizabeth sighed and slumped back on the sofa. Shortly after Patrick moved out of the apartment that he had shared with her and Robin for four years, the lease had expired and their building had gone co-op. She'd been unable to buy it, hadn't saved enough to swing the rent on another place and her father was useless at that point, so Patrick had offered her the guest room—more correctly, Elizabeth had pleaded, she remembered with some bitterness since he'd been trying to cut ties with anyone who mattered.

She had jumped at the chance to keep her brother in her life because she'd been worried that if she didn't, he'd graduate from medical school, take a job in another state and she'd barely see him. For all his drawbacks and irritating habits, he was her brother and had been her best friend all her life.

"Have you reconsidered going with that thug?" Patrick asked idly. Elizabeth glared at him, and thought about annoying him further by telling him her dinner plans with Sonny Corinthos and his wife.

She cleared her throat. "Patrick, I don't want to have this argument anymore."

Her brother finally lowered the newspaper and glared at her. "I thought we agreed that you weren't going to do that anymore. You know it drives us crazy—are you trying to put Dad in an early grave?"

"That's funny...Dad used the same phrase just the other day," Elizabeth said, irritated. Why did this have to be the *one* thing her father and brother bonded over? "You know, Jason might not have the same memories and a lot about him is different, but some of Jason Quartermaine's best qualities are

still there—"

"I don't want to hear it," Patrick muttered. He slapped the newspaper on the coffee table and flicked the television on, surfing through the channels restlessly. "I can't believe you're just ignoring our concerns—"

Elizabeth sighed impatiently and started to apply nail polish to her toes—at least she could try to be ready on time. "I'm not ignoring your concerns, but you're not being fair. Jason and I just go for rides together or sometimes we get something to eat. Or he teaches me to play pool. It's not like we hang out in the warehouse at night on the docks."

"You're just being stupid about it," Patrick muttered, finally finding a basketball game to watch. "I hear the rumors, you know. Morgan's a courier for Sonny Corinthos, and you know that's just going to lead to worse things."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "If I believed everything I heard, I'd think you'd had private time in the every single supply closet with most of the nursing staff."

Patrick arched an eyebrow. "And do you know I haven't?" he asked smugly.

"Because half of the nursing staff went to college with you and remember Robin," Elizabeth remarked primly. "Also...they have taste." She blew gently on her left foot to speed along the drying. "Are you and Robin going to spend the rest of your lives sniping at each other?" she asked glad to have successfully changed the subject from her plans for the evening.

"If I have my way," Patrick remarked, "we won't speak it at all." His eyes were focused on the game but she could tell his mind was elsewhere.

"That's just stupid," Elizabeth muttered, wishing she could throttle the both of them. They'd been friends longer than they'd been a couple. Why did things have to change so much? "Anyway, something's up with her but I can't figure out what."

"Guilt," Patrick muttered. "She actually had the nerve to apologize to me for not knowing about Dad's drinking. Serves her right for walking out on me."

Elizabeth set her nail polish down and reminded herself to count to ten before she said anything. She reminded herself that she wanted to keep things as they were—to not stir up problems. Bust for some reason, with culmination of the past few days, she just couldn't keep quiet anymore. "You're a real asshole, Patrick." She glared at him. "A self-centered son of a bitch. What the *hell* did Robin have to stick around for?"

Startled, Patrick swung his gaze to his sister and took in her almost murderous expression. "Ellie—"

"I am sick of you badmouthing Robin like you *were* blameless," Elizabeth seethed. "You drove her away, Patrick. Maybe she ended things, but you were the one that spent the six months that Mom was sick in a funk and then the three after she died not speaking to anyone. And the only time you bothered to talk to anyone was to bitch at them and be a bastard, so you know, what exactly should Robin have

stuck around for?"

"My mother had just died," Patrick snarled. "I expected her to give me some damn time—"

"She was *my* mother too!" Elizabeth surprised them both by crying. "I am so sick of you acting like you were the only one who lost her! You and Dad have been nothing but selfish bastards since the moment Mom died and you not only shut Robin out but you shut *me* out." She lunged to her feet, all the bitterness and resentment finally pouring out her mouth, too fast for her to think, to pull back. "You moved out of the apartment and left me alone to pay for the rent—rent you *knew* I couldn't afford and then I practically had to beg to use your guest room—beg, Patrick, you made me *beg* you to give me a helping hand! And then you make me feel bad for having someone in my life that doesn't make me feel like shit—"

"Ellie, come on—" Patrick got to his feet but Elizabeth had finally let loose and nothing was going to stop her now.

"You and Dad walk around like you were the *only* ones affected by Mom's death," Elizabeth continued, tears streaming down her cheeks. "But *I'm* the one that lost everything. I lost my brother, my parents, my best friends—I lost my home! But I've snuck around and I've hidden my friendship with Jason from you and from Dad because I didn't want to screw things up but I can't do it anymore. I won't lie and I won't let you make me feel like I have to be ashamed." She raised her chin and met her brother's stunned eyes with determination. "I'll be late for the party, I'm going to Sonny and Brenda's for dinner with Jason."

Whatever else had been in Patrick's expression disappeared at that announcement—his eyes narrowed and he pressed his lips together. "Ellie, I swear to God—"

"Drop dead," she muttered, pushing past him and slamming her bedroom door shut.

When she cracked the door open forty-five minutes later, the room was empty and Patrick's car keys were gone from the table. She stepped into the living room and waited for the guilt to wash over her. After all, things had been going well for her family. Her brother and father were closer to being a family again, Patrick was starting to loosen up a bit and the last thing she had wanted to do was ruin that.

But the guilt never came and Elizabeth realized that she didn't feel guilty, didn't regret it. She had a right to her feelings and more importantly, she had a right to her own life. And she wanted her life to include Jason.

She checked her makeup in the mirror, tugged nervously at the top of her black strapless dress, wondering if she should wear something else—anything else. She was over thinking this, analyzing it. This was just dinner, just Jason doing her a favor.

Just as she had convinced herself to exchange the black dress for a more staid blue one, there was a knock on the door and she sighed. She pulled open the front door and all illusions of coherent thought disappeared as she got her first look at Jason Morgan in a tuxedo. Any ideas of pretending that the

only feelings she had for him were those of friendship were laid to rest.

She dragged her gaze from his chest—he really filled out that shirt well—and met his eyes. "Ah, hey."

"Hey—" Jason frowned and tilted her chin up. "You were crying."

Elizabeth bit her lip and stepped back. "So much for makeup," she sighed. "Patrick and I had a fight, it's no big deal. We should go—"

"Are you sure?" Jason cut in. "I mean, we can just skip the dinner if you're not up to it—"

"No," Elizabeth shook her head and smiled faintly. "I'm not going to skip dinner. I'm just—there were some things that I said to Patrick that I should have a long time ago. I'm really fine, Jason." She reached for her coat and purse. "Should we go?"

"Wait—" Jason took her coat from her and stepped around to help her slide her arms through the sleeves. "I'm not doing this right. I'm supposed to tell you how nice you look or something."

Elizabeth was torn between being irritated and amused. Jason was never one to worry about doing something right—he'd make a decision and go with it, and to hell with anyone who disagreed with him. "Jason—"

Jason cleared his throat. "You do look nice, you know. I mean you always look nice but—" he dragged a hand through his hair. "You look pretty," he finally blurted out. "Sonny said I should bring you flowers but I didn't know why because you already have a bunch here but—"

"Thank you," Elizabeth said, her cheeks flushing. "Flowers are not necessary, but it was nice of Sonny to suggest it."

He stared at her for another long moment and she smiled nervously, breaking eye contact to glance past him. "We should probably go then."

"Right," Jason nodded. He stepped back and she stepped into the hallway, locking the apartment behind her.

Quartermaine Mansion: Foyer

Emily loved her adopted family. She had prepared herself, at first, to despise them. And she had for a long time. She had grown up in lower middle class suburbia and to suddenly be the granddaughter of one of the wealthiest families in the state—well, it had been an adjustment to say the least.

She had rebelled in every way that she could think of—she had refused to eat, she had refused to go to school, she had refused to come out of her room. She was sure they would send her away but they never had and gradually, they had grown on her, this bunch of eccentric people.

Her adopted parents, Alan and Monica, who were so busy with their careers that they often forgot to eat but they were never too busy to see her in a high school play or attend a graduation or help her

study for medical school.

Her adopted brothers, AJ and Jason. Jason, who had cut off most of the family after his accident but who had found a place in his heart for his little sister anyway and no matter how drunk AJ was, he had never spoken to her in the cutting tone he'd used for the rest of the family.

Her cousins, Ned and Dillon, whom she loved as brothers. She looked out for Dillon, took care of him and had bailed him and Lulu Spencer out of trouble more than once. And Ned, the stereotypical overprotective older brother who had grilled all her boyfriends. And of course, her cousin Justus, who had teamed up with Ned more than once to talk her out of dating Zander Smith in high school.

Her aunt Tracy, who drove everyone else mad but Emily secretly admired because Tracy didn't take bullshit from anyone. She was her own woman and she lived by her own rules and Emily wanted to be her when she grew up—albeit with a little more compassion.

Her grandmother, Lila—the sweetest woman that had ever lived. She had a heart that forgave all those who sinned and she had a smile that melted even the toughest of men. She was the heart, she was the soul of the Quartermaine family.

And then there was Edward.

Overbearing, overprotective, arrogant, irritating and a pain in the ass. Edward, who had actually had more time for Emily than anyone else in the family after he'd let Ned take over as CEO of the family investment firm, ELQ. Edward, who had been more than just her grandfather since she'd walked into the house. He was endlessly frustrating because he was always sure he knew how people should live their lives better than they did and what made it worse is that he had an infuriating tendency to be right.

He had told her bedtime stories when she'd moved in the house, and had shared milk and cookies with her in the kitchen when she'd stayed up late to study for exams. He was her favorite family member.

But tonight, Emily was sure she was going to murder him.

"You are being ridiculous," she sighed, straightening her grandfather's bow tie. "As always. If Grandmother heard you talking about AJ like that, she'd tell you stuff a sock in it."

"Lila was always a soft touch," Edward blustered. "Mark my words, young lady, he will never recover unless he is forced to."

"I agree that he needs to go to rehab but no one—including you, Grandfather, is going to kidnap him and take him in there in the middle of the night. AJ has to want to get better or else it'll never work." Emily stepped back and admired her handy work. "You look presentable enough."

"I'll never understand why we go to this thing every year," Edward muttered. He crossed to the stairs. "Will the rest of you get down here so we can get this over with?"

"We go to the Haunted Star on Christmas Eve because we throw the New Year's Eve party at the

hotel—" she threw up her hands. "I don't know why I'm explaining something you already know. You just want to complain."

The doorbell rang and Emily sighed in relief. "That must be Nikolas."

Edward's face flushed with anger. "You invited that scoundrel to my home?"

"It's *my* house and my daughter can invite whoever she likes," Monica Quartermaine retorted, gliding down the stairs in her pale green silk dress. She placed a hand on Emily's shoulder in support.

"Well, I gave it to you," her husband Alan snarked as he joined his father at the bottom the stairs in a matching tuxedo. "And I don't want him here either."

"For the love of God..." Emily muttered. The butler, Reginald, pulled the door open and Nikolas stepped in. "Thank God you're here. They're having the house argument again."

"Ah, this would make the one thousandth, six hundred and seventy first time I've heard it then," Nikolas said with a straight look on his face. He said it so seriously that Emily almost believed him—would have if not for the wink he sent her way.

"Nikolas and I are getting married whether any of you accepts it or not," Emily declared. "So either get used to it or—"

"We're having this discussion again?" Dillon sighed as he ambled down the stairs. He sank onto the bottom step and pulled his shoes on before standing to adjust his cuff links. "I've heard this spiel almost as many times as I've heard the house argument."

Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

Brenda Corinthos had once been a supermodel; her classic face sprawled across billboards nationally and even a few international spots. She'd sold lipstick, perfume, lingerie and on one memorable early photo shoot, a Ferrari. She'd been destined for a long career in the industry as she grew more ravishing as she aged.

But, instead, she'd shocked her friends and family when she'd retired at the age of twenty-seven—at the height of her fame. And when she announced that she'd done so to marry reputed mob kingpin Sonny Corinthos...well, there were rumors that her family still didn't speak to her.

Brenda Barrett Corinthos was old gossip in Port Charles and Elizabeth had heard about her for years before she'd actually met her. Everyone always spoke of her beauty, of her generosity but they never mentioned her lightning quick wit or the fact that her husband was so completely gaga over her that Elizabeth forgot to be intimidated by Sonny Corinthos the first time he looked at his wife with puppy dog eyes and a dimpled grin.

"So, Elizabeth, you've grown up in Port Charles?" Brenda asked, accepting a glass of wine from her husband.

"All my life," Elizabeth answered. "My parents, too. Kind of a family tradition to stick in one place."

"The Drakes have been doctors at General Hospital almost longer than ELQ's been around," Sonny remarked.

"Well, my brother and my father are the doctors," Elizabeth smiled. "My mother and I—well, she was a nurse. As sexist as it may be, the women tend to go into the nursing in my family and the men tend to be the doctors."

Brenda wrinkled her nose. "You never wanted to be a doctor—or anything else?"

"I thought about doing other things," Elizabeth admitted. "But all of my friends were going into medicine. My brother, my best friend Robin, Emily and Jason Quartermaine—" she shrugged. "I was the only nurse though. I wanted to be like my mother."

Brenda didn't miss the fact that she'd mentioned Jason Quartermaine and had been specific to point out that it had been his old self and not Jason Morgan that had wanted to be a doctor. She'd been present for some of the Quartermaine family arguments regarding Jason's choice of employment and was definitely pleased that Elizabeth seemed to understand that Jason Morgan was another person entirely. "Well, as long as you enjoy what you do, I say go for it." She paused. "You do like it, right?"

"I love it," Elizabeth nodded. "And it's great to be able to work with my friends and family." She bit her lip. "Most days. Others...not so much."

"Yeah, I have a sister too," Brenda said. "We do not get along. But I guess it's different with twins."

"Patrick, though he is thoroughly annoying and overbearing, is my best friend in the world," Elizabeth admitted. "I wouldn't trade him for anything in the world." She wrinkled her nose. "But some days..."

"It's good that you value family," Sonny said, nodding. "There's nothing more important than your family." He grinned. "No matter how annoying, right?"

"Right." Elizabeth sipped her wine and glanced at Jason, who had been silent for most of the meal and definitely the after dinner conversation. She'd enjoyed herself with Brenda and Sonny, liked to think that she had made a good impression but she wondered if Jason didn't want to be here—if he'd been instructed to come tonight and to bring a date. The thought that she'd been asked to dinner out of obligation rather than an actual desire for her to meet one of the most important people in the world to him depressed her and she took a long gulp of her wine.

Haunted Star: Outside Lower Deck

The December air gave Lulu goose bumps down her arms but she didn't really care. What was a little freezing air compared to the fact that within a week, her parents would be grounding her for life? She might as well enjoy the outside air while she could.

She was never *quite* sure how she got herself involved in these messes. One moment, everything would be going fine and the next, she'd have dropped herself right in the middle of an explosive

situation—or more correctly, herself and Dillon. He was her right hand man, after all. The Sonny to her Cher, the Jack to her Jen, and most importantly, the Wallace to her Veronica.

But this was a situation that she should never have tried to drop him into and she was already annoyed with herself—as she usually was with most of her plans five minutes after she set them into action. So she was going to have to stop depending on Dillon and start standing up for herself and she'd start by apologizing to him.

"I thought you were barred from attending tonight," Emily remarked from behind her. Lulu turned and sighed.

"Yeah, as punishment for sneaking into the principal's office to find my permanent record and erase a few details." Lulu frowned. "I would have gotten away with it if it hadn't been for those security cameras."

Emily laughed and leaned against the rail. "Well, thank you for not giving up Dillon as your accomplice."

Lulu shrugged. "I'm sure they know—I never do anything stupid without Dillon by my side. He's usually the one trying to talk me out of it. But I see no reason why he needs to join me in my out of school suspension."

"Mmm..." Emily rubbed her hands up and down her arms, pulling her jacket more tightly over her dress. "So *did* you sneak in tonight?"

"No, Lucky pointed out that I could get into a lot more trouble if they left me home alone," Lulu replied. "I'm just out here to avoid talking myself into another disaster, what about you?"

"Oh..." Emily wrinkled her nose. "Stefan and Edward crossed paths and there was another round of family warfare so I ducked out for a while." She studied Lulu for a long moment. "Will was looking for you."

"He usually is," Lulu grumbled. "Couldn't a boy just take I don't want to see you again as a final answer? Most would—and had—but Lulu had been trying to shake Will Drake for the last week and now more than ever, she needed to cut ties and move on. "I broke up with him last week but he's not exactly comprehending."

"It's a shame," Emily mused. "Will was such a great kid but he was always kind of the odd one out, you know? Patrick and Ellie are almost a decade older than him and you and Dillon were so tight. And now with his parents..."

"I know he's having a bad time," Lulu replied. She tapped her fingers restlessly on the metal railing. "Everyone knows. He went from quiet and clean cut to like—rebel without a clue. He's always getting into fights at school and he's just..." she shook her head. "I dunno. It was fun at first, I was looking for a little bit of rebellion but I can't—Will just started to take it all so seriously."

Emily frowned at her. "What do you mean?" she asked curiously. "Take the divorce seriously?"

"No, me and him. I mean, he told me he *loved* me," Lulu said, her voice rising a little. "And how glad he was that we found each other and how much fun we're going to have in college next year."

"Ah...well that'll scare any seventeen-year-old." Emily smiled. "Aunt Tracy was always terrified that you and Dillon would end up together but you guys just aren't like that."

Dillon? As a romantic possibility? Lulu raised her eyebrows. That had never occurred to her. And now that it had...she touched a hand to her abdomen. "I feel nauseous," she joked. "I was just standing here, thinking about how much I need him—because you know, he's my other half. But, dude..." she drew her eyebrows together and shook her head. "I just don't...we're not like that."

"I know you're not now but don't be surprised if things end up differently. I mean, when I was your age, I had a few certainties in my life," Emily told her. "Lucky and Elizabeth, Patrick and Robin—they were going to last forever. I never dreamed that I would look at Nikolas one day..." she smiled. "That I would look him at him and I would see the rest of my life. Things change, Lu, and usually before you're ready for them."

"Yeah, you're not kidding," Lu said crossly. "Em, have you ever made a really big mistake that just kept getting worse and worse?"

"Oh, God..." Emily sighed. "What did you and Dillon do now? Is it worse than the time you guys ended up in Minnesota? Because I'm telling you, I can't think of many things that could be worse than the albino, the bus and St. Paul in February—"

"I found out a few days ago that I'm pregnant," Lulu confessed. Her shoulders slumped. "And I panicked—"

"Jesus, Lu—" Emily's eyes widened. "Have you told your parents? Have you told Will?"

"No, I only told Dillon," Lulu replied. "But what makes you think Will's the father?"

Emily stared at her with an expression of combined horror and exasperation. "Lulu, *don't* make me hurt you."

"Okay, yes, he's the father but he absolutely can never be told," Lulu said sternly. "Never. He would just—he would blow it all out of proportion and his parents—" she hesitated. "His mom would just hit the roof—"

"Lulu, if you think you can justify cutting Will out, you're going to need a better excuse than that." Emily sighed. "Well, I suppose some things are worse than Minnesota in the winter."

Lulu blinked rapidly and looked back over the water. "I'm scared," she confessed. "I thought I was making a point to my parents—that I was just having some fun but now it's all blown up in my face and worse, I tried to convince Dillon to say he was the father and I think it's just going to get worse —"

Emily covered her eyes with her hands. "Oh, my God," she moaned. "You two are going to be the death of me."

Chapter Five

*You left something undone, it's now your rerun
It's the one you can't erase
You should have made it right, so you wouldn't have to fight
To put a smile back on your face*
- Fall Away, The Fray

Saturday, December 24, 2005

Haunted Star: Upper Deck

Robin hesitantly stepped out onto the enclosed deck—Luke had spared no expense for his floating casino—and cleared her throat. "I just want to say something and I promise that I'll—that'll I never bring it up again okay?"

Patrick turned from his position staring moodily out over the water and stared at her with an unreadable expression. She felt no encouragement to continue but didn't see any visible scorn so Robin decided to just continue with it. She would never feel at peace unless she had finished this.

"I'm just going to apologize for the way I left," Robin said after a moment of silence. "Hindsight being what it is, I could have found a better way to do it or I could have stuck it out for a few more months, I don't know. But my timing was awful and I can't blame you or Ellie if you can't forgive me for leaving the way I did—when I did." She hesitated. "But I can also say that I did what I thought was best at the time. I wasn't making anything better and every time I tried to draw you out, you just—you just got more angry with me so I figured that maybe I was just making things worse so I'm sorry—"

"Robin—" Patrick held up a hand and she stopped her clumsy ramble in mid-stream. "I appreciate your apology but really—you have nothing to be sorry for." He was silent for a moment. "Did Ellie ever tell you that I moved out of our apartment after you did?"

Robin silently shook her head and he laughed a little, a bitter and angry sound. "I left my sister alone in that apartment, not four months after our mother had died. The building went co-op and Ellie couldn't put any money down to buy it, my dad was completely useless at that point so she asked me if she could use the guest room in my new apartment for a few weeks, until she had enough saved for a new place."

He blinked and turned back to the water, tracing his hand over the railing. "I told her no. That I was tired of living with my sister, that she'd cramp my style. I basically left my only family to rot in the streets—"

"Patrick—" Robin began, her heart aching for the both of them.

"She cried, Robin, you know that? She was never much of a crier, you know Ellie, always looking on

the bright side, always trying to find the silver lining but when I told her that she had to be on her own and figure out her life without my help, she cried. And I changed my mind—I told her she could use it for a few nights, but that was it."

"But she still lives there," Robin said hesitantly. "So things got better."

"My father sold our house when Mom died," Patrick continued as if she hadn't spoken. "And he moved into a one bedroom apartment. He stopped going to work, he stopped smiling, he stopped living and I think, if he had had the courage, he'd have stopped breathing. All he did was drink and I just—" he shook his head. "I couldn't stand to be around him and remember how things used to be. And Ellie, I couldn't look at her and not see Mom. I mean, she looks just like her. I think that's why Dad stopped calling her, stopped letting her into the apartment."

Her chest felt so heavy and her cheeks were stained with tears as Robin again berated herself for not staying for Elizabeth's sake. The hell with Patrick, Elizabeth had been her friend, her sister and she'd had no business abandoning her. "But things are better now."

"I didn't let myself think about anything but me," he remarked caustically. "Ellie's pain, my father's pain, I just blocked it all out. I kept dropping hints that she should look for other places to live, other people to depend on because as soon as I graduated from med school, I was getting an internship at a hospital as far away as I could and I was never going to look back." His voice was rough now, sliding towards hoarse and Robin only wished she could wrap her arms around him and take away some the pain.

"But right before I graduated, Dad was in the car accident. I don't know if you know how bad it was, but he nearly died. And I sat in the ER, waiting to hear if I was going to lose another parent and Ellie came in and I realized that if my father died, she'd be alone. Not that she wasn't alone already, but if Dad died, and I moved away, she'd have no one but Uncle Liam and Aunt Cheryl to depend on and I can remember thinking that she'd hate that because she didn't really get along with either of them. And she started to cry when Monica Quartermaine told us how close Dad had come to dying—that he'd been drinking and he'd slammed into a guard rail and had nearly gone over an embankment. And I couldn't watch her cry anymore so I told her that she could live with me for as long as she wanted because I wasn't going to leave her after all."

"Well, that's good then," Robin said uncertainly, hoping he didn't have anything left to the story that would make her feel even worse about abandoning them. "Noah went into rehab afterwards, right?"

"He's been sober for a year," Patrick nodded. "And he and I...we'll be okay again if he doesn't pick up the bottle, and I thought, until tonight, that I'd fixed everything. But tonight, Ellie let me have it. She just—she exploded and all that anger and the hurt came rushing out, like she'd been bottling it up for a really long time. And I realized that I never told her I was sorry. And that I'd never seen her cry for what we'd done to her. She'd cried about what was happening, but not for the hell Dad and I put her through. She never once called us on cutting her out of our lives or at least trying to but tonight she did and I just—" He met Robin's eyes. "I wasn't a very good person to be around three years ago. You wouldn't have liked me much so I don't blame you for breaking up with me and taking off. I'm sorry that you weren't here for Ellie, but you'll have to take that up with her, not me."

"Ellie loves you," Robin said softly. "And she loves Noah. If she didn't, she would have cut her losses a long time ago. You guys—because of you, I wanted a brother, so that I could have what you and Ellie have. So you had a rough patch and you were an ass to her." A smile hovered at the edges of her lips. "I seem to remember a particularly annoying fourteen year old that sent me a Valentine lollipop with a cheesy awful poem attached because she wanted to torture her brother."

A small grin spread across his face. "Well, it got me the girl so I didn't hold a grudge for very long."

Robin smacked his arm. "It did not get you girl—that happened two years later. However—" she smiled wickedly. "It did get me the sneezing story that I have used against you—"

He slapped a hand over her mouth but it did nothing to stave off the giggles that escaped from her lips. "Okay, okay, Scorpio, I think it's time we laid that to rest. It was eleven years ago, for Christ's sake."

"You're right, which is why it's a shame you're still so sensitive about it," Robin sighed dramatically, dancing away from him. "Come on, Patrick, it makes you unique. How many other guys sneeze into the girl's mouth during their first kiss?"

Patrick glared at her. "It was your awful perfume I'll have you know, so it's really all your fault."

Robin let out an outraged gasp and whacked him in the arm. "You toad, I can't believe you'd blame that on me. What a gentleman you are!"

"All's fair in love and sneezing," Patrick drawled. He curled an arm around her waist in a familiar move that he'd used their entire relationship. They'd spent a good portion of their six years together teasing each other and torturing the other with embarrassing stories of their childhood and after each session, he'd draw her close to him and kiss her until they forgot what they'd been bantering about.

He'd realized that he'd slid into the old routine about halfway into it and changed course, drawing her to his side and steering her towards the door. "Let's go back in and I'll give you the real low down on what you've missed since you left."

Robin decided not to comment on the incident and grinned up at him. "All the dirty details Ellie was too nice to mention?"

"Of course." They stepped back into the main casino floor and Patrick stalled when he saw the group that had just entered. Not that he drew anyone's eyes to him—everyone had pretty much stopped into their tracks when Sonny and Brenda Corinthos had entered. Not so much for Sonny and Brenda but the couple behind them. Their friendship had been rumored but not since his accident had Jason been out and about in the social scene and no one had expected shy Elizabeth Drake to be on his arm when he did make an appearance.

Patrick glanced across the room where his father was standing with the rest of the Quartermaine family and quickly took Robin's hand, leading her to the door. "I'd better head this off before Dad's head explodes."

Sonny and Brenda had broken away from Jason and Elizabeth to speak with Lois Cerullo-Ashton and

her reluctant husband Ned. Patrick waited until his sister and Jason were alone before stepping up to them. "Ellie," he said warmly, kissing his sister on the cheek. "You look beautiful."

"Thanks," Elizabeth said warily, wearing the universal expression that all sisters wore when their brothers were acting in an uncharacteristic manner. "I'm surprised to see you here with Robin."

"We ran into each other outside," Patrick explained. He hesitated for a moment but then extended his hand to Jason. "Jason, it's good to see you."

Elizabeth blinked but Jason shook Patrick's hand. "Dr. Drake," the other man said evenly. It was surreal to see his best friend's face and hear his voice but realize that his best friend was, for all intents and purposes, dead.

Elizabeth recovered and turned to Jason. "You haven't met Robin, yet right?" She looked back at Robin. "Robin, this is Jason Morgan."

"Ellie has told me tons of about you," Robin joked, shaking Jason's hand.

"Robin," Elizabeth hissed.

"She's mentioned you quite a few times too," Jason responded, somewhat amused that Elizabeth had gone to the trouble of introducing him to someone he was pretty sure he'd been friends with before the accident.

"Well, it's a known fact that if there's oxygen to be breathed, Ellie will be using it for talking," Patrick sighed. "Would you mind letting me borrow my sister for a few moments? Because if we don't go see our father, he'll come over here..." he gave them a half-smile. "I don't think anyone wants that."

"That's fine," Robin said. "Jason and I will get caught up—" she hesitated, "we'll get to know one other," she corrected.

Elizabeth bit her lip but finally released Jason's arm. Patrick wrapped an arm around her shoulders and they started across the room. "Are you high?" she demanded under her breath as they drew closer to her father and his irritated expression.

"Now why would you ask something like that?" Patrick asked idly.

"Because you're acting like—" she waved her hand. "You're acting weird. You're being nice and you're standing next to Robin and you called Jason by his first name and you're..." she huffed. "You're freaking me out."

"It is a brother's prerogative to annoy the crap out of his sister," Patrick nodded. "And the best way I can do that is act the opposite of how you expect me to. Now, let's go make sure our father's head doesn't explode, okay?"

"You're such a brat," Elizabeth muttered.

Noah had crossed his arms and was taping his fingers against the dark fabric of his tuxedo when his children finally reached them. "Elizabeth Imogene Drake, I expect an explanation—"

"Ellie doesn't have to explain her behavior to you," Patrick cut in. "She's a grown woman and she's been taking care of herself for a long time."

Elizabeth's mouth dropped open. "What the hell?" she demanded, frustrated. "Why are you defending me?"

Noah stared at his son with a mixture of irritation and amusement. "Are you trying to drive your sister crazy? You know nothing does it better than agreeing with her." He shook his head. "It doesn't matter—Elizabeth, you're not acting rationally—"

"Dad, seriously," Patrick broke in again. "It's just a party. It's not like they're setting the date and sending out invitations, okay? So let's just be cool about it."

Elizabeth glared at him. "Okay, seriously, you're freaking me out." She raised a hand to his forehead. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm feeling fine," Patrick batted her hand away. "Look, Ellie, Dad and I have put you through hell and I figure if you want to get back at us by hanging out with Jason Morgan and Sonny Corinthos, well it's the least we deserve."

"I'm not doing this to get back at you," Elizabeth said, frustrated. "Is it so hard to comprehend that I enjoy spending time with Jason?"

"Yes," Noah said plainly.

"Okay, Ellie, come on, you've made your point," Patrick remarked. "I get it, Dad gets it—you can drop it now."

"You are such a jackass," Elizabeth said scathingly. She shoved him and stalked back to her date.

"I really thought I'd figured it out," Patrick said, a little confused. He looked to his father. "I mean, it makes sense to me."

"Me, too," Noah shrugged, "but since when has your sister done anything that makes sense to either of us?"

Haunted Star: Main Casino Floor

Robin watched the Drake siblings cross the floor to deal with their father and smiled faintly. It was clear that Elizabeth held no long-lasting grudge towards her twin and she hoped Patrick could forgive himself one day for grieving in the only way he'd been able to.

"So, I'm guessing you knew Jason Quartermaine."

Jason's familiar, yet completely strange, voice broke into Robin's thoughts and she turned her attention back to him. "Yes," she admitted. "We all grew up together, actually. Jason, Patrick and Lucky were all best friends and Ellie and I were like sisters. We were all very close."

Jason nodded and looked back towards the Drakes, where Elizabeth was feeling Patrick's forehead. "I didn't know—I didn't know that Patrick had been friends with Jason Quartermaine."

"Best friends," Robin corrected quietly. "They were friends before I met either of them and had been since pre-school. You—" she cleared her throat. "Jason actually set Patrick and me up on our first date—sort of." A smile flitted across her lips as the memory returned to her. "He'd gotten so tired of us dancing around each other, but never doing anything about it so he invited Patrick over to the pool house on the Quartermaine estate and invited me over as well. He locked the door and told us that he'd put food in there but neither of us were coming out until we figured out what the hell we were doing."

"Elizabeth—" Jason hesitated. "She doesn't tell me much about him, I think because she knows how the Quartermaines kept drilling me on how it used to be, how I wanted to be a doctor and what a good son I'd been and she knew how much I hated that." He looked in her direction. "She's very careful to separate the two."

"Because, to her, they are separate people," Robin told her. "In fact, after the accident, after you were out of the hospital, she would call me on the phone and tell me about the bike rides but she'd never say that it was Jason Quartermaine or even Jay—which was his nickname. From the start, you were always Jason Morgan to her." She paused. "Do you ever wish you remembered?"

"Sometimes," Jason admitted. "Monica—she looks at me sometimes and I can see how sad she is that I don't. I think if I remembered even a little, it would hurt the people who loved him less."

"I swear to God, that my brother sucks," Elizabeth grumbled, rejoining them. She slipped her hand through Jason's elbow. "His life's mission is to drive me crazy and he knows nothing does it more than agreeing with me."

"He's diabolical," Robin agreed, grinning.

"He's a crack head," Elizabeth corrected. She looked up at Jason. "He is not going to ruin my night. Let's go gamble and you can help me win some money. Ellie needs a new car." She tugged him in the direction of the blackjack table and Jason let her lead him away.

"Nothing's more satisfying than confusing my baby sister," Patrick said, returning to Robin's side. "Reverse psychology, you know. If I pretend to accept him, she won't need to use him to rebel."

"Oh...you are so thick," Robin sighed. "She's not using him to rebel. She's crazy about him—"

"No, no—" Patrick shook his head. "That's just—it's not a possibility. I won't stand for it."

"She's right, you are a crack head," Robin rolled her eyes. "Patrick, do you want things to be better between you and Ellie?"

Sensing where this was going, Patrick sighed, resigned. "Yes. And I suppose that means accepting and supporting all her choices, no matter how asinine."

Robin patted his arm. "Good boy." She let her eyes drift over the crowd and frowned when she saw a slightly familiar form stumble onto the floor from the room where the underage kids were playing poker. "Patrick, that's not—" she squinted. "That can't be Will, can it?"

Patrick followed her eyes and swore under his breath. His younger cousin was plastered again. He couldn't even begin to count the times Will had called him from a party to pick him up or even how many times he'd gone to the police station to talk Robert out of pressing charges for trespassing or fighting. "Yeah, it's Will." He set his half-empty glass of champagne on a passing tray. "I'm going to have to take a rain check for the catching up, Rob, but I should get him out of here before your father the commissioner realizes that he's drunk again."

"I'll help," Robin said immediately, setting her own drink on another tray. She followed him across the room.

"Hey, Will, why don't we call it a night?" Patrick suggested, slinging an arm around the slightly shorter boy in a thinly-disguised attempt to keep him on his feet.

Will peered at him blearily. "Lu?" he slurred.

"If I look like a tiny blonde than you really have had too much to drink," Patrick sighed, starting to steer him towards the door.

"No, need to find—I have to see her—"

"The only thing you have to do sober up, pal." Patrick saw Robert Scorpio's eyes on them and tensed. "Robin, be a pal. Go head off your dad."

"We're almost out of here and you're going to need help loading him in the car," Robin refused as she helped Patrick maneuver the teen up the steps and towards the door.

After making it off the yacht and folding Will into his car, Patrick shut the door and sighed. "Home to Aunt Cheryl, it is." He met Robin's concerned gaze. "Thanks for your help."

"What's wrong with him?" she asked softly. "He was an honors student, he was so clean cut—"

"My uncle moved out last year," Patrick said flatly. "And apparently, alcoholism runs in the family. Aunt Cheryl started drinking a lot and I guess the only way Will could cope was to get in trouble. He's only been drinking the last few months though. Since he started dating Lu Spencer."

"Lu drinks?" Robin's eyes bulged. "That's just—"

"No, I think Lu drives him to drink," Patrick said dryly. "Look, I should get him home, make sure my aunt doesn't..." he shrugged. "I'm glad we had a chance to clear the air."

Feeling dismissed, Robin smiled hesitantly. "Ah, me too. I'll just go in now. Good luck with him."

Patrick waited until Robin was back inside before sliding in the driver's seat and glancing at his cousin. "Thanks, Will. You just ruined any chance I had at getting some tonight."

Will snorted. "Robin Scorpio was not going to sleep with you tonight. Or any other night."

Though Patrick knew the first part was true, he was a little surprised Will added the second. He'd only admitted to himself that night that he wanted Robin back, that he wanted to be with her again, to have that part of his life make sense again. He knew it was going to take time but he'd thought it was a no-brainer. Robin was the only woman he'd ever loved. Of course, she was still in love with him. Right?

Perturbed now, Patrick started the car. "Why wouldn't she sleep with me?" he demanded, somewhat irritated.

"Because once women leave us Drakes, they never come back," Will muttered moodily. "I bet it's written somewhere."

"Look, if Lu ties you up this bad, then maybe you're better off without her—" Patrick began.

"You don't know a damn thing about it," Will retorted. "I love Lu. And she loves me, I know she does. I just have to make her understand that I'm not like—" he broke off. "I just have to make her see that I love her, that we belong together."

"That's usually what the guy says before he goes all stalker, Will," Patrick replied, now firmly concerned. "Have you mentioned Lu to your mom? Or to your dad?"

"No," Will muttered darkly. "I can't remember the last time Mom was sober and Dad hasn't been around, hasn't called."

Feeling guilty that he hadn't been there for his cousin, Patrick decided it was time for a change. He'd start hanging out with the kid more, making sure he drank less and instead of just dumping him off with his aunt after bailing him out of trouble, he'd stick around and make sure Will straightened out.

"Look, tomorrow, we'll go to the park, we'll shoot some hoops and you can tell me about Lulu, okay?"

He pulled into the drive way and shut off the ignition. "Look, I know what it's like to be in love with someone who walks away. Who makes it look easy to walk away. But you can't know what's in someone else's head, okay?"

"Spare me the lectures," Will muttered. "I don't want to hear them right now. You had Robin for six years. I had Lu for two months, okay?" He glared up at the split level home that up until a year ago, had housed a pretty decent family. "Home, sweet home," he muttered, pushing his door open.

Haunted Star: Casino Foyer

Robin was rubbing her chilled arms as she stepped back into the casino. This was not how she'd

expected her night to go and though she wished Will were in a better place, she was somewhat grateful for the interruption. She had been falling into old habits with Patrick and in another hour or so, it would have felt like they'd never been apart.

She wanted to make her peace with him, but she could never go back to that life and she had to be careful that he didn't get the wrong idea.

Lulu stepped out of a shadowy corner and grabbed Robin's arm. "Hey—" she swallowed. "I saw you and Patrick take Will outside. Is—is he okay?"

"Yeah..." Robin paused and tilted her head. "Lu, is everything okay between you guys?"

Lulu waved a hand and shrugged. "Oh...well, we sort of broke up last week. Will's not—" she paused. "He's not taking it well but I don't think that's really surprising. He hasn't been taking anything well. I just—I wanted to make sure he was okay. Is he?" she demanded.

The teen looked so agitated that Robin slid an arm around her shoulders and led her to a sofa. "Sit down, Lu. Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing," Lulu denied. "It's all fine—I just..." she stared at her hands. "I did something really stupid and I dragged Dillon into it like always and I think I really—I really screwed up with Will."

"Hey, there's nothing so bad that we can't fix it," Robin assured her. "Why don't you tell me what's wrong and we'll see what we can do about it?"

"You're just going to say what Emily said," Lu huffed. "You're going to tell me to be honest and to tell Will and then it from there, but c'mon, Robin, you saw him! He's in no shape to be getting this kind of news—"

"Lulu," Robin interrupted, feeling the strain of a headache coming on. "What news?"

"I'm pregnant," Lulu announced. "And it's Will's and I broke up with him because he's a lush and he's self-destructive and I asked Dillon to say he was the father because I panicked, but you know, that's just making this whole thing worse because my father would literally kill him—"

"Okay, okay, deep breath—" Robin held up a hand to ward off more of Lulu's ramblings. "You said that Emily knew, right? And I take it that Dillon knows." When Lulu nodded, Robin continued, "So, we'll get together after Christmas, and we'll figure this out." She squeezed the blonde's hands. "You're not alone, Lu. You know that right?"

Lu smiled weakly. "Sure feels like it sometimes."

Casino: Main Floor

"Should I put it on red or black?" Elizabeth asked, glancing over her shoulder at Jason. But he was looking at Sonny across the room. She exhaled slowly and looked back at the table before putting half her money on black twenty-nine. "Black it is," she muttered.

Jason touched her shoulder. "Hey, I'll be right back, okay?" he told her. Elizabeth shrugged—not like he was paying any attention to her anyway. As first dates went, this was a bust. Which wasn't entirely surprising considering it wasn't supposed to be a date.

She smiled weakly when she won and raked her winnings in while watching Jason join Sonny at a table with a man she vaguely recognized from the newspapers as Hector Ruiz. It looked like a planned meeting and suddenly she felt nauseous. She quietly cashed out her winnings and exited out to the upper deck.

She wasn't sure how long she stood there, staring out over the bay and damning herself for seeing things that were never there to begin with. Jason was a friend, he clearly had no interest in being more and she was only making herself look like an idiot by thinking he did.

"Elizabeth?"

She turned and leveled a cool stare in Jason's direction. "Is your meeting finished?" she asked.

He frowned and glanced over his shoulder. "How did you—" he hesitated. "Yeah, it's done. Did you want to go gamble some more?"

"Don't worry about me," Elizabeth replied stiffly. "I can get a ride home from Lucky or Robin. You can go now."

Jason stepped out onto the deck and shook his head. "Elizabeth, I'm not exactly sure but I think you're angry with me and I really don't know why—"

"I'm angry with myself, I'm only irritated with you," she muttered. She turned back to the water and leaned her elbows on the railing. "You could have just told me that you had a meeting here tonight. You didn't have to make me twist your arm to come. And here's a little piece of advice for the future, Jason. I don't like being used."

"Used?" he repeated, completely lost. "I wasn't—I don't understand what the problem is. I had a meeting, I was already going to be here—"

"Since when do warehouse workers take meetings with Sonny Corinthos and Hector Ruiz?" Elizabeth demanded. He fell silent, not realizing that in trying to defend himself against an unknown charge that he'd given away his role in Sonny's organization. She swiped at her eyes, furious with herself for feeling hurt that he hadn't confided in her about his changing job. But that wasn't surprising, not really. She'd usually been the one doing the talking. She saw that now.

"So I guess you're not even a courier now." She hated that her voice sounded thick and she was sure he could see the tears in her eyes. "The problem is, Jason, that you invited me to dinner with your boss and his wife. And you agreed to come with me tonight. Stupid me, I thought it was because you wanted to spend time with me. If I'd known it was a means to an end..." she shook her head. "Never mind. It's my own fault—"

"Elizabeth—" Jason began, still not completely following the thread of the conversation. She was

angry, and she was hurt and he wanted to make that go away but he'd caused it and he didn't know how. "I can take you home now if you want—"

"Don't bother," Elizabeth said. She pushed past him. "I'll find my own ride home. I don't want to inconvenience you any further."

Jason followed her back inside and tried to catch up with her but someone stepped between them and by the time he could see her again, she was going out into the lobby.

"Your date just ran out on you," Brenda observed, sidling up to him. She sipped her champagne. "Care to explain how you scared her off?"

Jason drove his fingers his hair and glared at her. "I would if I knew what I did wrong. She said something about being a means to an end and not wanting to inconvenience me anymore. And I think it has to do with the meeting I had to take here tonight."

"Oh..." Brenda patted his shoulder. "Jason, you have so much to learn about women."

Drake House: Living Room

Cheryl Harris Drake had been a pretty woman once, with strawberry blonde hair and a peaches and cream complexion. Sixteen years of marriage to a functioning alcoholic had given her a hard look in those pretty green eyes and a chip on her shoulder the size of Colorado.

She was in the living room, watching a movie when Patrick pushed open the door and started to steer Will towards the stairs. She sprang to her feet and crossed to them. "What the hell is this?" she demanded.

"Will wasn't feeling well so I brought him home," Patrick replied. "I'm just going to help him to bed —"

He broke off when his aunt reached forward and roughly grabbed her son's chin. "Sick, huh?" She smiled nastily. "Drunk as a skunk." She let go abruptly and Will stumbled a bit. Patrick braced a hand on his back to keep him standing. "You're just as useless as your father, you lousy bastard—"

"Hey, his girlfriend just broke up with him," Patrick began.

"Don't defend him to me," Cheryl spat. "You're no better than your father or his brother. All the Drake men are useless piles of shit. You just haven't fallen into a bottle yet. You will, you all do—"

"Well, being married to you, I can't imagine why Dad would stay sober," Will remarked with a sardonic grin. Cheryl answered that with a vicious slap that sent Will sprawling in his weakened state.

"Okay, that's enough—" Patrick stepped between them. "I'm sorry Uncle Liam sucks, okay? He was never much use to me anyway. But don't take it out on Will—he lost his father too—"

"Oh, don't come in here acting all high and mighty just because your daddy went to rehab!" Cheryl retorted and she was close enough to him that Patrick could smell the whiskey on her breath. "He'll fail just like Liam failed and Will over here ain't no better—"

"That's it," Patrick snapped. "I've never hit a woman in my life, but man, you're coming close." He hauled Will to his feet. "C'mon, I'm taking you back to my place. And I'm not letting him back here until you clean up your act," he told his aunt. He yanked the front door open and all but shoved Will down the front step. "This family is falling apart," he muttered.

Will started to laugh. "Falling apart? Christ, Patty, when did we ever have it together?"

Chapter Six

*Memories 'round the Christmas tree
Are the sweetest ones that remain with me
It's a comfort deep inside
Though you can't stop the race of time
To know that Christmas will always be*

- At Christmas, Hanson

December 25, 2005

Elizabeth & Patrick's Apartment: Living Room

Elizabeth yawned and stumbled out of her room, almost crashing into the Christmas tree in her trek to the kitchen for some coffee. Unfortunately, this was not a normal morning where Patrick would have risen before her and prepared it. So she clumsily set up the filter and poured the water and hoped for the best.

She peered out into the living room and frowned when she saw a tall lanky form sprawled over their couch. Why would Patrick have crashed on the couch when he had a perfectly good bed just ten feet away? She rubbed her eyes and stepped forward and finally realized that while the person was taller than she was, he didn't have Patrick's height. And his hair was somewhat lighter than her brother's.

Why was her cousin Will on their couch?

Too bleary for complex thoughts this early, Elizabeth decided to wait until she'd had at least eight cups of coffee before thinking the matter over.

Patrick exited his room and joined her at the coffee machine, wincing at the strange smell coming from inside. "What did you do wrong this time?" he demanded. She scowled at him—stupid morning person. How did he think so clearly so early? She should do the world a favor and crack him over the head with something hard.

Patrick dumped her coffee attempt and restarted it before turning to his sister. "You wanna go back to sleep until it's finished?"

She glared at him wordlessly and then sat at their kitchen table. He sat across from her and reached for a medical journal to peruse through until the coffee was finished. Restless, Elizabeth started to tap her fingers. After a few moments of trying to ignore it, Patrick reached over and grabbed her hand. "You know that annoys me."

"It's a sister's prerogative to annoy her brother," Elizabeth said dryly. Just the aroma of the coffee was perking her up a bit. "We need to look into some kind of intravenous coffee line."

"Or you can just stay in bed until you smell the coffee," Patrick replied, releasing her hand. "I suppose you're wondering why we have a houseguest."

"The thought crossed my mind," Elizabeth stifled a yawn. "I thought you took him home last night."

"Ellie, are you awake yet?" he asked. "Because this isn't a conversation we should have until you are."

Jolted by the serious tone in his voice, Elizabeth stood and crossed to the fridge. Orange juice helped in an emergency. She poured herself a glass and gulped it down. "Okay, I'm awake."

"I took him home and his mother was drunk. She was insulting and she slapped him around." Irritated remembering it, Patrick tossed the journal back onto the table. "And I don't think it's the first time she's acted like that."

Elizabeth sighed and set the orange juice back in the fridge. "I haven't spent enough time with him since Uncle Liam walked out on them." She returned to her seat. "So what do you propose we do? Arrange for Aunt Cheryl to go to rehab?"

"Sure, we can do that. But I think Will should stay with us until she's put herself back together." He shook his head. "I can't change the way I treated you after Mom died. How I treated Robin and anyone else who cares about me. But I can stop myself from watching another train wreck just pass me by. He needs someone to stand up for him, Ellie."

"Absolutely, he should stay with us," Elizabeth agreed. "Robin rented a two bedroom apartment, maybe I can go stay with her for a while and Will can use my room—"

"You don't have to do that, El," Will said, appearing in the doorway. "I'm not putting you out of your home."

"Will, honestly, I don't care about me," Elizabeth assured him. Patrick stood up to pour three cups of coffee. "You need a place to stay and you can't just use the couch. For one thing, you're too tall—"

"No, I have to go back to my house," Will said. He took the mug of black coffee and took a long gulp. "You have any aspirin?" he asked Patrick hopefully.

"You're not going back there—" Patrick began. Elizabeth stood to retrieve some aspirin from the medicine cabinet.

"I can't walk out on my mom," Will argued. "That would make me no better than my dad." He took the pills his cousin offered. "Thanks."

"I appreciate that you want to stick by her, dude, but c'mon. You're practically falling down drunk most of the time, you're getting into fights and your grades have probably taken a serious hit. You're not an adult yet, you don't have to act like one," Patrick told him.

"Look, thanks, but no thanks. I don't need you guys to fix me, okay?" He took another long gulp of his

coffee. "Mom just needs time—"

"Hey, *who* do you think has kept you out jail?" Patrick demanded. He slapped a hand against his chest. "Me. I'm the one that gets up in the middle of the night and convinces Robert Scorpio not to toss your skinny ass in jail."

"I only called you because you've got an in with the commissioner," Will said sourly. "If I'd known you'd throw it in my face later—"

"That's not what he's doing, Will." Elizabeth covered his hand with his own. "We just want to help. We know we haven't been there the way we should have and we're both sorry—"

"You've got your own lives to worry about," Will jerked a shoulder. "It doesn't bother me."

"In any case, you're staying with us," Patrick said firmly. "Ellie, when's Robin moving into her new apartment?"

"After the holidays, I think. She's staying with her dad until then. I'll give a call later and see if I can use the extra bedroom." Elizabeth took a long sip of her coffee. "Now, why don't we all get showered and dressed? We've got to hit Dad's for breakfast."

It was clear his cousins weren't going to give him much of a choice. If he just left and went home, Patrick would only follow and drag him back. When the twins made up their minds about something, there was no talking them out of it. So Will sighed, sat back and finished his coffee.

Robert Scorpio's House: Living Room

Robin sat in the window seat, staring at the falling snow as she twirled the white phone cord around her finger. "Merry Christmas, Mom."

"Well, Happy Christmas, darling. I confess, I'm still not used to hearing your voice," Anna Devane remarked dryly.

Robin sighed. They'd never give up on the guilt trips. "Well, that's over now, Mom. Is it snowing where you are?"

"Raining," Anna replied. "But that's England for you. Has your father driven you mad yet?"

"No, not yet," Robin smiled over her shoulder at her father who was cursing at the lights on the tree that refused to light up. It was a yearly battle that Robert lost more than he won. "But the thought that I'll be moving into my own place in two weeks keeps the insanity at bay." She hesitated. "I wish you were here, Mom."

"I know, darling, and I do as well, but I just wasn't able to get away this year. Perhaps next year."

"Right." Robin shifted and looked out again at the landscape that she'd grown up with. The house had been in her family for two generations now. Her grandparents—her father's parents—had bought it

when this section of Port Charles had been rural and there had been nothing but fields and trees surrounding it. By the time Robert and Mac were old enough to have their own families, the growing city had started creeping in. A house here, a house there.

Robert had married Anna and they'd always lived in this house, even when his parents had been alive. Mac had married Felicia Cummings and they'd moved to a newly built house a few streets away to raise their girls. But this house had always been in Robin's dreams. Once, she'd dreamt of raising her own family here. Of graduating from medical school with Patrick and then in a year or two, after the first years of being interns were behind them, they'd marry or maybe they'd already be married and then they'd start talking about children.

It had always been Patrick Drake in those dreams though she felt disloyal now to Stone for feeling that way. But with Stone, there hadn't been time for dreams and plans for the future. There had only been the precious gift of right here and now. And now the future was a concept Robin couldn't visualize.

And now, the home she had grown up in was still there but there were more houses now, more streets and there was even some stores. It was a blinding reminder that time didn't stand still and that things would always change.

But this house would always be here for her and Robin didn't even have to live there to know it. "Next year, Mom. You can come here and you and Dad can pretend that you still hate each other. And we'll have a huge Christmas party."

After she'd slid the phone back in the receiver, Robert joined her, perching at the other end of the window seat. He handed her a mug of hot chocolate. "It's Christmas, love, you shouldn't look so down."

"I'm not down," Robin said. She sipped her drink and smiled at him. "I'm just reflecting. It's been a whirlwind couple of weeks and I can't believe everything that's happened since I've been home." She set the mug on a nearby table and pulled her legs up to tuck her knees under her chin. "Dad, you told me that you were glad we weren't involved with the Drakes anymore. Is that because of his cousin?"

Robert sighed and leaned back. "Partly. And because of his father," he admitted. "I've hauled Will Drake in more times than I count and it's always for fighting, trespassing and lately, it's public drunkenness." He shook his head. "Patrick bails him out. Doesn't want the mother to know. But I don't know how much longer I can look the other way. Patrick's a good kid, he always was. But his father's a lush, his uncle's worthless and his sister..." He shifted. "His sister's taken to hanging out with the local criminal element."

"I thought Noah stopped drinking after the accident," Robin said, a little dismayed. "That's what I've heard—"

"Well, now, that's what I've heard as well. But sometimes they just get better at hiding it. In any case, it's a good thing you and Patrick won't be mixing the genes."

Robin smiled faintly. "Oh...there's no danger in that." She took a long sip of her hot chocolate. "Patrick and I are just friends now." She smiled at her father. "And Ellie's not hanging with the local criminal element," she echoed her father's words with a teasing tone. "She's friends with Jason Morgan. It's hardly her fault if after they became friends, he chose to work for Sonny Corinthos. And he's only working in the warehouse."

"Sweetheart..." Robert shook his head, "No, it's a holiday and we're not going to get into this today. I'm glad to have you home." He leveled a glare at her. "Even if you are leaving me again to stay in this lonely house all by my lonesome."

Robin arched an eyebrow. "Dad, I've hardly stayed here since I started college. You're laying it on thick now."

"It's a father's prerogative," Robert replied. He touched her nose. "I'm glad to have you home again, love. Don't you leave again."

"I don't plan on it," Robin replied softly.

Quartermaine Mansion: Living Room

Emily pressed a finger to her head. "Please, God, if you're listening, save me."

Dillon shook his head and reached for a scone. Biting into with great relish, he remarked, "Don't bother. I tried that about an hour ago when Grandfather set in on my hair. God's off today."

Emily huffed. "He always is when *I* need him." She sipped her orange juice. "Why must we do this *every* year? How many rounds of Ned's Not Running ELQ The Way Grandfather Wants are we going to have to sit through?"

"As many as it takes before my mother stops rising to the bait." Dillon cast a look back to the family gathered on the sofa and the settee. Tracy was needling Edward about the great success that her son had turned out to be, despite Edward kicking her out of the family while he'd been growing up. "You'd think they'd be happy that it's still a family firm."

"Careful, Dillon, you don't want Grandfather to think you care," Emily popped a piece of bacon into her mouth and chewed. "He'll be grooming you to take over."

Dillon shuddered. "Oh, God. Don't even *say* those words out loud. Because now they're out there and they're floating and they'll go in his ear and I won't be able to turn around without hearing about investments and capital gains and all that other crap I could care less about." He sighed and continued to loiter at the breakfast buffet with his cousin. "You going over to see Nikolas today?"

"We're meeting at the Spencers." Emily glanced at him. "You want to come along, see the mother of your child?"

Dillon opened his mouth to accept the invitation before the rest of her sentence filtered in and he flushed. "So you've heard."

"I've heard that Lu tried to talk you into yet another brainless scheme. Just as long as it doesn't involve Minnesota again, I figure I'll toss my support in." She set the tongs for the eggs down and glared at him. "Support for Lu telling Will and for you to learn to tell that girl no every once in a while. I love Lulu, you know I do. But isn't there a point where you gotta tell her she's on her own?"

"I could," Dillon said after a moment. "It's crossed my mind. But she's family, you know? She's..." he hesitated. "She's my best friend. And she's been there for me. She'd have my back if I needed her. She's Lu, Emily. I'd like to see *you* tell her that she can't count on you."

"I understand loyalty to friends, believe me. Lucky and Nikolas, they're my family, they've been my friends for years. And Ellie and Patrick and Robin. If any of us needed someone, we know we can count on each other. But, honey," Emily hesitated. "I think that you need to think very carefully about how you and Lu deal with this situation. If you're gonna get killed by Luke, I'd rather it be for something you actually did."

"Thanks, Em. I did talk her out of that first plan, you know that. So I appreciate all the stuff you've gotten me and Lu out of. But she's my best friend. And I'm gonna do whatever she needs me to do." Dillon set a slice of French toast on his plate. "Just like how you do what this bunch of loons need you to do. You don't parade Nikolas around, you don't ask your parents or Grandfather about wedding plans. Because you know that they're never going to accept Nikolas or his family. And they're never going to make him feel welcome." He shrugged. "It's just what you do for family. You accept what you can't change and you deal with it. Lu's impulsive, irrational and half the time, she drives me crazy. But I can't change her and honestly, Em, I wouldn't if I could."

He walked away from her and perched on the arm of the chair his beleaguered older brother sat in. Emily stood at the buffet table for a long moment and finally squared her shoulders and joined her family.

Her cousin was right after all. The Quartermaines would tolerate her marriage to Nikolas, but they would never accept him, never make him feel like part of the family. And that tore at her just a little. She loved her adopted family so much and had worked so hard to make herself one of them. A small piece of her wondered if falling in love with the scion of her family's worst enemy was a betrayal in some ways.

The Quartermaines had a rivalry with the Cassadines that didn't quite measure up to the Cassadines and Spencer feud, but it was felt—on both sides of the family, though all the parties excluding her grandparents had been dead for years. She thought that she and Nikolas could be happy with the knowledge that they loved each other and were happy together but family was so important to both of them. Could they really turn their backs on it forever?

"You look like someone just killed your best friend," her mother said, sliding an arm around her shoulders. "You okay, sweetheart?"

Emily smiled faintly. "I'm fine, Mom. Just anxious to finish breakfast so we can get to the presents."

Spencer House: Living Room

Lulu shook the box her mother handed her. "I wonder if that's the new set of door locks for my room," she teased.

Laura laughed and shook her head, putting a hand on her mother Lesley's shoulder. "Open it, baby, and find out."

"Maybe it's a muzzle," Lucky called out from the desk where he was putting the finishes touches on the computer he'd bought Lulu for Christmas. He'd built it himself and had been quite excited to give it to her though he knew she'd only use it for chatting and emailing and plotting her ridiculous schemes. Still, she'd be off to college next year and she'd need it.

"Maybe it's a new brother," Lulu said sweetly. She tore off the wrapping paper and pulled out a velvet jewelry box. Her hands started to tremble and she looked at her mother, at her grandmother with trepidation. "Mom?"

"We're a little late giving them to you, darling," Laura said, "but your father wasn't ready yet." She looked at her husband affectionately. "He still thinks you're twelve."

"As far as I'm concerned she is," Luke grumbled. "Daughters should stay twelve forever." He looked at his wife's son, the stepson that he grudgingly accepted and to his own son. "Believe me, when you have girls of your own, you'll understand."

Lulu lifted the lid and found the double strand of white pearls nestled inside. Her heart pounded as she skimmed her fingertips over them. Her great-grandmother had given these to Lesley on her sixteenth birthday and Lesley had in turn continued the tradition by giving them to her daughter Laura on her sixteenth birthday. Lulu had known this and had been so excited on her birthday but instead, her parents had given her the keys to her brother's old Chevrolet. She'd been devastated and sure that they had sensed finally what she'd known all long. She wasn't a real Spencer—she would never be as slick and cunning as her father, as gracious and elegant as her mother, cool and confident like her brother or even sweet and loving like Lesley, her grandmother. She wasn't a real Spencer and they'd proved they knew it by not passing the pearls down to her.

She'd cried herself to sleep that night and for two weeks afterwards. And from that moment on, she decided to prove to herself and to her family that she was a real Spencer, that she belonged in this family.

And they'd given her the pearls for Christmas now—when she was on the brink of disappointing them forever and having a baby out of teenaged wedlock. The tears swelled in her eyes and she set the box down with care and delicacy before springing to her feet and running from the room.

Chapter Seven

*I still believe in Santa Claus
Maybe that's just because I'm still
A child at heart
And I still believe in old St. Nick
But then again maybe that's the trick we need
We need to retreat to a world of make believe
- I Still Believe in Santa Claus, New Kids on the Block*

December 25, 2005

Spencer House: Upstairs Hallway

Laura Spencer had always thought that raising a daughter would somehow be simpler than raising her sons—or more specifically, raising her son as she hadn't had much of an input in Nikolas's upbringing. She'd imagined being able to understand her more than her boys because she'd been a rebellious teen herself.

But Lulu was in a class all her own. She'd been sweet and loving for the first sixteen years but one morning, she'd woken up and her daughter had been replaced by a sullen, angry and disobedient young woman and Laura couldn't understand where the hostility had come from. She'd plodded along, battling each crisis as it came up but for Lulu to reject a gift that was meant to be a legacy in their family—Laura just couldn't fathom it.

She knocked once more at Lulu's door but knew it was a fruitless effort. If Lulu were in the room, she would never answer and it was more likely that she'd crawled out the window. Laura reached into her pocket, withdrew the trusty hair pin that she no longer traveled without and with a few careful flicks of her wrist, unlocked her daughter's bedroom door.

When Laura had found out she was pregnant, she'd been stunned. And thrilled. She loved her son Lucky and she broke for the loss of her son Nikolas. She craved a daughter and she'd been so sure that her third child would be a female that she'd immediately painted this room a soft pink in preparation. She'd decorated it with white wicker furniture, stuffed animals and a gorgeous oak rocking chair that she used every night for the first year or so of Lu's life.

Lulu had long ago repainted the walls from the original pink to a loud purple and the carefully selected baby furniture was now gathering dust in the attic. Lu had replaced it with a large brass double bed, a beaten down dresser that she'd painted ebony black and posters of bands that Laura had never heard of covered the walls. Lu's clothes were strewn over the carpet, still the same cream color and the ancient computer that they'd bought three years ago sat on the second hand desk Laura had refinished for Lu's fourteenth birthday. Lu had painted it black shortly after she'd turned sixteen.

The window was cracked open and a piece of notebook paper was tucked under one of the pillows

on the window seat. Laura sighed, resigned and plucked it free. She unfolded it and read Lulu's loopy handwriting. *I'm sorry, Mom. I had to get away for a little while. I'm at Dillon's. I'll call you.*

She folded the paper and tucked it underneath one of Lulu's notebooks on the desk. Some mothers—her own included—would have gone over to the Quartermaine estate and dragged her daughter back if it meant tugging her by the hair. But Laura liked to think that she had learned from her childhood, and from her time raising Lucky on the run. She and Luke had raised a level-headed young woman and no amount of dragging Lulu home would solve this. She would wait until Lulu called (she always did) and then they would take it from there.

She closed Lulu's door and rejoined her family in the living room. "Lulu's not feeling well," Laura lied without guilt. "She needs some time to herself."

"I don't think so." Luke started to rise but stilled with one touch from his wife. "She can't just sulk whenever she wants—"

"She's having some boy trouble," Laura remarked. "She's not feeling herself and doesn't want to ruin everyone's holiday. Sometimes girls just need some time on their own." She flicked her eyes to her mother. "Right, Mom?"

Lesley Webber hesitated but then smiled at her son-in-law. "She's right, Luke. Teenage girls will rebel whether you like it or not. You might as well give her some space or else she'll run off with the first reprobate she finds and before you know it, she'll spend the whole summer on the run."

"Ah, hell," Luke muttered, chastised properly at the reminder that he'd once spirited his beloved angel away from her family and friends simply because he'd wanted her at his side. "The kids were always your area, Laura," he admitted. "You know better than I do."

If only Laura could believe that as firmly as Luke seemed to. She smiled and handed a gift to her son, hoping the observant young man had taken her explanation at face value. "Your turn, honey."

Lucky hesitated before taking the brightly wrapped present, studying his mother's face. Whether he believed her or decided to support her, Laura wasn't sure, but Lucky took the gift and started to rip it open.

Quartermaine Estate: Dillon's Room

Dillon closed the door, coming perilously close to shutting it in his grandfather's face. For some reason, Edward had decided to pay attention to his youngest grandson and bombard him with questions about his future. The words future and Edward never went together in the same sentence without a healthy dose of fear so he'd done his best to escape. Dillon had plans that did not include ELQ.

A thump from his window jarred him from his thoughts and Dillon glanced over in time to see his window slide open and a duffle bag plop to the floor. "Lu?"

His best friend's blonde head popped in through the opening and in another moment, her body followed. "Hey. Ah, I need a place to crash for a while."

"You should not be climbing the trellis," Dillon said, crossing the room and closing the window. "You're in a delicate—" he gestured with his hands, "you know, condition."

"Gee, I *didn't* know," Lulu retorted. "Because it's so easy to forget I'm knocked up." She huffed. "Relax, I can climb that thing in my sleep." She sat on his bed and pulled off her boots. "How'd your day go?"

"Edward realized I existed," Dillon kicked his shoes off and flopped on the bed. He laid back and rested his head on the pillow. A moment later, Lulu's head appeared on the adjacent side. "My mother and Grandfather had their yearly go around about my brother Ned and his running of the company. Alan and Monica had the house argument about eight times." He frowned. "The only thing that didn't go as usual was the Nikolas argument."

"What, they actually saw Em's point?" Lulu asked.

"No...Emily never mentioned him so it never came up." He folded his hands behind his head. "Maybe she's finally realizing that she's been wasting her breath. They're never going to accept him as part of the family."

"That must be so hard on her," Lulu sighed. "I mean, my parents never approved of Will, but at least I wasn't planning on marrying him. And you know, Em like totally lives for this family. It must be really hard knowing they don't approve of the man you want to marry."

He'd never thought of it that way before and now it troubled him. Dillon didn't really mind Nikolas Cassadine—he'd helped Emily bail him and Lulu out of that embarrassing St. Paul mess last year—but Dillon had never really given his cousin his support either. He didn't think that she had needed it; Emily had always seemed so strong and confident but he supposed it wouldn't hurt to know that someone was on her side.

"So, speaking of Will," Dillon said casually. "I ran into him a few days ago."

Lulu tensed but otherwise didn't move. "You didn't tell him I was pregnant," she stated. "He would have knocked down my door otherwise."

"Well, I didn't mention it because it was clear he didn't know." Dillon turned his head to face her. "What encouraged this sojourn from home anyway?"

She sighed and pursed her lips. "My mom gave me the pearls today," she said quietly. "Like it was all normal and they *hadn't* waited two years. She just handed them to me."

"Lu..." He'd never understand girls. From the moment Lulu had told him about the legendary pearls and how she'd been so upset when she didn't get them on schedule, he was kind of confused. Lulu didn't even wear jewelry. "What'd you do?"

"Oh, you know—made a huge scene of running out of the room. I packed a bag and climbed out my window."

Typical Lulu behavior. "What're you going to do?" he asked and they both knew he wasn't referring to tomorrow or even the day after.

Lulu flopped back on the pillow. "I wish I knew," she said. "I know I've got options. They're limited, you know, but they are there. I could go with adoption, I could go with the young mother routine or I could..." she tapped her fingers restlessly on the bedspread beneath them. "Whatever."

"You know I'm here no matter what happens, right? No matter what you pick."

"Yeah, I know." Lulu smiled faintly. "That's pretty much the only thing I do know but at least it's something." She turned her head to face him. "You think I could pull off the Molly Ringwald routine?"

"Well, that movie did have a happy ending."

"I could probably be okay at it," Lulu said after another moment. "I wouldn't be spectacular I guess, but I could learn. I've watched a lot of *Gilmore Girls*. It would be cool to have a Rory."

"Does that make me Luke?" Dillon pondered. "I think I might like to be a troubadour though. That looks like fun."

Lulu snorted. "Please, you're so Sookie."

Elizabeth and Patrick's Apartment: Living Room

Will had just discovered three months worth of *Veronica Mars* on Patrick and Elizabeth's DVR when a knock interrupted his impromptu marathon. Grumbling, he paused and stood to answer the door.

In the hallway, stood Jason Morgan with a fistful of flowers and a brightly wrapped box under his arm. The two men stared at each other for a long moment before Jason coughed and shifted his eyes to the left. "I need to speak to Elizabeth," he said roughly.

Will had spent the day with his cousins, had watched them interact with each other and with their father and he'd become aware that something was bothering Ellie, there was a shadow in her eyes. Will didn't really like seeing her sad because she was too nice for that and she'd offered to move out without even blinking. It was *his* turn to look out for her.

He folded his arms across his chest and aimed best steely look at Jason Morgan. "Ellie's sleeping."

Jason frowned and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "It's six o'clock," he argued.

"She had a long day," Will replied. "Maybe you should have called first." He raised his chin and tried not to think too much about the rumors of Jason Morgan working for Sonny Corinthos.

Jason looked hesitant then and Will might have actually won this round if not for the creak of

Elizabeth's bedroom door opening. "Will, who's at the door?"

Elizabeth appeared at her cousin's side and her mouth tightened at the corners when she saw Jason. "Hey, I wasn't expecting you."

Apparently deciding to ignore the annoying cousin altogether, Jason held out the flowers—daisies, Elizabeth noticed, not easily found in December. "These are for you."

She hesitated, slid her eyes to those of her very interested cousin. "Will, you wanna go watch TV or something?"

"I'll be right over there if you need anything." Will sent Jason a look he liked to think warned the older man not to mess with Elizabeth and then disappeared to the couch.

"Sorry, he's...unpredictable," she waved her hand. Elizabeth accepted the flowers. "Ah, thanks, but you know, I don't need flowers—"

"Brenda said to bring flowers when I apologized," Jason interrupted. "She said it would show sincerity."

She arched an eyebrow. "Do you *always* do what Brenda says?"

"No," Jason replied, "but she's usually right when it comes to stuff like this and I figured it couldn't hurt to listen to her for once. I'm sorry about last night. I'm still not sure what I did wrong, but you were hurt by whatever it was and I don't want *that* so—"

Elizabeth sighed and turned away to grab her jacket from the hook. "Let's go for a ride, I could really use one."

He opened his mouth to say that the snowfall that morning had made the roads a little too icy for a ride, but he saw the misery in her eyes and knew it was more than just him. "Sure," he said, stepping aside so she could join him in the hall. "We just can't go that fast."

Quartermaine Mansion: Patio

Emily wrapped her scarf around her neck and slid her hands into the pockets of her maroon pea coat before stepping out onto the patio. She was troubled by her conversation with Dillon, by the idea that this could be her last holiday with the Quartermaines.

She could never bring Nikolas here next year and she couldn't imagine living in Wyndemere after the wedding, constantly under the disapproving eyes of his uncle Stefan. She wondered if Nikolas was disturbed by how violently their families opposed their marriage. Emily had always assumed they would come to accept it, but she wondered now if Edward had meant his threat not to attend her wedding and if Alan would follow his father's lead and refuse to walk her down the aisle.

She knew Monica would be there, that Ned and Dillon would show up. AJ, if he wasn't in rehab. She knew they would be there, but she also knew that none of them really understood why she was

determined to marry Nikolas, to have a family with him. To be his wife.

She hadn't chosen the Quartermaines for her family, she probably would never have chosen them if she'd had a say in the matter, but they were hers now and she didn't want to sacrifice that, she didn't want to lose that.

There was a scuffling, some footsteps and Emily turned to see Nikolas stepping up from the lake. She smiled faintly—he'd taken a boat from the island and docked at their boathouse, just as he always did when he wanted to see her at her home and not deal with her family. The smile faded. He went out of his way to avoid her family and she did the same with his. How was that any way to start a life together?

"Merry Christmas," Nikolas said. He brushed his lips over her cheek but frowned when he saw her expression. "Emily, what's wrong—"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. They would find a way to fix this, she was sure of it. "Nothing, just another fun family holiday with the Quartermaines." She wrapped her arms around his neck and threaded her fingers in his dark hair. "You want to sneak up to my room and make out for a while?"

"I can't think of a better way than to end this day." He rested his forehead against hers. "Next year, we'll be in our home and we won't have to be apart."

She wanted to ask where their home would be but kept the words back. She only smiled and kissed him. He was the love of her life and she wasn't going to give up on this without a fight.

Vista Point

Elizabeth rubbed her hands together and blew into them. "I'm sorry for dragging you out here," she sighed. She rested her back against the railing and tilted her head up to the sky. There were no stars out tonight. "I just couldn't sit in that apartment anymore."

"Your cousin said you had a long day," Jason remarked. "Is something wrong with his family?"

"Oh, it's just the usual Drake family sob story," Elizabeth murmured. "Patrick and I come from a long line of alcoholics, you know, but it's not until my dad's generation that they even bothered to label it that way. No one saw anything wrong with a man coming home after work and drinking a few drinks." She shifted. "My dad was a social drinker, but you know what happened after my mom died. He just...lost all control, but his brother, my uncle—he was always drinking. We always knew *he* was alcoholic. He drove my aunt Cheryl from a very loving and bright woman into this cold, hard shell. She finally filed for divorce last year and since then, Will's been living with the result. She started drinking, too, which makes her a hypocrite, and he started to act out." She pursed her lips. "But I can't really tell you what this last year has been like for him because I stopped paying attention. He's younger than me by eight years and I just..." she shrugged. "I lost track."

"It's not your fault," Jason said when she fell silent. "You have your own life."

"Apparently, Will has been drinking pretty heavily since Lulu Spencer broke up with him and last night, he embarrassed himself at the Haunted Star. Patrick took him home and Aunt Cheryl..." she shook her head. "She was cruel to him, she slapped him and Patrick didn't want to leave him there, couldn't. So he brought him to our place." She met Jason's eyes. "Today, we went to my father's apartment. It's the first Christmas since my mother died that we've tried it but I guess after watching what happened to Will, after I blew up at him, Patrick just couldn't keep it inside him anymore. He blew up at my father for abandoning us when Mom died. They argued and Patrick stormed out. He still hasn't come home."

Jason leaned against the railing next to her. "Maybe he just needs some time to himself."

"I guess." Elizabeth sighed. "I'm sorry I made a scene last night. I was just—I was upset and I shouldn't have been. We're friends and—"

"I didn't really spend a lot of time with you," Jason interrupted. He paused for a moment. "You were right when you said that couriers wouldn't take a meeting like that. Sonny's...he thinks I've got potential and he thinks I can read people well so he asked me to sit in on the meeting. I was nervous last night because I didn't want to let him down but I wanted you to know that I had already agreed to go with you when Sonny brought up the meeting."

Elizabeth nodded. "Okay, I can deal with that." She exhaled slowly. "So, this is what you want? Working for Sonny...like this?"

"Is that—" He shifted. "Is that going to be a problem?"

It should have been, Elizabeth thought. If Sonny Corinthos thought Jason had potential, he would move up in the organization into more dangerous positions and she had grown up as the best friend of the police commissioner's daughter. She believed in right or wrong, in justice and in the law. Nothing was ever black or white, she reminded herself and Sonny's world was populated with gray. Jason would be a criminal, but she knew Sonny ran a clean operation and a mostly safe one. Everyone knew what kind of man Sonny was.

But more importantly, she knew what kind of man Jason was and his friendship was too important to her. "No," she said after a long moment. "I can't say I wish you'd chosen a more...traditional career path but I know how important this job was to you, how much you respect Sonny. Friends don't ask each other to give up things they love."

Jason tilted his head to the side. "But we're not just friends, Elizabeth. I mean, *Sonny's* my friend. I don't think about him the way I think about you."

Her eyes widened. "How do you think about me?" she asked, her voice almost a whisper.

Jason wasn't sure how to answer that but he liked honesty, he valued straight forward answers so he just went with his instinct. "I-I think about your mouth," he said after a moment. The tips of his ears felt a little warm and he thought he might finally know what it was to feel embarrassed. "The way it would...taste."

Elizabeth never believed that the heart could actually stop or skip a beat like it did in all those trashy romance novels, but that was before Jason Morgan told her he wondered what it would be like to taste her mouth. Her heart more than just skipped, it started to gallop. "Oh." She blinked and licked her lips. "Well...I can't say that I haven't—" she coughed. "I can't say that I haven't given the matter the same sort of consideration with regards to your, ah," she gestured when words failed her.

And because she knew she'd never forgive herself if this moment passed without a little bit of courage on her part, she cleared her throat and said what any self-respecting heroine in those novels would. "I think we should find out."

"I think..." Jason drew out the words as he straightened and gripped her under the elbows, "that is a really...good idea." He dipped his head and Elizabeth felt almost light headed as he lifted her just a little to close the distance between them. His mouth brushed over hers, feather light before settling in for a long sip.

He drew back and Elizabeth remembered to breath and tried to remember what that heroine would say next. "So what's the verdict?" she finally asked, not even recognizing the tone of her own voice. Surely that was someone else speaking. Her voice never shook or sounded so...unsure.

Jason licked his lips and a smile spread slowly across his lips. "A little cold," he admitted. "I'd like to conduct further tests if you wouldn't mind."

"Oh, boy," Elizabeth mumbled before he kissed her again.

Chapter Eight

*You've got to get yourself together
You've got stuck in a moment
And now you can't get out of it
Don't say that later will be better
Now you're stuck in a moment
And you can't get out of it*
- Stuck in a Moment, U2

December 26, 2005

Quartermaine Mansion: Dining Room

Emily watched as Dillon piled his plate high with French toast, bacon, sausage and six slices of toast before arching her eyebrow. "Lu's hungry this morning I see."

Dillon glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "How do you always know?" he muttered, reaching for the pitcher of orange juice to pour a glass.

"Please," his cousin replied. "You hate sausage." She watched him continue to fill his plate. "Why did she make a break for it this time?"

Dillon hesitated but before he could say anything else, Edward ambled in with Tracy behind him, the two already finding themselves knee deep in their usual arguments. "The thing about Lu is that you think you know what she's getting herself into and then she just completely goes in another direction."

"What's this about Lulu?" Edward demanded. He jabbed a finger in his grandson's direction. "Mark my words, young man, Lesley Lu Spencer will lead you into nothing but disaster. As this family's leader of the next generation—"

"I'm out of here," Dillon interrupted, making a hasty exit towards the foyer.

"That boy is out of control," Edward continued. "This family is out of control! One grandchild is a motorcycle riding thug, another is a lost cause alcoholic, one has his head in the clouds, another wears leather pants and you..." his gaze fell on Emily. "You have completely lost your mind over some boy."

He expected Emily to launch into her usual defense of the Cassadine boy but was surprised when she remained silent and took her customary seat to the left of his own. Not sure what to do now that Emily had disrupted his morning routine, Edward sank into his seat and reached for the newspaper. Maybe she hadn't heard him.

"Have you come to your senses then about that boy?" Edward demanded. "He's useless, I tell you.

And a wastrel! Why, when I think about all the spending he's authorized at the hospital. He'll have you in the poorhouse in less than ten years, mark my words!"

But Emily didn't rise to the bait. She smiled absently at him and bit into her blueberry muffin. She was ignoring him! If there was nothing else Edward hated, it was being treated like a doddering old fool. Well, he'd see about this!

"And when that happens, don't bother to darken my doorstep!" he declared. "The day you marry him, you're no longer a Quartermaine!"

He finally got a reaction from his granddaughter but it was not the fiery defense he had expected. Instead, she set her muffin down, pushed her chair away and left the room. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"Nice job, Daddy," Tracy said, strolling in the room. "I don't believe I've ever seen two members of the family flee the room so close together since Alan and I were teenagers. You haven't lost your touch."

Edward put Emily's strange behavior out of his head and started on the next step in his routine: questioning Tracy about Ned and ELQ.

Kelly's: Courtyard

Patrick checked his watch and scowled. "She's late."

"You have the patience of a five-year-old," Lucky said. He breathed some warm air into his hands and rubbed them together. He was always leaving his gloves at home. "She's ten minutes late. Maybe that ancient car of hers wouldn't start again."

"I'm not even sure she came home last night," Patrick huffed. "Will said she disappeared with Morgan and he wasn't awake when she came back, if she came back at all. She certainly wasn't there when I got home and she wasn't there when I woke up."

"Ellie is a big girl now, which you should know since you're the same age and you've spent a few nights out yourself," Lucky reminded him. "Why don't you let the girl live her own life?"

"Because she's clearly incapable of it," Patrick said. "Look at who she hangs out with! First Morgan and then she goes to the holiday party with Sonny freaking Corinthos! Who knows where she is right now?"

Elizabeth was not that far away, in fact. She had returned to her apartment, but it had been extremely late and she had met Jason very early that morning for coffee before his shift at the warehouse. At that very moment, she was around the corner, her back pressed up against Kelly's and giggling as Jason kissed the side of her neck. "I have to go," she told him.

"Why?" he asked, pulling away and frowning in mock confusion. "You'd rather eat breakfast with your brother?"

"Not in the mood he's going to be in, but I do have to go to work eventually." She raised herself up on her tiptoes and kissed his nose. "I'll see you tonight?"

"What time are you done?" he leaned down to steal another kiss.

"Mmm..." Elizabeth blinked, distracted. "What was the question? Wait..." she closed her eyes and licked her lips, really enjoying the taste of coffee. "Nine tonight. I'm working a little overtime."

"I'll meet you in the parking garage then." He kissed her again. "Unless you want to ditch everything and we'll go on a ride. I'll take the cliff road."

Elizabeth pouted. "No fair. You know I'd do just about anything for that." She paused and then wiggled her eyebrows. "I'll do it if I can drive."

Jason chuckled and stepped back, finally allowing Elizabeth to come away from the wall. "No deal."

"Bully." She kissed him one last time and then darted around the corner to find her brother waiting for her impatiently.

Not that Patrick had any other way of waiting. Nothing was ever on time for him, even if it was five minutes early.

"Nice of you to tear yourself away for your own family," he snarled.

Elizabeth was too buoyed by the events of the last fourteen hours to care about her brother's bear of a mood. "Well, I'm here now and I'm starving. Let's grab some food—"

"Not so fast," Patrick grabbed her arm to anchor her in place. "Lucky, we'll meet you inside."

"Courage, El, courage," Lucky shrugged and entered Kelly's to find a table.

"Where were you last night?" Patrick demanded.

"Where were you?" Elizabeth countered easily. "You stomped out of Dad's like a five-year-old and then didn't bother to come home. I didn't even leave until after nine and I don't seem to recall you calling and checking in—"

"Do not turn this around on me, Ellie. I am not the one who spends her time gallivanting with criminals—"

"Patrick, please do not start this right now." Elizabeth could feel the glow of her happy morning fading away. "Because I swear that if you do not stop asking right now, I will tell you exactly where I was."

Something in her tone of voice stopped him from opening his mouth for a long second. But he wasn't out for long. "Did you sleep with him?" Patrick demanded harshly. "Jesus, Ellie—"

"Stop it, just stop it right now!" Elizabeth planted both her hands on his chest and shoved hard. "How dare you do this in the middle of the courtyard? How dare you treat me like a child? I am your sister, you jackass and I think I have earned at least a miniscule of respect." She jabbed her finger at him. "I will spend my time with whomever I please. I don't ask you to run your friends by me. You do not get to treat me like this—"

"Whoa, whoa—" Patrick closed his hands over her shoulders. "Wait, I'm sorry."

"Do not apologize to me unless you mean it," she warned. "I am through with the Drake men and their drama. You and Dad treat me like I stopped growing up at age five and I am sick of it. I am an adult, Patrick. An adult. Which means I get to sleep with whomever I want."

"Oh, God, you did—"

"For your information, and I am only telling you this because I don't want there to be any misunderstandings. I did not have sex with anyone last night, and I did not spend the night with Jason. I came home late and left early." She crossed her arms and glared at him. "And just so we're completely honest with each other, I do have feelings for Jason and I am lucky enough to know that he feels the same way. I have the right to that, don't I?"

"You have the right to that and a lot more, Ellie, but not from some two-bit criminal—"

"If you say another word—just one more word—along that subject line, we are done, Patrick. We are done," she threatened.

Patrick closed his mouth, fuming. "Fine. Have it your way. You're right. You're a big girl now and you can do whatever the hell you want. Far be it for me to try and keep you from making a mistake." He glared at her for another moment before letting out a huff. "Are we going to eat breakfast or not?"

He expected her to smile and follow him inside like she had done after all their arguments in the past. But this time, she shook her head. "No. I'll get something at the hospital."

"Ellie, wait," he called after her half-heartedly. But he didn't say it loud enough and she disappeared back into the parking lot.

Patrick went inside and threw himself into the chair across from Lucky who merely checked his watch. "Five minutes less than I thought it would take."

"Shut the hell up."

General Hospital: Locker Room

"I am supremely glad that Christmas is over," Emily said, pulling her scrubs top on. "No more family togetherness."

"At least until New Year's Eve," Robin laughed.

"Do not remind me." Emily tied her scrubs pants and hesitated before closing her locker. "Robin, am I being selfish?"

"About what?" Robin asked. She bound her hair back in a ponytail. "You're like the least selfish person I know."

"About Nikolas." Emily touched her engagement ring. "I love him, I love him so much, but I love my family, too. I never thought I would, but I do and I just...I feel like I'm making things difficult for my family. They don't like the Cassadines, they never have. They don't approve of my relationship with Nikolas, and I think it's just going to get worse after we get married, not better."

"Em, you can't let your family dictate your choices in life—" Robin began but Emily shook her head.

"I know that," Emily cut in. "And that's not what this is about. I have to face what my choices might cost me. This might be my last Christmas with them, my last New Year's. The only person at my wedding will probably be my mother."

"Emily, if that's true, if that's what happens..." Robin touched her shoulder.

"Then the loss is theirs, not yours."

"I know that here," Emily tapped her head and then she pressed her hand flat against her chest. "It's here I'm having trouble coming to terms with. I love the Quartermaines. They saved me, they gave me so much love and understanding and so many opportunities—how can I make a choice that will cut that off?"

"I don't know," Robin answered. "I don't know what the answer to that is. I guess you're going to have to find out for yourself if it's worth taking the risk."

"He is worth it," Emily said. "He's worth it and so much more, but I'm not the only one risking here. Nikolas adores his uncle. Stefan is his father in every way and he has made it clear that if Nikolas goes through with this, Stefan will go back to Greece and will cut all ties. The hatred is that strong."

"Oh, honey..."

"I'm terrified that one day, the only thing Nikolas and I will see when we look at each other is everything it cost to be together and that we'll hate one another for it," Emily confessed.

Spencer House: Living Room

Laura carefully took down Lucky's Christmas ornament and smiled fondly at it before wrapping it in tissue paper and placing it back in the box. She loved her little family mementos and couldn't wait to pass certain pieces to her future daughter-in-law, whoever she may be or even a son-in-law one day.

And of course, to Emily, when she joined the family. She had a Christmas ball for Nikolas that she had kept hidden away for many years; she had taken it on the run, brought it home to Port Charles and that first wonderful Christmas that she felt like she could put it up and not have Luke snarl, it had

taken its place near Lucky and Lulu's.

She would hate to part with it, but it should be Emily's next year.

The door opened and closed behind her and Laura, with that uncanny sense that only mothers seemed to possess, smiled. "I'm glad you came back." She placed a silver angel into its box and turned. "Honey, I think it's time we sat and talked."

Lulu nodded but stayed on the front landing. "I know. That's why I didn't sneak in through my window."

Laura gestured towards the kitchen. "Do you want some hot chocolate? I'll put marshmallows in it."

"No," Lulu bit her lip. "Is anyone else home?"

"No, Lucky went down to the club to do the books, Grandma is at the hospital and your father is looking after the cleanup at the Star." Laura lowered herself onto the couch and patted the cushion next to her.

Lulu sat gingerly on the edge and kept herself closed off, her arms tightly crossed. "I'm sorry I left yesterday. I was just—you gave me that necklace and I was so..." she shook her head. "I don't know, everything just bottled up inside me and I couldn't think anymore."

"Sweetheart..." Laura wished she could reach out and hug her daughter, but she knew Lulu wouldn't accept it right now. "That necklace is very special to our family. It's passed down three generations and it's my dream that even a hundred years from now, a woman in our family will give it to her daughter and tell her about all the women that came before her."

Laura took the velvet box from a drawer in the coffee table. "I don't suppose I went about the right way of giving it to you. Family tradition dictates that on the sixteenth birthday, I come into your room, fasten it around your neck and tell you about those who came first. But that day, as I put it into the box, your father..." she sighed. "You're his little princess, his gumdrop as he likes to say and he just...he wasn't ready. He asked me to wait and against my better judgment, I did."

"This is going to sound so stupid, but when I didn't get that necklace, when we didn't have that moment I had actually been looking forward to..." Lulu sniffled. "I thought it...Well, it's because she knows. She looks at me and she knows."

Laura frowned. "Know what, Lu?"

"That I'm not a real Spencer," Lulu admitted in a tiny voice.

"What?" Laura gasped. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not clever like Dad, I'm not slick like Lucky, I'll never be as sweet as

Grandma and I'm nothing like you. I'm not graceful, I'm not compassionate, I'm not—"

"Baby..." Laura reached across the gap between them and pulled her daughter into her arms. "How can you say such things? Is this what has been going through your head this last year?"

"I just knew that I didn't fit, that I didn't belong and you guys seemed to believe that because you didn't even give me the family heirloom—"

"You are a Spencer, in every way that counts." Laura pulled away and smoothed the hair from her daughter's face. "I pray to God you never have to prove it by having the kind of lives your father and I led and I'm so grateful your childhood wasn't like Lucky's, but darling, you are everything that's good about your father and I. If we had planned our daughter, we couldn't have planned anything more perfect."

"You have to say that, you're my mother," Lulu mumbled.

"Even after I had Lucky, I knew I wanted one more," Laura told her. "I wanted a little girl to love and I couldn't have asked for a better daughter." She wiped her eyes and sat back. "This pearl necklace was given to my mother on her birthday by my grandmother, your great grandmother. Have I ever told you about her?"

Lulu shook her head. "No. Not really."

"I didn't know her, she had passed by the time my mother found me, but her name was Lillian. Her husband gave this to her on their wedding day and it was his idea to pass it down to their daughter, which she did. My mother gave it to me when I turned sixteen even though we were barely on speaking terms, as we so rarely were. She still sat me down and we had this moment." Laura gestured for Lulu to turn so she could fasten the necklace.

As she did so, Laura continued, "My mother told me that my grandmother was the strongest woman that she'd ever known. She'd grown up during the Great Depression and had left her family to find work so they wouldn't have to worry about having another mouth to feed. She ended up in Texas, picking fruit for the local orchard and one day, the owner's son was there to check on the work. According to family legend, he looked at Lillian and she looked back and they never looked at anyone else for as long as they lived."

Lulu smiled. "That's very romantic."

"Mmm...well then my mother told me about my father and how they met. He was her college professor, the man that encouraged her to go into medicine. They did not end up together, of course, but she told me that he had given her the two greatest gifts—her daughter and her path in life."

"Trust Grandma to find a spin to put on that story," Lulu laughed.

"So now it's my turn to tell you about your father and I. I don't suppose there's much you don't already know. We have had an interesting marriage, with all the excitement I think I can stand for one lifetime, but I know that I will never find a man who will cherish me or love me more. I wish that for you, baby."

"I hope I get half of the love you and Dad have had," Lulu swallowed hard.

"One day, when I give this necklace to my daughter, I'm going to tell her that my mother was the best woman I've ever known and that the only thing I've ever wanted is for her to be proud of me."

"Of course I'm proud of you," Laura began.

"I wish I had a pretty story to tell her or a way to put a spin on how she came into existence, but I don't." Lulu fingered her pearls for a long moment. "Because all I'll be able to say is that I was dating her father to make my parents mad and how I was too scared to tell him I was pretty sure he was going to end up being an alcoholic like all the other men in his family."

Laura stared at her for a long moment before finding the words. "Are you telling me that you're pregnant and that Will Drake is the father?"

Lulu nodded miserably. "Still proud of me?"

Chapter Nine

*I have a tale to tell
Sometimes it gets so hard to hide it well
I was not ready for the fall
Too blind to see the writing on the wall
- Live to Tell, Madonna*

December 26, 2006

General Hospital: Lab

Robin hummed as she slid another slide under her microscope and made some notes. Doing this kind of mindless work was good for her. It kept her mind from wandering ... to other places.

But that ability was starting to fade. She could only go five or ten minutes now without focusing on the steps she was going to have to take in the next few days. The things she would say, the people she would say them to and how they would react.

She had until the end of the year to tell her father, to tell Ellie.

To tell Patrick.

Her mother was flying in for the New Year's parties and Robin knew she couldn't put it off much longer.

The door to the lab slapped open and Patrick stalked in. He ignored the other lab techs who gave him dirty looks and stomped back towards Robin's work station.

"You know, this is a place of serious work," Robin said as he sat on the adjoining stool. "You can't barge in here like it's a bar."

"Save it, I'm not in the mood."

"Mmm...well if your mood has anything to do with the incredibly pissed off Drake sister I had lunch with this afternoon, than I'd say it was well deserved." Robin glanced at him. "But she wouldn't tell me what happened."

"She's being unreasonable," he muttered.

Sighing, Robin shoved her work back and slid around to face him head on. "Patrick, when we slept together for the first time, did you rush out to tell your sister?"

"What?" Patrick asked, surprised. "Of course not."

"Then what makes you think that it is any of your business who Ellie sleeps with?" Robin asked. "Or who she dates?"

"I don't—" Patrick huffed. "You just don't understand. She's my sister. My little sister—"

"She's only eight minutes younger," Robin reminded him. "You have to stop treating her like she's a child or you're going to push her away."

"If she would stop making dumb decisions..."

"Where is the guy who barely forty-eight hours ago was telling me about how much he'd wronged his sister, how strong she was and how she kept your family together. You don't give Ellie enough credit, Patrick and it has to stop." Robin put her hand on his thigh. "She talks about him, you know. She's filled to the brim with Jason stories."

"I bet," Patrick grumbled. "It's all she can ever talk about."

"Because he was there when your father dropped out on you two, when you stopped being there for her. When I was gone. Jason was her rock. He let her vent, he let her scream, cry or just talk until she lost her voice. Whatever she needed, whatever she wanted, he gave it to her and he never once asked her for something back."

"Yeah, well..." Patrick shrugged. "Now he is."

"Maybe." Robin tipped her head to the side. "But maybe she wants something too. Patrick, forget his job. Forget what he does and who he works for. Isn't he exactly who you'd want for her?"

"No," Patrick shook his head. "No. You know what guy I want for my sister? Jason Quartermaine."

Robin sat back. "What?"

"My best friend. That's who I wanted for her. And that's who I would have got for her." Patrick shook his head. "Jay liked her. He'd always liked her, but she'd been dating Lucky since birth practically so he just had to wait around. And then she was free, but we were both so busy with college. He figured he had plenty of time." The corner of his mouth curved up into a half-smile. "It was perfect, you know? Or it would have been. Mom and Dad all over again. Nurse and doctor. He would have given her the world, but then his brother had to scramble his brains."

"You can't keep thinking that," Robin said softly. "You can't keep looking at Jason Morgan and seeing Jay Quartermaine. It's just not fair to anyone. To Jason, to you and especially not Ellie if this is the reason why you're against him."

"Why did he have to wake up and be someone else?" Patrick said quietly.

"Wasn't losing you and my mother enough? Did I have to get my best friend taken away too?" He slid off the stool. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I need to give them a break. I don't know. But you know what's not going to happen? I'm not going to forget who he is now or who he works for. Because no

matter how good he is to my sister, he's a criminal and he's just going to break her heart."

Robin watched him leave a lot more calmly than he'd entered. She'd come home to make things right, to make amends. She was beginning to think that was not going to happen.

Spencer House: Living Room

"Oh, Lulu..." Laura sighed and gathered her daughter back into her arms.

"How could you ever think you couldn't tell me that?"

"Because it's such a huge mistake," Lulu cried. "It's not like going to Minnesota or even like stowing away on Sonny Corinthos' jet to Puerto Rico. It's a major life thing that should only happen when you're ready, and you know I've been handling this like my usual stupid self. I asked Dillon to say he was the dad because Dad would have killed Will, but then I realized that it just meant Dad would kill Dillon instead and that hardly seemed fair and if Dad was going to kill Dillon, it ought to be for something that he had actually done."

"Hey, hey, shhh," Laura smoothed her hand over Lulu's hair. "It's all right. We can deal with this. This is something we can handle."

"But it's not a 'we', it's a 'me' because Will is a just spiraling down into his own hell and I can't pull back him out. I tried and I tried but it didn't work—"

"Will is just a lost soul and if there's something the Spencer family can handle, it's taking in a lost soul." Laura framed her daughter's face in her hands. "But whatever you choose, however you deal with this, whether it is adoption, keeping the baby or even...abortion, I will support and love you no matter what."

"You're not—you're not disappointed?" Lulu asked, warily. "Why aren't you mad?"

"I'm a little sad," her mother admitted. "I wish that it could have happened when you were in love, and when you were old enough and ready, but I'm not disappointed in you. This is not something you get to be disappointed about. If you keep this child, then we will love him or her and we will support you. So do not think you have to do anything because you don't have back up, okay?"

"I don't know what I want to do. I keep thinking that I should give her up for adoption because there's no way I can take care of a baby, but then I think I won't be able to after carrying her, so of course I'll keep her, and then I remember I'm barely seventeen with no future whatsoever so what can I offer a baby?"

"This is not a decision you have to make overnight," Laura told her. "If you want to talk to Will, if you want your father to weigh in, then we can do that."

"Should I tell Will?" Lulu wondered. "He'll hate me. He'll think I trapped him and it's true, but I didn't mean it. Mom, I can't spend my life with an angry drunk. I mean, he didn't start drinking like this until I dumped him, but you know all Drakes are drunks, it's just like something that goes together. Drunk

Destructive Drakes, everyone knows it—"

"Lulu, you have to stop," Laura said firmly. "You have to stop and take a breath or you're going to lose it. Just relax."

"Mom, I'm so scared," Lulu whispered. "I'm scared I'm going to make the wrong decision and I won't be able to take it back."

"I know, baby. It's part of being a parent." Laura leaned forward and kissed Lulu's forehead. "From now on, everything you do affects someone else and that is the most terrifying concept on this Earth—to know that their life is completely in your hands for the next eighteen years." She smiled through her own tears. "But, Lu, if that's what you choose to do, I can promise you that being a mother is also a wonderful gift so don't be too scared. The good outweighs the bad."

Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

"I was pleased with the meeting," Sonny told Jason, who was trying to his best not to hurry a look at the clock on Sonny's desk. It was drawing dangerously close to nine o'clock and he didn't want to be late to pick up Elizabeth.

He was looking forward to seeing her again, knowing he'd be able to touch her and kiss her—all the things he'd been thinking about for months. He didn't know how they'd managed to get to this point or where they were going but he'd like to find out.

He forced his thoughts from Elizabeth. Concentrate on business, he told himself. Don't get distracted. "I didn't think he was lying when he agreed to the new terms," Jason replied. "But..." he hesitated.

"But what?" Sonny asked.

"His son, Manny. I wonder about him. He seems eager to take over for his father," Jason said. "A little too eager. He talked a lot, interrupted his father and didn't seem to agree with the deal."

"I noticed that," Sonny replied. "There's no way to broach the subject with Hector. He would be insulted and it would lead to problems we don't need, but we can't ignore it either. You should keep an eye on Manny."

Jason blinked. This was not a courier job nor was it a request for an opinion. This was an actual assignment and an important one. Manny Ruiz was a potential threat to Sonny and this was a huge leap of faith.

He nodded. "When should I start?" he asked, but he knew the answer. Immediately and it would last indefinitely.

However, Sonny had not ignored Jason's secret glances at the time, nor had he overlooked the younger man's general state of distraction since he'd walked in the door. "It'll keep until tomorrow. You'll need to tell Elizabeth you might be out of touch for a while so she doesn't worry."

Jason frowned. "What?"

"Women," Sonny began patiently, "do not appreciate when their men disappear with no word. They worry. And when you turn up safe and sound, their worry turns into anger and you're left with a very ticked off female. It's best to avoid that altogether. I didn't have anyone tell me that when I met Brenda so I found that out all on my own." He grinned. "I thought I'd spare you."

"But I can't tell her what I'm doing," Jason replied, "so why bother saying anything?"

"Elizabeth does not strike me as a stupid woman. She knows that working for me is not exactly carting coffee beans around. If what you have with her has a prayer of lasting, you have to establish boundaries and procedures now. You can't tell her what you're doing, but you can tell her that you'll be out of touch, that if she needs you, she can call me and that if anything happens to you, I'll make sure she's informed."

Jason shook his head. "I don't want to scare her—"

"Jason, what I'm asking you to do is not necessarily dangerous," Sonny told him. "But there are no guarantees in this life. The next thing I ask you to do might be a lot more risky. It's likely you'll get injured at some point or another. You wouldn't want to disappear on her and let her worry would you?"

He paused. "There's time, Jason, to back out. You can go back to being a courier, or even to just working at the warehouse. I won't think badly of you and we'll still be friends. I'd respect that decision, if you wanted to have a safe life. But this is a limited time offer. Once you're in this life, leaving is not usually an option and anyone you care about has to be able to accept that, to understand the rules and be able to work with you. I think Elizabeth is capable of that, so the real question is are you still interested in this life?"

Jason hesitated. "I don't think that's a decision I can make by myself," he admitted. "I want to work for you, Sonny, in any capacity that you ask of me. But things with Elizabeth have changed and I don't really know what's going to happen with that, but she's important to me. If she can't...if it's not something she wants to sign up for, then I have to respect it and go back to the warehouse."

Sonny nodded. "I can accept that. You know, I saw this coming months ago. The first time you mentioned her to me, I could see how important she was to you and I knew she'd be the deal breaker."

"I'll talk to Elizabeth tonight," Jason said. "I can give you an answer tomorrow."

"That's fine, and hey, there are no hard feelings if you go back to your old job," Sonny assured him. "I consider you a friend, regardless of your employment."

"I appreciate that." Jason stood. "I should pick her up; she's probably waiting for me."

General Hospital: Elevator

Elizabeth smiled when the doors slid open and she joined Lucky in the elevator. "Hey, what brings

you here?"

"Oh, just updating the hospital's security mainframe," Lucky replied. He pushed the button for the parking garage. "You off work?"

"Just finished my shift." She tied her scarf around her neck. "Sorry about breakfast this morning, I just wasn't in any mood to deal with the Neanderthal any further. I had Epiphany assign me to the maternity ward to avoid him."

"Hey, he's your brother. I got a sister who does things that I probably don't want to know about and things I do know about that drive me crazy. You just want to protect your family." Lucky shrugged.

"I get that, believe me, but he's got to let me grow up in his head. I just don't get why he's so against Jason. It can't be the fact that he works for Sonny," Elizabeth said. "I mean, I can see that's why he's worried, but the anger I see in him..." she sighed. "It just doesn't make any sense."

The elevator doors slid open and they stepped out. "Look, El, I can't say what's up his butt," Lucky told her. "All I know is that he's got something going on in his head and it's not about you, at least not completely, but you're the only out he's got right now so it's probably some misplaced stuff."

"Maybe," Elizabeth agreed. "You think it's about Robin being home? Stirring up old things with my parents?"

"Could be," Lucky nodded. "Could be he's just got a stick in his butt. I don't know, but take it easy on the guy. It's hard to be a brother, no matter how old the sister is. All we want to do is lock them in a room to protect them and apparently, the courts frown on that." He heard a motorcycle engine roar and looked up to see Jason rounding the corner. "Look, Ellie, just give him some time. He already feels like an ass." He kissed her cheek and wandered off towards his car.

Jason pulled to a stop. "Hey, sorry I'm a little late." He took her hand and drew her closer. "You weren't waiting long, were you?"

"Nope, shift ran over a few minutes." She leaned down to kiss him. "Mmm, your lips are cold."

"Yeah, it's little cold for a ride." He hesitated. "We have to talk about a few things, so do you want to just head somewhere for some food?"

Elizabeth hesitated and thought of the clothes she'd stuffed into her purse. "Let's go back to your room. We can order pizza or something."

He stared at her for a long moment before nodding. "Sounds good, hop on."

Scorpio House: Living Room

Her father was still awake when Robin came home around ten. She found him on the sofa, reading over a few case files and sipping bourbon. "Crime never sleeps, huh, Dad?" she asked, smiling as she dropped her bag on the end table by the door and curled up next to him on the couch.

Robert smiled and drew his daughter under his arm so her head rested on his shoulder. "Unfortunately not. There's been a rash of vandalism in the waterfront business district. Kids today have nothing better to do."

"Even if they did, some would still be committing the crimes," Robin sighed. She peered up at her father. "Dad, I think we have to talk."

Robert nodded and closed his reports. He took his glasses off and set them both on the coffee table. Robin pulled away and turned to face him on the couch, tucking her leg underneath her body. "Are you finally going to tell me what's been on your mind since you came home?"

"You always could tell," Robin smiled wistfully. "I didn't just come home because my grant fell through," she admitted. "It was too close to Christmas and I just...I couldn't deal with Paris anymore." She stared at her hands for a long moment. "Shortly after I moved to Paris, I met someone."

"Oh?" Robert cocked an eyebrow. "You never mentioned this."

"No. I was just..." Robin paused. "I was drained from all the drama and I needed to excise all the Port Charles things from my head. That's why I didn't keep in touch for a while, why I did nothing more than write. I just needed a break and I found something in Stone."

"Lucky was in Paris for a few weeks and he'd met Stone somewhere, I don't remember where now. He introduced us and that was pretty much it. There was this connection that I hadn't felt with anyone since Patrick." Robin stopped. "I was looking for that connection again. I missed being part of a relationship, being part of a team. Everything with Stone was so easy, so simple. We fell in love and it was like everything was meant to be. He asked me to marry him, Dad."

"I don't suppose your story ends with—he's coming to Port Charles next week for the wedding?" Robert prompted.

Robin smiled, "No. I said yes and we started making plans, I started to think about coming home to tell you in person." She bit her lip. "So I could tell Patrick face to face. I didn't want him to hear about it from someone else."

"What stopped the magic?" her father asked quietly.

"Stone got sick," Her voice faltered and a tear slid down her cheek. "He got really sick and I finally forced him to go to the hospital. He'd been sick off and on all year with this bad cold and I guess it was finally too much." Her throat felt tight, she wasn't sure she could get the rest of this out. "He had AIDS."

Whatever Robert thought Robin had been about to say, this was clearly not what he had expected. "Oh, God, Robin..." He reached out and took her hand, terrified he now knew what was coming next. "Sweetheart..."

"It was advanced, he'd had it for years and he just...didn't know. He hated doctors, never really had the money for it anyway so I guess a cold here and there didn't matter to him. But once he got the

diagnosis, we knew I had to get tested." Robin stopped then, wanting desperately to go back in time and not have started this conversation.

"Tell me it was negative, baby," Robert sat forward and looked at her urgently. "Even if it's a lie."

"Daddy..." Robin wiped at the tears streaming down her cheeks. "I did lie. To Stone. He was dying and if he knew I was sick too...I couldn't let him take that to the grave. So I lied. I told him I was negative and he died last Christmas thinking that. Or maybe he knew the truth and didn't tell me. I don't know anymore."

She saw her father's stricken and terrified expression. "I'm not dying," she hurried to assure him. "I mean, I'm sick, but I was lucky. I only have HIV and I was able to get on a cocktail that has kept me relatively healthy. As long as it continues to work, there's no reason I shouldn't live another fifty years."

"Robin—" Robert shook his head, unable to absorb this information. "I can't—how could you keep this from me? From your mother?"

"Because it all happened so fast. Stone and I were together for such a short time before we found out he was sick." Robin sighed. "The only reason we even stopped using protection was because we were going to get married and I wanted to start a family. I wanted to have a baby as soon as possible." She shook her head. "His health weakened from the drugs, they tried all kinds of treatments but nothing took. It wore on him until he just couldn't do it anymore."

"I should have been there for you," Robert said. He stood and stalked to the fireplace. He spun around and jabbed a finger at her. "I should have just hopped on a plane and gone out there. I knew something was wrong, your emails were just...not the same and there were all those gaps of time. For God's sakes, Robin, how could you go through this and not once pick up the bloody telephone?" he demanded.

"I didn't know how," Robin whispered. "I hadn't told you about Stone, so I couldn't figure out how to do that and tell you in the next breath that he was sick. And then before I knew it, I found out I was sick too and that he was going to die. It was all so fast."

"What about since then?" he continued. "It's been a year!"

"I know!" Robin stood and crossed her arms. "But I needed air to breathe; I needed to adjust to the fact that not only was my fiancé gone, but that I was sick, that the person wasting away on that bed could be me one day." She stopped and took a deep breath. "I needed to come to terms with it and when I was ready, I started to make arrangements to come home. I knew I couldn't put any of this off any longer." Her composure started to crumble and the tears began to fall again. "Please don't be angry, Daddy. I can't stand it."

He crossed the room to her and drew her into a tight hug. "I am so angry at a world that could do this to you, to this young man you seemed to love so much, but I am not angry at you. I could never be angry with you for doing what you felt was necessary for you." He kissed the top of her head. "I'm just

so scared for you, Robin. I'm scared for what this could all mean."

"I know," Robin replied, burrowing into her father's embrace. "I am, too. I have to ask you to please keep this under wraps for now." She broke away. "I need some time to tell the people that matter the most. Ellie, Mom...Patrick. Lucky already knows, he was Stone's friend. But there are some people who need to hear this from me. I need to tell Uncle Mac and the girls."

"Anything you want, darling," Robert tightened his hold, afraid she'd disappear when he wasn't looking.

Jake's: Jason's Room

Jason unlocked the door and pushed it open so that Elizabeth could enter first. He was nervous about the conversation they would have to have and he wasn't sure if she would agree to the new terms of their relationship.

He'd meant what he said to Sonny—Elizabeth's reaction would seal his decision. She was the deal breaker. If she wasn't okay with his moving up in the organization, taking on a position of power, he would go back to the warehouse. She was more important than anything he could do for Sonny.

Elizabeth set her bag on the floor and started to unbutton her coat. "You would not believe the day I had," she told him, unwinding her scarf and tucking into the pocket of the pea coat. She pulled the coat off and tossed it on the chair. "No, you know what? I'm not going to talk about it." She took the rubber band from her pony tail and shook her hair out. "What did you want to talk about?"

Jason held out a hand and when she took it, he drew her close to him. "I don't exactly know what you are to me," he admitted, "but I know that I want to be around you all the time, that I like when you smile and even better, I like when I can make you smile."

She grinned. "I think I like this so far."

They sat in the chair close to the door, her on his lap. "Sonny and I had a conversation today," he said and stopped.

Elizabeth wrapped her arm around the back of his neck, her fingers playing with the ends of his hair at his nape. "Sounds serious," she said. His somber mood since picking her up was making sense now and the first feelings of anxiety started to spread. "Is everything okay?"

"I hope so," Jason hesitated. "I'm trying to think of how to say this without saying too much," he told her. "Sonny asked me to do something that would kind of indicate where I stand in his company," he said slowly. "And it would be a decision that you can't take back in a few months or even years, not without a lot of trouble. Are you following me?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said. She pulled her legs up so her knees were almost tucked under her cheek. "Is what he asked you to do a crime?" she asked. She bit her lip. "Or is that too much to ask? I'm not sure of the limits."

"No, not necessarily," Jason answered. "I think it if was, I wouldn't be able to tell you." He rested his forehead against hers. "I don't know all the limits either. Which is something else Sonny wanted to me to talk to you about."

"Does he not want us to see each other as more than friends?" she asked.

"No, no. He likes you, he does. But he wants to be sure that there are things you can handle. Like this thing he wants me to do..." Jason paused. "It involves me not being to talk to you, contact you or see you for a while. I'm not sure how long. And I can't tell you why."

"Would this happen a lot?" Elizabeth asked.

"It might. I don't know yet." Jason took her hand and laced it with his. "I told Sonny that I had to make sure it was okay with you. That I didn't want to agree to do this and find out you didn't want to sign up for this kind of...relationship."

"Jason..." Elizabeth shook her head. "I don't want you to make that kind of decision based on me. This is your life; you can't let me control things. Isn't that why you left the Quartermaines?"

"I left because they wanted to control my life, make my decisions. They never once asked my opinion about anything. I want this to be okay with you," he told her. "My job is just a job; it's just something I do. I can do something else. But I can't...I can't find another you."

"God, just when I think you've made me speechless for the last time, you find a way to say something else that just completely blows me away." She leaned forward and kissed him softly. "Whatever you choose to do, I'm here. If you want to work for Sonny in this capacity, then you do that. I just want you to be as honest as you can with me. If you need to do something and can't tell me, say that. Don't just disappear and not tell me. I wouldn't be able to handle that."

"I can do that," Jason nodded. "And if you need to contact me for any reason, Sonny can always get in touch with me, okay?"

"Okay."

Satisfied that he had straightened everything out, Jason gestured towards the bureau where his cell phone was. "Are you hungry? Do you want to order a pizza?"

"No, I ate at the hospital. Are you hungry?"

He frowned. "I thought you wanted to come back here and grab dinner."

"Not exactly," Elizabeth hesitated. She glanced down and concentrated on the collar of his shirt. "I came here to spend the night." She glanced up at him. "Is that okay?"

Jason swallowed. "Yeah," he answered. "That's just...fine." They stared at each for a long moment before he seemed to get his wits about him. He kissed her hard, shifting his grip so that when he stood, she was cradled in his arms. "Are you sure?"

"You have no idea."

Chapter Ten

*Cause everybody knows, that nobody really knows
How to make it work, or how to ease the hurt
We've heard it all before, that everybody knows just how to make it right
I wish we gave it one more try*
- Everybody Knows, John Legend

December 27, 2005

General Hospital: Cafeteria

Elizabeth hummed as she selected a container of peaches to go with her peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"Somebody's in a good mood," Emily laughed as she moved her tray up. She studied the peaches but opted for an apple.

Robin poked her head in between them, her already paid for lunch in her hands. "Somebody got some last night," she sang in a soft voice.

"Shut up," Elizabeth replied good-naturedly. "That's not for public discussion."

"Then we can wait until we get to our table," Emily said. She handed the cashier her money and then followed the girls out of the cafeteria. "I don't want too many details because hey, he's my brother. Still, I didn't even know you were dating!"

"That makes two of us," Robin said suspiciously. She looked at Emily. "How do we know it was Jason?" she asked in mock suspicion. She spotted a group of empty couches in the corner of the waiting room and gestured there. "Let's sit there."

"Oh please, the girl has been panting after him for ages," Emily rolled her eyes. "Like the identity was ever in doubt." She set her tray on the table and tucked her leg underneath her body on the sofa before uncapping her iced tea.

"You two are a riot, really." Elizabeth perched on the edge of the sofa and stuck her straw in her cut of apple juice. "I did spend the night with Jason, we've only been...I don't know the right word because dating just sounds so much less than what it is, but it's only been a day or two. And I know we spent the night together a little quickly but—"

"You've been doing the foreplay thing for like two years. An hour would have been too long to wait," Emily waved it away. "How did it happen? With as few details as possible."

"Well..." Elizabeth quickly and concisely summed up their argument Christmas Eve and his apology

the next day. "I don't know, it just felt right." She pushed her plastic fork around her peach container. "But Patrick is just...he's just lost it over all this."

"He's having a rough time," Robin said, before telling them about his visit to the lab the day before. "I don't think he's over everything that happened before. Your mom, my leaving, Jay's accident, Noah's drinking; I think he's still dealing with it all." She hesitated. "I think that me coming back stirred everything up again and probably not for the better. Maybe I should have just stayed in Paris."

"No," Emily said quickly. She put her hand over Robin's. "No, absolutely not. You came home to clear the air and you have a right to be with your family."

Robin bit her lip and glanced at her watch before deciding to speak again. "That's not entirely the reason I came home," she said quietly.

Elizabeth and Patrick's Apartment: Kitchen

Will was doing his best to battle the dishwasher when the doorbell rang. It didn't seem to want to close and no amount of rearranging the dishes within was working so he was relieved to give up that chore.

He pulled open the door and his eyebrows shot up when he saw Lulu standing there. "Hey, ah...I wasn't expecting to see you."

"Yeah, Emily said you were staying with Ellie and Patrick." Lulu gestured towards the living room. "Can I come in?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah." Will stepped back and closed the door when Lulu was clear. "Listen, I was gonna call you, but then I figured you wouldn't answer. I mean, I wouldn't blame you, I've been acting like an ass."

"Yeah," Lulu admitted. She clutched the strap of her purse. "But I gave you reasons to."

"I don't know," Will shrugged. He hesitated. "Are you staying long enough to take off your coat?"

"Oh, yeah, sure." Lulu set her purse down on the coffee and unbuttoned her coat, placing it over the arm of the couch. "Will, I know you're having issues with your family and stuff and the reason I broke up with you—"

"It doesn't matter, Lu, you get to do what you need to do for you, I know that," Will interrupted.

"Right, but I just wanted you to know that I'm worried about you," Lulu said. "I know you're drinking a lot—"

"I haven't had a drop since Christmas Eve," Will assured her. "Patrick and Ellie don't keep liquor in here and made me promise not to touch the stuff. It's part of the reason I agreed not to go home for a while." He shuffled his feet. "I know my mom will have the vodka lying around."

"Good, I'm glad," Lulu nodded. "Because you know, you don't have to let your family problems screw up your life. You could," she swallowed, "there's a lot you can do with your grades. You could go to college and stuff."

"Yeah, Ellie's been on me about my school stuff." Will frowned at her. "Did you come over for a pep talk or whatever? Because really, it's not that much fun coming from the girl that broke my heart."

"Right," Lulu sighed. "I wanted to tell you that things have changed a lot since we broke up and I've done a lot of thinking—"

"If this is going where I think it is..." Will held up a hand. "I don't think it's a good idea if we got back together. I still care about you, but I have to be on my own right now. I can't deal with anyone else's baggage and no offense, Lu, but you have a lot of baggage."

Lulu exhaled slowly and reached for her coat. "Right, I'll just...let you be alone. I'll do this by myself."

Will narrowed his eyes. "Do what by yourself?"

She shrugged into her coat and grabbed her purse. "Anything. Everything. Whatever." Lulu brushed past him and left.

"Girls," Will sighed and returned to the dishwasher.

Quartermaine Mansion: Foyer

Edward was descending the stairs when Emily burst through the front door and disappeared into the family room, slamming the door behind her.

Probably that no good Cassadine boy, Edward fumed. He knew that she'd rue the day she started with that reprobate and clearly Edward was being proved right!

He went to the family room and found Emily standing by the terrace, tears sliding down her cheeks. "What's he done?" Edward demanded. "I'll have his head!"

"What?" Emily looked back and wiped her cheeks. "What are you talking about?"

"That boy! What's he done to make you cry?" He crossed to join her at the windows. "I told you all along that he would do this to you—"

"Grandfather," Emily tilted her head back and let out a frustrated cry. "This has nothing to do with Nikolas!"

Edward faltered. "What? Then what's going on?"

"Robin just told me why she came home," Emily sniffled. "And I was just standing here, thinking about how small my problems seem. So what if you guys disown me after I get married? I'm not dead;

no one in the family is dead—"

"Who's dead?" Edward asked, alarmed. "Emily, I demand you tell me what's going? And what's this about disowning you? Who's disowning you?"

"Robin's sick," Emily whispered. "She's really sick and I guess she's healthy right now, but that could change at any time, and she's been going through this for over a year and all this time I've been selfish and thinking about myself—"

"What kind of sick is she?" Edward asked, confused. "Is it cancer?"

"No..." Emily closed her eyes. "It's so much worse. It's HIV, Grandfather. Robin has HIV and you know, I'm a doctor, so I know all the treatments and I know the odds, and I know all the important stuff, but I also know that tomorrow her cocktail could stop working and she could get really sick."

"HIV?" he repeated. "People like Robin don't get that."

"Grandfather..." Emily shook her head. "I just...when she told us that she came home because she was sick, I never expected to hear..." She hesitated. "I'm upset because she's sick, yes, but I'm also furious with her for putting herself through this and never once picking up the damn phone to tell us! And Patrick, he's going to be devastated. He's loved Robin since we were fourteen." She scrubbed her fingers through her hair. "I just don't understand the world sometimes."

Edward hesitantly reached out to touch her shoulder. "Sweetheart, I'm sure it's all going to be okay."

"If only I could believe that."

General Hospital: Lab

"Hey, Robin," Patrick pushed through the door. "I got a message that you needed to talk to me."

Robin swirled around on her stool and stood. "Yeah...there's something I have to tell you."

Patrick perched on his usual stool and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Is this going to be another lecture about Ellie and Morgan? Because I gotta tell you, I'm not particularly up to it."

"No, it's not." Robin set her pen down and started to carefully pack up her station and put away her slides. "I like to think we've cleared a lot of the bad air between us. I mean, things aren't quite as bad as when I got home..." she trailed off. "Has it really only been a few weeks?"

"I guess so." Patrick shrugged a shoulder. "Yeah, I guess things are better. Are you sure this isn't about Ellie?"

"No, it's not," Robin repeated. She put her microscope in the cabinet beneath the station and rounded the counter to perch on the stool adjacent to Patrick. She'd thought it would be easier to work while she told him, that she would be able to concentrate more and handle the situation. But it wouldn't be fair to Patrick and wasn't that really who this conversation should be about?

Telling Emily and Elizabeth had been difficult, but they were her friends and had each been through painful breakups. They knew what it was like to move on and find someone new. They weren't her first boyfriend, the boy she'd grown up with and had had so many of life's firsts with. She wasn't sure how she was going to tell him about Stone without hurting him, much less the disease.

"Patrick, I went to Paris because I needed a fresh start," she said softly. "And I needed to be away from Port Charles. I didn't write very much, I never called and I never came home. For three years."

"Yeah, I know all this," Patrick tapped his fingers on the counter. "And you've apologized. Everyone's over it—"

"You've forgiven me for doing it, yes," Robin broke in slowly. "But you don't know why."

"Because you didn't want to deal with our bullshit," Patrick muttered. "And I know that it's fair. I've told you I was an asshole to everyone the whole time anyway—"

"Patrick, for six months, that was true," Robin told him. "I needed a break and I needed to find out if what I had done was the right decision. I woke up so many times thinking about you and Ellie back here, how you guys were handling things and wishing I had done a better job of saying goodbye."

"What happened after the first six months?" Patrick asked suspiciously.

She bit her lip. "I might be getting the wrong impression, so forgive me if that's true, but I get the feeling that you wouldn't really mind..." she waved her hand. "Picking up where we left off. Being together again."

"Well, no," Patrick admitted. "I've been thinking about it and it makes sense. I still love you, Robin and I know you still love me—"

"And I need to tell you why that can never happen," Robin said gently. "I do care for you, Patrick, a great deal. But the life you're mapping out in your head, that future—I can't be a part of it."

Patrick closed his mouth and stared at her in confusion. "I don't understand."

"After six months, Lucky came to see me. He was doing some things in Europe and dropped by Paris to see some old friends. He and I went out to dinner and he introduced me to someone."

Patrick stood abruptly and took a few steps back. "Someone," he repeated.

"His name was Stone," Robin said, her stomach twisting. "I wasn't interested in romance, not then. I had been with you since we were kids and part of me figured that when I went back home, we *would* just pick up where we left off. So, initially, Stone and I were just friends—"

"I don't think I want to hear about this anymore—"

"I'm asking you to please let me finish," Robin said. "I'm asking you to let me clear the air between us once and for all if we're ever going to be friends again."

"We're friends now," Patrick replied. "I don't need to know any of this—"

"Yes, you do," Robin interrupted. "I wasn't looking for romance," she repeated, "but the more I was alone, the more I missed being in a relationship. I wasn't used to being on my own, to living by myself, and not having someone to be with. So yes, because I was lonely and I missed the way things were between us before your mom died, Stone and I started dating." She chewed her lip. "There were no complications, everything was easy and we..." she stared down at her hands. "We fell in love," she said softly.

"Why do I need to know *any* of this?" Patrick demanded harshly. "Why the hell is any of this necessary? So you moved on, that's abundantly clear. I was just some stupid kid you dated because there was no one else. So where's this guy now? Did he dump you? Is he waiting for you back in Paris?" He pressed his lips together in a thin angry line. "Is he coming here? Is that why you're doing this? To make sure I know I mean nothing to you?"

"No," Robin stood and shook her head. "No, that's not it at all. Patrick, please, you have to let me finish—"

"What's to finish?" he kicked the stool, sending it flying across the room. Their little scenes in the lab were run of mill by now and most of the other researchers ignored them for the most part. She'd chosen this place to tell him hoping to control his reaction, but clearly the presence of others wasn't enough of a deterrent. "You made it all very clear for me, Robin. I'm not the guy anymore. That's just fine."

He slammed through the lab doors, leaving them swinging angrily in his wake. Robin sank onto her stool and put her head in her hands.

Chapter Eleven

*All around me are familiar faces
Worn out places, worn out faces
Bright and early for their daily races
Going nowhere, going nowhere
Their tears are filling up their glasses
No expression, no expression
Hide my head I want to drown my sorrow
No tomorrow, no tomorrow
- Mad World, Gary Jules*

December 27, 2005

Bannister's Wharf

Elizabeth sat on the bench staring out over the water, letting the stinging wind whip around her. She couldn't really feel the cold. Not after what Robin had told her today.

Her best friend in the world was sick, could become even worse and die some day. She had lost her fiancé to this illness, a man that Elizabeth hadn't known about. Hadn't been able to gush about, to mourn, to love. Robin had had an entire life in Paris and no one had known.

She couldn't turn to Patrick because he didn't know and he deserved to hear this from Robin. She couldn't talk to her father because in some ways, she blamed her father for all that had happened in her life since her mother had died. If Noah had just handled things a little bit better, maybe Patrick wouldn't have torn himself apart and driven Robin away.

Anyway, she could never talk to her father in any real way that mattered. Not about anything.

And she couldn't turn to Jason, which had been her first instinct. She had had her phone out and was pressing the speed dial before she remembered that today was the first day of his disappearance. No contact until he made the first move. It had seemed like such an easy promise last night, but she wasn't so sure anymore. How could she lose her heart to someone who was turning out to be as inaccessible as her father and brother? Sure, Jason's distance was physical, not emotional, but it was distance all the same.

She should have stuck with Lucky. Maybe they *had* already been drifting into "friends" territory towards the end of their relationship in high school. The passion and the sweetness had disappeared and they'd each known that there was more out there. But now they were both alone and he was the most normal guy she'd ever known. She should have stuck with him.

"Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth glanced up to find Sonny Corinthos staring at her, concerned. "Sonny?"

He gestured with a gloved hand. "You're crying," he stated. "Are you all right?"

Elizabeth brought her hand up to feel her freezing face and was surprised to find her hand bare and her cheeks wet. "Oh. I didn't realize."

Sonny lowered himself onto the bench next to her and took her freezing hands in his, rubbing them to warm them up. "If I let you turn into an icicle, Jason would never forgive me." He turned to one of the men she hadn't noticed before. "Could you find a pair of gloves for Miss Drake to wear?"

"Sure thing," the man disappeared up the stairs and Sonny turned his attention back to her.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked.

"No," Elizabeth shook her head, embarrassed. "I was just feeling sorry for myself. You don't need to do anything—"

"Of course I do," Sonny said easily. "Jason is my friend and you mean a lot to him. Is it him? Are you missing him already?"

"No," Elizabeth said quickly. "Well, yes, of course, but that's not why I'm upset." She sighed. "A friend gave me some really awful news and I just...I was thinking about how I didn't have anyone I could talk to about it. Jason's...not available. My family is a mess and everyone else is dealing with the news anyway."

Sonny nodded. "It's rough to be in the same circle of friends when something bad happens," he said. "Because you can't really depend on someone else to be strong since they're reeling from it as well."

"Yeah," Elizabeth bit her lip. "Robin Scorpio," she said, "was my best friend growing up. We were more like sisters because she was basically dating my brother from the time we were fourteen until we graduated from college. My mom died and my brother made her so unhappy she went to Paris for medical school," she explained. "She met someone there, planned to marry him and found out he had AIDS and shortly before he died, she was diagnosed with HIV."

"I'm so sorry, Elizabeth," Sonny murmured. "And you found this out today?"

"Every piece of it," she said. "Robin left very abruptly about three months after my mom died. I didn't really know why then; I assumed my brother had broken up with her and she needed to get away. But she only wrote me once or twice, she never returned my phone calls and she never visited. Since I never knew about this guy she was engaged to, there was a lot of ground for Robin to cover before she even got to the bad parts."

She could feel the hysteria crawling up her throat. Her voice began to hitch. "She was my best friend in the world. Her life fell apart a year ago and she never once bothered to pick up the phone. I can't understand why any of this happening, how I can be so devastated for her and so goddamn furious at the same time!"

Sonny shifted his arm and put it around her shoulders, drawing her in a warm embrace that reminded her a bit of the safety she'd once felt with her brother. Just the reminder of how far apart she and Patrick had grown drove her over the edge and the tears started to slip out. "How could she shut me out like that? Because I'm Patrick's sister? Because she didn't want to deal with it anymore? How could she ignore me?"

Her voice broke. "My life fell apart too, and I couldn't talk to her anymore. And now I don't have anyone because I was stupid enough to fall in love with someone like my father, who always manages to be unavailable when you really need someone—" she broke off abruptly as she realized who she had just said that to. The man that caused Jason to be unavailable. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

"Sure you did," Sonny said. He used his free hand to rub her shoulder. "But it's okay, we can keep it between us."

"No, really, I don't have a problem with Jason working for you and we talked about him not being able to talk to me for a few days or even longer if necessary. I'm okay with it, or I was in theory. I just..." she drew in a deep breath. "I just wasn't expecting this to happen today. I'm all over the place."

"Hey, it's okay," Sonny assured her. "I'm sure it's going to be a rough adjustment period, so don't worry about it. You're having a bad day and not having Jason to help you through it is going to make you resent things a bit. Don't worry about it."

"Jason's always there when it counts," Elizabeth said. "He's nothing like my father, I didn't mean..." she exhaled in a huff. "I don't know what I mean anymore. I'm sorry to have lost it like that."

"I'm going to tell you something that I've never told anyone," Sonny said. "So maybe it will help you to trust me a little." He patted her arm. "I didn't ask Jason to do more for me because of his skills or his abilities. Or I should say, not just because he has them." He hesitated. "I asked him because I think he's a little like me. Searching for something to make his life matter, to prove something to himself. I went down a lot of dark roads trying to do that and I didn't want that to happen to him, so I cut out the middle road and gave him more responsibility than I would have given to anyone else working for me for so little time."

"Sonny..."

"My wife adores him," Sonny continued. "She considers him part of her family and so do I. I've known for months that you were more than just the friendly nurse who took care of him in the hospital. Jason considers you part of his family, which makes you part of ours."

"He thinks the world of you," Elizabeth said softly. "He would never want to disappoint you because you gave him a chance when everyone else said he was worthless and would never amount to anything. That's why I told him it'd be okay to take the job, that I would never hold him back. Because as much as he says he wouldn't hold it against me, and we'd go on the way we were before, I knew what would happen. He'd resent me because he'd have to let you down and he would rather cut his arm off first." She swiped at her eyes. "He's important to me, Sonny, and I'll find a way to deal with the rest of it because it's worth it to me to try."

"Good." Sonny handed her a pair of leather gloves that his man had given him. "Put these on. And if you're free, I'll bring you home to Brenda. You can cry on her shoulder because she's a woman and might be able to tell you why your Robin did what she did. Then maybe you can face Robin without the bitterness. That's what you want to do, right?"

"It is," Elizabeth admitted. "I guess I didn't realize I had been holding that in for so long. But I have to be able to support her through what's happening and I can't do that if I'm angry."

"Excellent." Sonny stood and pulled Elizabeth to her feet. "I'll cook you a nice dinner."

Spencer House: Lulu's Room

Lulu heard the front door close, which indicated that her father had left for the casino for the night. She reached under her bed and tugged out a bag of books.

"'What To Expect When You're Expecting'," she read the title of the first. "Why doesn't anyone write a book called 'What To Expect What You're Not Sure You Want to Be Expecting'?" she muttered.

"Because it would never fit on the cover."

Lulu whirled around to find her older brother leaning against the doorjamb.

"Lucky...what're you doing here?"

"Mom called me. She thought you might need some advice from someone a bit younger and less biased." Lucky turned her desk chair around and sat in it. "So, Lu, I guess you've got yourself in a bit of a pickle."

"A pickle," Lulu murmured. "That's interesting." She leaned against her bed and closed her eyes. "So where's the advice you promised Mom?"

"When Elizabeth and I were seniors," Lucky said slowly, "she was late."

Lulu jerked her head up and stared at him. "What?"

"Really late," Lucky said. "And we were scared shitless. We were barely seventeen, and already we knew that we were just marking time. We were together because we had been for three years and neither one of us wanted to find out what high school would be like without the other. So to think that we had made a kid together when we didn't want forever...that was terrifying."

"She wasn't pregnant though, right?"

"No," Lucky replied. "But we had about three weeks of thinking she might be. She didn't want to take the test and I didn't want her to either. Because if it came out positive, what the hell would we do? I mean, we were just kids. We still had college to go through; we had the rest of our lives ahead of us. How could we raise a kid?"

"So what happened?" Lulu asked.

"Well, eventually we decided that if she was pregnant, we wouldn't get married," Lucky said. "At least not because she was knocked up. That's no way to start a marriage and it would be bad enough to saddle a kid with teenage parents, you don't want to add an unhappy relationship to it, you know? We decided we'd do joint custody, maybe even get an apartment so we could raise the baby, but we wouldn't promise to spend our lives together. That would just be a trap for us."

He scratched his forehead. "Anyway, Elizabeth wasn't pregnant and we decided to break up. Like I said, it was over anyway and we didn't want to chance making another mistake."

"So that's why you guys broke up," Lulu said. "Everyone always wondered, but you guys never really said." She picked at her carpet. "So you decided to keep the baby, if there was one?"

"We talked about everything else," Lucky said. "We discussed abortion and adoption, but Elizabeth wasn't really into either. She knew she wanted to be a mother one day and figured if it was meant to happen, it would happen."

"Did that scare you?" Lulu asked. "I mean, that she basically made the decision for you?"

"Well, I figured it was her body, she had the final decision anyway, but my heart was never in the other options either. But that was us, Lu. We didn't have the stuff to deal with that you do. Elizabeth wasn't dating someone who had a lot of problems and we'd been together forever. We already knew we were going to end up friends. You and Will are different. He's got a lot of problems, Lu, and no one would blame you if you didn't want to bring a life into this world with him."

"I tried to tell him today," she said softly. "I was kind of hoping he'd take it out of my hands, you know? But I wasn't saying it right and he thought I was asking to get back together. He's sober, he has been since Christmas Eve and I know it's only three days—"

"Three days, three hours, it doesn't matter," Lucky said. "Patrick told me he's trying."

"Yeah, and I guess he's trying to get his life back in order. He could still get his grades under control and go to a really good college," Lulu sighed. "I guess a baby could mess that up."

"Lu..." Lucky left his seat to slide down next to her. "He needs to make that decision for himself. I'm glad he's trying to find his way out from under the mess his parents left him in. I know he's had a rough year, and you have in your own way, too. I'm not saying that you have to tell him, because ultimately, that's up to you. But speaking from experience...even though Ellie and I were on the way out, I still cared about her and I'm glad I was able to be there for her while she was scared. I know Will cares about you; that's pretty easy to see. Is it healthy? Maybe, maybe not. You guys are young; it's hard to tell if it's something that can last. Lu, I can't tell you what to do. I can only tell you that I love you, that I will support whatever it is you choose to do."

"And by the way, squirt..." he grasped her chin. "You are my kid sister and no one had better tell you that you're not Spencer enough. You've got enough Spencer in you to scare the crap out of our old

man. And that's saying something."

Lulu laughed and then found herself starting to cry. She threw herself into her older brother's arms. "Thank you for saying that. You're the best brother a girl could have."

General Hospital: Locker Room

"I thought you were done a few hours ago."

Emily glanced up to find Robin studying her closely. "Oh. Yeah. I'm picking up another shift. I needed to get out of the house." She opened her locker and tugged out her scrubs top. "Um, did you tell Patrick?"

"I tried," Robin sighed, "but I didn't get very far. He didn't take the news about Stone well."

"Well, if you got the mention of Stone out, he'll probably figure out the rest—" Emily started.

"No, I mean the fact that I moved on and found someone else." Robin sank onto the bench and huffed. "I didn't...I knew that since I came home, he'd hinted that maybe we could date again but I didn't realize...it's like he thinks time stopped. That we didn't have lives in the last three years."

"He didn't," Emily said softly. "Not in the way you did. After you left, his father's drinking started to get worse. He started to argue with Ellie and Jay had his car accident. That first year, I wasn't sure that he was even going to stick around Port Charles. Especially after Jay woke up and wasn't, you know, Jay anymore. That was the last straw for him. For a lot of us, Robin. I can appreciate that you did not have a magical fairy tale in Paris and my heart breaks for what you've been through but our lives didn't exactly stop either and we're all still picking up the pieces."

"I get that but hasn't Patrick dated?" Robin asked, bewildered. "I got the impression from the nursing staff that he's dated half of them and asked out the rest—"

"*Dated*," Emily repeated. She took off her sweater and hung it in her locker. "There's been no one for him since you left. No one that was anything more than a distraction. Robin, he fell in love with you when he was fourteen and he's never fallen back out. The last time his life made any sense, it was with you. I don't blame him for thinking that if he had you back, things would be okay."

"I thought they were now," Robin frowned. "His dad stopped drinking, he and Ellie are all right. I mean, he still lost his mom and Jay, but—"

"The thing about Noah is...he's only been sober for about a year and..." Emily paused. "The thing is, only Ellie really thinks he's sober. I mean, he gives the impression that he is but I don't think anyone believes him."

"My dad said something like that but I didn't really pay attention to that. Emily, I can't date Patrick to make his life easier—"

"No, I get that. But he doesn't know the rest of the story. He thinks that his life exploded. In the span of

six months, his mother died, the love of his life disappeared, his family disintegrated, his best friend basically died and as far as he knows, you were in Paris...falling in love with someone else. Honestly, Robin, I'm not sure he can handle the rest of it now. Because now he's hating you for being happy at all and when he finds out what really happened, he's going to turn that hatred on himself." She fastened her scrub bottoms and sat next to Robin.

"The truth is," Emily continued, "that Patrick has been walking a very fine line for the last year, since Noah's accident, but he's starting to fray at the edges. Watching Ellie with Jason and knowing it should be Jay is eating at him. Wondering if his father is going to sink back into a bottle and knowing that it runs in the family...he's terrified he's going to end up just like his father and I think...if he finds out that you're sick...he might just fall off the edge altogether."

"I can't *not* tell him," Robin chewed her lip. "I'm telling my mother when she flies in for New Year's. Ellie knows. My father knows, you know. Lucky knew anyway. If I don't tell him, if I wait too long, it'll be worse because he'll know everyone else knew. And he'll think I lied to him. You know he hates when someone tries to protect him."

"All *very* valid points," Emily agreed. "But you also need to tell him for you. *You* want to tell him. And you can't be selfish, Robin. It's not fair to him."

"No, I get what you're saying. I just wanted this over with, but I can't do at risk of hurting him more," Robin replied. "What do you suggest I do?"

"Wait a few days, at least until your mom gets here on the thirtieth. Give him some time to calm down, to accept that you did move on in Paris, and then see where you are. If you have to tell him in stages, then tell him in stages. No one says you have to do all at once."

"Thanks." Robin was silent for a moment. "I know you and Ellie are angry with me. Ellie, in particular, for the way I left. I wish I could say sorry and have it be enough..."

"Robin..." Emily hesitated. "Yeah, I was angry. I still am, a little. But it's because I'm your friend and I should have been there for you. I wish I could have been there, at the funeral. With Ellie, she's had the exact same time of it as Patrick, except she's walking away from it with Jason, which isn't exactly a prize. I loved my brother so much and I love the one I have now, but he is working for Sonny and I don't care what she tells him, I know she's not doing well with it. You and Ellie were always closer than you and me. Maybe you needed to get away from Patrick, but she could have used you a time or two. "

"I know. I felt awful when I realized all that had happened. She never told me about it in her letters, but that's no excuse. I didn't handle any of it right."

"All that aside," Emily stood and shut her locker, "I *am* here for you, no matter. Whatever you need. I'm sick inside about what's happened to you and I hope you'll let me know if there's anything you need from me."

Robin reached forward and hugged her friend. "You're wrong about something, you know." She said,

pulling back. "Even though you were two years behind us, you and I were still friends and I shouldn't have abandoned you either."

"Well, it's over now. You're home now and we have to pick up new pieces." Emily smiled faintly. "And throw out others."

Patrick & Elizabeth's Apartment: Living Room

Elizabeth pushed open her front door and found Will on the couch, watching television and eating a slice of pizza. "Hey." She closed the door and removed her coat. "Don't tell me that's what you ate for dinner."

"Not much else in there except frozen pizza." Will gestured towards the uneaten pieces on the plate in front of him. "You can have some."

"No, thanks." She dropped on the couch next to him. "Didn't Patrick come home?"

"Not yet." Will dropped the half eaten slice back on his plate. "So Lu stopped by." He scratched his head. "She wanted to talk but I thought she wanted to get back together so I told her that wasn't going to happen. She looked kind of upset."

"Did she actually say that?" Elizabeth pointedly.

"Um." Will paused. "Well, no."

"Then you should probably have heard her out." Elizabeth tapped her fingers restlessly against the arm of the couch. "It's pretty late. Patrick didn't call?"

"I don't think so, but I figured he was out wooing the lovely Dr. Scorpio." Will shrugged. "He was talking about trying to get her back on Christmas Eve."

"He wants to get back together with Robin?" Elizabeth asked. "Oh, *no*."

"That's what *I* said," her cousin replied. "I told him Drake men don't get to keep the girl but I guess he thinks he can break the cycle." He eyed her. "Do Drake women get the guys? I always wondered."

"Will..." Elizabeth sighed. Before she could say anything else, the apartment phone rang. She leaned back and grabbed the cordless from the table behind the couch. "Hello?"

"Ellie Drake?"

"Yes?" Elizabeth replied.

"It's Coleman down here at Jake's. I, ah, called you a few times to pick up your dad."

Elizabeth's stomach clutched terribly. "My...dad isn't there right?"

"No, no, darlin'. Your brother is. Patrick, right? He's been here for the past three hours."

"Oh, no," she sighed. "How bad is he?"

"Well, that's the thing. He's been staring at the same shot of whiskey the entire time. I don't think he's even sipped it. Normally I don't chase off the sober ones but I gotta say, Ellie, I'm a bit worried."

"I'll be down to pick him up. Thanks, Coleman," she sighed again, "you do have a way of bailing out the men in my family." She hung up and rubbed her eyes. "I have to pick up Patrick at Jake's. Do me a favor, Will?"

"Yep?"

"I want you to call Lu tomorrow and ask her to tell you what she wanted to tell you today. She deserves to be heard out, even if it is just to break your heart again." Elizabeth stood and reached for her coat. "You never make anything better by running away from it. It's usually worse that way."

Port Charles Grille

"Are you tired?" Nikolas asked. "I knew I should have taken you home."

Emily shook her head. "No, I was hungry and we don't get to see each other much." She set her fork down and sipped her wine. "I don't really want to be anywhere else."

He eyed her, concerned. "I wish I could say that I believed that because you want to be with me, but I get the feeling that I'm not much more than a distraction right now."

"Oh...no," Emily shook her head. "No, Nikolas. You're never a distraction, I'm sorry—"

"Em..." He reached across the table and squeezed her hand. "I love you. I know I'm not the center of your life and I can tell something's on your mind. Why don't you just tell me what's wrong?"

Emily pursed her lips. "Well...I guess Robin wouldn't mind." She haltingly related the information she'd received today. Nikolas took it in slowly and sighed.

"How awful," he murmured. "I remember this Stone Cates. Lucky went to his funeral last year but he never said anything about Robin."

"She didn't tell anyone but Lucky and I guess she made him keep it a secret." Emily leaned back in her chair. "She's starting to tell everyone, it's the reason she moved home. She told her father and then me and Ellie today. She wanted to tell Patrick but..." she shook her head. "He couldn't accept the fact that she'd loved someone else enough to marry him so she wasn't able to tell him about the illness."

"He's always loved her," Nikolas said. "I can imagine the idea of her finding that with someone else must have shaken him a great deal."

Emily nodded and they were silent for a long moment. "Nikolas, your uncle still plans to move to Greece after the wedding, doesn't he?" she asked softly.

Nikolas didn't answer her right away. He wiped his mouth with the linen napkin and signaled for the waiter to remove their entrée plates. Once that was finished, "He hasn't mentioned it in a while but I imagine that's still his plan."

"Does it bother you?"

"Does it bother me that my uncle refuses to let the past go?" Nikolas clarified. "That the legacy of a Cassadine woman neither one of us knew is enough for him to cause us both unhappiness? Yes, it bothers me. Emily, you are not the reason he will go to Greece and I am not the reason your grandfather is threatening to disown you."

"No, I know that," Emily replied. "I know that my grandfather has never forgiven Sofia Cassadine for breaking his brother's heart and Grandfather believes that led him to commit suicide. Logically, I know that his reaction to our engagement has nothing to do with either of us. But I guess...our families are both so important to us, Nikolas. How do we know that one day, years from now, we won't look at each other and think it wasn't worth it?"

"Are you having second thoughts?" Nikolas inquired, forcing his voice to be light.

"Not about you," Emily assured him. "I love you. I do." She paused. "But my family...they took me in and loved me even when I didn't give them a reason to. I don't know if I can willingly cause them this kind of pain."

"You aren't causing them *anything*," he argued. "They're doing it to themselves and they'll come to their senses soon enough. They're bluffing, Emily. I wish you had the spine to recognize that."

She sat straight in her chair and stared at him. "You wish I had the spine to recognize that," she repeated. She set her glass of wine down. "I didn't realize you thought so little of me."

"I didn't mean that the way..." he cursed under his breath. "Emily, I'm just frustrated by the situation. We've been engaged for months and you refuse to set a date because your grandfather is jerking you around. I want to start our lives together and I'm tired of waiting for you to realize that your family is just using your love for them a weapon to hurt us both."

"It may be easy for you to turn your back on your family," Emily said. "But your impatience with your uncle is not the same as mine for my grandfather. You and he never knew your great-aunt. For my grandfather, every time he sees a member of your family, he is reminded of why he believes his brother is dead. I am asking him to go through that again, so forgive me if I want to have a bit more patience with someone who has never asked a single thing of me." She stood and reached for her purse. "I love you, Nikolas, but I love my family, too. I just don't find it as easy as you do to choose between the two."

She walked away and Nikolas found himself just a little panicked when she didn't turn back.

Jake's Bar

Elizabeth stowed her cell phone into her purse as she crossed the threshold into the dive near the docks. She'd been here many times. Despite its seedy appearance, she'd celebrated her twenty-first birthday here with Jay, Patrick, Robin, Lucky and Nikolas.

And of course, she'd dragged her father out of here quite a few times.

She found her brother sitting at a corner table, a bottle of vodka in front of him, nearly full. A shot of the alcohol beside the bottle. Thanks to her conversation with Robin on her way here, she knew that her brother did not have the full story.

If he knew the full extent of Robin's life in Paris, Elizabeth didn't doubt that he would have done more than stare at a glass. He'd be almost through the bottle.

She pulled out the chair across from him and sat in. "Hey."

He glanced up at her. "What are you doing here?"

"Coleman must have me on speed dial," Elizabeth said dryly, tipping her head towards the gray-haired bartender dressed in one of his usual wildly printed shirts. "We're on a first name basis. Well, he calls me Ellie anyway."

"I'm sorry. About this morning," he clarified when he saw her questioning look. "I'm just trying to look out for you but I guess I'm kind of rusty at it."

"I just want you to respect me enough to trust my choices," she said softly. "I love you, Patrick. You've always been more than my brother; you've been my best friend. I don't want to lose that."

"Well, you're about all I got left," he said roughly. "I don't know what to do about Dad. It's like I tried to put all that anger and resentment away while he was getting better and now it's out again. I don't know what to do with it all. Robin's...well, she's just not the person I thought she was or wanted her to be. I don't have anything else."

"Patrick, Robin's still your friend..." Elizabeth sighed. "Why are you here anyway?" she asked, changing the subject.

"I don't know," he answered. "Either trying to prove I'm nothing like the rest of our family or I'm exactly like them. I forget."

"Patrick, you are nothing like Dad. Or Uncle Liam. Or our grandfather." Elizabeth pushed the vodka bottle to the side. "In the last three and a half years, you lost your mother, your girlfriend and your best friend. Did you start to drink then?"

"No," he answered.

"No," Elizabeth repeated. "Instead, you graduated with honors from medical school in two years and

you're on the fast track to being an incredible surgeon. Yeah, maybe your patience for other people has taken a bit of a nosedive and you became a little distant, a little hard to confide in, but I am proud of you. You easily could have disappeared into the bottle like all the men we've grown up with. You didn't."

"It's different now," Patrick said. "For three years, Robin was out there. I figured she would get over whatever was annoying her and she'd come home. And everything would be the way it was supposed to be. But I guess she didn't love me as much I loved her."

"That's not fair," Elizabeth protested.

"She moved on." Patrick stood and grabbed his coat from the back of the chair. "I guess it's my turn to do the same."

He stalked out of the bar and she put her head in her hands. She wished she could tell him the truth about Robin, but it wasn't her place. Instead, she was afraid her brother was only going to make everything worse.

Chapter Twelve

*Here I stand
Consumed with my surroundings
Just another day
Of everybody looking
I swore they'd never see me cry
You'll never see me cry*
- Everybody Knows, Dixie Chicks

December 29, 2005

Quartermaine Mansion: Parlor

Emily stopped in the doorway of the room, hesitating. The conversation she was going to have with her grandfather was one of the most important in her life and she hoped she was going to walk away with an outcome she could live with.

She hadn't spoken to Nikolas since her exit at the Grille two days before. He hadn't called and she'd gone out of her way to avoid him. She knew he was coming very close to issuing her an ultimatum and for the first time since he'd asked her to marry him, Emily knew she might actually have to choose.

"Grandfather?"

"Oh, hello, dear," Edward said absently, glancing at her from the table near the terrace windows. He turned a page in the newspaper. "Have you seen this editorial about the upcoming election for school board? Bunch of pansies."

Emily smiled faintly and sat at one of the adjacent chairs. "Can we talk? I mean...really talk?"

Edward peered over his newspaper and studied her face for a long moment. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know." Emily shrugged. "Maybe."

He folded his newspaper and set it aside. "All right, my dear. What's on your mind?"

Emily folded her hands on the table and took a deep breath. "I have been very patient with you about Nikolas and our engagement because I can sympathize with where you're coming from."

"If this is going to be about that reprobate—" Edward shoved his chair away from the table and started out of the room.

"Grandfather, please!" Emily stood. "When have I ever asked for anything?"

He stopped and turned back to her. "Haven't I made my feelings about this subject very clear?"

"Yes," Emily nodded. "You have. But you haven't given me the same courtesy and I'm just asking you to listen to me."

"Then talk," he said shortly.

"I can understand how you feel about the Cassadines," Emily said. "It's so much easier for me to understand why you feel the way you do because this feud started with your brother. You have very real personal feelings about it and I—"

"I don't want to talk about any of that." Edward sliced his hand through the air. "It's *done*, Emily. You know how I feel. You know the history. If you need anything else from me, well I can't imagine what it is."

"Grandfather..." Emily took a deep breath. "I know this isn't an easy subject for you—"

"No, young lady, you do *not* know." He took a step towards her and jabbed a finger in her direction. "I had to watch my brother spiral out of control over that woman and I had to be the one to find him, dead by his own hand. She broke his heart and did what *her* family wanted. It's the Cassadines' fault and that's the end of it."

"But why does that have to mean Nikolas is cut from the same cloth?" Emily pressed.

"Because he will do the same to you that Sofia Cassadine did to Thomas and I refuse to stand by and watch. Not again." He nodded brusquely. "It's already started. He's come between you and your family, he's pressed you to ignore your obligations to us and if he hasn't issued any ultimatums, then it won't be long before he does."

"So if I marry Nikolas, I'm no longer welcome in this house," Emily stated softly.

Edward closed his mouth abruptly. He looked away for a moment before meeting her gaze again. "If that's how you want to put it, then yes."

"Okay." Emily swallowed hard. "I just...I wanted to make it clear to myself. Thank you." She wrapped her arms around herself.

Edward looked at her as though he wanted to say something else but instead, he just left the room.

General Hospital: Locker Room

Elizabeth sighed and neatly folded her scrubs uniform to place it in her bag to take home for washing. She had worked a very long shift and wasn't entirely looking forward to going home and dealing with her wayward cousin. She hadn't seen much of her brother since the sojourn to Jake's and she was worried enough for him.

Not to mention the fact that she hadn't seen Jason since the day after Christmas. He'd warned her there

would be no contact but after two years of seeing or talking to him every day, it was an adjustment not to have him to lean on.

One of the student nurses plopped onto the bench next to her and started to untie her sneakers. "Ellie, you're going to the party at the hotel for New Year's, right?" Nadine Crowell inquired.

"Every year," Elizabeth replied. She closed her locker and looped her coat over her arm. "Why?"

"Well, this is the first time I'm going and I was wondering how dressy it is. I mean, I know it's dressy but there's like a code of dress – is it really conservative?"

"It runs to the conservative. The pillars of the community don't like anything cut too low or too high and nothing really flashy." Elizabeth hesitated and studied the younger woman with a little curiosity. "I don't mean to pry, but ah, how is it that you're going to the party?"

"You mean how am I affording the ticket?" Nadine said wryly. She tugged on her jeans. "Patrick asked me to be his date."

"Oh, good Lord," Elizabeth muttered and banged her head against the locker. "My brother is an idiot."

"I'll try not to take that as an insult," Nadine said good-naturedly. "Look, Ellie, there's not a person on staff here that thinks Patrick is a good bet relationship wise and I'm not interested in that anyway. Some of the board members from the hospital will be there and I just want a chance to schmooze. Robin has *nothing* to worry about from me—"

"No, I'm sorry. It's not...it's not like that. He's trying to make her jealous for all the wrong reasons and he's going to make everything worse in the long run."

"Well..." Nadine shrugged. "Then I guess it'll be an interesting party." She grabbed her coat and purse. "Thanks for the advice, Ellie."

General Hospital: Nurse's Station

Robin stepped behind the counter and handed a chart to Epiphany. "Mrs. Kyle is ready for discharge in Room 220." She paused for a moment when she saw Patrick at the other side the station.

She stepped towards him, putting her hands in her pockets. "Hey, do you have a minute?"

He glanced at her and then looked back at his charts. "No."

A bit stung, Robin bit her lip but decided to forge ahead. Her mother was flying in that night and she didn't want Patrick to be the last to know. "Patrick—"

"Robin, I'm a little busy right now," Patrick said, "I don't have time to talk to you about anything. We agreed three years ago to go our separate ways. You've clearly done that, now it's my turn."

"Fine," she said shortly. She stripped off her lab coat and turned to Epiphany. "I'm done for the day,

I'm on my way to the airport and I'm not on call for the night but if any of my patients need me..."

"I'll take care of it, Dr. Scorpio," Epiphany said.

Robin stepped out of the station and started for the elevators.

"Say hi to your boyfriend for me," Patrick muttered, but didn't bother to keep his voice low.

Robin stopped in her tracks and closed her eyes. It was clear Patrick assumed she was going to the airport to pick up Stone. She wasn't angry at him, but angry at herself for making this situation into the mess it was now.

If she had been honest with everyone from the beginning, even if she had come clean the second she'd stepped off the plane, none of this would be happening now.

She regained her composure and went to the elevators.

Elm Street Pier

"Penny for your thoughts."

Elizabeth glanced up as Lucky settled himself on the bench next to her. "Hey. What brings you out here?"

"Just wandering. Saw my best girl sitting by herself here." He shrugged. "I know that you don't sit here alone unless something's on your mind."

Elizabeth smiled faintly. "Noticed that did you?"

"Yep." Lucky stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed them at the ankles. "So spill it, Ellie. What's on your mind?"

"Robin told me about Stone," Elizabeth replied. "And about her illness. So I know you knew."

He nodded. "And I was sworn to secrecy. Not exactly the easiest thing to accomplish being around you and Patrick all the time, especially Patrick." He grimaced. "She's having trouble telling him."

"She's only managed to tell him that she fell in love with someone else and he flipped. He asked a nurse to the Quartermaine party."

Lucky whistled softly. "Ballsy. That party is not the time and place to make a stand but I guess he's not really thinking clearly. And I bet he thinks that Stone is alive and well and probably on his way to Port Charles."

"That would be correct." Elizabeth shook her head. "He's acting like an asshole which is only going to make things worse in the long run. He won't shut up and listen to Robin long enough to get the truth and as much as I want to shake him and make him listen, I can't." She shook her head. "There's just

way too much going on, especially now that Will has moved in."

"Will." Lucky nodded. "He's, ah, doing all right?"

"As well as can be expected. He's going through something rough with his parents but Patrick and I think we can get him back on track." Elizabeth glanced at him. "Your sister broke his heart."

"Well, he certainly left his mark on my little sister." Lucky hesitated. "She's pregnant."

"Oh my..." Elizabeth blinked and stared out over the water. "Oh my God."

"Yep." Lucky shifted. "She's scared to death, she almost had Dillon talked into claiming paternity but decided it wasn't fair for Dad to kill him over something he didn't do."

"Naturally," she said dryly. "Will's a good kid, he'll stand up."

"Yeah, I know. She's just got to get the courage up to tell him, or to keep trying until he shuts up long enough to listen to her. It's like everyone in our lives is having the same problem. No one ever closes their mouth long enough to listen to anyone else." He jerked a shoulder. "Anyway, I told her about what happened to us. Senior year."

"I guess you would." Elizabeth fell quiet. "Did it help her?"

"I'm not sure but it got me thinking...looking at how scared she is to tell Will...it made me glad that you were able to come to me." He looked at her. "I know we didn't work out, Ellie, mostly because we weren't supposed to. It was just that normal first love thing and we burned ourselves out but I'm glad that we were able to share all that together and still come out with love and respect for each other. It doesn't happen enough."

"No, no it doesn't." She smiled. "We had a good time, Lucky. I'm almost glad we had that scare because we were just...we were so close to sliding into a future together because neither of us had ever seen anything else. We'd already been together for so long, it would have been easy to keep going on that road."

"I've been thinking about that lately," Lucky nodded. "And yeah, you're right. We were very comfortable, Ellie. We probably would have been married right out of college, settled right down and probably have a few kids by now."

"Probably," she agreed. "And that wouldn't have been a mistake, you know. It would have been nice, safe and comfortable."

"But we both deserve more," Lucky said. "And if I'm not wrong, I think you've found it in Jason. I'm glad. It's all I've ever wanted for you, you know?"

"I hope I have found it. It's not that easy but nothing worthwhile ever comes from taking the easy way out, right?"

"Nope." He grinned at her and bumped his shoulder against hers. "We coulda had it all, babe."

She giggled. "And bored ourselves to tears in the process."

On the top level of the docks, Jason Morgan stepped out from one of the buildings, returning from his meeting with Sonny. Trailing Manny Ruiz had not taken as long as either of them expected. Jason had found the youngest son meeting with a competitor the night before and Sonny had called him off the assignment.

He was on his way to Jake's to clean up and call Elizabeth. He'd missed her so much and there wasn't too much snow on the ground. They could go for a ride. He really just wanted to see her.

Jason heard her familiar laugh and glanced down at the bench to find Elizabeth giggling with Lucky Spencer. Something tightened in his chest, a sensation that was both familiar and strange at the same time. He knew she'd dated Lucky in high school but they'd had nothing but friendship since then.

But she was laughing with him, looking happy and for some reason Jason couldn't quite name, that made him uncomfortable. He thought about making himself known but instead, he continued on his way. He'd call her tomorrow.

Spencer House: Porch

As soon as Lulu opened the door to find Will standing there, she blanched, glanced over her shoulder and quickly stepped out, pushing him back a step. She slammed the door behind her. "What are you doing here?"

Will frowned. "I needed to talk to you—" he stopped and narrowed his eyes. "Is there a reason we can't go inside?"

"Um. Yes." Lulu went to the window and sighed in relief when she saw her father sitting contritely on the couch with her mother lecturing him. When Luke had seen Will briefly at the door, he'd started towards the entryway with blood in his eyes, hence Lulu's quick escape.

Her father had taken the news in stride mostly, quick to let her know that while she had his utmost support...the boy would have to die. Lulu had been trying to talk him out of it when Will had made his untimely appearance.

"Okay," Will said slowly. "I wanted to apologize. You came to see me, you had something to say and I cut you off. That wasn't fair and I should have heard you out."

And now here was her chance. Except Lulu couldn't wrench the words from her throat. How hard could it be? I'm pregnant. She could say it in her head. Why couldn't she open her mouth and make the words come out?

"Lu?" Will prompted. He stripped off his suede jacket and draped it around her shoulders. "Are you okay?"

He was sober, Lulu could see. For the first time in months, he was completely sober. His eyes were clear and focused and he was starting to sound like the Will she'd fallen for. The one she'd had a crush on for most of her teen aged life. He'd always seemed so strong and able and she'd wanted that more than anything.

And then he'd been dangerous and exciting so she'd thought it was all her favorite things wrapped in a gorgeous package. Until he was drinking to dull the pain of his parents' problems more than he was doing it to have fun and that no longer appealed to her.

But now that Will was gone. Or on hiatus. She wasn't sure. In his place was the boy she'd known forever and just like that, her terror and apprehension melted.

"Will, I am so sorry," she said softly. "I don't know how to tell you and I was scared for so long but I'm not anymore." She paused. "You're really doing okay, aren't you?"

"Getting there." Will hesitated and tilted his head to the side. "But you're not. What's wrong?"

She swallowed hard. "I'm pregnant," she said quietly.

Port Charles Hotel: Anna's Room

Robin twisted her fingers together and refused to look at her mother. "Say something," she murmured.

Anna Devane stood from the sofa and crossed to the terrace doors, sweeping her dark eyes over the harbor. "I'm not sure what there is to say, love." Her accent slid over the words in a short, clipped manner. "I suppose your father took the news with his customary anger before settling down and promising you the moon and stars."

"Something like that," Robin said uneasily. "Mom..."

"For three years, I knew something was wrong with you," Anna said, as if her daughter hadn't spoken. "I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but there was a reason you were never available when I wanted to fly in and why you never had time for more than short phone calls and pithy postcards. I told myself that I had raised a bright and independent daughter who clearly wanted some space to herself."

She turned and confronted the daughter in question. "I'm not sure what reaction you want from me, Robin. Should I be angry that you kept it from me? Should I be devastated for your loss? Scared for your future? Happy that you were able to find someone to love? I am *all* of those things, Robin. I just don't know which one to concentrate on at this precise moment."

"I know three years seems like a long time," Robin said haltingly, "but it was all so fast to me. I was swept up by medical school and by Stone that by the time I realized I wanted to tell you guys, we were engaged. I thought I could fly to London and surprise you and then he got sick. I just...I could never find the words. And then I was just so wrapped up in Stone and his illness." Her voice thickened. "I am so sorry, Mom, for what I've put everyone through. You and Dad, my friends. I would do anything to change it but I can't."

"I am terrified that despite everything your father and I have done to protect you from the evils of the world—his work with the police and mine with the government—we might lose you in a way that never really occurred to us." Anna wrapped her long arms around her slim torso and Robin realized her shoulders were shaking.

"Mom..." She stood and took a step towards her mother.

"If you are ever blessed with a child, you may one day understand a portion of what is going on inside of me," Anna continued. "You don't realize how easy it is to go from anger to terror in a split second but when it comes to your children, you tend to spend a lot of time with those emotions. Of course, there is always happiness, and joy. Quite a lot of worry but I have spent most of the time being terrified."

"I'm okay," Robin assured her. "I'm on the cocktail, I'm relatively healthy. There are advancements being made all the time. My doctors can't imagine why I wouldn't live another fifty years."

"I am desperately grateful for that." Anna exhaled slowly and turned around. "I'm sorry to be such a drama queen, darling, it's just not the easiest set of news for a mother to receive and for it to be such a large dose...it was almost a bit more than I could digest."

"I wish I hadn't put it off so long," Robin admitted. "I've made a big mess out of everyone's lives and I just hope I can make it right. In case..."

Anna sighed. "Oh darling, is that why you came home? So you could fix everyone in case the worst happens?"

"I guess. I wanted to make sure you and Dad were okay. That Patrick and Ellie were happy. That the people who mattered the most would be taken care of. I'm not expecting to die any time soon, Mom, but..." Robin shrugged. "I have to be prepared. Just in case."

"Come here." Anna drew her daughter into a bone crushing embrace. "You are forgiven for not telling me, love of my life, but promise me that you will never shut me out like this again?"

"I promise."

Chapter Thirteen

*You walk along by yourself
There's no sound, nothing is changing
Been gone away, left you there
Emptiness is nothing you can't share
All those words that hurt you
More than you would let it show
Comes apart, by yourself*
- Falls Apart, Sugar Ray

December 31, 2005

Port Charles Hotel: Ballroom

Dillon dropped into the seat next to Lulu and popped a hors d'oeuvre in his mouth. "You know what I like best about the stuff they serve here?"

"What's that?" she asked, smiling and leaning forward.

"I don't care what's in them. They usually taste good." He leaned back and sipped a glass of the wine he'd snuck with Emily's help. "So I haven't heard from you much since you left my house the day after Christmas."

"Yeah...sorry..." Lulu jerked a shoulder. "I've just been in my own head about things, you know? I told Will a few days ago and he was kind of...shell shocked."

"I may have a few things in common with that sentiment." He paused. "But what else did he say?"

"Oh, all the right things, of course. He said we'd keep the baby, we'd figure it all out. He would be there for me, we'd get married and somehow he'd still go to college. We'd still get everything we wanted."

"You sound like you don't believe him."

"Well," Lulu paused, as if considering the notion, "he said he would call me, that'd we discuss sitting down with my parents and talking about what would come next." She took an olive from her plate and tossed it, aiming for an empty wine glass across from her table setting. "He never called."

"I can beat him up for you," Dillon said. At Lulu's arched brow, he clarified. "I mean, I have money. I can *pay* someone to beat him up."

"Thanks, but I'm not going to force him into anything. He's still trying to figure himself out; he doesn't need to be saddled down with a kid. I care about him too much to force him into this, Dillon."

"I'm all for figuring things out and being honest with yourself, but, Lu, we both know what happens when a parent disappears without a word." He tapped his fingers. "I never met my father and I've never even had a letter from him. It sucks. It sucks large."

"I know, but we've seen the other side of the spectrum, too. How crappy is it when a kid *knows* they're not wanted? My brother Nikolas knows that even though my mom loves him, she didn't really want him, that when she looks at him, she can't help but see Stavros. I mean, sure, she loves him but that's because he's her kid and she's just built that way. But he wasn't planned and my father was never a magical stepfather to him, you know? I can't force that kind of life on my kid."

"So you're keeping the baby?" Dillon asked.

"Yeah." Lulu smiled at him. "That's, like, the only thing that's really been solidified in my head. I know it's early, and I'm not exactly sure what I'm doing with the rest of my life, but I think I'd be all right at being a mom. I had a great example. Plus, my parents are being really good about this. My mom just hugged me and told me that she'd always be there for me."

"And your dad?"

"I think maybe he was disappointed," Lulu admitted. "But mostly because he just wanted life to be easier for his kids than it was for him and my aunt Bobbie, so he's worried that I'm going to have a hard life but he loves me anyway. I've got a good family, Dillon. It makes up for a lot of things."

"Yeah, family's good." Dillon frowned and glanced over at the Quartermaine table. "Even when they're bat shit crazy."

Lulu glanced over her shoulder and pursed her lips, drinking in the members of Dillon's clan. "Someone should tell AJ that it's bad taste to finish a bottle of champagne in an hour. And why does Emily look so sad?"

"I don't know," Dillon murmured. "I think she had some kind of argument with Edward or Nikolas, but she's not talking. I keep trying to pry it out of her but she's not having it. And I think AJ's about to be shipped off to rehab again."

"Eighth time's the charm?"

"One can always hope." Dillon's eyes darkened as he saw something over Lulu's shoulder. "If you don't want to see Will, then I can get you out of here."

Lulu twisted in her chair to find Will at the entrance. The rest of the ballroom's attendees paid more attention to the people he had arrived with – or to be accurate, the person. Elizabeth had her arm intertwined with Jason Morgan's, who hadn't been to this party since before his accident.

So one could say Jason Morgan had never attended at all.

Edward Quartermaine started to stand but his daughter-in-law Monica quickly told him to sit back down. Patrick Drake, who had arrived earlier with his date Nadine, looked furious.

Elizabeth ignored them all and smiled up at her date before whispering something to Will. She and Jason started towards her brother's table but Patrick quite pointedly turned his back and started talking to someone at his table.

Elizabeth stopped in her tracks, mortified.

Suddenly feeling brave, Lulu stood and started across the room to the girl she'd known her entire life and had once dreamed would be her sister. "Ellie, you look absolutely fabulous tonight," she said with a bright smile. "Jason, you should always wear a tux!"

"Hey, Ellie, Jase," Dillon nodded, sidling up to his friend's side. He lifted his chin. "Will."

Will scratched the side of his nose. "Lu, you look really pretty tonight."

"Thanks," Lulu answered absently before extending a hand to Elizabeth. "Lucky's running a little late tonight but we've got some seats at our table. Come and join us." She looked to Dillon. "We've probably got a seat for you for dinner if you'd rather steer clear of the Quartermaine's."

"I almost want to say yes but I want to give Em some support." Dillon kissed Lu's cheek. He left her and went back to his seat next to his cousin.

"Let's sit down," Lulu said, waiting for the trio to start over to the table. She backed up a few steps and went straight to Patrick. She smacked him upside the head.

"Damn it, Lu," he swore, rubbing his head. "What is with you?"

"We only get one family, you jackass, and you're not exactly blessed with a multitude of friends. So why don't you stop acting like an absolute asshole and start acting like a man?"

She flounced off to resume her seat.

"Crazy teenagers," he muttered. Nadine, the nurse he'd asked on a whim, smiled sadly at him. "What?"

"She's right, you know. Sisters do not wait around until you're good and ready to make time for them." She sipped her wine.

"What do you know?" he demanded. He took a piece of bread from the basket and ripped it in half. "My sister's deranged."

"Mine, too," Nadine replied. "She's in a coma right now but before that, she arranged for some people in the hospital she was working at to die accidentally."

Patrick choked on his bread. "Excuse me?"

"She was being paid by this company to make the hospital look really bad so they'd have to be bought out but Jolene always was an overachiever." Nadine sighed, seemingly oblivious to the stares of the people at their table. "She wasn't supposed to kill anyone but she thought it would get the job done."

"Ah..." Patrick fumbled.

"So, you know, some people would say she got what she deserved, getting shot in the back, but she was still my sister and I'd rather she be dating someone I didn't really like than in a vegetative state." Nadine shrugged and eyed the kitchen. "When do you think they'll serve dinner?"

Port Charles Hotel: Balcony

"You're avoiding me."

Emily smiled and turned to the doorway to find her fiancé standing there. "When my grandfather remodeled the ballroom, he thought I was being ridiculous in suggesting a balcony that was closed in by glass but I told him that when it comes to parties like these, people like to think they're getting away. But it's too cold to stand outside."

Nikolas joined her. "I'm sorry for our argument, Emily; I suppose I am getting frustrated with the state of things."

"I know," she answered. "I haven't been fair to you."

Something in her tone made his blood run cold and a strange feeling sank into him. He wasn't entirely familiar with panic, but he thought that's what this might be. "Emily."

"I haven't been fair to anyone. To you, to myself, or to my grandfather. Nikolas, you're okay with Stefan moving back to Greece and I envy you that. Because I know somewhere in your head, you've made yourself believe that he'll still love you. That he will still visit and he won't cut you out. I don't have that same kind of faith."

"Wait a second, Emily—"

"I think it has to do with the Quartermaines having *chosen* to love me. They adopted me, and they made me part of the family. But I know I'm not truly a Quartermaine. I've been living on borrowed time with them, waiting for the moment they look at me and know that I'm not really one of them."

Nikolas frowned. Now he wasn't sure what was going on. Was she abandoning her family? Was she breaking up with him? "I'm not following you."

"They have been so good to me, Nikolas. So patient. Even when I was a brat and they could have easily tossed me back, they kept me." She paused. "My grandfather is the love of my life, Nikolas. He held me when I cried about my mom, he would sit with me and talk about his business even though I was twelve and didn't understand a word of it. He treated me like his own from the moment I came to the Quartermaines. I am *breaking* his heart."

And then he knew. "Emily, if you do this, you're giving an old man exactly what he wants and you're breaking your heart instead." He swallowed hard. "My heart. How is that fair?"

"It's not," Emily admitted. "And I wish I could be selfish. I wish I could be stronger. But I'm not. I

love my family too much to give them up." She slowly removed the diamond ring from her finger and held it out. "I can't marry you, Nikolas."

He refused to take the ring. "This is insanity. You can't do this."

"I thought that if I tried hard enough, if I really worked at it, Edward would love you as much as I do. That he would accept you into his family, but I realize now that it will never happen and I can't be happy knowing he's not part of my life." She held out the ring again.

"I'm not taking the damn ring." He stepped back. "This is a mistake, Emily. You and I love each other and that's not going to go away."

"Nikolas—"

"I won't let it," he promised her. He turned and stalked back into the ballroom where he made a beeline for the Quartermaine table.

"Listen up, old man," he all but snarled at the patriarch who sputtered in surprise. "You may have won for now but I am *not* going away. She can end the engagement but Emily still loves me and I love her and I'm not going to let you destroy us." He slapped his hand on the table and then stormed out of the room.

Monica watched her daughter's fiancé leave. She then turned to her father-in-law and just glared.

"I suppose you're going to blame me for this," Edward muttered.

"Edward, you are going to find my daughter, you are going to fix what you have done and I swear by all that is holy, if you fail, you will be living in this hotel for the rest of your life."

"Monica, you can't kick my father out of the house," Alan admonished. "Not over a Cassadine."

"It's my house," she declared.

"But I gave it to you!"

"Oh, will somebody save me?" Dillon moaned and put his head in his hands.

Across the room, Elizabeth checked the time on her cell phone. "I wonder what's keeping my father," she said.

"Maybe he's at the hospital," Lucky suggested. "Is he on call?"

"I don't think so, I didn't see his name." Elizabeth sighed. "I just haven't seen him since he and Patrick argued on Christmas and I'm worried. I hate when they fight."

"I think Patrick's an ass," Lulu grumbled, pushing what was left of her entrée around her plate and ignoring her ex-boyfriend across the table. Where was Dillon when she needed him?

"He's just mad because you're not doing what he wants you to," Jason said. "Don't you remember when he wanted you to share an apartment with him and Robin after high school and you kept telling him no? He didn't talk to you for a week."

Elizabeth blinked at him. "I remember that," she said softly. "But..."

"How do you?" Lucky finished. "That was...you know...Jay Quartermaine's time."

Jason's lips thinned and he shrugged, a little uncomfortable. "I don't know. Sometimes things just...they're just in my head." He glanced up from his plate to find the stares of everyone directly on him. "I'm not getting my memory back," he said flatly. "I just get...flashes. Okay?"

"Right." Elizabeth glanced at her cell phone again. "I'm just going to step out and call him, okay? Just to make sure."

"I'll go with you," Jason offered, eager to be away from the stares. He followed Elizabeth into the foyer.

Lucky shifted, feeling somewhat uncomfortable being left with Will and Lulu. Part of him wanted to choke the crap out of the younger man and the rest of him wanted to leave them alone, in hopes that it might force some kind of confrontation.

He opted for the responsible adult rather than the annoyed brother. "Lu, I'm going to go check in with Patrick. He's got a really cute nurse with him I'd like to get to know." He stood and made his escape before his sister could stop him.

The two were silent for a while but finally Lulu couldn't take it anymore. "You didn't call," she stated. "Did you change your mind?"

"No," Will said. He shook his head. "I didn't...I've been...I don't really have an excuse, Lu. I was just kind of figuring things out."

"That's fine," she said dully. "I imagine you're trained to say the right thing without thinking about it. Don't worry, I don't hold you to anything."

"I meant what I said," Will replied, irritated. "I just...I had to deal with what that meant. Look, I wanted to have some answers the next time we talked, to have some ideas. A kid needs more than promises."

"Oh, and what? Now you have all the answers?" Lulu asked, feeling nasty. "Lucky me."

"I'm not going to let you piss me off," Will said. "I went to the hospital to talk to one of Ellie's friends. She's a counselor. I wanted to get my head on straight. And then I talked to a college counselor to find out if I could still get in next fall."

"Oh." Lulu hesitated. "I'm sorry. I know how much you wanted to go college...before. So I just wanted to you know that I was serious about not...I don't want you to feel like you have to do anything—"

"I wanted to make sure that any scholarships I get won't be taken away if I'm going part-time," Will continued. "Because I also had an interview at the hospital as an orderly. They have great health insurance. I figure I'm a Drake, I'm a shoo in. Ellie said she'd try to pull some strings."

"I..." she stopped. "Will, I'm just...you're serious about all of this?"

"Look, I know you think I'm a bad bet because my dad walked out and my mom has lost it, but I'm going to be okay. Plenty of people get through college and med school with kids, you know? It'll be hard but there's no reason why we can't do it. Ellie's volunteered to baby-sit and I bet your mom will, too."

She blinked. "Um, yeah."

"So, when we sit down to talk to your parents about this, I'm thinking Luke will be less likely to kill me because I have a plan to support you. Or I will after I graduate. I can only work part-time until then. It'd be stupid to drop out of school when I only have a semester left. I've got money saved we can use for the hospital stuff..."

"I'm still on my parents' insurance until I get out of school." Lulu moved over to the empty seat next to him. "I don't need you to support me, Will. I'm going to work, too. I have some money saved. But..." she bit her lip and smiled at him. "Thank you for wanting to. I never expected you to have all the answers, but it's nice to know you have some of them."

He took her hand between both of his and squeezed. "I'm not my father. I don't have to make the same mistakes. It's going to be okay."

"I almost believe that." Lulu sighed and rested her head on Will's shoulder. It was so nice to have solid and stable Will Drake back. He was the boy she'd fallen for in the first place.

Port Charles Hotel: Outside Balcony

"You're going to freeze out here."

Robin blew out a frustrated breath and didn't even bother to turn around. "I'm fine. Go back inside."

Patrick stripped off his suit jacket and placed it over her bare shoulders. "I noticed you came in with your parents. Alone."

"Patrick, I'm not really in the mood for this," she sighed. "Why don't you go back to humiliating your sister? You're getting really good at it."

He hunched his shoulders, wishing he could defend that but knew he couldn't. "Ellie and I are just fine," he replied shortly. "We'll be fine long after you disappear again. I don't need you to tell me how to treat her."

"I guess we're back to that." Robin shook her head. She closed her eyes. "We still have to talk about a few things. I think you really need to listen to me—"

"I'm done listening to you," Patrick interrupted. He sliced a hand in the air. "Done! You come back, pretend you care, go around acting like you're sorry for what happened but it was all a lie, Robin. You just wanted to make yourself feel better for going away and finding something better. Well, I hope you go back to your something better and choke on it—"

"He's dead!" Robin cried. She whirled around and hurled his jacket at him. "God damn it, Patrick, he's fucking dead! He died!"

He caught the jacket, his face pale, his eyes wide. "What are you talking about?"

"He died just before Christmas last year." Robin dragged her hands through her hair. "That's what I wanted to tell you. Not that I had met someone, that I had become engaged, I wouldn't...God, Patrick." She swallowed hard. "He was sick. Stone had AIDS and he died."

"Jesus Christ." His jacket fell to the ground and he staggered back. He thought of the things he had said—those he'd said the day he found out and what he had said in the interim. What he had said just moments ago.

He felt sick.

"Robin, I—" And then something slammed into place so fast he almost retched. Her behavior since she had returned and her reaction to the cut on her finger after she'd broken some glass in the lab. The way her beeper went off at the same time every morning they started their shift.

"Oh, God." There were spots in front of his eyes. "Oh, God. You..." He shoved his fist in his mouth and bit down, turning away from her.

"Patrick," she said softly. She stepped forward and reached out. "It's okay—"

"Are you kidding me?" he demanded. "Okay? You...you're sick. You have..." He couldn't bring himself to say it. "Oh, God," he repeated.

"I came home because I wanted to be sure everything was okay for you," Robin said, "for you and Ellie, and Emily and Lucky. I wanted to know that you guys were happy."

"Happy?" he echoed. "You're going to die and you want to make sure *I'm* happy?"

"I'm not—" Robin closed her mouth as he kicked a chair. It flew across the balcony and hit the stone wall. "Patrick—"

"My mother wasted away from cancer," Patrick bit out. He kicked another chair. "My father tried to kill himself with alcohol." Yet another went flying. "My best friend had his brains scrambled." He overturned the table. "And the girl I've loved my entire life went away and when she finally comes back, it's to die." He sank to his knees and stared blindly at the stone ground. "I have been *horrible* to you."

Robin slowly sank to the ground in front of him. "Patrick, I don't blame you. For any of it. I knew you

were upset, angry and hurt. I know you didn't mean any of it."

"I think I'm going to be sick," he choked. "I am an awful brother, I'm a terrible friend and—" He couldn't speak anymore.

"You have to let me tell you everything," she said. She touched his shoulder with one hand and with the other, she caressed his cheek. "You have to let me explain so you understand."

The balcony doors flew open and Elizabeth stumbled out, Jason on her heels. Her gaze took in the destruction of the scene and her brother on the ground. Her eyes softened. "Patrick."

He turned and saw her and scrambled to his feet. "Ellie. You have to let me fix this." He started towards her and then stopped, seeing the tear tracks on her cheeks. "I made you cry?"

"What?" She touched her cheek absently. "No, no. This is—the hospital called." She hesitated. "There was an accident. Dad."

Patrick froze. "Is he...?" he couldn't finish.

"I don't know," Elizabeth answered. She bit her lip. "After the hospital called, your dad came to get me." She directed this to Robin.

"My dad?" Robin repeated. "Why?"

"Because he hit someone else," Elizabeth whispered. She brought a hand to her mouth. "They said he lost control and slammed into another car." She stopped. "Patrick, there's more."

"They think he was drinking," Patrick finished roughly. "That's the more. He was drunk out of his mind and lost control."

Chapter Fourteen

*No one but me can save myself, but it's too late
Now I can't think, think why I should even try
Yesterday seems as though it never existed
Death greets me warm, now I will just say goodbye*
- Fade to Black, Metallica

December 31, 2005

General Hospital: Waiting Room

"He took a curve too fast," Robert Scorpio murmured softly to the Drake twins. "There was a car coming around the bend, he clipped right into them and sent both their cars flying. I haven't seen any photos of the scene yet but I'm told it's a miracle anyone got out."

Patrick wrapped his arm around his sister and drew her close to his side. "Are they sure alcohol was involved?" he asked reluctantly, though in his heart he knew the answer.

"They were not able to administer any kind of tests on the scene," Robert informed them, "and the blood tests aren't back yet, but apparently there were some open containers in his car. From the speed he was traveling, it's just an assumption at this point. Given your father's history and previous charges..."

"I don't doubt you, Commissioner," Elizabeth said quietly. "You wouldn't accuse him unless you were sure."

"I'm sorry about this, Patrick, Ellie..." Robert shook his head. "I know you wanted to believe he was sober...we're going to have to charge him."

"I understand," Elizabeth nodded. "Can you tell us if the people in the other car are all right?" she asked.

"I can't give you any specifics but they're alive. I understand they're in surgery." He patted her shoulder and shook Patrick's free hand. "I'll be in touch when I know more, kids." He touched his daughter's shoulder on the way out.

Emily and Robin came over to the pair immediately. "Let's get you out of this dress," Robin suggested.

"Yeah, we'll get changed," Emily said. They led Elizabeth towards the locker room.

Patrick was left in the waiting room with Jason. Lucky had offered to come along, but Patrick had refused. He'd wanted to be alone with his thoughts, with his misery. Instead, he was left with this

stranger who wore his best friend's face.

He stalked across the room and dropped into one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs. "This entire night has been a disaster," he muttered.

Jason lowered himself into a chair across Patrick and was silent for a long moment. Finally, he cleared his throat. "I remember, I think I do anyway, sitting in this room when your mom died."

Patrick snapped his head up and stared. "What?"

"I get flashes sometimes," Jason admitted. "More now than I did before. They said I might get pieces back eventually but it was a long shot."

"Frontal lobe injuries almost never heal completely," Patrick murmured. "Most people never get more than a flash."

"I don't know about that but I get them sometimes, more when I'm sitting in the same place as when something else happened. Like your mom," Jason shifted. "She came in because she couldn't breathe, right? And I think..." he paused. "We left the room because your dad wanted to be alone with her."

"Yeah," Patrick said thickly. "Ellie was crying and you...you were comforting her. Robin was sitting here, next to me. My dad came out and..." he shook his head. "This is unreal."

"I didn't know that we were friends...before," Jason said slowly. "I'm sorry. Elizabeth told me a few weeks ago. I guess it was hard for her." He scratched the back of his neck. "I'm sorry about your dad, too. I seem to remember this from before, too. Not the first accident, but we bailed him out of jail once right?"

"Yeah, about six months after my mom died." Patrick stood and crossed the window. It had been three years since he'd spoken to his best friend and to have Jason Morgan sitting in this room, remembering things that had happened to Jay, it was almost more than he could take. "It was like a week before your accident." He laughed harshly. "Fucking car accidents."

Jason wasn't sure if he should say something else, even if he could have thought of something to add. Since he'd returned from his assignment, something in his brain had changed. Like a switch had been flipped. There were no memories, nothing to attach to certain sensations but he knew what Elizabeth had told him about Jay and Patrick's friendship was true and he felt an obligation to stay here, to make sure Patrick was okay.

Robin stepped back into the waiting room. "Ellie's in the cafeteria with Em," she told him. "Could you give me a second with Patrick?"

"Sure." Jason pushed himself to his feet. "Is she okay?"

"She'll feel better when you're there," Robin replied. When he exited, she slowly approached her ex-boyfriend. "Patrick."

"I think you'd be better off with Ellie," he said roughly. "I'm not in the mood."

"I'll go in a minute," she replied. "But I just...I know you've got a lot weighing on you right now and I think I can take a bit of it away." She joined him at the window. "The conclusion you came to tonight...that I'm sick...it's not entirely untrue but it's not the whole truth."

"Robin," he shook his head.

"Please, I've made things so much worse by trying to protect you," she said softly. "Let me finish. For once." When he said nothing else, she continued, "I have HIV, though. Not AIDS. I was lucky, I ended up on a cocktail that works and as long as that holds true, the doctors don't know why I shouldn't live another fifty or sixty years. I didn't come home to die, Patrick, I just came *home*."

He was silent for a long time. "The things I said since you tried to tell me," he said slowly. "I didn't mean them. I just...I wanted to hurt you."

"I know that," she nodded. "And I knew they were partly my fault for not being honest, for not telling anyone." She rubbed her hands up and down his arms. "I can forgive you if you can forgive me. I want to be friends again, Patrick. Please."

"That's the thing," he raised his dark eyes to meet hers. "We were never just friends. Not since we were old enough to know the difference. I woke up one day and realized that you were a girl and since then, I could never be just friends with you."

Robin sighed. "Why do you have to make everything so difficult?"

"I guess it's my lot in life." He braced a shoulder against the window. "But you want to be just friends. So, it's okay. We can be friends. I wish I could say that if you wake up one day and change your mind, I'll be there, but..." he pressed his lips together and looked away.

"No," she shook her head. "You deserve better than that. I want you to move on and find someone, okay? Or at least just move on."

He shrugged. "We'll see. I have to figure out what I'm going to do about Ellie and my dad before I worry about my love life." Patrick hesitated. "For what it's worth, I am relieved that you're, you know, okay. And I guess...if you were able to find something in someone else that made you happy, then I guess I'm glad about that."

"You guess?" Robin said wryly.

"I'm not going to change overnight," he replied with a weak smile.

"Ah, Patrick?"

The two turned to find Nadine Crowell standing awkwardly in the door. She had joined the entourage to the hospital after being paged to join the trauma team. The pretty blonde twisted her fingers together. "Your dad's out of surgery. Dr. Jones sent me to get you and Ellie."

"I think she's still down in the cafeteria with Em and Jason." Robin patted his shoulder. "I'll go get her." She smiled at Nadine and left the room.

Patrick scratched the back of his neck. "I'm, ah, sorry about tonight. I don't know if I gave you the impression that it was, um—"

Nadine held up a hand. "Relax, not only did I know it was platonic but I think my boyfriend might have an issue with me going out with you as anything else."

He frowned. "You have a boyfriend?"

"Sure. And I told him that if I wanted to get hired at GH rather than temping and stay in Port Charles, then I'd have to kiss up to the board of directors. So I kind of used you," Nadine admitted. She gestured towards him. "But you used me to make Robin jealous so I guess that makes us even."

"I, ah, guess so." He cleared his throat. "So, my dad?"

General Hospital: Cafeteria

Elizabeth was sitting alone, nursing a cup of tea when Jason found her. She saw him enter and immediately stood to wrap her arms around him. "I'm so glad you're here tonight."

He put his arms around her shoulders and held on tight. "I'm sorry I wasn't here when you found out about Robin. Sonny said you were upset."

"It's fine," she said, her words muffled by his shirt. "I'm just glad I don't have to lean on Sonny again." She pulled away to look at him. "Not that he wasn't absolutely wonderful. He was and you've picked a good man to work for. I just wanted him to be you." Elizabeth shook her head. "Never mind, I'm just upset and I don't mean to make you feel bad."

But he did feel bad. They had only begun exploring what could happen between them and he'd disappeared on her. She didn't deserve that and no matter how much Jason knew she'd hold herself together to be strong for him, she shouldn't have to. He wasn't going to tell her tonight, but he'd decided to tell Sonny that he wanted to go back to working in the warehouse. The respect and opportunity Sonny had offered him was tempting but it wasn't worth the price.

"I know you're upset about your dad," Jason said. He rubbed her back in soothing circles. "Did you think he might be drinking again?"

"No," Elizabeth said, her voice trembling. "No, I never—the smell wasn't on him and Coleman never called for me to pick him up anymore. He said he was sober and I believed him." She gripped the sides of his white shirt. "How could he do this to me again?" she whispered. "I can't keep putting the pieces together if he's just going to keep breaking them apart. I don't—I can't go through this again."

"You didn't talk about it a lot the first time around," Jason said. "Other than the times you picked up your father, I almost didn't know what was going on."

"I didn't want to bother you with my family problems," she admitted. "You were dealing with your own stuff and I just..." she bit her lip. "I wanted something that wasn't touched by my mother's death, my father's drinking and my brother. I wanted something separate. Your friendship was—it is—so important to me. That's still true even though we're more now."

"Things are different now," Jason told her. "You're not going to be on your own this time." He smoothed his hands down her arms and took her hands in his. "Promise me you'll lean on me."

"You'll get sick of me," she warned with a watery smile.

"Not possible." He leaned in and kissed her forehead. "It's going to be okay. If your dad needs rehab, we'll get him into rehab. If he won't go, then we'll deal with that. I know you've been alone since your mom died but it's not going to be like that anymore." When she didn't answer, he frowned. "Promise me, Elizabeth."

"I promise," she whispered.

"Hey, you two," Robin said with a tired smile. "What happened to Emily?"

"She got a phone call from her grandfather and had to take care of something with her family," Elizabeth answered. She hesitated. "Are you and Patrick okay?"

"As okay as we're going to be tonight. Noah's out of surgery and Dr. Jones wants to meet with you and Patrick," she told Elizabeth. She glanced at the clock and smiled weakly. "Midnight came and went."

"What a way to bring in the New Year," Elizabeth murmured. "Not at all how I planned it."

January 1, 2006

Quartermaine Mansion: Parlor

Emily scrubbed at her eyes as she entered the room. "You wanted to talk to me?" she asked.

Edward stood and set aside the business section he'd been pretending to read. "Yes, my dear. How are Patrick and Elizabeth?"

"Holding up," Emily folded her arms under her chest and yawned. "I'm kind of tired, Grandfather. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Your mother is concerned," he said. "She seems to think that I have done something to make you unhappy and wasn't very subtle with her threats about what would happen if I didn't fix it." He paused. "The Cassadine boy came by the table and said a few things that led us to believe that you two had had a falling out."

"I wanted to return his ring," she said quietly. "He didn't take the news well."

"I hadn't realized you'd decided to break off the engagement," Edward replied. "I'm sorry it didn't

work out."

Emily stared at him for a long moment, her eyes tired from more than just sitting in a party dress at a hospital. She was exhausted through and through. She was tired of playing this game with her family and with Nikolas. "I wish I could believe that you meant that. I wish I could believe that you put my happiness above your own personal feelings but we both know the truth, Grandfather. What you're sorry about is that I'm unhappy. I didn't get this way myself, you know. You made it clear that I could have my family or I could have Nikolas." She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "I chose you."

"Emily..."

"I'm sure there are going to be moments when I feel like I made a mistake," she continued slowly. "But I guess I know that it would have been a mistake to marry him if it meant losing my family. I would have resented him sooner or later and our love would have turned to hatred. I couldn't do that to either of us, because what we had was too precious to tarnish that way."

"I never meant for you..." Edward stopped because he couldn't finish that. Of course he had meant for Emily to break it off with the boy. In his head, he'd been sure it was the right decision but seeing the very real unhappiness on his little girl's face, he wondered if he'd been wrong.

"I'm going to go to bed now, Grandfather," Emily said. She turned and disappeared back into the foyer.

"I never meant for you to be unhappy," he murmured.

General Hospital: Noah Drake's Room

Noah's eyes flickered and then opened. A soft groan escaped his lips. "What's going on?" he murmured.

"You're in the hospital," Patrick said roughly, coming out of the shadows of the room and resting his hand on the metal bar of the hospital bed. "You were in the car accident."

"What?" Noah shook his head. "No. I—where's Mattie?"

Patrick exhaled slowly. "It's January 1, 2006, Dad. Mom's been gone for three and a half years."

"I don't..." Noah licked his lips. "I don't feel any pain."

"Because you're on some pain medication," Patrick answered. "So you can't feel the broken arm and the shattered leg. But you know what else is numbing that?" He didn't wait for his father's answer. "The alcohol in your blood, which was three times the legal limit. You were drinking and you got in a car."

"I don't understand..." Noah blinked. "I just...I had a drink but I promised Ellie I'd meet her. Where's Mattie?" he asked again.

"There's no use talking to you," Patrick muttered. "I'll be back in the morning, when you're a bit clearer."

"Patrick..." his father called after him but Patrick ignored him and left the room. He wasn't the soft touch his sister was. Maybe Ellie could sit by and watch their dad drink himself to death, but he wasn't about to sign up for another front row seat.

Harborview Towers: Penthouse 4

"I wasn't expecting to see you here," Sonny remarked, rising from his seat next to Brenda. "I saw on the news this morning that Elizabeth's father was in an accident. I thought you'd be with her."

Jason nodded. "I went to my room to shower and change but I'm on my way back there."

He shuffled his feet. "I don't know if you want to have this discussion with Brenda here but..."

The slim brunette smiled and stood. "I'll just be in the kitchen, making some coffee."

"Be careful with that machine," Sonny warned, watching his wife enter his beloved kitchen and trying not to imagine the mischief she could create. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know." Jason shoved his hands into his leather jacket pockets, nervous. "It depends on how you take this. I might be too late and I'll understand if that's true but if it's not, I think I need to go back to just working in the warehouse."

Sonny nodded slowly. "Is this something Elizabeth asked of you?" he asked, curiously.

"No and she doesn't know I'm here." Jason hesitated. "The job is tempting because I know I'd be good at it and I am honored that you would trust me with so little experience but being away these last few days made me understand that I can't do it. Elizabeth needed me here and maybe it wasn't really an emergency, but she's spent enough time dealing with things on her own and I'm not going to let her do it anymore. She's part of my life, Sonny and I have to put her first."

"I had a feeling that you might come back and say this to me," Sonny replied. "You're right, it's not that Elizabeth can't handle it but that you don't feel that she should have to and that's true. It's very noble of you to give up something you want for her well being but I've spoken a little with her about this and she would not agree with what you're doing here."

"Maybe," Jason allowed, "but I would explain that it was my choice and that that wasn't just doing it for her, that I was doing it for me. Elizabeth is important to me, Sonny. She might decide in six months or a year that she won't put up with the limitations and that's a risk I'm not prepared to take. This is your way of life, and I respect that, but it's just a job to me and I can find another job."

"Okay," Sonny said after a moment. "I can accept that and I also respect it. You know I like Elizabeth, I always have. Whatever happens, I hope you know that we are friends first."

"I'm glad." Jason paused. "I have to go back to the hospital to be with Elizabeth. Sonny, if you need

me, you can come to me. I just can't do the jobs that will take me away from her without contact. Anything else is fine."

"We can work around that and we can do it later. You go be with your girl and take care of her."

Chapter Fifteen

*How many of you people out there
Been hurt in some kind of love affair
And how many times do you swear that you'll never love again?
How many lonely, sleepless nights
How many lies, how many fights
And why would you want to put yourself through all that again*
- Brand New Day, Sting

January 2, 2006

Spencer House: Front Porch

It was nearly ten minutes from the time Will rang the doorbell to the time the door swung open and a grim Luke Spencer stood in front of him. If not for the rustling and low voices inside, he might have thought no one was home.

"My wife and my daughter made me promise I can't shoot you," Luke informed the teen unhappily.

Will nodded. "I appreciate that, sir."

Luke leaned down and lowered his voice. "But there are other ways to kill a man," he growled.

"Dad!" Lulu yanked on his arm. "Stop it! You promised Mom you'd behave."

"Within reason," Luke grumbled. But he stepped back and Will entered, doing his best to keep out of striking distance.

Luke sat next to his wife on the sofa and Lulu gestured for Will to sit in the armchair. Once everyone was settled, though Luke almost put up a fight about Lulu perching on the arm of Will's chair, Will cleared his throat. "Um, first, I just want to thank you and Mrs. Spencer for being supportive of Lulu before I was told. I know I didn't make it easy for her to fill me in, so I just wanted to thank you."

"She's our daughter," Luke said gruffly.

"Right." He hesitated. "Um. So Lu and I have talked a lot about what we want to do. We talked for a long time yesterday and I think we've got a few plans in mind. Lu thought, and I agreed, that it's something we should discuss with you."

Lulu put a supportive hand on his shoulder, knowing that her father was not the easiest man to communicate with. "We agreed that neither one of us is going to drop out of school, obviously. We're both six months from graduating and Will's wanted to be a doctor his whole life. I think we can work together to make sure that doesn't have to change."

"Of course," Laura said. "It would be counterproductive for you to drop out so close to completion and college is definitely something we want you two to consider, right?" She prodded her husband.

"Right, right," Luke said hastily. "I never went but it did well for Laura here and I know there are doors that are open to Lucky that wouldn't have been without college, regardless of his talent with electronics." He stroked his chin. "But I guess what I'd like to get some answers for is the behavior you've exhibited over the last year."

"You mean am I still drinking and will I end up like my father and uncle?" Will clarified. "I stopped drinking before Lu told me about the baby. I'm staying with my cousins because my mom and I are having issues. I'm seeing a counselor to keep me on the right track."

"So what will you do about college next year?" Luke asked. "How will you manage to juggle the kid, a job and school?"

"Well, I've got a full scholarship to PCU," Will said. "That was in place before my grades took a little nosedive but I talked to a college counselor and she seemed to think that as long as I keep a clean record for the second semester, I should be okay. She's checking to find out if I can keep the scholarship but only go part time so that I can work full time as an orderly at GH. They've got great medical benefits."

"Well..." Laura drew out slowly, "I certainly commend you for thinking that far in advance regarding health insurance. It's all very expensive. Luke and I have discussed it and we have decided to pay for Lulu's care, up to and including the birth. We also will not accept any repayment from either of you."

Lulu blinked. "Mom, I told you I wanted to help—"

Luke held up a hand. "Now, gumdrop, your mother and I are in complete agreement. Kids are expensive and I don't want you to have the added medical bills to stress you out. Life is hard enough without starting it with debts. We're going to pay for it and I'd like it if you continued to live here, Lulu, for the foreseeable future."

Will coughed. "I, ah, have enough saved for us to get an apartment," he said. "It wouldn't be anything grand—"

"I think what Will is trying to say is that he wants to be involved as much as possible," Laura said, "and what Luke was supposed to say is that we'd like you to come stay here, Will. In Lucky's room."

"Where's Lucky going?" Lulu asked, surprised. "Because I thought we were going to use the extra room for the baby—"

"I couldn't ask you to—" Will said simultaneously.

"Lucky's been staying above the club a lot and he decided that it was time for him to move out." Luke looked at the boy that had impregnated his daughter. "I know you're going through a tough time with your parents and we Spencers tend to stick together. I may not be thrilled with the situation you and my daughter have put yourselves in, but I'm going to do whatever I need to do to help you two out."

Spencers take care of each other."

General Hospital: Waiting Room

Elizabeth was curled up in one of the uncomfortable chairs, staring at a speck of dust across the floor. She didn't register Jason exiting the elevator doors and didn't notice him until he set a Styrofoam container on the table in front her.

"I thought you might be tired of hospital food," he said when she focused on him. "I think Robin's bringing you and Patrick a change of clothes later."

"Oh." She blinked and sat up. "Thanks."

He took the seat next to her. "Have you been in to see your father yet?"

"No." Elizabeth uncapped the iced tea and took a small sip. "I keep going to the doorway but I can't go in. Patrick's been in and out. He doesn't stay long." She set the iced tea back on the table and rubbed her eyes. "He says Dad's mostly still out of it, from the drugs they give him."

"Do you know anything else about the accident?" Jason asked. He removed his leather jacket and set it on the seat next to him.

"Commissioner Scorpio was here this morning," Elizabeth murmured. She stared straight ahead. "He was finally able to release some more of the details. Dad's blood alcohol level was twice the legal limit. He took a turn too fast and ended up in the other lane. He struck the other car head on. A woman and her little—" Elizabeth closed her eyes, her voice broke. "Her little girl. They were coming home from a party."

"Elizabeth..."

"The mother made it through surgery but she's still in the ICU. But the little girl?" Elizabeth shook her head. "Died on the table."

Jason exhaled slowly. "I...I'm sorry."

"She was seven. Just seven years old. She didn't deserve this end," she said softly. "I sat in a hospital room like this just a year ago. My father swore that he had taken his last drink. He promised me that things were going to be different." She looked at him then. "Nothing is different. My father is an alcoholic. My brother and I are only speaking because we have to but we're further apart than we've ever been. I thought I put this family back together but..." She sucked in a breath. "It's in pieces and now a little girl is..." Elizabeth broke then, tears spilling down her cheeks.

Jason shifted in the chair and drew her into his arms, holding her tight as her shoulders heaved. "What can I do?" he asked.

"There's nothing," she choked out. "Nothing is going to bring my mother back. Nothing is going to make my father stop drinking and nothing is going to turn back time so that little girl can grow up."

Nothing is going to make this okay!"

Robert Scorpio appeared at the doorway of the waiting room, a morose Patrick just behind him. "I'm so sorry, Elizabeth," he murmured.

At his voice, she jerked out of Jason's arms and stood. She started to wipe her eyes frantically. "I'm okay. I am. I just...I'm fine."

"Ellie..." Patrick pushed past the police commissioner and took her hand. "Ellie, Commissioner Scorpio's here to talk to us about Dad."

"You mean he's here to arrest him," Elizabeth whispered. Jason put a hand on her shoulder.

"I wish there was something I could do," Robert said. "But there isn't any room to maneuver. I'm going to read him his rights and then place someone on the door. You can still visit him as much as you like, I wouldn't prohibit that and due to his injuries, you're going to want to get him an attorney to arrange bail and an arraignment as soon as possible."

"What are you charging him with?" Patrick asked.

"Right now, vehicular manslaughter," Robert said. "I'm sure the charges will be changed or reduced at some point, but the evidence..."

"Because Dad has a clear history of driving under the influence, has already been in an accident under these circumstances," Elizabeth finished. "So basically, because he knew the consequences of getting into that car with alcohol in his blood, it proves negligence."

"Essentially," Robert confirmed. He hesitated. "I wish there was something I could do for you, Ellie." He glanced at Patrick. "For the both of you. To ease this somehow."

"No," Elizabeth shook her head. "No, Commissioner, you have always been good to us and I appreciate everything you've tried to do but that little girl and her mother—*they* have to come first. Their family. Not ours." She wrapped her arms around her torso. "Patrick and I can look out for ourselves."

"Regardless." Robert cleared his throat. "I'll go place the officer now. Take care of yourselves." He touched Elizabeth's shoulder. "Let me know if I can do anything."

He left the room and Patrick exhaled slowly. "I don't really know who to call," he admitted. "I don't even know if I *want* to get involved."

"He's still our father," Elizabeth replied. "We can't just abandon him."

"Why not?" Patrick demanded. "He abandoned *us*. He lied to us for a year, Ellie. He swore he was sober and that it was all behind him. Instead, he's been drinking in secret. I went to his apartment yesterday and I tore it apart. I found liquor hidden in nearly every cabinet!"

"No, that can't be true," Elizabeth argued. "The other night was an aberration, I'm sure he stopped. We would have *known*, Patrick!"

"Wake up, Elizabeth!" Patrick shot back. "Our father never stopped drinking. He just got better at hiding it! Maybe you want to throw yourself into his defense and get him off the hook but I'm sick of this! I'm sick of everyone looking at me, wondering when *I'm* going to crack up and start drinking too!"

He threw his hands up and stalked out of the room. Elizabeth closed her eyes. "I'm not stupid, am I?" she asked softly. "I'm not naïve in hoping I can help my father?"

"I think you're upset," Jason said slowly. "And you're not willing to accept the truth right now. I don't think New Year's Eve was an aberration, Elizabeth. I think Patrick's right."

"How could my father do this to us?" Elizabeth opened her eyes. "How could he look me in the eye every single day this last year and pretend to be sober when he was drinking in secret? How could he lie to me like that?"

Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

"Why are you just sitting here?"

Brenda closed the door behind her and set her shopping bag on the desk. "Sonny?" she tried again. "You're supposed to be at the warehouse."

"I was thinking about Jason."

Brenda sat on the sofa next to him and curled her leg up underneath her body. "Oh?"

"I was thinking that he'd regret quitting the job for Elizabeth," Sonny continued, "or that he'd come to resent her, something she told me she worried about. I was coming to the conclusion that she was right when I remembered something." He fastened his brooding eyes on her. "You gave up your modeling career for me."

Brenda laughed. "And you've been sitting here, convincing yourself that *I* must resent *you*. You're such a ninny." She leaned forward and kissed the tip of his nose. "Sonny, I love you. I liked modeling but I'm not sorry I gave it up for you. It was the only decision I could make if I wanted to marry you. You never came right out and said anything, but I couldn't remain in the media spotlight if I was going to marry you. It would focus too much attention on you." She took his hand in hers. "You knew from the moment you met Jason there was someone in his life. You knew before he did just how essential she was to him."

"That's true," Sonny agreed. "But I think he's going to remember that he gave something up that he wanted and it will come between them later."

"I don't think so," Brenda replied. "I think he made the only decision he could. He's not like you, Sonny. He's not fighting for the top spot, he just wanted to prove to himself that he was capable of

something more than unpacking crates and parking cars. Someone who is at the top has more freedom. You wouldn't have married me if you'd been in Jason's position."

"Probably not." Sonny hesitated. "But—"

"You want him to regret it so he'll come back." She rolled her eyes. "Because you value his friendship and can't imagine how you'll be friends now because you don't work together. Boys. You're all so dumb."

He frowned. "Hey—"

"Jason loves her, Sonny. And Elizabeth is the kind of girl you settle down with and have a family. He can't ever do that and not drive himself crazy thinking about the kind of person he'd have to become to continue working for you. He made the only choice he could now so he wouldn't have to make one later that he'd hate. And when you give up someone you love for something else that doesn't really mean as much in the long run, you will come to hate the thing you left them for. He'd hate himself, someday, Sonny, for having to leave her and possibly a family. And I think you know that."

"You may have a point," he allowed. "But—"

"You can still be friends with him, Sonny," Brenda sighed. "It just means you're actually going to have to make an effort."

General Hospital: Locker Room

Patrick was seated in front of his locker, his head bowed and his hands clenched together. Robin dropped the plastic bag with his change of clothes on the floor next to him and leaned against the bank of lockers. "Hey."

He shrugged a shoulder. "Hey."

"Uh oh." Robin scuffed the tip of her shoe against the floor. "You and Ellie are at it again."

"She wants to get a lawyer for my dad and fix everything. Typical." He scoffed and got to his feet. "It's not penetrating her thick skull that Dad's been lying to us, that's he been drinking the entire time he's been telling her how to run her life. She's not seeing that."

"No," she murmured. "She's just seeing that her family is broken and she wants to put it back together. Patrick, she's not ready to accept that Noah's still drinking."

"I'm not ready to accept it," he muttered. "He was normal, Robin. As normal as he'd ever been growing up but you know, he always drank then. He was just..." he shrugged. "A social drinker." He shook his head. "There were liquor bottles stashed in his closet. In his nightstand. In his bureau. Anywhere Ellie and I wouldn't be likely to look at. And now..." he threw up his hands. "A little girl is dead and her mother is in the ICU. How can I convince myself to help?"

"How can you step back?" Robin said after moment. When he just looked at her, she sighed heavily.

"You told me that after I was gone, after your father was shutting everyone out, Ellie kept the family together or tried to. You abandoned her then and you told me that you feel bad about it. How can you step back from her again? Forget helping your father. What about your sister?"

"Look, you want me to work on accepting Jason in her life, I can agree with that. But she wants to get Dad a lawyer and get him released—"

"Is that what she wants to do?" Robin interrupted. "Or did she just suggest getting a lawyer?"

He exhaled slowly. "Your father mentioned an arraignment and Ellie mentioned a lawyer. I didn't stick around to hear much else." He sat back on the bench and after a moment, Robin joined him. "I just don't know if I have it in me to go through this again," he admitted. "After you left and Jay...had his brains scrambled, I shut down and it was just easier not to get involved and to keep a distance from everyone and everything. Even after my father's first accident and things started to get better, I didn't get involved beyond ribbing Ellie about Jason. I just stepped back."

"There's nothing wrong with protecting yourself," she told him. "We do what we have to keep it together but I'm afraid that if you and Ellie don't stick to one another, neither one of you will come out of this without more damage. Jason can do all that he can, but he can't replace you. You and Ellie were so close once. Why can't you find a way to make that work again?"

"We were kids then." He shook his head. "Nothing's the same anymore."

General Hospital: Nurse's Station

"How are the insurance forms coming?" Emily asked, setting a chart next to Nadine. The nurse rolled her eyes.

"Tedious as ever." Nadine glanced at the intern and hesitated. "You're not wearing your ring."

Emily glanced down at her hand. Nikolas had refused to take back the ring but she couldn't bring herself to wear it. It sat in her jewelry box at home and after all this time, her finger felt bare without it. "We broke off the engagement," she said quietly.

"Oh...I'm so sorry." Nadine gathered her forms up. "You seemed like such a nice couple." She smiled and stepped out of the station.

Emily sighed and turned away to find Nikolas stepping off the elevator. His eyes went directly to her hand and when he realized the ring was missing, he frowned. He came towards her. "Emily."

"Nikolas, I'm really not up for this," she sighed. "And besides, I'm working."

"I didn't realize how seriously you took the problems between our families," Nikolas said. "I'm sorry, I didn't pay enough attention—"

"It doesn't matter," she said, shaking head. "It's done." She reached for her next chart but Nikolas grabbed her hand to keep it in place.

"I'm not giving up without a fight," he warned.

"Mr. Cassadine," Epiphany said coldly, stepping up behind him. "I do not care how much money you donate to this hospital. You do not put your hands on a staff member."

"Epiphany, it's okay," Emily said. She gently pulled her hand away. "Nikolas was just leaving."

Nikolas reluctantly took a step backwards. "This isn't over, Emily."

Chapter Sixteen

*Weep for yourself, my man,
You'll never be what is in your heart
Weep, little lion man,
You're not as brave as you were at the start
Rate yourself and rake yourself
Take all the courage you have left
And waste it on fixing all the problems that you made in your own head*
- Little Lion Man, Mumford & Sons

January 3, 2006

General Hospital: Conference Room

Diane Miller was a lawyer in every sense of the word. She lived, ate and breathed the legal system. From the tip of her salon cut red hair to the soles of her designer heels, she exuded both confidence and superiority.

Sonny had recommended her to Jason and Elizabeth as someone who helped him out when his brother Ric wasn't available. She was their go-to woman and Sonny trusted her with his life and freedom, which meant Jason did as well. Elizabeth wasn't entirely sure but she was willing to try it.

At least until she ran out of money for the legal fees.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Miss Drake," Diane said, making a note. "It will be extremely difficult to get your father off the hook for these charges."

"I'm not worried about that right now," Elizabeth replied. "I just need to get him arraigned and hopefully released on probation. He's still in and out of consciousness with the drugs. I haven't really been able to discuss anything with him." She chewed her lip. "You should know upfront that I'll be paying the fees but if Dad wants to take this to trial—"

Diane waved a hand, dismissing her. "The fees are taken care of. I'm on retainer for Sonny and he's instructed me to bill him."

"No..." Elizabeth shook her head. "No, I can't accept this."

"My dear, I am not exactly cheap," Diane said, twisting her pen between her long fingers. "Sonny merely said that you were a close friend of his—practically part of the family. And Sonny's family receives the best."

"I suppose I'll have to take it up with Sonny then," Elizabeth sighed. She rubbed her eyes. "Do you have the information about his arraignment?"

"Yes. I imagine getting bail won't be difficult, however..." Diane hesitated. "It won't be cheap. With his prior record and the seriousness of the charges, it could be very steep. Is there perhaps a house or some other real estate that you might be able to put up as collateral?"

"Dad sold the house and I rent..." Elizabeth shook her head. "I guess I'll have to cross that bridge when we get to it." She stood and extended her hand across the table. "Thank you very much for coming on short notice, anyway. It means a lot."

"Of course." Diane paused. "On a personal note, I wanted to tell you how sorry I am that you seem to be going through this alone. This won't be an easy time for you. I'd like to say that I could offer you an ear but I'm told I'm somewhat..." she lifted her hands in a shrug. "Lax in the area of compassion."

"I have Jason," Elizabeth said. "And some friends. I'm not alone." She offered a thin smile. "But thank you for your concern."

Diane nodded and gathered her materials before exiting. Elizabeth took another moment to gather her thoughts before following. She wasn't alone, not really.

But she was pretty damn close.

Drake Home: Living Room

Will gingerly pushed open his front door and stepped into the house. He hadn't been home since Christmas Eve and he hadn't spoken to his mother since a disastrous call Christmas Day. It was hard to accept that his family had come so far in such a short time.

Two years ago, his father had been a well-respected cardiac surgeon at General Hospital, his mother a solid housewife and he'd been an honors student. Or so he'd thought. Shortly after Thanksgiving the previous year, Cheryl Drake had kicked her husband of eighteen years out of the house with very little warning to her son.

It was not something Will understood then. Sure, everyone knew Liam Drake was a social drinker—the life of the parties. Occasionally, he imbibed a bit too much but wasn't that true of everyone? To Will's sixteen-year-old eyes, nothing about that seemed wrong. The bills were paid, his dad went to work and came home. They had a nice house in a nice area of town.

But Liam was drinking more and more after his sister-in-law passed away because his brother Noah was drinking more and they'd always drank together. He was coming home later and later and his work performance was suffering. These were all things Will had learned later by interrogating family members and friends.

Now, Liam had moved to New York City to work and he and Cheryl were still duking it out in the courts. His mother was angry because she hadn't worked in nearly twenty years and didn't know how she was supposed to take care of the house or herself now. She'd started drinking to dull the reality of her situations months ago and that's when things had become almost unbearable in his home.

Will sighed and stood in the entryway for a long moment. Alcoholism and bad relationships were the Drake legacy. He just hoped he wasn't doomed to repeat it.

"Will?" His mother came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on the dish cloth. Her eyes were red and her mouth pinched. "I...thought you were staying with your cousins."

"I am," Will said cautiously. "I came home to talk to you about some stuff and to get some things." He looked at her for a long moment. "Mom....are you sober?"

Cheryl closed her eyes and nodded. "Three days without a drink. I heard about Noah's accident and the little girl..." she shook her head. "Suddenly, my future looked kind of bleak. I looked around this house and you weren't here." She stepped towards. "Will, I'm so sorry for what I've put you through."

"It's okay," Will shrugged and looked away. "You were going through stuff."

"No, it's not okay. I am your mother and that should be my first priority." She gestured towards the sofa. "Let's sit and talk for a moment. We have a few things to figure out."

"Yeah." He scratched his head and joined his mother on the sofa. "Uh, Mom, there are some things I need to tell you that you might not be happy about. Lu..." He paused. "Lu's pregnant."

Cheryl sighed. "Oh, dear. That's unfortunate." She hesitated. "You two are so young...surely you're not going to keep the baby."

"We've figured out a plan," Will said. "We're keeping the baby. Lu and I are going to finish school and her parents are going to help us out so we can both go to college and get our education. I'm going to stay at the Spencers to take care of Lu."

"Will..." Cheryl reached out and grabbed his hand. "This is just a promising time in your life, I can't help but feel you're making a mistake. What kind of life can you give a child? You're just babies yourselves."

"Mr. and Mrs. Spencer said they'd support whatever decision Lu made and Lu wants the baby. It's her decision to go through with it and she made it clear that she doesn't expect anything from me. But that's not what I want. I care about Lu, Mom—"

"Don't be ridiculous—you can't care about her enough to ruin your future!" Cheryl stood. "You're going to be a doctor, Will. And teenage fathers never make it to medical school!"

"There's no reason why I can't continue on. I've got scholarships lined up and her parents made it clear they won't allow either of us to sacrifice what we want—"

"That's easy for them to say!" Cheryl planted her hands on her hips. "Their kid wasn't going to amount to much anyway. What the hell was Lulu Spencer ever going to accomplish in life?"

Will slowly rose to his feet. "Mom, that's not fair. We've made our decision—"

"The hell you have! I won't allow it. I am your mother and until you are eighteen, I have the right to dictate what you do and where you live. You will come home immediately and I don't want you to have anything to do with that girl or her family."

Will sighed. He should have known this would end like this. Even if his mother had given up the alcohol, she was still the angry, bitter woman who'd kicked out his father. She was never going to understand this decision and she was never going to support it. He'd have to learn to accept that.

Quartermaine Estate: Foyer

Monica stepped in from the dining room, sipping her coffee. She was glad she'd arranged for her day off to coincide with her daughter's. Since she'd broken off the engagement New Year's Eve, Emily had been subdued and stayed in her room more often than not.

It was unacceptable and Monica wasn't going to allow it to continue.

She watched Emily come in from her morning jog and pull off her parka and her earmuffs. She tugged her gloves off and shoved them in the pocket of the park. "How cold was it out there?"

Emily jumped and turned to find her mother, sipping her coffee. "Mom. Aren't you supposed to be in work?"

"I took the day off." Monica tipped her head towards the door to the dining room. "Why don't you join me for breakfast?"

"I'm tired, I thought I'd lay down—"

"Join me," Monica repeated in a tone Emily recognized. With a sigh, she followed her mother into the room and obediently filled a plate with food she knew she wouldn't eat.

Monica took her seat and reached for a slice of grapefruit. "We haven't had a chance to talk since you broke up with Nikolas."

Emily's hand stilled as she stirred sugar into her tea. "No one in the family has really said anything."

"Emily, I hope no one influenced you to make this decision." Monica remarked. She hesitated. "You seem to think that you have to work harder to be a member of this family. That you have to *be* something extra so that we'll love you."

"Mom—" Emily shook her head.

Monica reached over to cover Emily's hand. "All you ever had to do was to wake up in the morning. You are my daughter and a member of this family, no matter *who* you marry."

Emily bit her lip. "I think that you could probably make Dad and Grandfather go to the wedding and you could probably insist that they be nice to Nikolas on holidays and when we ran into each other in public but it would never be the same. Nikolas's uncle is going back to Greece if we get married and

Grandfather will never look at me the same way—"

"Emily, if you love Nikolas, that shouldn't matter—"

"That's what I told myself when we started dating," Emily cut in. "And when Nikolas asked me to marry him, I told myself that what happened between our families wouldn't matter. But that's not true, Mom. My family..." She blinked away tears and swallowed hard. "You guys loved me when you didn't have to. You took me in and kept me out of the foster system. Who knows where I could have ended up. You gave me a direction in life — I love being a doctor, I love my work at the hospital."

"And we are all so proud of you, sweetheart. It was worth every heart ache of your teenaged years to get to this point," Monica said. "But we are your family no matter what—"

"I am terrified that Nikolas will look at me one day and he'll think it wasn't worth losing his uncle. They're so close, Stefan is like his father." Emily paused. "And I'm scared that I'll look at him and all I'll see is the loss of my relationship with Dad and Grandfather. We'll resent each other, Mom, and this beautiful love that we have...it will wither away and we'll hate each other."

"It doesn't have to be like that, Emily—"

"I don't see how it could be any be any other way. Family means everything to Nikolas and I. If we sacrifice our families to be with one another, how can we not resent one another down the line?" Emily shook her head. "It's just not possible, Mom. I'd rather break our hearts now and be able to remember him with love than with hate."

Monica couldn't find it in herself to argue with that logic. She couldn't deny that Emily certainly had a point. Alan and Edward would probably distance themselves from Emily. Not deliberately and not maliciously, but Alan knew his father hated the Cassadines. Nikolas would not be invited to any family gatherings and Emily would be forced to choose.

"Well, you know your own heart better than anyone else," Monica murmured. She patted Emily's hand. "But I am your mother and I will love you no matter what."

General Hospital: Locker Room

"Fancy meeting you here." Robin dropped onto the bench next to Patrick and put her hand on his forearm. "Ellie said you hadn't been by all day."

"Couldn't." Patrick stood and pulled open his locker. He tugged his scrubs off and reached for the pullover in the locker. "I know what you want me to do, Robin and I wish I could say I'd do it, even if was just for you..."

"Patrick..." Robin got to her feet and surprised him by wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing her cheek to his bare back. It was one of the things she'd always done to comfort him in the past and it was almost torture to have that for a moment. "All I want is for you and Ellie to be okay."

Patrick turned and gripped her shoulders lightly. "He was arraigned this afternoon, wasn't he?"

"Mmm-hmm," Robin murmured. "They set bail but Ellie can't pay it. Even so, Noah can't be released from the hospital for another week so she's not even going to worry about it."

"How can she stand behind him?" he muttered. He pulled away from her and shoved the sweater over his head. "How can she support him after everything he's put her through?"

"Because its family," Robin said simply, "and Ellie's never turned her back on family." She paused. "Patrick, my heart aches for all the pain you're going through but I can't help but think..." she stopped and shook her head.

"Just say it, Robin. We both know what you're thinking. I'm making myself miserable," Patrick said sharply. "I'm the one who refuses to go see my father and I'm the one who's leaving my sister alone to deal with this. God knows how she's paying for the lawyer or how she'll pay for bail."

Robin pursed her lips and pondered her next statement. "Diane's on retainer for Sonny Corinthos. He's doing Ellie a favor."

Instead of flying into a rage as expected, Patrick surprised her by sinking back onto the bench. "This is what I've been reduced. Sitting and doing nothing while the local crimelord plays hero. This is ridiculous."

"He cares about her because she's important to Jason," Robin told him. "It's not about playing hero. He knew she needed help and he did what he had to do to support her. That's what friends do. That's what family does." She sat next to him. "Patrick, you don't have to want to set Noah free to support each other. You just have to listen to one another. Don't shut her out again because she might not give you a second chance to make it right."

"I know you're right but it's just so hard..." He shook his head. "How can I face her after everything I've done to her?"

"You just have to walk up to her and let the rest of it take care of itself." Robin touched his cheek. "Patrick, I would give anything to turn back the clock and change the way I left, the way I handled my illness. I have so many regrets. Don't let Ellie be one of yours."

Chapter Seventeen

*If you love somebody
Better tell them while they're here 'cause
They just may run away from you
You'll never know quite when, well
Then again it just depends on
How long of time is left for you*
- On Top of the World, Imagine Dragons

January 5, 2006

Elizabeth & Patrick's Apartment: Living Room

Elizabeth sipped her coffee and leaned back against the couch cushions, relaxing for the first time in days. Will had packed and left for the Spencer house the day before, moving into the empty room vacated by Lucky.

It would be good for Will to be around the Spencers, to get some of the unconditional support that Lucky had benefited from all his life. She knew her aunt wasn't in favor of the idea, but Cheryl was just going to have to get over it. This was what was best for Will.

She heard rustling from Patrick's bedroom and steeled herself for a confrontation. She'd been avoiding him for the past two days, but she knew this couldn't continue. They would have to come to some sort of agreement.

Patrick's door opened and he stepped out. "Hey."

"Hey." Elizabeth sat up and set her mug on the table. "Ah...I guess you should know that Dad's being transferred to lockup in the next day or so."

"You're not bailing him out?" Patrick asked his tone even and calm.

"I can't." Elizabeth sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Sonny's paying for Diane's services. I tried to argue with him, but he just...he said that money should never be an obstacle. He offered to pay the bail, but I told him that I absolutely couldn't accept that." She chewed her lip. "We don't have anything for collateral."

"Ellie..." Patrick crossed the room and perched in the armchair adjacent to the couch. "I know...I know I haven't always been as supportive as I could have been. Especially in the last week. Or since Mom died."

"We all lost her," Elizabeth responded softly. "We all have to deal with it in our own ways. Dad drinks, I try to manage everyone's lives and you...step back."

"It leaves you holding the bag and it's not fair." He hesitated. "I can't...I don't know how to fix this for you. Or to help you fix it. I don't know that I want to fix it."

"I understand. I really do." She bit her lip. "I told Diane that I wasn't necessarily interested in getting him acquitted. That she would have to discuss that with Dad. I don't..." Elizabeth paused. "I don't know what I want to happen. I don't want Dad to go to jail, but I can't see...I don't understand how he could go anywhere else. How he could deserve anything less." Her voice broke. "That little girl... deserves so much more from us. I can't keep pretending."

"Robin told me that I had to talk to you, to find out what it is you really wanted and not just assume," Patrick said with a small smile. "As usual, she knows better than me."

"She always was the better half of the two of you," Elizabeth replied softly. She cleared her throat. "I don't know what Robin told you about her time in Paris--"

"She told me she's sick," Patrick responded. "That she's healthy right now, but you and I both know that's...not necessarily always going to be the case." He shoved himself off the chair and crossed to the window. Outside, the park across the street was covered in thick, white snow. He hated winter.

"No," Elizabeth agreed. "Her cocktail could stop working at any moment." She stood and walked over to stand beside him. "How cliché of us to fall for people like our parents." When Patrick threw her a questioning look, she continued, "Jason is wonderful when he's here, but he can be...inaccessible sometimes. Like Dad when he's drunk. When he's sober, he's the best dad. When he's had the alcohol..." Elizabeth shrugged.

For once, Patrick didn't rise to the bait regarding Jason. "And I'm doomed to love a woman who will leave me first." He paused. "She told me on New Year's. Just before you told me about the accident. Double whammy."

"Oh Patrick--"

"And for the first time, I could understand how Dad did this to himself," Patrick continued. "Because Mom was his entire world and with her gone, he didn't know how to go on without her. That's why I can't face him. Because I'm condemning him for not being strong enough. Ellie, I don't care that Robin and I are not together. I wish that we could be, but I'll deal with that. But if something happens to her, if she gets sick and or is in an accident...I realized that night that I don't have to be with her to be okay, but I do need *her* to be okay. I need her to be out there, somewhere in this world, living and breathing." His voice caught and Elizabeth realized he was as close to losing it as she had ever seen him. "And I'm more than a little worried if something happened to her...maybe I would end up exactly where Dad is."

Quartermaine Estate: Dillon's Room

"So Drake officially moved in yesterday?" Dillon asked. He frowned and ran some more footage through his computer. He needed a better angle on this shot and made a note to reshoot it the next day.

Lulu sighed heavily from her position on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. "The last of his things are in the room, yeah."

Dillon glanced over at her. "You don't sound particularly thrilled."

Lulu propped herself up on her elbows and shook her head. "No, it's not that. It's just--it's like life is happening so fast. If you blink, it's like a year goes by, you know?"

"Well, when you get knocked up in your teens, life does start to go very fast," Dillon murmured, making some dialogue notes.

"Ha," she responded dryly. "I just want everything to be okay. I don't want Will to be sorry that he took this on--"

"Lu, it's not like you did this by yourself," he interjected. "You and Will are equally responsible for this situation, so if he regrets that he stepped up to take responsibility, he's a weak-willed, little boy that doesn't deserve your time."

Lulu blinked and frowned at him. "That's kind of pessimistic, don't you think?"

"Not at all," her best friend replied. "You know, I'm so tired of the attitudes in this town towards family and doing the right thing. Grandfather browbeat Emily and guilted her into choosing him over Nikolas. Will's parents just suck. And every time I see Elizabeth Drake or her brother, they're arguing about their father again. It's all just crap."

Dillon threw his pencil down. "I've met my father once and I only know that because I happen to have a picture of it. My mother forced him into marriage and got pregnant on purpose. That's we do in this family. We have an agenda and we go after it whether it's ethical or not."

Lulu sat up and tucked her feet under her. "I'm surprised Emily gave in," she said, tackling the only part of Dillon's tirade she felt she could. Dillon was usually more laid back and content to go with the flow. This was unexpected to say the least.

"She still thinks she needs to earn her place here," Dillon replied. He shoved off his chair and paced his room. "Like she's less because she's not blood-related. She's freaking lucky she doesn't have this blood running through her veins. Jesus, Lu, you know who my mother is. Who's to say I won't wake up like her tomorrow?"

"Dillon..." Lulu tilted her head to the side. "You've already inherited the stuff you're going to take from your mother. Don't you think if you were going to be as ruthless as Tracy, some signs would start to show?"

"I'm as self-absorbed as she is," Dillon muttered. "For years Emily has been trying to keep it all balanced and she could have used some support, but did I help? No, I just holed up with my camera and my movies and ignored it--"

"Dillon--"

"I just stay in my room or I tune everyone out. Maybe Ned would have liked some support against Grandfather--"

"Dillon--"

"And what about AJ? Grandfather and Alan just go after him like he's meat on a bone all the time. No wonder he's an alcoholic. And I could have been nicer to Jason after the accident--"

"Were you mean?" Lulu asked curiously. "I thought you just avoided the whole situation because your family was insane."

"Exactly!" Dillon threw up his hands. "I'm self-absorbed. I don't care about anyone other than myself and--"

"Okay, seriously, you've lost it." Lulu got off the bed and waved her hands in front of time. "Time out."

"Lulu--"

"Who's the guy who tackled Maxie Jones when she pulled my hair in the third grade?" Lulu asked. "And who's the guy who let me cry on his shoulder when I thought Ellie wasn't going to like me anymore because she wasn't dating my brother? Who's the guy who got on the bus to St. Paul just because I thought I saw a celebrity and never once held it against me that we got stranded there?"

"That stuff doesn't count," Dillon grumbled.

"It counts to me." Lulu put her hands on his shoulders. "You're the Wallace to my Veronica. The Xander to my Buffy, the Sonny to my Cher. The Jack to my Jen--"

"You know I hate that one," Dillon sighed.

"You are my best friend and I never would have been able to get this far in life without you." Lulu hugged him fiercely. "You could never be your mother and don't blame yourself because you figured out how to be a sweet, compassionate, awesome guy without your family ruining all the good stuff." She pulled back. "You are the best friend a girl could have and I want you to know how important that is to me."

"All right, all right," Dillon sighed. "I guess you have a point. No one who worries about numero uno would have tackled Maxie Jones. She bites."

Lulu laughed. "Listen, if you really feel badly about what happened to Emily, then you can start standing up for her now. Make her understand that she's got a comrade in arms in this loony bin."

General Hospital: Noah's Room

Noah heard the door to his room creak opened and wondered if it was Patrick again--opening and then closing the door without bothering to actually come in. He hadn't seen Ellie in days. He wasn't

sure what to make of anything -- he could barely stand to be awake and asked for sedatives to keep him sleeping.

"Uncle Noah?"

Noah turned and frowned as his nephew Will stepped out of the shadows. "Will?"

"Hey." Will shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and rocked back on his heels. "Sorry I haven't been by...I don't know if Ellie or Patrick mentioned it, but I'm...well...things are happening in my life that are little surprising."

"That's okay." Noah struggled to sit up. "The kids haven't mentioned anything, is everything okay?"

"They're not bad," Will said slowly. "Bad would be an unfair term." He paused. "I moved out of my house at Christmas and I moved into the Spencers yesterday."

"The Spencers?" Noah searched his beleaguered mind. "I thought I heard you and Lulu had parted ways."

"We did," Will confirmed. "We're not really back together. Not yet. I don't know if we will be. I was drinking too much and she didn't want to be around that."

"Sounds familiar," Noah murmured in reply.

"But she found out that she was pregnant," Will continued. "And everything had to change."

Noah just blinked in response. His nephew, to become a father? His seventeen-year-old nephew? "Will..."

"I know it's a big responsibility," Will continued, "but Lulu and I think if we stay realistic and stick together, we'll be okay. Her parents wanted me to come live with them so they could support Lulu through everything. They're going to help with the medical bills and make it so Lu and I can graduate from high school and go to college. I just...I wanted to ask you something."

"What's that?" Noah asked.

"The Drake curse," Will said. "The thing that makes all Drake men drink like fish and ruin their lives." He shrugged uncomfortably. "I was just wondering if it could be avoided."

"There's no such thing as a curse," Noah replied. "It's a matter of willpower. I don't have it. Your father doesn't. My father didn't. Patrick...he has it." Noah stared at his hands. "He had every reason to drown himself in alcohol these last few years and he kept himself going. You want advice about staying out of the bar and keeping your life together, your cousin is the best person to ask."

Will nodded. "I just...I don't want to screw this up. I don't want to be my father, I don't want to be--" he cut himself off and shrugged again. "I just want to be okay at it. It's too important to mess with."

"I agree," Noah replied. "Don't make the same mistakes that I did. You can be better than that."

"It's not like you can't make things better," Will said. "You're still a dad. You can fix things."

"I'm not sure this can be fixed," Noah replied. "You know what's happened."

"You can't take back the night you decided to drink and drive, no," Will said bluntly. "And you can't take back the lying you've done over the last year or the role you played in my parents' divorce. You can't take back the last three years, Uncle Noah, you know that. But you can help Ellie and Patrick. All they do is argue, and when they're not arguing, they're just silent. They don't talk to each other. And how to deal with your...situation is why."

Noah just stared at him and Will decided to just go for it. "You should plead guilty, Uncle Noah. You did it and it's ridiculous to walk in that room to pretend that you don't deserve to be punished for it. The more you screw up, the more you make Patrick and me think we don't have a chance. And the more you lie and drag this out, the more pain you cause Ellie. It's not fair."

When his uncle still didn't speak, Will just shrugged. "Anyway, that's all I really wanted to say. See you later."

Harborview Towers: Apartment

"Why do I have to close my eyes?" Elizabeth asked. She stumbled out of the elevator as Jason led her down a hallway.

"Just a few more seconds," he told her. He fumbled with a key and Elizabeth heard a door open. She was led through a doorway and heard the door close behind her. "Open your eyes."

She lifted her eyelashes and frowned when she saw a modest set of rooms in front of her; a small living room that opened into a kitchen to the left. On the right, there was a hallway that probably led to a bedroom. "What is this?"

"I'm renting it," Jason told her. He shoved his hands into his pockets. "I can't keep bringing you to Jake's--"

"Jason--"

"I know it's not much, but it's in a better part of town, you know?" Jason continued, almost sounding nervous. "And it's got a better bathroom. I know it's cleaner than the one in my room."

"The one in your room is fine..." Elizabeth smiled faintly. "Jason, I like Jake's."

He nodded. "I do, too. And we should still go there for pool if you want. But I'm not the same guy that moved in there, you know. And you deserve something better."

"I don't want you to do this for me." Elizabeth chewed her lip. "You quit working for Sonny, didn't you?"

He hesitated. "Not exactly."

"You're back to working at the warehouse," Elizabeth qualified. "No more...side jobs."

"I don't like having to disappear on you," he said, his voice taking a slightly stubborn tone. "You needed me and I wasn't here--"

"Jason..." Elizabeth sighed and turned in a slow circle. "This is...this is all a little...fast."

"I know you don't want to move in with me," Jason said. "That's okay. I know you and Patrick still need time together, to work things out. I just wanted you to know that I'm...serious about what's going on here."

"I wish you wouldn't quit working for Sonny," Elizabeth murmured. "I don't want you to be sorry about it--"

"I won't," he insisted. "I did it for me. I don't want to be out of town or out of contact when you need me. When anyone needs me. I told Sonny that I wasn't quitting exactly, but I couldn't take those jobs anymore."

"Jason, you have to want this, too." Elizabeth stepped towards him. "The apartment, the job. You have to want this, too."

Jason was silent for a long moment before exhaling slowly. "I told you that I was getting flashes of Jason Quartermaine--that some things were clearer than others. I talked to Tony Jones about it and he doesn't think I'll ever remember everything but the flashes are normal. The more I remember, Elizabeth, the more I know exactly what I want." He took her hand in his and just looked at it. "And what I want is to make sure that you don't have to carry it alone anymore. It's important to me to know that I'm supporting you and taking care of you." He held up his other hand when she opened her mouth. "I know you can do all that for yourself, but it doesn't stop me from wanting to do it."

She huffed and looked away for a moment. When she looked back at him, the expression in her eyes made him relax a little. "It's hard to argue with that," Elizabeth replied with half a smile.

PCPD: Commissioner's Office

Robert glanced up when he saw a thermos set in front him, and then next to it, a large brown bag. "What's this?"

"Dinner." Robin unbelted her jacket and tossed it on the back of the chair. She sat. "Someone has to look out for you."

"Thanks." He opened the bag and grinned. "Corned beef on rye. You are my favorite daughter."

"I'm your only daughter," Robin replied with a grin. "That we know about it." She hesitated. "You've been working late because of Noah Drake's case."

Robert paused as he unwrapped his sandwich. "You've always known me too well."

"I just know how you can get with a case that you can't leave at work," she replied. She tilted her head to the side. "You never want to bring it home, so you just stay here." Robin paused for a moment. "I think Ellie and Patrick are going to come out of this thing stronger, so if it's them you're worried about, it's okay. They understand what's happening and why Noah's in trouble."

"I could give a rat's ass about that man," Robert said shortly. "I had my suspicions that he was still drinking, but as long as he kept himself out of trouble and those kids seemed to be okay, I kept my mouth shut. It wouldn't have served any purpose to do anything else. But if I had said something--"

"It wouldn't have changed anything, Dad," Robin said gently. "Because nothing would have kept Noah from drinking. He knew what he was doing and the only person to blame is Noah. Ellie arranged for Noah to get a lawyer, but she's not bailing him out, and she's not helping him in his defense."

"I always knew she was a smart one." Robert swallowed his food. "I know the Drake men have their problems, which is part of the reason I was glad you were out of town when all of this hit the fan. I worry about Patrick. So far he's kept himself on the straight and narrow--"

"Patrick is going to be just fine," Robin replied. "Liam and Noah belong to another generation. Patrick and his little cousin are going to turn things around. Patrick has lost too much to alcohol -- his father and Jay. And Will lost his entire childhood."

"You really believe that, don't you?" Robert said.

"I do," Robin said firmly. "Now what's keeping you here late every night?"

"It was mostly Ellie," her father admitted. "I just remember watching her grow up, her being in and out of the house so much. She was always around; she started to feel like my daughter too. And I guess it's Patrick. I want to believe that this cycle in their family can be broken, Robin. Jay Quartermaine was such a bright kid with the entire world in front of him and so was Jennie Young. I'm tired of losing young people to this disease and the thought that Patrick might eventually give in under all that stress..."

"I knew you liked Patrick," Robin replied, pleased.

"For a long time, I thought he'd be the one for you." Robert paused. "Are you feeling all right? I mean, everything is okay?"

"Everything is fine." Robin stood and moved around to hug her father. "You know why I loved Patrick so much?"

"Why?"

"Because he's funny, smart, loyal and absolutely the best man I've ever known." Robin leaned over and kissed her father's cheek. "In short, Dad, I didn't think I should ever settle for someone who didn't measure up to my father."

Chapter Eighteen

*And lately, it's yellow lights and you're braking
Say you just want to wait and see it all unfold
But baby when you find what you're seeking
Something you can believe in you just got to go*
- Slow, Andy Grammer

January 10, 2006

General Hospital: Noah's Room

Elizabeth and Patrick stood side by side at the end of Noah's hospital bed, facing their father and his lawyer. It had been a week since their conversation in their apartment where they had finally come to some sort of agreement on how to handle their father. They would not bail him out, would not participate in his defense. As far as Patrick was concerned, Elizabeth had already gone above and beyond in order to get him a lawyer.

And now Noah and Diane wanted to meet with them, and the only reason Patrick was in this room was his promise to Elizabeth to see this through—to at least hear him out. But he hadn't promised to stay.

"Thank you both for coming to see me," Noah said, wincing in pain as he shifted his leg. "I know... that you didn't want to."

"Well, now that you know that, maybe we can speed this up," Patrick bit out. Elizabeth nudged him, but he just nudged her back. She'd *also* forgotten to secure his agreement to be nice.

"I wish I could..." Noah hesitated. "I want to say I'm sorry, but I'm aware that for the both of you, that word means next to nothing, especially from me."

"Not next to," Patrick clarified, "but nothing. At *all*. Because you only mean it for five seconds."

"Patrick," Elizabeth hissed, but Noah held his hand.

"Your brother has a right to be angry, and I don't blame him." Noah nodded. "You're right, Patrick. It means nothing. But I'll say it anyway, because it's true. I...never stopped drinking last year. I wanted to. I tried to, but after I came home from rehab and realized that in addition to destroying our family, I had helped destroy my brother's."

"I just..." Elizabeth sighed. "I don't understand, Dad, *how* you hid it. We saw you practically every day. Did..." She lifted a shoulder. "Did you just get better at it?"

"No. I didn't drink as often and I didn't drink on days when I was having a meal with either of you, or

an operation to perform.” Noah closed his eyes. “But I still broke my promises, and the longer I did, the worse I felt, so the more I drank.”

“Typical,” Patrick muttered.

“I thought about fighting the charges,” Noah said after a moment. “Because it was an accident and I never meant to hurt anyone, except...maybe myself.” He looked at Patrick. “But I hurt more than the two of you. I...killed a young child, whose life was just beginning. I’m a doctor, I’m supposed to save lives...”

“Is there a *point* to this pity show?” Patrick said when Noah just trailed off, and he waited for his sister to hit him again. She didn’t.

“The point is,” Diane huffed, “is that we’ve spent the last week working out a deal with the DA’s office so that your father can avoid a trial and get help.”

“He’s *done* rehab before,” Elizabeth said softly. Patrick looked down at her and saw the anguish, the anger, and the betrayal reflected back. “What makes anyone think they can trust him to do it again and have it stick?”

“I don’t...blame you for thinking that.” Noah swallowed. “So that’s why I made the deal that I did. Diane, you understand the terms better than I do.”

“He’ll spend thirty days in a detox center, and then one more month in court-ordered rehab. After which point, he will be plead guilty to vehicular manslaughter in the first degree and will be sentenced to the maximum of fifteen years.”

Patrick blinked. He opened his mouth and looked at his father, confused. Because... “Aren’t deals supposed to...be give and take? That’s...the *opposite* of give and take.” He cleared his throat. “Not that I think...you don’t deserve it.”

“I wanted you two to know that I was serious,” Noah said quietly. “Diane says I’d be eligible for parole in four years, but it’s not good enough for me. So I’m also going to have lifetime probation. If I get pulled over even *once* for drinking and driving, I get taken right back to finish my sentence. It doesn’t matter if I do it ten minutes after I walk out of prison or ten years.”

“Dad...” Elizabeth’s hand found its way into Patrick’s, and she clung to him. “Dad...I know I wanted you to take responsibility, that I didn’t want you to be set free, but I didn’t mean...for you go...” Her voice broke. “You’re...fifty-five. You could be seventy before you can home. You’ll...”

And when she couldn’t continue, Patrick did it for her. “You’ll miss everything,” he said thickly. “Elizabeth is going to get married and have children, and they’ll be grown before you come home. Or almost grown.” He looked down at her. “Because we both know she’s already met the guy. It’s just a matter of when.” Focusing on his father, he said, “I...get that you’re serious about this...but don’t...*don’t* do it.”

Noah exhaled. “That’s why I have to do it. Because I want you look at me, Patrick. I want you and

Will to look at what happens when you let the pain and devastation of loss take over your life. I climbed into a hole and I *never* climbed out. My brother is heading my way, if he hasn't already gotten there. My father's marriage was a disaster because he cared more about his brandy and his career than my mother. I want more for you. For Will. For Ellie."

"And *I* want my father in my life," Elizabeth whispered. "Dad...please..."

"It's not as though he'd serve the fifteen years outright," Diane reminded them. "He'd be home in four. Any grandkids wouldn't even know he was gone." She lifted her hands. "These are arguments I made before I made...the arrangement, because it as hell ain't a deal." Her eyes cast darts at her client.

"I've promised them too often that I'll change," Noah said simply. "I wanted them to know I meant it this time. If I come home in four years, I'll count myself blessed, but I've been useless to them for years. What's four more?"

"I *get* that you think you're doing the right thing," Patrick said tightly. He wrapped an arm around his sister's shaking shoulders. "And I don't disagree you should go to prison. But this is just selfish. So what if you get out in four? At any time, you could go back to jail for eleven years. We would just have to trust you to keep your nose clean for the rest of your life." His voice was pained, but he forced himself to finish. "You think you're proving something to me? To Ellie and Will? You're just proving that you can't keep your word. You *need* the threat of jail to keep you sober. Ellie and I aren't enough. That's what you're saying."

"No..." Noah shook his head. "It's not what I'm saying, or doing. Patrick, you just don't understand —"

"I understand perfectly." Patrick nodded. "The day our mother died, we became orphans. Sure, you paid lip service to it this last year, pretending everything was fine. But you knew you were living a lie. I never bought it, not really, but Ellie did. And *that's* what I'll never forgive you for. Me, you can hurt me. But *not* her." His arm tightened. "I'm through."

"Is it too late to stop this?" Elizabeth asked, wiping her tears.

Diane hesitated, but nodded. "He's being officially sentenced tomorrow, but the agreement is in place, so his statements to the police on the subject would be admissible. I suggested he talk this over with the two of you, but—"

"I thought you'd see this as me taking responsibility," Noah said, his voice almost angry now. "But as usual, Patrick, you're making it all about you—"

"I come by it honestly," Patrick shot back. "You abandoned us three years ago, why should this be any different?" He looked down at his sister. "You ready to go?"

"I just...I don't understand why you had to make it like this. Why...you had to make this decision without us." And Patrick hated his father in that moment, for making his sister look like that—

shattered and uncertain. “Didn’t...you care what we thought?”

“I didn’t think you’d see it this way, Ellie.” Noah shifted. “I killed a girl. I should go to jail—”

“You’re right. You should. It’s time that we were free of you and your guilt trips. Don’t make her feel like crap because she still loves you.” He nudged her towards the door. “Let’s go, El. You don’t have to justify yourself to him anymore.”

He steered her out of the room and was unsurprised to find Jason and Robin waiting for them by elevators. He saw the way Jason tensed and pushed away from the wall when he realized Elizabeth was crying, and he saw the concern in Robin’s face.

“What happened?” she asked softly. “He’s fighting it?”

Patrick released Elizabeth and felt not an ounce of annoyance or frustration that she went into Jason’s arms. He wasn’t Jay Quartermaine, and Robin had been right all those weeks ago. He had to let go of that, and just accept that whoever Jason was inside his own brain, he made Ellie happy.

He huffed and looked at Robin. “He tried to be self-sacrificing. He’s going to court-ordered rehab and then he’s pleading guilty to the maximum of fifteen years, eligible for parole in four years with lifetime probation.”

“I...” Robin stepped forward. “You mean if at *any* point for the rest of his life, he drinks and drives, he goes back to jail and finishes his term.”

“Yep,” Patrick said flatly. “So he needed the threat of prison to keep him on the straight and narrow. His kids aren’t *enough*. But I guess I already knew that.” He looked at Elizabeth. “Hey, El?”

She looked at him, not moving an inch from the circle of Jason’s arms. “Yeah?” she asked.

“You should...get out of here. Go...clear your head or something. I’ll stick around, make sure Dad gets transferred to the PCPD later without issue.” He hesitated. “Maybe Jason can take you out on the bike—I know you like to do that when you’re...upset.”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes and he sighed, because he knew she was searching his statement for the hidden meaning, for the catch. When she couldn’t find it, she offered a smile and then tilted her head up to the man in question. “Can I drive?”

“Absolutely not,” he replied, but he smiled as he said it, and Patrick realized it was almost a routine for them. He wondered how he had missed this between them, insisting until the bitter end that Jason Morgan was nothing more than Elizabeth’s rebellious middle finger to her father and brother for all the crap they’d given her.

“I’ll see you at home, Patrick,” Elizabeth called over her shoulder as she and Jason headed towards the elevator.

“Probably not though,” Patrick muttered to himself after they were out of earshot. He wiggled his

shoulders to chase away that thought and turned to find Robin studying him. “What?”

“That was a very nice thing you did for your sister.”

“You act so surprised,” he muttered. “She’s been dealing with Dad since the accident. It was my turn to get inconvenienced.” He slid his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “I told him in there that Elizabeth would be getting married in the next four years, because she’d already met the guy. Which meant he would miss that.”

“It’s probably true,” Robin agreed. “They just started dating rather than just being friends, but I think...they just took the long way around. Maybe they don’t see it right now, but they’re already in love.” She stepped next to him. “What makes you the angriest? That Noah is going to prison at all, that he wants the security of lifetime probation to keep him sober...”

“That he’s in this mess at *all*,” Patrick bit out. “I want him to pay for what he did to Jennie Young’s family, for putting the mother in a hospital bed as well, so they had wait on the funeral until after she could be discharged. So the four years...that’s fine. And I wouldn’t even care about probation, but...” He dipped his head and closed his eyes. “If he had just been telling the *truth* last year...about not drinking...he wouldn’t be facing this. So, yeah, bully for him to taking responsibility, but you know what? Too little, too late.”

“Fair enough.” Robin nodded. “So when Elizabeth gets married, you’ll just have to walk her down the aisle.” She smiled up at him. “And it’s appropriate. You always wanted her to end up with Jason Quartermaine, but *Jay* sat around and waited. He waited for her to break up with Lucky, waited for her to have a little time to enjoy being single. He never reached out for her.”

“Yeah.” Patrick rocked back on his heels. “And Jason Morgan did. So I guess it’s fair that he ends up with her.” He looked down at his ex-girlfriend. “We’re okay, aren’t we? We’re friends.”

“Always.” Robin slid her arm around his waist, he slid his around her shoulders and for a brief moment, Patrick felt the weight lift from his shoulders.

Spencer House: Kitchen

Lulu reached for the bowl of mashed potatoes with one hand as she passed the green beans to Will on her side. “Hey, Lucky, what did you get Emily for her birthday?”

Her brother glanced up and shook his head. “Uh uh, Lulu. I’m not telling you so you can go steal it and then pass it off as your own. You buy your *own* gifts.” He dumped carrots onto his plate and set the platter on the table.

Lulu rolled her eyes and looked at Will.. “Any ideas for Emily’s birthday? I think I’m still paying off the St. Paul/Minneapolis trip she got me out of, so it’s gotta be good.”

“Why you thought it was a good idea to drag poor Dillon on a bus because you thought you saw Kristen Bell,” Laura sighed, sipping a glass of a wine. “Thank God for Emily and Nikolas. I don’t

know what your father and I would have done if *we'd* had to fly out to get you.”

Luke frowned and looked at his wife. “You think I would have been disappointed in her? She’s a Spencer—” he gestured with a fork full of chicken. “She was following her God-given intellectual curiosity.”

“Is *that* what we’re calling it this week?” Lucky asked. “Because I remember when Liz and I ditched school for a week to go to New York for a music festival, I was tossed in my room for a week.”

“Yours was deliberate,” Luke waved away Lucky’s objections. “And you know that was your mother. I don’t hold with punishments. I turned out just fine without parents controlling me.”

“Right,” Lulu drawled. “You and Aunt Bobbie are the poster children for well-adjusted adults.” She mimed the universal okay sign with her hand. “Okay, Dad.”

“So, Will, did Ellie or Patrick call you today?” Lucky asked, before Luke could offer a retort. “Their dad was supposed to be transferred to the PCPD today.”

Will swallowed his mouthful of carrots and nodded. He’d been content to just watch the Spencer byplay until that point. Their family dinners were full of warmth and laughter, good-natured mocking and reminiscing of past adventures. He had been used to frozen dinners standing over the kitchen while his mother was passed out upstairs. Or before his father had left, it had been silence and the occasional question about classes.

He preferred this.

“Yeah, Patrick called after Uncle Noah was all set up at the station.” Will sighed, and briefly related the deal that his cousin had told him over the phone. “So he’ll be in jail for four years, and then a lifetime probation.”

“That must be hard for Patrick and Ellie,” Lucky said, his face sober. “But they’ll get through it.” He leaned back in his chair. “Ellie’s got Jason, and Patrick...well he’s still *kind* of got Robin.” He shrugged a shoulder. “And it goes without saying, they’ve got us. You. And Emily. They’ll get through this.”

Will nodded, because it was true. Their father was going to be in jail, but he knew his cousins would be just fine. They had great friends who would stand up for them, the way family should.

“But I’m sorry for them all the same,” Laura murmured. She reached over and covered her husband’s hand with her own. “Noah and Mattie were so wonderful. We raised all our kids together, and when we lost her, it was like the light went out in his eyes.”

Luke nodded. “Can’t say I blame him for taking it so hard. Not that anything is *ever* going to happen to my Angel here,” he sent his wife a smile that told him exactly how much he loved her, “but I can’t say I’d handle it better than Noah.”

“You’d be surprised what you can handle when you have to.” Will looked at Lulu, who smiled at him

hesitantly. They might not ever date again—they might always be co-parents, but he thought they'd be all right. Somehow.

Family would make the difference.

Quartermaine Estate: Parlor

Monica stepped into the parlor, knowing that Edward liked to spend time after dinner, sipping tea and reading the newspaper. After nearly two weeks of watching her daughter's unhappy face, Monica Quartermaine had had enough.

“Edward, it's time you and I had a frank discussion.”

Edward scowled as his daughter-in-law sat next to him on the sofa. “Monica, I don't want to hear it —”

“How is what you're doing to Emily *any* different than what the Cassadines did to Sofia?” she demanded. At that, his mouth closed. “Mikkos Cassadine wanted something better for his sister—some European royal probably. And instead, she fell in love with a playboy Quartermaine like your brother. You want something better for Emily, but instead she's fallen in love with someone you don't approve of. And you have browbeat her into believing that her family's wishes ought to come first.”

Edward pressed his lips together and looked away. “I hadn't...Monica, I *know* that family—they'll break her spirit.”

Because she honestly knew that Edward loved her daughter, that he idolized her beyond sense, her heart softened. “I know that's what you believe Nikolas will do. But have you seen her since New Year's, Edward? She left him so that she wouldn't resent him later for giving up her family. She did what you wanted her to do. Are you satisfied?”

“Of course I'm not *satisfied*,” Edward bit out. “I thought...” He waved his hand. “I thought she'd realize he was a reprobate and when she asked me if I...I meant for her to choose between this family and Nikolas, I-I suppose...” He looked away. “I didn't mean it. I didn't know...I didn't realize she...”

“You and I, Alan and Lila, everyone in this family looks at Emily as one of our own,” Monica said. “But she still remembers when she wasn't. She believes we *chose* to love her, which means we *might* choose to stop.”

Edward scowled. “I don't *care* who she marries, Monica. That girl is a Quartermaine. She may not have our blood, but she is Lila through and through, and I will not have—” He closed his mouth and dipped his head. After a long moment, he folded his paper and set it on the coffee table. “But I suppose that's exactly what she believes. That I will withdraw my love and affection if she marries Nikolas Cassadine.”

“And we both know that's not true. You may grumble, you may pout, but you will still love her.”

Monica reached out and touched his hand. “I remember when Alan and I decided to adopt Emily after her mother died. I was...nervous because, of course, we had the boys and you loved them so much, but I know how proud you are of the Quartermaine name. But you and Lila never once looked at Emily as if she weren’t ours.”

“She *is* ours,” Edward said, fiercely. He rose to his feet and pointed at her. “You and Alan...you were busy, but I was...I was *here* for the rebellions. When she tried to run away, Robert Scorpio brought her back to me. I thought she might follow me into ELQ, so I talked to her about the company. She’s mine every bit as much as she’s yours.” He cleared his throat. “I...don’t want her thinking she has to be anything different to keep my love, Monica. She simply...” He gestured with his hands, as if not knowing exactly what to do with them. “She simply *has* it. And it’s not going to change.”

“So you should probably tell her that.” Monica nodded, wishing she had had this conversation months ago with the morons in her family. Alan would follow his father’s lead, and peace would reign again. “You could make this up to Emily, you know. We’re throwing her a birthday party this Friday at the Haunted Star. Perhaps you might invite Nikolas for her.”

Edward frowned. “Now, Monica, you’re pushing things. I will tolerate him, but—”

“You will *accept* him with open arms.” Monica got to her feet and leveled a glare at her father-in-law. “You will invite him and tell Emily yourself that you not only accept the engagement, but that you’re willing to pay for the wedding—without making any of the decisions. You have made Emily miserable from the moment she fell in love with him. She thought she was breaking your heart, Edward. So she broke her own instead. You need to make it up to her, otherwise she will never believe that you mean it.”

He looked away, but offered a small nod, which she knew considering his pride, would be all that she would receive.

Vista Point

Elizabeth leaned over the railing, staring out over the city, her breaths little puffs of air. “I’ll be glad when it starts to get warmer.”

“Yeah.” Jason leaned his back against the railing. “We can’t go as fast when there’s ice on the road.”

She grinned and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. “I’m not saying that because of your bike. Not *everything* is about how much I like it.” She tilted her head up to the stars. “Is it wrong to be angry that he’s taking himself out of our lives like this?”

“You get to feel how you want to feel,” Jason said after a moment. “Did...you want him *not* to go to jail?”

“No, I didn’t,” Elizabeth admitted, “but I...knew he probably *would*.” She focused on the lights of the harbor, on the island in the distance, and the hulking structure of Wyndemere. “I just...didn’t think he’d do it willingly. And fifteen years, Jason...”

“That’s only if he breaks the terms of his probation.”

She closed her eyes. “And he will, you know. I can’t...believe that he won’t take a drink the second he’s out of prison. I simply...I don’t trust him.” She felt his arm draw her closer, and she burrowed herself in the opening of his leather jacket. “Isn’t that horrible?”

“He hasn’t given you much of a reason to trust him, has he?” he replied. “You thought he was sober all this last year, and he was lying to you.”

“It’s just...” She closed her eyes, and concentrated on the scent of him, of the warmth of his arms, the steadiness his embrace offered her. “He was so wonderful once. He and my mother...the four of us were so happy. How...could that be gone like this? I know nothing will bring her back, but I wanted that sense of family. I think Patrick and I will be okay, but...”

“But what?”

“I just...wish I knew what happens next.” Elizabeth drew back, her hands holding the edges of his jacket. She met his eyes. “He’ll be gone for four years, maybe longer. He’s going to miss so much of what happens in our lives. I mean, I guess I’d go visit him, but Patrick probably won’t. We’re never going to be a family again. The three of us.”

He sighed and his hands slid up from her hands to her elbows. “I don’t know what to say to you, because that’s true, I guess. It’ll never be the same.”

She pursed her lips and was quiet for a few moments, listening to the sounds of the night around them, the far off horns of the ships in the harbor, the cars on the highway below them. The leaves rustling in the trees. “I remember thinking that things would never be the same after Lucky and I broke up in high school. It was senior year, and I thought...” Elizabeth laughed a little. “I thought my life was *over*. We didn’t love each other the way we had, but I didn’t know who I was if I wasn’t Lucky’s girlfriend.”

She tilted her head to the side and met his eyes. “And you know what? They *weren’t* the same. Lucky and I are friends now. Patrick and Robin may never be the couple we all thought they’d be forever, my father will never be a part of my life the way he used to be...but you know what? It’s okay. Because at the end of the day, things can’t stay the same.” When he just frowned at her, she continued to smile. “What if Lucky and I had just decided to stay together? You know, we were laughing about a few weeks ago. We could have been happy together, maybe. Comfortable, at least. But we would have settled. Somewhere out there, there’s the perfect woman for him.”

Feeling nervous now because he hadn’t said anything, Elizabeth continued, “But if we had stayed together, we both would have missed out. He’ll find that person one day, but I needed to be free.” She leaned on the tips of her toes to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth. “So that I could find you.”

“Well, I’m not sorry you broke up with him,” Jason finally said, his hand sliding up to her nape of her neck. “After my accident, after I left the Quartermaines, you were the only person in my life that didn’t seem to care I wasn’t Jason Quartermaine anymore. You made me feel...” he hesitated.

“Normal. When everyone said I couldn’t be.”

“Well, normal’s relative,” Elizabeth murmured. “I hated the way Tony Jones talked about you, as if the brain damage had...made you less human.” She slid her hands inside his jacket, wrapping them around his waist. “I’d like to see him be half as well-adjusted as *you* are if he woke up with a blank slate.”

“So, maybe things *aren’t* going to be the same with your dad,” Jason said, brushing his lips across the tip of her nose. “Maybe he’ll drink when he gets out, and maybe he won’t. And maybe your brother will figure out how not be angry all the time. But you and me, Elizabeth, I don’t think *that’s* going to change.”

She grinned and leaned up to accept his kiss. “Oh, I don’t know about that, Jason. I think it might just get *better*.”

Chapter Nineteen

January 13, 2005

Haunted Star

*You didn't ask for this
Nobody ever would*

Emily stepped into the main room of the casino, and couldn't help the broad smile spreading across her face at the elaborate decorations her family had put together for her twenty-fifth birthday.

She saw her parents across the room, glasses of champagne in their hand. Monica raised her glass to her and then tipped her head to her grandparents, near one of the dinner tables.

Edward looked at her, his eyes unreadable, but his smile was warm. And then he nodded his head, as if to indicate she ought to look behind her. Emily turned, and she simply stopped.

“Nikolas.”

*Caught in the middle of this dysfunction
It's your sad reality*

“Oh, good.” Elizabeth leaned into Jason's side. “I hope he's going to convince her to put the ring back on.”

Her boyfriend scowled. “I told her not to let the old man tell her what to do.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Yes, well, Emily felt differently.” She watched one of her best friend's just stare at her estranged fiancé. “She was so happy when he proposed. I want her to light up like that again.”

And then Jason looked down at her, with a frown. “Do you want to get married?”

Elizabeth laughed. “Maybe one day, but certainly not now.” When he just kept staring at her, she flushed and sipped her champagne. That was the blessing and the curse of dating someone without a filter. One never *what* Jason would say next.

*It's your messed up family tree
And all you're left with all these questions*

Lulu hesitantly stepped in behind Emily and Nikolas and skirted around the edge of their staring at one another. She saw her parents across the room, and then Dillon by the appetizers. She checked the time on her phone, and sighed. Will was stopping by the house first to talk to his mother. He said that her family inspired him to do better with her.

Well, her lips curved into a grin at the thought. The Spencers were nothing if not inspirational. She saw Dillon motioning towards her and she nodded. With a finger touching the pearl necklace at her throat, she started for her best friend and partner in crime. Will might be the father of her child, but Dillon was her platonic life partner and they were going to have fun tonight.

*Are you gonna be like your father was and his father was?
Do you have to carry what they've handed down?*

Patrick eyed the drink in his hand and then looked across the room, where his sister and her boyfriend were talking quietly. She was smiling brightly, and even he looked less like a stone statue.

And he saw Robin with her father, sipping wine and laughing. He loved her so much—he'd never stopped. And with the news of her illness, of his father's accident, he'd quite simply blocked out the fact that she'd moved on, had planned on marrying someone else.

He didn't know who he was if he wasn't Patrick Drake, Robin Scorpio's childhood sweetheart. And he wasn't sure he was interested in finding out.

Leaving his barely touched drink on the bar, he started across the room towards the Scorpios.

*No, this is not your legacy
This is not your destiny
Yesterday does not define you*

Robin turned from her father who was deep in conversation with her uncle Mac about the Yankees' prospects for the next season as she saw Patrick approaching her. "I love Quartermaine parties," she said to him as he joined her. "They go all out every year."

"Yeah." He slid his hands in his pockets. "Were you happy with him?" he asked quietly.

Robin hesitated and her heart aching for this boy, for this man who had always been in her heart. "I was, Patrick. But maybe..." She hesitated. "Maybe it was easy because it was just us in Paris. Our own little world. I don't know what would have happened if he didn't get sick." Robin felt almost guilty for admitting what she'd only thought in her bed, alone at night. "But I *won't* pretend that I didn't love him."

Patrick nodded, dipping his head towards the ground. "Fair enough." Then he looked at her, his dark eyes burning into hers. "Do you think you could love *me* again?" He cleared his throat. "Never mind, don't answer that."

*No, this is not your legacy
This is not your meant to be
I can break the chains that bind you*

Will stepped into the casino, his eyes searching the room for a familiar face. He saw the Spencers by the blackjack table, and grinned because he could tell Lu's mom was trying to discourage her husband from placing another bet. He saw Patrick winding away from a sad-looking Robin towards his sister

and Jason.

And he saw Lulu laughing by the appetizers with Dillon.

He sighed, because he really *did* love her. He was just afraid it wasn't the right kind of love, the kind that could keep a family together through the hard times. But it was a good, steady love that might end up fading into friendship.

And there were worst things in life than parents who were friends. He lifted his chin and started towards some friends from school, leaving Lulu to enjoy her time with her best friend. He was going to be okay, whether he lived with his mother (which seemed unlikely given her unhappiness at Lulu's pregnancy), or he stayed with the Spencers.

He was going to be a better man than his father, and he was going to be a better father than the Drake men before him.

*I have a dream for you
It's better than where you've been
It's bigger than your imagination*

Jason had excused himself to grudgingly say hello to Monica who had been casting sad looks in their direction all night, as Patrick approached them. "Hey," he nodded to his sister. "You look nice, tonight."

"Thanks." She hesitated. "Did...you argue with Robin?"

He shook his head and glanced back towards his ex-girlfriend standing with her father, her uncle and one of her younger cousins. "No. I'm just...trying to come to terms with the fact that she's not the one."

"Patrick..." She reached out to touch his forearm. "You don't know what. You *can't* know that. You guys are friends, and you can't see what's in the future." Elizabeth hesitated. "But maybe she's not. You'll never know if you don't open yourself back up to love."

He nodded. "I know, I get that, Ellie. It's the one thing Robin has beat into me in..." He let out a sound that was almost a huff mixed with a chuckle. "Has she *only* been home a month?"

"See?" Elizabeth arched an eyebrow. "Four measly weeks, you don't know what could happen. Just...give yourself a chance. I love you, you annoying bastard." She glanced down. "You, me and Will, we're it. We have to stick together."

"Don't worry." Patrick brushed a kiss across her forehead. "You're stuck with me."

*You're gonna find real love
And you're gonna hold your kids
You'll change the course of generations*

“I can’t believe my grandfather invited you,” Emily murmured as Nikolas passed her a glass of champagne. “Are you positive he *meant* it?”

Edward approached them as he heard Emily’s statement. He cleared his throat. “I did.” He looked at his granddaughter, his beloved little girl all grown up. “I’m a stubborn old man who likes to believe he can control the people in his life. That being said, Emily...my dear, you *are* my granddaughter no matter whom you may marry. You can’t change that.” He scowled. “You’re a Quartermaine now, and you can’t just walk away from that.”

Nikolas just muttered something under his breath and rolled his eyes.

“Grandfather, I love you so much,” Emily began, but her tears slid down her face as her grandfather fished something from his tuxedo pocket. “That’s my ring.”

“Alice filched it from your jewelry box after you finished getting ready tonight.” He held it out to Nikolas. “So you know that I accept it, young man. But if you ever hurt her...”

Nikolas took the ring and cleared his throat. “Mr. Quartermaine, I know that your approval and blessing means the world to Emily, and as she means the same to me, I hope we can find some common ground.”

“We already have, my boy.” Edward kissed Emily on the cheek. “We both love this woman.” He returned to his wife, who beamed at him.

Emily took a deep breath and held out her hand. “I know you didn’t think I made the right decision—”

“You did right by you,” Nikolas said, softly. He slid the diamond ring back on her finger. “So let me do right by me. I love you, and we’re going to spend the rest of our lives together. All the rest? Doesn’t matter now.”

*No, this is not your legacy
This is not your destiny
Yesterday does not define you*

“I think my mother is trying to scheme my brother out of the CEO position at ELQ,” Dillon sighed as he perused the shrimp platter. “She’s just never satisfied.”

Lulu shrugged. “So we’ll just have to outscheme her. I’ll talk to Nikolas, he’s in business, and he’ll have some ideas to protect Ned.”

Dillon frowned. “You’re *pregnant*. We can’t be doing our old stuff anymore, Lu—”

She planted her hands on her hips. “Watch it, buddy. Don’t let me hear you say that being pregnant means I can’t wreak havoc on this unsuspecting world. I’ve always been the brains behind this operation, you’re just the brawn.”

“And that,” Dillon mused as he pooped a shrimp in his mouth, “is how we ended up sitting next to an

albino you thought was Kristen Bell on a bus to Minneapolis in the middle of winter.”

“I really do love you, you know.” She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “Chicks and guys come and go, but you and me, Dillon, *this* is forever. I love my family, they’re amazing, and Will’s been stand-up about this. I don’t know if we’ll get back together, but *you’re* my best friend in the whole world and I just don’t work without you.”

Dillon grinned. “Well, I will say, Lesley Lu Spencer, with you, there’s *never* a dull moment.” He tweaked one of his curls. “You really think we can outscheme Tracy Quartermaine?”

Her grin broadened. “We’re sure as hell going to try.”

*No, this is not your legacy
This is not your meant to be
I can break the chains that bind you*

Robin found Patrick as he was leaving his sister in the capable hands of friends from the hospital. “Hey...you just walked away earlier—”

“I’m sorry.” He took a champagne glass from a passing waiter. “It wasn’t a fair thing to ask you—”

“Patrick.” Her dark eyes were soft. “I don’t know if we’re going to be together again. It seems *ridiculous* to rule it out because at the end of the day, I still love you and you still love me. And it’s insane to think that it won’t matter down the road. But I just got home. I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow, much less next month.”

He nodded. “I can live with that. I know I told you I wouldn’t be around waiting, but I don’t know...” He offered her that dimpled grin that had kept him out of trouble with her for years. “I’ve already waited three years for you to come home. We can be friends. For now.”

And she laughed, because though she had moved on while she was gone, she had never closed her heart to Patrick Drake, and she knew she never would.

*Cause you're my child
You're my chosen
You are loved
You are loved*

On the dance floor, Emily looked at her ring over Nikolas’s shoulder. “I missed this ring,” she murmured. “My hand felt empty without it.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t take your concerns seriously.” He drew back to brush his lips against her cheek. “I didn’t want to see how our families could threaten us, but it’s different for me. I’m all Stefan really has. I knew he’d relent eventually. I...” he hesitated. “I forget sometimes you were adopted.”

“I think...” Emily’s eyes found her parents and she smiled. “I think sometimes, Nikolas, I’m the *only* one who does remember. I always felt like I had to be something more to deserve their love, to justify

their choice.”

“And it’s just not true. They love you regardless of whose blood is in your veins.” He grinned. “I can understand that. I find it simply impossible not to love you, so how can they not feel the same way?”

“We are going to have the best life,” Emily said, her eyes bright with dreams of future happiness.

*And I will restore
All that was broken
You are loved
You are loved*

“It wasn’t so bad talking to the Quartermaines was it?” Elizabeth asked as Jason finally escaped that side of the room and rejoined her side. “Monica loves you.”

“She’s not really as bad as...” He grimaced. “All the rest of them. I can live with Monica and Emily. And the kid, Dillon, he’s a little goofy, but he’s all right.” He slid his arm around her waist. “I saw you talking to your brother earlier. Everything okay?”

“Yeah.” She leaned her cheek against his shoulder. “Yeah, I really believe that this time.” She looked up at him. “I...want to say something to you, and you don’t have to say it back, except if you want to, but I know—”

He gently covered her mouth with his hand. “Elizabeth, I love you, too.”

She laughed, and wrapped her arms around his neck. “You know me better than anyone. And I do love you.”

*And just like the seasons change
Winter into spring*

//Edward taps his champagne glass in order to make a toast to his granddaughter. Emily blushes as he lavishes praise on her, and begins to cry when he formally announces her engagement.//

*You're bringing new life to your family tree now
Yes you are
You are*

//Laura comes up behind Lulu and wraps an arm around her shoulders. She touches the pearls around her neck and the two share a smile. Luke looks proud and worried.//

*No, this will be your legacy
This will be your destiny
Yesterday did not define you*

//Patrick and Robin are dancing, and he dips her almost too low. She bursts into laughter, and as Patrick twirls her back around, she catches her dad’s resigned smile.//

*No, this will be your legacy
This will be your meant to be
I can break the chains that bind you*

//Elizabeth whispers something into Jason's ear and he grins. She'll keep that promise later, he tells her. It's the least she can do after he got into a tuxedo for this.//

*And just like the seasons change
Winter into spring*

//Robin pulls Lulu away from her family over to Elizabeth and Emily and surprises the younger woman with a teddy bear, promising to stick by her. They've known Lulu since she was a little girl, and she's always been like a little sister to them. Lulu starts to cry and throws her arms around them. How did a girl get so lucky to know so many wonderful people? Her baby is going to have the best family. //

You're bringing new life to your family tree now

THE END

Author's Note

In December 2005, I was introduced to the gorgeous dimples of Patrick Drake, and shortly after his first scene with Elizabeth, I began to write the first scene in this story. It wasn't until I reached the end of the first chapter that I even knew what I was going to do with this story — but I wrote Robin, Lulu, Emily and Elizabeth commiserating about the fathers and suddenly knew.

I thought about stringing this out until I figured out if Lulu and Will should be back together, to reunite Patrick and Robin, but it was never about those specific things. It was about four women, their love for their family and friends, and getting them past the struggle.

I grew up on GH in the 90s when it was this amazing mixture of action and adventure, family, love, friendship, secrets and drama. People were honestly friends who loved one another, not plot points on the way to the next story, so *Daughters* is kind of my nod to that old history. These relationships and friendships still exist under the muck on GH, because you can't kill history. It's probably the reason I keep going back.

Thanks for reading. If you've enjoyed it all the way through, please think about dropping me even a brief line to let me know.

In Chapter 19, the song used is *Family Tree* by Matthew West. Fantastic song on an equally fantastic album.