

Chapter 10

*Always pushing and pulling
Sometimes vanity takes vacation time on me
I'm in a daze stumbling bewildered
North of gravity head up in the stratosphere
You and I roller coaster riding love
You're the center of adrenaline
And I'm beginning to understand
- The Best Thing, Savage Garden*

Sunday, January 2, 2000

Corinthos Penthouse: Living Room

Alexis yanked off her reading glasses and stared. "What did you just ask me to do?" she demanded.

Sonny held out a mug of coffee. "Draw up a preliminary prenuptial agreement for Jason and Elizabeth and refresh yourself on spousal privilege. Oh, and meet us at the clerk's office tomorrow to get the marriage license."

Alexis didn't reach out for the coffee, so Sonny set it down in front of her. "He's not really going through with this asinine plan, is he? When I mentioned it, it was—he wasn't supposed to take me seriously!"

"I wondered who planted the seed in his head." Sonny returned to the coffee bar, poured his own cup. "It didn't occur to me, to be quite honest, but it really does solve a number of our problems."

"Oh, if Audrey ever finds out about this, she's going to murder me," Alexis muttered. "You know, I was already on thin ice as the hospital's attorney after I took you and Jason on as a client — she'll be calling the board of directors—"

"Elizabeth is an adult—"

"Who graduated from high school last year," Alexis said. "She's a child—"

"And Jason woke up from a coma three years ago without a single memory of his first twenty-two years. His life experience was reset to zero," Sonny interrupted. "Look, I'm not going to stand here and tell the man he's too old for her. I've made plenty of mistakes in my relationships — it's not like he's a grown man who's been out here for seven years as an adult—"

"No, but—" Alexis held up her hands. "Okay. Okay. I get what you're saying. It's just—I mentioned it to Jason because he seemed upset, but because I knew *he'd* never go for it—"

"It was my impression," Sonny said carefully, "that he hadn't intended to consider it seriously. Our plan was to have him leave town. I imagine when he presented that to Elizabeth, she pushed him for other options. Having negotiated with Elizabeth on other matters, I know that she's tough and doesn't back down when she knows she's right."

"But is she?" Alexis wanted to know. "Can she possibly understand what she's getting herself into?"

"I don't know if anyone ever really knows what they're getting into when it comes to marriage," Sonny said. "There are people who date for years, get married, and divorce within the first year. Alexis, if you're not comfortable—"

"I just—I feel responsible." Alexis picked up the coffee. "She's been through a lot. And it's not just losing Lucky Spencer last year. Sonny, I don't know how familiar you are with her history—"

"I'd heard a few things from Luke, but nothing solid. But when she let Jason stay in her studio last month, I wanted to know how she'd hold up. I had Benny run her." Sonny sat down, his eyes sober. "Her outcry at the trial last year made the papers. I was just getting settled back in town, I missed it. She accused a photographer of raping her."

"The same photographer who blackmailed Emily Quartermaine and held her and Elizabeth hostage in his studio," Alexis said tightly. "Yes. He confessed to the rape when Elizabeth went to help Emily. I don't know any of the details—"

"It was Valentine's Day, she was sixteen, and it was in the park," Sonny said quietly. "Don't ask how I got the police report."

"I wasn't going to." Alexis's features were pained. "She was a baby, Sonny. Just a baby. And it was only two years ago."

"I'm not going to sit here and pretend that I can sit in judgment of anyone, but particularly Elizabeth Webber. I know that she's had dozens of opportunities to cut ties with Jason and, at great personal and public cost, and she's rejected every one of them. She lost her reputation, her grandmother, and friends over this. If she has agreed to marry Jason to keep Carly from screwing up her life, I'm not going to tell her she's not ready or old enough to make that choice."

Alexis nodded. "All right. All right. And you have to know, I'd have these objections even if it weren't Jason. I like Jason. I like him better than you," she added, and Sonny made a face. "I just—I'll feel responsible if this ends badly."

"I think they're both going to surprise you," Sonny said. "I'd worry more about protecting *both* of them from the amount of stupid they're going to face when the world finds out."

"That's certainly true. All right, I'll draw up the preliminary details to have them review tomorrow, and review the literature on spousal privilege." She sighed. "What are you going to be doing while I slog through paperwork?"

"Planning a wedding." Sonny smiled as he raised his cup. "This has to look real, doesn't it? So I'm calling Father Coates, and, uh, I do need one more favor from you. What do you know about wedding dresses?"

Morgan Penthouse: Living Room

Elizabeth fiddled with the hem of her sweater as she made it to the bottom of the stairs and found Jason at the desk across the room, his pencil moving swiftly over what looked like accounting books. The chair squeaked as he straightened and twisted to look at her. "Hey."

"Hey." She nibbled on her bottom lip as she remained standing there. Yesterday everything had seemed so much more simple, she thought, even after the bomb in her studio. She and Jason were on the same page regarding their non-existent sex life, and she knew she could sleep in the same bed with him.

Now, she was staring across the room at her future husband, and she'd just had a massive panic attack at everything that label could and should mean.

"Are you hungry?" Jason wanted to know. He pushed himself to his feet. "I could—" He frowned towards the kitchen. "I don't know if there's any food in there, but maybe—"

"I'm okay." She wasn't. Her stomach was growling, but the words were out of her mouth before she knew she was going to lie, and why had she done that?

Why was it so hard to talk to him? Where had that ease and comfort gone? Had it disappeared the moment Carly had swaggered into Kelly's and reminded Elizabeth of all the ways that she could disappoint him?

Jason didn't seem to be any more at ease than she did, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I have to finish the books for the warehouse, but if you want—do you have

to work today?"

"No. No, I usually have Sundays off."

"We could go out. On the bike, I mean. Or go to the studio and get the rest of your stuff."

"Both of those sound good. I don't really have much there anyway. I didn't bring it from my grandmother's." Elizabeth paused. "Um, I guess I can't—or I shouldn't tell her. Right? Until it's over."

"You can tell anyone or whoever you want," Jason said. "But—"

"But my grandmother might not keep it to herself, and this only works if Carly doesn't find out until after. Yeah. I figured." Elizabeth nodded. And Audrey would hardly attend or be overjoyed. "Okay."

"I'm sorry—"

"Why are you apologizing? This was my idea," Elizabeth interrupted. "And my friends and family are the reason that any of this is happening. I didn't know Carly followed me to the studio — or she wouldn't know. No one, including Sorel, would know where you were if I'd done a better job." She sighed and wandered across the empty space between the staircase and window.

"It's not your fault. You can't control how people react—"

"Really? I could have predicted it," Elizabeth muttered. She sighed. "I'll find something to keep myself busy until you want to go—"

"Hey." Jason came to her, took her hands in his. "It's—it's not too late. If you want to change your mind."

Her eyes flew up to his, but his expression was guarded. Did *he* want to back out? Did he think he couldn't because *she* had pushed for it? "No. But I think maybe you do."

"I don't—"

"It's just—" She paused, trying to articulate what was swirling in her head. "Alexis told you about this, and then you didn't say anything. You didn't even suggest it until I got upset. If you'd rather go—"

"If I went," Jason said, cutting her off, "I might not be able to come back. And you'd

still be here. You were right last night. None of this goes away because I go." He brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. "And I don't want to go. I didn't. I just thought it was the best way to protect you."

"I can protect myself—"

"I know you can." He smiled, almost reluctantly. "But it doesn't stop me from wishing you didn't have to. Or wanting to take care of you. I care about you."

"I care about you, too," Elizabeth replied, though the word felt weak and vague. "I just—I don't want any of this—or what's going to happen to..." She paused. "I feel like we were just starting to figure out what *this* is, and now—" She shook her head. "I don't want to lose that."

"We won't." Jason kissed her forehead, then his lips found hers, and she sighed, melting into his embrace, wishing she felt as confident as he sounded. They were pouring gasoline on what had been, until then, a small flickering flame. Sure, it would burn hotter, brighter, and more intense than before — but it could also just as quickly burn itself out before she was ready to let it go.

But it was too late to turn back, and she'd just have to hold on for as long as she could. Jason might not have wanted to leave, but that didn't mean he really wanted to *marry* her. She just had to remember that part of it — the marriage, the wedding, the way the world would see them — it was just business. A way to protect her from Sorel, and to keep Jason and Bobbie safe from Carly's lies.

Jason cared about her, but he didn't love her, and he wasn't going to promise her forever after a few weeks. It would be a terrible mistake to forget that it was all just a fantasy, a dream that wouldn't—couldn't—last.

PCPD: Squad Room

Taggart rubbed the back of his neck as he flipped through a surveillance report, scowling at the notation that Elizabeth Webber hadn't spent a night in her studio in two days. They'd had a guy staking it out for any trash or anything she might discard because he knew that the typo on the search warrant had ruined their best chance at getting any solid evidence.

He hadn't really expected to find anything at the studio — Morgan was too smart for that—and, Taggart admitted to himself, reluctantly, Morgan was also unlikely to draw Elizabeth in that directly. Maybe she might look the other way if he was recuperating from an injury, but there was little chance she was a direct accomplice.

But he'd wanted to find something, *anything*, that might suggest Morgan had been

injured. A blood stain. Maybe some medicine she wasn't supposed to have — he just wanted to get Elizabeth on her own and talk some sense into her. She was a good kid, with a soft heart. And unswerving loyalty. Morgan had earned it, somehow, but it could be broken.

Taggart just needed to find a fracture in their relationship that could shatter the whole damn thing and get him what he needed.

He pulled out the autopsy report on Moreno, looking for anything he'd missed. Two gunshot wounds. One to the chest, one to the head—execution style. Different bullets had been pulled from the body, he noted. He went for the ballistics report —

"Any progress?"

Taggart glanced up at the commissioner, shook his head. "No. Just thinking it through. They pulled two different wounds from Moreno. One matches the type of ammunition for the gun registered in Morgan's name, but it's common. We'd never get a direct match."

"The other?"

"From Sig-Sauer. Not that he couldn't have two weapons, just doesn't—" Taggart paused. "Doesn't seem right. He follows the right laws," he muttered. "Has a concealed and carry permit for the Glock. He has a different license for two more Glocks — but they're for premises. Can't carry them outside the house and he's never been caught with them."

"He only uses the Glock?"

"That we know of. No telling how many unregistered he's got squirreled away—" He paused. "The chest wound matches Morgan's usual gun. But not the head wound."

"Not the kill shot." Mac sat next to him. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking Joseph Sorel probably doesn't mind Moreno being gone. And maybe, just maybe, he took advantage of a situation to make himself come out on top. We got reports of gunshots down near the pier that night. Late on November 30, almost into the next day. But by the time cops showed up, the scene was clean."

"And Moreno was pulled out of the harbor downstream."

"Figured he got dumped in a hurry." Taggart leaned back. "I can't prove it, but I think Morgan took fire, probably got wounded. He's responsible for the chest, and Sorel finished Moreno off."

"And you think he was injured because he disappeared," Mac continued. "And that's when the rumors started swirling about Elizabeth Webber."

"I hate that she's screwed up in all this." Taggert met the other man's eyes. "You know what I mean. Robin finally got out."

"Jason nearly did, too," Mac reminded him. "Maybe he would have stayed out if Sonny hadn't come back. Careful with this, Taggert." He got to his feet. "I saw the report on your interview with Elizabeth Webber, and the search warrant dismissal. She's a smart one. And she was with Lucky Spencer long enough to be introduced to the Spencer way of life — laws are more like suggestions to them."

"Yeah, I know about that." Taggert nodded. "I'm not an idiot, Mac. I'm waiting on a solid lead to come through. But someone has to know something about those weeks Morgan was out of sight. All I need is one domino to fall — I get Elizabeth in the box, I can find a way to get the truth out of her."

"Good luck."

Harborview Towers: Lobby

Carly looked around the nearly deserted lobby, making sure that no one could recognize her. The last thing she needed was some helpful Good Samaritan reporting to her husband or his damned family that she'd made a visit to Jason's place of residence.

When she was satisfied that no one could possibly know her, she went to the security desk. The guard behind it looked up, and his expression shifted to wariness. "Mrs. Quartermaine."

Carly flashed a forced smile. "Hey. Wally, it's good to see you. Been a while. Can you let Jason know I'm here?"

"Uh—" Wally sat straight. "No."

Carly narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean, no?"

"You don't have access to the penthouse floor." He paused. "Mr. Morgan told us so a few days ago. If you need him, I can call him and see if he'll come meet with you—"

"Then do that," Carly said, her teeth clenched. Jason thought he could avoid her? No. She'd given him time to think about her offer. She needed to make sure he understood what was at stake.

Wally sighed, picked up the phone. "Mr. Morgan, Mrs. Quartermaine would like to see you. Okay. Thank you." He set the phone down, met her eyes. "He's not available."

Carly gripped the edge of the counter. "Wally, you and I go way back—"

"I have my orders, Mrs. Quartermaine—"

"Stop calling me that!" she snapped.

"Maybe you can try again later."

"You make sure Jason knows that he can't avoid me forever. He's got forty-eight hours. You tell him that. I'll be back then to get my answer."

"Yes, ma'am."