

The Billionaire's Secret Wife

Chapter Fourteen

The next morning, Vanessa thought that maybe she'd spoken too soon. Zoe greeted her with, "Harry and John are looking for you. They want to see you immediately. In the Grand Conference Room."

Vanessa raised an eyebrow. It was the nicest one the firm had, the one the partners used to impress new recruits and clients. She walked briskly down the hall, getting a few strange looks along the way. They barely registered. Strange looks were becoming almost normal, now that she was working so little.

She stopped in front of the dark wood door and took a deep breath. The Grand Conference Room isn't designed for layoffs. You'll be okay.

She knocked once and went inside. The conference room had a long mahogany table with expensive leather chairs. The windows gave a panoramic view of downtown Los Angeles, and the pristine cream walls had built-in shelves that held strategically placed awards and photos of the partners posing with various VIPs. It had been designed to impress. Neither Harry nor John sat at the head of the table. Oh no. That seat currently belonged to another, far more important person: Barron Sterling.

Vanessa paused. Despite his age, Barron looked as languid and deadly as a great white shark. Fortunately his eyes twinkled with something that looked like good humor. She wondered about it for a split-second before remembering that it had to be because Justin had survived the crash. Totally understandable.

A Saville Row suit encased his solid body, only a hint of softness around the middle betraying his advanced years. He toyed with a sugar cookie that was on a plate in front of him.

Tags: Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 48

Vanessa nodded to him and turned to the partners. “You were looking for me?”

“Yes.” John glanced at his watch. “For the last twenty-six minutes.”

She flushed. “I wish you’d called.”

“Nonsense,” Barron said, his gaze turning flinty as he glanced at John.

“I’d never let anybody disturb my niece’s morning.”

She blinked a few times. “Your niece?”

Barron wiped his hands clean and rose. Facing her, he spread his arms.

“Welcome to the family, Vanessa.”

She stared at Barron, then at the partners. The latter looked quite pleased. They were actually beaming at her like she was a prize race-horse who’d just won the triple crown.

“Mr. Sterling, I think there’s been a mistake,” Vanessa said thinly.

Despite her suggestion to make their marriage public the night before, she was certain Justin hadn’t gone ahead and told his great-uncle. He knew how Barron was.

“Nonsense. I don’t make mistakes. And please, call me Barron.”

No mistakes? She bit the inside of her cheek. She could think of a few times, but mentioning them now wouldn’t be prudent.

Barron continued, “My only objection to all this is that you didn’t invite me to the wedding. Despite what you might’ve heard, I make a marvelous wedding guest.”

“I’m sure,” she said automatically. Her stomach suddenly started churning. “Excuse me,” she said, then bolted from the conference room. John yelled from behind her, and Barron muttered something. She couldn’t make out anything, her ears ringing. She reached the bathroom and emptied her stomach.

She rinsed and wiped her mouth. Her cheeks looked flushed, matching the apple red of her hair, but otherwise she was deathly pale. She put a hand to her forehead. How could Barron know about the marriage? As she walked out of the bathroom, she bumped into Stan. He gave her a smirk too big for his small head. “Now it’s Barron Sterling, eh?” “Back off, Stan.” She gritted her teeth at how shaky she sounded. It was galling to look weak in front of the enemy. Stan raised a supercilious eyebrow and walked off; she composed herself and marched back into the conference room.

Barron munched on his sugar cookies, while the partners sat to his left, making small talk and trying to appear nonchalant, as though an associate running out was an everyday occurrence. Vanessa closed the door. “Sorry about that.”

“Are you all right? You look a little peaked,” Barron said. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have barged in like this after the unfortunate incident yesterday, but I simply couldn’t wait.”

“I’m fine, thank y—”

“I agree with Mr. Sterling.” Apparently Barron hadn’t given Harry leave to call him by his first name. “You should take some time off. I’ve seen your billable hours, and you’ve been working too hard recently. We’re all quite concerned.”

Concerned? Vanessa’s jaw loosened. Harry hated associates billing fewer than a hundred hours a week, to the point that he called them “parasites.” He probably thought she was the most indolent sloth in the history of mankind since she was only working forty.

“Harry’s right,” Barron said.

“Sir, that’s—”

“Vanessa, we’re family now. You’ll call me Barron, or Uncle Barron, if you wish.”

Her hands tightened into fists. “Naturally.”

Barron rose to his full height. He wasn’t particularly tall, but the confident way he held himself gave him a commanding air. “Take a week or so off. We can do all the right things to welcome you into the family.

And perhaps you can change your name while you’re at it? Vanessa Sterling... It has a certain ring to it.”

She forced a smile. “I have to admit, it does,” she said, all the while thinking We’ll see.

* * *

Her cell phone was ringing in her purse when Vanessa made it back to her office. It was Kerri Lloyd, Justin’s cousin.

“Oh my gosh, I can’t believe you’re family now!” Kerri said. “I thought Barron was joking when he told me this morning.”

Tags: Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 49

“He wasn’t.”

“I see that. This is awesome.”

“Thank you,” Vanessa said through rubbery lips. She stood at her window, not really seeing the view.

There was a beat of silence. “You don’t sound so good. Are you still shocked about the accident?”

Vanessa made a non-committal noise.

“We’ve got to meet and chat. I never pegged Justin for the impulsive elopement type.” Then Kerri added, “You either, for that matter. But this is so romantic.”

Romantic? “There’s nothing to tell, really.” It had been about the baby. The heir. Saccharine I love yous had never been exchanged.

“You don’t expect me to believe that, do you? Listen, I gotta go, but we’re definitely meeting up sometime soon. Barron said it was a secret elopement, but now that it’s out, I’m sure your parents will want to chat.”

Kerri hung up as Vanessa bit back a groan. Damn it. It wasn’t just her parents, but her brothers who’d descend upon her. Shane might even call, for news this big.

Two knocks and her door opened. Zoe stuck her head in. “Hey, is it true you’re married to Justin Sterling?”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Everyone’s talking about it.”

She sighed. Apparently, gossip was the only thing in the universe that traveled faster than light. “Yes, it’s true.”

“Wow. No wonder you almost fainted yesterday.” Zoe flushed. “I wish I’d known. I would have phrased things a little differently.”

“It wasn’t your fault. We were trying to keep it quiet.”

“Still, it’s so romantic. Young love. Did you elope in Vegas?”

Vanessa shook her head. “Canada.”

“Huh. I had no idea Canada was an elopement destination.”

“We’re just crazy iconoclasts. Um, would you mind closing the door? I have a few things I need to wrap up. And if anybody calls, I’m not in.”

“Sure. By the way, Sandra said you have the next two weeks off. She wanted me to remind you.”

“Of course,” Vanessa said, trying not to kick her desk. Sandra was Harry Dickson’s secretary. Harry would’ve never given her that many days off if she’d asked, but since Barron had practically demanded it... “Thanks.”

Vanessa sat down. Her phone rang again, and she turned it off. So many emotions were roiling...and she wanted to throttle Justin for the mess in her office! How could he have let Barron know? Her husband had all the finesse of an elephant in heat.

She would’ve preferred to announce their marriage in a way that would minimize the disruption to both of their lives. Now, with everyone whispering about it everywhere, that was impossible.

Don’t be ungrateful. You would’ve given anything to have Justin alive just a day ago. You got your wish. Don’t get angry over something Barron’s done. Justin might not have had anything to do with it.

She closed her eyes and dragged in some air. Maybe it would be good for her to take some time off, talk with family, and figure out her next steps. This was just a minor hiccup in her life. Besides the firm was already making it clear she wouldn’t have made partner anyway. What did it matter if everyone knew she was a Sterling now? Her career was effectively over.

She turned the phone back on and called Iain and Mark first. Neither picked up—they were generally busy—so she left them both a message, letting them know she was married to Justin Sterling.

Dane, on the other hand, had an assistant who was a news and gossip magnet and superb at reading situations. She instantly connected Vanessa to him.

“Make it short; I’m in a meeting,” Dane said.

Vanessa sighed. Work before family—her oldest brother’s MO. “I got married.”

A stunned silence, then he said, “To whom?”

Tags: Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 50

“Justin Sterling.”

“Prenup?”

She

frowned. “No.”

“You did well then.”

“There’s more to a marriage than a prenup or lack thereof.”

“Of course. But it’s nice not to sign one, especially if you’re a woman and have fewer assets.”

“Do you ever actually listen to yourself?”

“Yes. And as a high-priced lawyer, you know I’m right.” He hung up.

She glared at the phone. She should’ve known Dane would be callous about the whole thing. Not even a token “congratulations.”

Well, what did she expect from the manipulative jerk? At least her three other brothers were nice. Since she no longer knew Shane’s number, given all his travels, she emailed him a short message, letting him know she was married and that she missed him. It wasn’t like Shane to be gone so long, as adventurous as he was.

Then she debated who she should call next. It was going to be either her mom or dad, and she flipped the “inner conflict resolution” quarter she kept in her desk drawer. It came up heads.

She dialed and waited. Ceinlys picked up on the fourth ring. “Hello dear.”
“Hi, Mom.”

A beat of silence. “What’s wrong?”

Vanessa closed her eyes briefly. There was no escaping the maternal mood radar. “I just wanted you to know that I, ah, got married. To Justin.”

“You what?”

“I married him. Justin Sterling.”

“Justin Sterling.”

“Yes.”

“When did this happen?”

“About seven weeks ago.”

“Vanessa!” Ceinlys gasped. “And you never told me. He didn’t mention it either...and both of you came over to my party!”

“Well, we weren’t going to tell anybody for the time be—”

“I am not ‘anybody.’ Really, Vanessa. Keeping an affair like this from your own mother. Marrying someone like him isn’t just a matter of love.” Ceinlys would know from experience. Vanessa covered her face with a hand.

“Did you negotiate your own prenup?” her mother asked.

She sighed. “There isn’t any prenup.” Not for a lack of trying. She would’ve preferred everything to be laid out crystal clear.

Ceinlys made a vague humming noise. “I see. Well. When is the honeymoon?”

“Whenever Barron decides is good, I guess,” Vanessa grumbled.

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 51

“That man. Don’t let him walk all over you. You’re family now, not one of the servants.”

“Don’t worry. By the way, I haven’t told this to anybody except Justin, but I’m pregnant.”

“Oh.” A short pause. “Is that...? Never mind. We should meet and talk about this. Can you get away? I’m in downtown at the moment, and I can be at the Starbucks across from your office in about ten minutes.”

“You don’t have to change your plans for me,” Vanessa said.

“Don’t be silly. It’s just some shopping.”

Ceinlys hung up, and Vanessa stared at her phone. Did she have enough time to talk to her dad? Maybe yes, maybe no. Biting her lip, she dialed his number and sighed with relief when it went to voice mail.

“Dad, I married Justin Sterling about seven weeks ago. I thought I should let you know before Barron calls. Love you, bye.”

She picked up her purse and got up, then hesitated. What the heck. She took her briefcase too. She had a feeling she wouldn’t be coming back to the office after talking with her mom. It looked like the partners really wanted her to take time off—anything to keep Barron Sterling happy.

There were stares as she left, but she kept her chin up. She would not be cowed by something like this.

Ceinlys had already ordered a drink by the time Vanessa had made it to Starbucks. She got an iced tea and joined her mother at a table in the corner.

Ceinlys was dressed in black slacks topped by a dark magenta silk blouse with a round neck. Stilettos encased her impeccably pedicured feet, and not a fleck of gray showed in her hair. Her makeup was perfect, her skin smooth and flawless. With diamonds at her ears and throat, she looked like the proverbial million bucks despite going through what had to be a stressful divorce. When people had the kind of assets Ceinlys and Salazar did, divorces rarely were clean and easy... even with a prenup.

Despite her cool disinterest, a few men were checking her out. Vanessa almost bared her teeth at them. Her mother wasn't on display at a meat market.

"So. The baby," Ceinlys said, getting straight to the point.

Vanessa sighed. "Almost eight weeks."

"Is that why you decided to marry?"

"It was mostly his decision. He said something about it's being the heir to the Sterling & Wilson fortune."

"Well, yes, I suppose. But surely, marriage wasn't necessary."

Vanessa took a sip of her tea, which was too bitter. She pushed it aside. "I'm not sure. It's complicated."

"Do you love him?" Ceinlys peered at her.

Vanessa shrugged, then cleared throat. "I don't know. We have...chemistry. We dated when I was in college and law school, then we—actually I—broke it off."

"So how did the pregnancy come about?"

Vanessa sighed. "I went to Chicago when I heard about your divorce."

"Ah." A frown creased Ceinlys's forehead briefly. "Do you still want to talk about my divorce?"

"Are you going to tell me to go see Samantha?"

A small smile appeared on her mother's lips. "No. I suppose that wasn't very nice of me. But at the time I didn't want to discuss the matter with anyone who might question my decision."

"Why not?"

"Because it was a very difficult one. And I didn't think I would be able to do what I needed to if people tried to talk me out of it."

"Do you still love him?" Vanessa asked.

Looking away, Ceinlys dragged in a lungful of air and exhaled softly. "In some ways."

"Even though he was so bad to you?"

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 52

"We were bad for each other. By the time I realized this, it was too late. There were three children, and I couldn't leave."

Vanessa tapped the table with a fingernail. The infamous Pryce prenup meant her mother would have lost custody of her children, and that wasn't something she would have risked.

"For a time I thought things might change if he realized the prenup had nothing to do with my decision to stay, but...we just weren't meant to be," Ceinlys added.

"Love isn't enough, is it?"

"No." Ceinlys reached over and held Vanessa's hand. "You're a smart girl, so maybe what I'm about to tell you is superfluous, but..." Something in Ceinlys's eyes shifted, grew hard. "Never forget you have to protect yourself. Don't ever let yourself be in a position where you have to depend on somebody else for your happiness and fulfillment in life. Don't

ever let emotions cloud your judgment and make you see things that aren't there. I don't want you to have the kind of life that I had. I want you to be free and happy."

Vanessa laid her other hand over her mother's. "Are you free and happy?"

Ceinlys's smile didn't reach her eyes. "Soon, dear. Soon I will be."

* * *

Salazar drained another glass of whiskey. The home office was dark except for the light on the desk. It illuminated his mother's portrait. Shirley Pryce had been a harshly beautiful woman with a mind that stayed sharp to the very end. The artist had put a small curve to her lips and softened the lines around her eyes. A complete lie. Shirley Pryce had never smiled easily, and her eyes had always been hard and vigilant.

"You wanted your grandkids to marry well. And gue...guess what? Vanessa snagged Justin Sterling! Can you believe it?" He toasted his mother. "Amazing what that girl can do, eh? Despite your worries about her 'over-education'."

He staggered over to the liquor cabinet. "S'pose I should call and congratulate Vanessa," he mumbled. "But that would take energy." Ever since Ceinlys had hired Samantha Jones, Salazar hadn't been able to focus on anything.

Why now? He couldn't figure it out. Did she think he'd change his mind about the prenup? Or was it something else?

It was really too bad the best liquors in his cabinet couldn't help him. Because he'd do anything to numb the bitter ball of panic in his gut.

Chapter Fifteen

His hands still on the keyboard, Justin took another look at his phone. Vanessa hadn't called him back or returned his texts about their weekend getaway to Mexico. Maybe she was occupied doing the busywork her partners had given her. Even though it was clearly bullshit, she dedicated

herself to the work, just like always. He appreciated that about her, even though her work ethic could be annoying from time to time.

When his phone rang, he answered immediately. “Justin Sterling.”

“Holy shit, you dog!”

He made a face. “Nate?”

“You married Vanessa Pryce? And you didn’t tell me when I asked you why you were flying to L.A. so much?”

“What are you talking about?” Justin flipped through all the possibilities in his mind. “Who told you that?”

“Barron. He had his assistant send out a text blast to everyone in the family just now. He said he’d already gone to L.A. personally to welcome her into the family.”

His stomach dropped like somebody had disemboweled him. “You’ve gotta be kidding. When did he go?”

“This morning.”

Justin bit back a curse. “How did he find out?”

“Unlike your erstwhile brother, Barron is a suspicious bastard. He probably checked on why you were flying back and forth between San Francisco and L.A. so much. I told you to watch your expenses.”

“Damn it.” Justin gritted his teeth, thinking shit shit shit. “Okay, thanks. Gotta go.” He hung up. No wonder Vanessa hadn’t contacted him. She was probably furious right now. He tried her number again, but it went to voice mail. He tried the next person on his list.

“How are you doing, Justin? I hear the doctor gave you a clean bill of health, but I don’t know if I can trust it.”

Justin reined in his temper at the droll tone. “Barron, what did you do?”

“Be more specific. I’ve done a lot of things in my life.

Actually you can hang up now. I’m right outside your office.”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 53

Barron cut the line and simultaneously opened the door to Justin’s office. He looked hale and happy, his color high as he walked inside and took an armchair near Justin’s desk. “You horrible child. You should’ve invited me to the wedding.”

“Have you considered the possibility that maybe we didn’t want to make a big deal about it? That we wanted to keep it to ourselves?”

“Why on earth would you do that?”

“Various reasons.” It wasn’t really a lie. Vanessa had her big reason, and Justin had the reason of wanting to show support and make her happy. “We were going to keep it quiet until July.”

“July! Ridiculous.”

A secretary scurried in with a tray of hot tea and sugar cookies. She left it on the table by Barron and ran out as quickly she could.

When the door closed behind her, Justin said, “It may seem ridiculous to you, but not to us. You should’ve at least talked to me first.”

The good humor leached from Barron’s face. “You were unreachable this morning.”

“Not on purpose.” He’d been on a commercial flight and unable to use his phone.

“I wasn’t going to wait. This is about the family.”

“No. This is about you trying to show everyone you’re still in charge.”

“I am in charge. I’m the head of this family!”

Justin stared at Barron, who stared right back. This is it, Justin thought. If he didn’t put his foot down now, Barron would continue to interfere whenever he felt like it. No more. No way. “Then I’m resigning.”

“What?” Barron said in a booming voice.

“I quit. If you want to be in charge, you don’t need me. I won’t play this game, Barron.”

“Do you think you’re irreplaceable?”

Justin gave him a slight smile. “I wouldn’t go that far. Let’s say...very difficult to replace. You’ll want a family member who’ll be okay with attempting to run the company while all the executives try to gauge your intentions. But Sterling & Wilson is your legacy, so of course you’ll want that person to be trained. And you have Kerri, Nate, Robert, Benjamin and Beatrice to choose from. Thankfully they’re all intelligent...it won’t be that difficult to mold them.”

“You’ll be cut off.”

“That doesn’t bother me.”

Barron gave him a penetrating squint. “What’s changed? The idea that you might not be my heir always bothered you.”

“I found something I value more than Sterling & Wilson.”

Barron snorted, then chuckled, the sound reluctant and soft. He reached for his tea. “All this over a girl.”

“She’s my wife. And she’s pregnant.”

Barron choked on his tea, and Justin walked over to pound his great-uncle’s back with slightly more force than was necessary.

“Pregnant?” Barron gasped. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. About eight weeks now.”

A huge grin split Barron’s face. “Kerri, and now you!” He let out a booming laugh. “Wonderful!”

“I’m still quitting.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Sterling & Wilson is also your son’s legacy.”

“It may not be a son,” Justin pointed out.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 54

“Bah. Son, daughter, what does it matter? Girls can lead a company just as well as boys.”

Justin watched his uncle with bemusement. The old curmudgeon sometimes surprised him.

“If it would make you feel better, I suppose I could try to be more considerate of your situation.” Barron pursed his lips, but then he noticed the sugar cookies laid out for him. “By the way, did that marketing VP turn in his resignation?”

“Who, Ross?” Justin frowned. “No.”

“If he doesn’t do so by COB today, fire him.”

“Why?”

“He came to me to discuss your comments on his latest ideas yesterday, and I told him to resign.”

Justin scowled.

“You have to make examples of a few. Then things will be fine. I won’t overrule you no matter who you fire. I’m on the board, but that doesn’t mean I want to make managerial decisions. That’s your job.”

“Fine. I’ll talk with Hayashi and see if we can cut the strings on his golden parachute.”

Barron smiled. “See? There’s a reason I chose you. We always were on the same wavelength, as you youngsters like to say.”

* * *

After Barron left, Justin got up and stretched, then poured himself a drink. Finally, it looked like he was going to have full control of the company. It was a considerable weight off his shoulders.

As he sipped his scotch he glanced at the clock. It was already a little after one thirty. It was a Friday and victory or no, he didn’t feel like staying in the office any longer. Just at that moment a notice came in that there was a replacement jet and pilot waiting for him at the airport.

Okay, time to go to L.A. and do some damage control. But first, he needed to take care of a bit of business.

Rita helped him put away all his documents. “Anything else before you leave?”

“Actually, there is. Can you ask Keith Ross to come to my office?”

“Sure.”

“And get the security team ready to escort him out.”

Her smile faltered. “Uh... Is he being let go?”

“Yes, but don’t tell him. You know the protocol.”

She nodded. A few minutes later, Keith showed up. He was always well-packaged—an expensive suit, an expensive watch and expensive shoes.

His dark hair was slicked back, the high forehead shiny as a pebble in a river. “Hey, boss. You wanted to see me?”

“Yes. Close the door.” Justin pointed his chin at the armchair and waited until the other man was seated. “You’re being let go effective immediately.”

His eyes bulged out, making him look like a goldfish. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“Why? My performance has been exemplary.”

“If you truly believe that, you’re delusional. Your performance has been adequate, but is outweighed by your disruptive influence. Nobody can undermine my authority and expect to stay on my team.”

“Jesus.” He raked a hand through his hair. “Is this because I called Barron yesterday?”

Justin merely sat back and watched Keith’s face turn red.

“It was just to get some feedback. It wasn’t like I was going over your head.”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 55

“Spin, spin, spin,” Justin said, circling his finger in the air.

“Come on! I have a family.”

“Then you should’ve done your job, which doesn’t include running to Barron every time you disagree with my decisions. I sit in the CEO’s seat. I call the shots.”

“Justin—”

“I’ve been lenient with you, but obviously that hasn’t worked. Security will escort you out.” Justin got up and left, while the former VP sputtered. Outside his office two large men dressed in black were waiting.

That taken care of, he called Mark Pryce to make a reservation at his restaurant. They should probably do a big family dinner with Vanessa’s relatives since none of them had gotten invited to the wedding. Then he groaned when he saw a call from his mother. Ever since his father passed away, she’d lived like a hermit, but for her to call was serious. There was no way to avoid this one.

“Hi, Mom!” he said extra cheerily.

“Justin Augustine Sterling!”

He winced. She hadn’t used his full name or that tone of voice since he was twelve.

“I cannot believe you got married and didn’t tell me about it!”

He didn’t mention she wouldn’t have come to the ceremony anyway since she didn’t like to travel, and a small town in Ohio was probably not a suitable venue for an overpriced high society wedding. “I didn’t invite Barron either,” he said lamely.

“He’s your great-uncle. I’m your mother!”

“I know, I know. Look, I’m s

orry. But don’t worry. I married a very nice, very smart girl. Vanessa Pryce. You remember her, right?” His mother might not get out much, but she didn’t live in a bunker either.

There was a pause. “Yes. The lawyer girl?”

“Right.”

“I thought you were dating London.”

“Well...I was. It didn’t work out.”

“And that was only a few weeks ago. How is it that you suddenly changed your mind and fell in love with Vanessa?”

Justin smiled at how outraged his mother sounded.

“Please don’t tell me you married her because of her looks. Vanessa’s a nice girl, but I’m afraid you might have gone for the looks. I’ve yet to see a girl that gorgeous, except possibly for the Fairchild girl.” Catherine Fairchild was so good-looking, she didn’t even seem human at times.

“Don’t worry, Mom. I didn’t marry her for looks. We’ve been dating on and off since college. You remember how I went to Stanford, even though Barron wanted me to go to Harvard?”

“Yes. You argued quite a bit over that, as I recall.”

“Vanessa was attending Stanford Law.”

“Oh.”

“As much as I love a pretty face, I also enjoy good conversation.”

She sighed. “I suppose I ought to have more faith, but it’s so difficult. Barron gave you too much of everything too soon. It’s just not normal for a young man to grow up the way you did and not lose some sense of proportion. I never like how he kept pushing you to be as horrible and entitled as possible.”

He chuckled. It was no secret she disapproved of Barron’s Machiavellian ways. “Don’t worry, Mom. I haven’t forgotten anything you taught me.”

“Good. But you’re going to bring her home soon? I want to see her.”

“We’ll have to see our schedule. She’s pretty busy. Besides, she’s pregnant.”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 56

“Already?” There was a pause. “Did she get pregnant before or after you married her?”

“I...don’t know. It happened so fast.”

“I suppose it doesn’t really matter.” She let out something that sounded suspiciously like a squeal. “Oh my stars, I’m going to be a grandmother!”

“Looks like it.”

“All right then. You bring her home soon. And let me know if she’s allergic to anything. I’m going to cook.”

Justin smiled at that. His mother rarely cooked these days, but when she did it was a treat. “All right. Will do. Love you, Mom.”

“Love you too. I hope you two make each other as happy as your father made me.”

Chapter Sixteen

By the time Vanessa arrived home a little after five, Justin was waiting for her. She gave him a hard look. “I can’t believe you did what you did.”

He put his hands up, palms out. “Hey, I didn’t tell anyone. Barron found out.”

“How? We were in a helicopter, and our witnesses were your lawyers. Did they talk?”

“No. It’s my fault. He noticed expenses related to my commute and decided to dig around.”

“Expenses? Since when does the world’s fifth richest man worry about expenses?”

“I know. But Barron’s suspicious. He didn’t grow up rich, so he checks everything. I should’ve anticipated that and done things differently.” Justin made a face. “Was he bad?”

“You would not believe! He forced two weeks’ vacation on me. He insisted I be welcomed ‘properly’ into the family without consulting me on the timing or anything. No, it’s what he wants, so that’s the way it’s going to happen.” Vanessa stopped to take a breath. “FYI, Mom knows about the baby. There was no way I could keep quiet about us once Barron visited the office. Then of course Mom wanted to know why we married, so I had to tell her.”

“That’s fine. Your mom has every right to worry.”

Vanessa nodded, not telling him about the rest of the conversation. Her mother had always wanted her to protect herself, and she knew that was the smart thing to do. She was comfortable, but didn’t have as much money as people assumed, since after having taken her inheritance to buy the condo and pay off her debts, she’d spent most of it setting up a nationwide non-profit organization, Just and Proper Help, to provide legal aid to the poor. The only person who knew she was behind it was Gavin Lloyd, and that was only because he managed its assets. She’d never had the time to really get involved in running the NPO, and she preferred to keep her connection to it quiet.

“We have a reservation at Éternité tonight,” Justin said. “Mark and Iain will be joining us, probably with their fiancées.”

Ah, okay. That explained why her brothers hadn’t called yet. They were probably saving all their questions for the face-to-face inquisition. At least Justin would be there to help her handle them. I should get my rings from the jewelry box for dinner. There was no reason to keep them hidden anymore.

“I’m not sure about Dane, though. I just left a message with his assistant. And I invited your parents as well.”

She looked up quickly. “Both of them?”

“Yes. I thought about doing it separately, but each asked me to invite the other.”

Vanessa frowned. She'd been certain they wouldn't want to be anywhere near each other. Maybe they just didn't want to be jerks in front of the new Sterling son-in-law. Getting Justin was a coup by anyone's standards, and if her grandmother had been alive, she would've praised Vanessa to the skies. “By the way, Kerri called. I think we may have to do an obligatory dinner or something soon with your side of the family, too.”

“No, we don't, not unless you want to.”

She shook her head. “The cat's out of the bag, so we should do what's expected of us. I don't want any friction, especially right off the bat.” She knew what that was like at home with her family, all the tension and unspoken words on every holiday. It would be nice to avoid that, not just for her sake, but for the sake of their child. She didn't particularly look forward to holidays, but she wanted her children to anticipate every one of them with joy.

“Okay. I'll take care of it. And let Rita know when your next doctor's appointment is so she can put that on my calendar.”

“Aren't you going to be busy?” The accident from the day before must've screwed up his schedule for the next few weeks.

“I'm always busy.” He put a warm, strong hand over her belly. “But you and the baby matter more.”

She blinked away sudden tears. She didn't know why she felt like crying just now when he was being so sweet. It had to be hormones.

Or maybe she was just scared he was becoming too irresistible for her own good. She could put up a shield against thoughtless gestures and harsh words, but what protection was there against such sweetness when all she wanted to do was sink into it? It spun seductive images of their future, each one a giant wave of warmth and happiness washing over the dark frissons of her doubts.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 57

She put her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. Then wished fervently that what they had would never change.

* * *

Éternité was packed by the time Vanessa and Justin arrived. It was an interesting melding of French and Japanese sensibilities. The transparent hangings with hand-embroidered designs swirling like flags from the high ceiling reflected the meeting of east and west. Justin had never been to the restaurant, but he assumed it would be excellent—after all, it was Mark’s.

The tuxedoed maître d’ led them to a private party room on the second level. Justin’s mouth watered at the scent of seared meat and seafood and butter and sauces. He hadn’t realized he was quite that hungry. He turned to Vanessa. “Are you feeling okay? No nausea or anything?”

“I’m fine.”

He squeezed her gently, and they went in to meet their dinner companions.

Her brothers, Iain and Mark, were both dark with what everyone called the classic Pryce profile—clean and aristocratic, with a high forehead and a patrician angle to the bridge of the nose. Nobody looking at them would have ever questioned the family connection. Justin noted Iain’s slightly narrowed eyes. His friend was probably feeling conflicted right now. He was quite protective of his siblings, since Dane, the oldest Pryce brother, was somewhat of a jerk. Justin considered Iain the “good cop” of the two, while Mark was just laid back.

As predicted, they’d also brought their fiancées. Next to Iain was a brunette with a shy smile who must be Jane Connolly. How surprising. Justin had always thought his friend would end up with a flashy model

named after a fruit. Mark had come with Hilary Rosenberg, whom Justin was familiar with already. He and her boss were related by marriage.

Hilary and Jane rose and hugged Vanessa, then Hilary introduced Jane and Justin, while the Pryce men greeted their sister.

“Where are your folks?” Justin asked.

“They’re both running late,” Mark said. “Just called a few minutes ago. Separately, of course. We better talk before they show.”

Justin quirked an eyebrow. Surely Salazar and Ceinlys could be civilized for something like this, even if it came during their divorce. After all, they’d been civilized while they were married, and their relationship had been nothing more than a wedded farce.

Iain turned to Vanessa. “Tell me how this came about.”

“How it came about? We eloped. What’s there to say?”

Mark snorted. “You’re not the eloping type.” He opened the menu and perused it. A superfluous gesture. Mark probably knew every item by heart. “Don’t get the special,” he said.

“Why not?” Justin asked, eyeing the tuna.

“Specials generally mean ‘old but not yet bad’ stuff we’re trying to unload. The lobsters are good today,” Mark said.

And most likely the most expensive item. The menu didn’t have prices on it, but Justin could play this. “Then we’ll have lobsters.”

“An excellent choice!” Jane said. “André is a genius with lobsters.”

“Didn’t you say that about him and lamb last time?” Iain asked.

She looked up at him adoringly. “He’s a genius with anything related to food.”

Justin watched the lovebirds in front of him chatting and smiling. There was something about them that made his chest ache. Maybe it was the total intimacy and easy way the couples interacted. Justin didn't know how long they'd been

together, but it couldn't have been more than a few months.

He wished he and Vanessa had the same kind of easy rapport, but things had been tense between them for the past few months. Right now she was staring at the menu without really reading anything. "What's wrong?" he whispered. "Don't you see anything you like?"

"No. I'm sure everything's great."

A sheen of sweat glistened along her hairline. "Too warm in here?" Justin asked, but she shook her head.

"So, tell us how he proposed," Hilary said. "I think it's awesome that you couldn't wait to get married. So romantic."

"We can elope if you want," Mark said, and she slapped his arm with a laugh.

"I proposed on my plane. With that ring right there."

Vanessa tilted her hand so everyone could see it.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 58

"So simple but so elegant," Hilary breathed.

"Classy," Jane said. "I love it." She smiled at Justin. "You have great taste."

"True," Justin said. "I—"

Vanessa bolted to her feet, her face paper-white.

“What’s wrong?” Mark asked.

She ran out.

Hilary watched the direction Vanessa was running toward, then said, “Oh.”

“What?” Mark said.

She turned to Justin. “She’s pregnant. Isn’t she?”

No way to hide it now. Justin nodded.

She got up. “I’ll go see if she needs any help.”

“How far along is she?” Jane asked as Hilary left.

“About eight weeks, I guess.”

“Son of a bitch,” Iain muttered, and she put a hand on his sleeve. He glared at Justin. “I asked you to watch my sister, and you got her pregnant instead?” Then he stopped. “Wait, is that why she married you? Because you guys had a one-night stand and she felt like she had to get married or something?”

“For your information, we’ve never had one-night stand. We’ve been dating since she was in college and law school.”

Iain and Mark stared like he’d just told them Martians had landed in West Hollywood.

“Ten years? No way. We would’ve known about it,” Iain said.

“No offense, man, but you need better intel.”

“So what happened after law school?” Iain demanded.

Justin shrugged. How much to tell his irate friend? “We sort of went our separate ways, with her in L.A. and me in various cities for Sterling & Wilson. Sometimes we saw each other when it made sense.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this. You had, like, a decade of booty calls with my sister?”

“Uh, I wouldn’t put it quite that way.”

Jane cleared her throat. “Iain, if Vanessa didn’t want to marry him, she wouldn’t have. It’s not like she lacks options.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right,” Iain said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m okay with it.” He scowled at Justin. “Do you love her?”

Did he? Justin wanted her and wanted to spoil her and spend his life with her, but he wasn’t sure if it was the same thing as the kind of love Iain wanted to hear. Besides, he hadn’t even told Vanessa he loved her, and he wasn’t going to tell Iain anything first. So he merely cocked an eyebrow. “Why else would I have married her? I could’ve always just offered to pay child support instead.”

“And I would’ve kicked your ass,” Iain said.

Vanessa came back with Hilary. Her face was flushed, but otherwise she looked all right. “What are you guys talking about?” she asked, taking her seat next to Justin.

“Whether or not to kill Justin,” Iain said at the same time Mark said, “Dinner.” Mark signaled the waiter, and two baskets of warm bread appeared on the table. “You know it’s been a while since we had a big family dinner. Can we try to have a good one?”

“I second that motion,” Hilary said.

Jane raised a hand. “Third!”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 59

Everyone started ordering, much to Justin’s relief.

Then Salazar showed up, and Ceinlys a few moments later.

* * *

The last time Justin had seen Salazar was at his cousin Kerri's wedding. There, the older man had been robust and glowing with health and alcohol. He was still dashing in his carefully tailored clothes; silver touched the temples of his black hair just so to hint at worldliness without suggesting advanced age, and his well-cared for skin was a light bronze. But there was a dullness to him now, like a hazy film over glass.

Ceinlys, on the other hand, looked much the same as before—wealthy, elegant, with just a hint of superiority. Ironically enough, the latter reminded Justin of Shirley Pryce, Ceinlys's great adversary.

They sat at opposite ends of the table without any prompting. Salazar didn't even glance at the menu. "Just bring me the most expensive item and a shot of whiskey," he said, then turned to Justin. "So. Married."

Justin nodded.

Salazar's mouth smiled. "May you two be happy."

"I can't imagine why they wouldn't," Ceinlys said, not looking up from the menu. Her tone had the ponderousness of an English lit professor pontificating on the meaning of "nunnery" from Hamlet's monologue. She finally folded the leather folio closed. "You should have a real ceremony for family and friends."

"The original one they had was real enough." Salazar downed the shot of whiskey and gestured for another. "Unless you're implying it's fake?"

"No more fake than ours." Ceinlys gave him a precise smile, but her eyes stayed cold.

Salazar held her gaze, while his children reached for more bread. "If you want a ceremony, you can pay for it."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary. Barron undoubtedly wants one as well."

A waiter brought a glass of champagne for her, breaking the exchange. Justin leaned over. "Is it always like this?" he whispered to Vanessa.

"Actually they're behaving pretty well."

His jaw slackened. If this was the good version, he couldn't imagine how bad the regular one was. He'd assumed the family dinner would be semi-friendly since it was really about Vanessa and his marriage, not Salazar and Ceinlys's situation. Tension crept into the back of his neck and shoulders as Salazar and Ceinlys kept sniping at each other.

Vanessa put a hand over his wrist. "Relax. Just pretend you're not here, and you should be all right."

"Sorry. I should've never invited them."

"They're the parents, so we would've had to eat with them at some point. It's fine. Really." She flashed him a quick smile.

He squeezed her hand. "I can't believe you're trying to cheer me up."

She shrugged. "I'm used to this."

His phone buzzed, and he glanced at it. It was a text from Dane.

Can't make it. You're an idiot for inviting both my parents. If you make Vanessa unhappy, I'll kill you. Anything else we can discuss later.

Mentally shaking his head, Justin typed: Appreciate the congrats. He hesitated, then decided the rest of what he wanted to say needed to be said in person.

A few seconds later came a response: You're welcome.

The food smelled amazing, but he couldn't remember what it was or how it tasted. All he could feel was the hostility under the glittery civilized veneer that Vanessa's parents projected and the silent tension as the rest of them went through the motions of dining. By the time they reached the fish course, he couldn't eat anything without feeling like there was a drill

in his gut, and Vanessa hadn't touched much of anything except some bread.

Justin had heard rumors about how awkward Pryce family dinners could be, but this was worse than he'd imagined. No wonder Dane hadn't bothered to show. Justin felt like an idiot for having arranged the event in the first place.

At the same time he was beginning to see why Vanessa was so skittish about marriage, commitment and family. She had no role model, nothing she could emulate or aspire to.

r /> He ached for her and wished he could replace all her bad memories with good ones.

Chapter Seventeen

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 60

Dinner hadn't gone as badly as Vanessa had feared, all things considered. She'd already expected her parents to be unhappy, so that hadn't been surprising. But Justin, normally relaxed in situations where others would freeze up, had been so tense the whole time she felt awful for him.

As they waited for the valet to bring out their cars, Iain pulled her aside. "So you're really happy?" he asked.

She nodded.

"You know you can come to me any time there's a problem, right? I'm always here, always got your back. Don't let Justin intimidate you."

"Do I look like the 'easy to intimidate' type?"

“You don’t know him the way I do. He looks all nice and cool, but if you’re in the way of what he wants, he has no problem crushing you. He learned from the best.”

True. Barron Sterling had a terrible reputation in that regard. “I can handle Justin. And if I need help, I have your number.”

“Good.” He gave her an extra-tight hug. “There’s my car. Talk to you soon?”

She nodded and watched her brother leave with Jane. Then her mother came out—sans Salazar—and strode toward her rapidly.

“Oh, good you’re still here.” She gave Justin a quick smile. “Do you mind? I need to steal Vanessa for a moment.”

Ceinlys led Vanessa off a small distance and lowered her voice. “We already spoke about your marriage, so I won’t repeat what I said. Something occurred to me just now, and I thought you should be aware.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve been getting some odd calls. You probably will too.”

“What do you mean?”

“You just married one of the wealthiest and most influential men in the world. People will try to use you to get to him.”

Vanessa gaped at Ceinlys. “Seriously? Do we know anybody that crass?”

Ceinlys sighed. “It is simply impossible to underestimate some people’s behavior. Anyway, I need to say good-bye to Mark and Hilary. I just rushed out to catch you.” She gave Vanessa two air kisses, waved at Justin and slipped back into the restaurant.

Vanessa walked slowly back to Justin, who put an arm around her. “Your family has a lot of secrets.”

“They’re just worried.”

“I will make you happy.”

A small pang in her heart. Not because she didn't think he was lying, but she didn't think he realized how empty such promises were at the end of the day. Would he believe her if she told him her father had vowed the same to her mother? And just look at how the dinner had just turned out. “I don't think that's what they're worried about.”

Finally the valet brought out Justin's car. Just as she was about to walk inside, she stopped.

“What is it?” Justin said. “Do you feel sick again?”

“No.” She leaned forward, staring at a couple walking up the street toward them. The man's hand rested against the small of his companion's back, and the woman looked extremely familiar. As they passed under the light, her face was illuminated, and Vanessa gasped.

Justin looked at the couple. “Do you know them?”

“Yes. That's Ginger Maxwell!”

“Ah...who?”

“Shane's fiancée!”

Ginger was laughing at something the man said, her head tilted toward him in a comfortable, intimate way. Vanessa couldn't believe this. How dare she!

Without even thinking, Vanessa ran down the street after them. She felt Justin follow.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 61

“Hey!” Vanessa said. “You cheating scum!”

The man turned and stared. “Do I know you?”

“Not you. Her!” She pointed at Ginger.

The small blonde gaped. “Vanessa?”

“I would’ve never believed this if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. What the hell?”

The shock vanished from Ginger’s face. She put a hand on her hip. “Do you mind? I’m trying to have a nice evening out with my date here.”

“Oh my god, are you serious? You’re engaged to my brother!”

“I’m completely not engaged to your dickhead of a brother. He dumped me five months ago.” She turned to her date. “Really, I’m not engaged to anyone. I swear.”

Vanessa’s jaw slackened. “What? How... He contacted you?”

“No, like an idiot I went to see him. After I didn’t hear from him for weeks, I might add.” Something dark and painful flickered in her eyes, then died as she tightened her fists. “I’d waited since forever, and he acted like he didn’t even know me! So I’m moving on, because you know what? Shane’s not the only man out there.” Ginger linked fingers with her date. “Now if you’re just all done jumping to conclusions, we have a movie to catch.” They turned and walked off.

Justin put a hand on her shoulder. “You okay?”

Vanessa stared after the two. “I don’t get it.” Her mind felt blank. “They were so in love.” Was love not enough after all?

“Sometimes couples break up.”

“But with the love of their lives?”

“Maybe it wasn’t really the love of their lives.”

“No, no. Shane and Ginger were together since high school.”

“Well...feelings change.”

Like her parents. All those passionate love letters, but the love had turned into poison and they were now divorcing. Logically, she knew it was better than staying together and being miserable. You didn't have to be alone to feel lonely. But emotionally...

Her mother's words came back to her. Love wasn't enough. And children certainly weren't enough to keep a couple together. They were often pawns used to squeeze more concessions out of the other party.

Vanessa's marriage didn't even have love as the foundation. They were together for the baby, but would that be enough for them in later years? Or would Justin resent the fact that her pregnancy had trapped him into doing the right thing?

“I'm sure there's more to the story than just her version,” Justin was saying. “We won't know the whole truth until Shane gets back.”

The ring on her finger flashed, and she looked at the brilliant diamond, the sapphires...this supposed symbol of his commitment to her. But was it? Unlike most men, Justin could buy millions of those rings without a second thought. It was about as significant as a lollipop she'd received from a boy in kindergarten.

Suddenly cold, Vanessa hugged herself.

Chapter Eighteen

Vanessa went to a mid-morning class at the yoga studio. She was restless, and hoped some exercise would help her regain some balance. The previous night had been awful, full of crazy, vivid nightmares about her being trapped. She'd been as small as a cricket, and a clear glass jar had been put over her. She punched and kicked it, but it didn't even crack. Then as panic grew in her chest, she saw a gigantic Justin outside. He had a forefinger on the jar, and he was staring at her with a smug smile. “Gotcha.”

“Where's my family?” she'd yelled, but it had been no use.

Dane, Shane, Iain and Mark wagged their fingers at her, and then Ginger was there. She put her hand on the back of Justin's head and kissed him deeply, and he kissed her back.

Vanessa shook her head to clear her mind. It was just a bad dream, a mix of her anxiety and Ginger.

A petite brunette walked up. "Hey," she said.

There was an instant of non-recognition, then the name clicked. "Hi, Peggy."

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 62

"You here alone?"

"Yeah. Just me today."

"Oh." Peggy cleared her throat, her cheeks pinkening. "Do you mind if we talk privately for a moment before class?"

Vanessa checked the time. They had at least fifteen minutes before it started. "Sure."

The two women went to a green juice and smoothie bar adjacent to the studio. It served freshly made spinach and kale concoctions that Vanessa loved for the quick and easy micronutrient effect. It seemed more natural than taking a bunch of pills. "So."

"Um." Peggy's left foot started tapping rapidly. Vanessa glanced down at it, but Peggy seemed oblivious. "I... I didn't really come here for a job. I actually came to L.A. to see you. I called your law firm to see you, but they said you weren't available to take on any new clients and hung up on me."

Vanessa sighed and shot her an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry they treated you that way. I’ve been sort of”—she struggled for the right word—“busy with things.”

“I know. I heard you’re an amazing lawyer.”

With a career that was going nowhere fast. “If you want, I can give you some referrals.”

“Oh, no, please.” Peggy waved away. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“Okay, sure.”

“It’s just...I don’t know how to begin, but we’re sisters.”

“We’re... I’m sorry, what?”

“We’re sisters. Half-sisters, really.”

Vanessa’s mind blanked for a moment, then heat flooded her face. Was Peggy another of Salazar’s love children? She didn’t look anything like him, but it was entirely possible, given the number of mistresses her father had had. “Um. Okay... You’re sure about this?”

“One hundred percent. But I’m happy to take a test or whatever if you want.” Peggy shifted. “Look, I’m not here to ask anything for myself, but...the fact is, my mom has cancer, and neither one of us can afford the chemo. I was wondering if there’s any way you can help with the cost. I know it’s a lot to ask, but...” Peggy blinked fast, dropping her gaze. “I don’t know what else to do. I tried not to involve you, but it’s been impossible. It’s just...totally shameless of me to ask, but could you please do this for me? Save my mom? She’s all I have.”

Sighing, Vanessa pressed her temples. It would’ve been more logical for Peggy to approach Salazar, but he wasn’t an easy man to get to with his wall of lawyers and assistants. “I’ll see what I can do.” He’d given his other illegitimate child, Blaine, fifty million bucks. Vanessa didn’t see why he wouldn’t be as generous with his daughter.

Still, this would hurt Ceinlys. Vanessa remembered

how furious her mother had been when Salazar had claimed Blaine as his own. Couldn't her father have been more careful? Or maybe her mother would be happy this time, since it would strengthen her position in the divorce proceedings.

Peggy visibly sagged. "Thank you."

"How can I get in touch with you?"

"Here." Peggy jotted down ten digits on a napkin and handed it to Vanessa. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. I haven't done anything." Vanessa sucked down the rest of her smoothie and went outside. She had zero desire to exercise now.

She hopped into her car and drove to the family mansion. Her father lived there alone now, along with staff who kept the place clean and habitable. She'd always thought the place was somewhat ostentatious, but it'd been in the family for generations, and her family wasn't going to give it up just because she didn't care for it.

Al, impeccably dressed as always, welcomed her. The butler had been a standard fixture at her house ever since she could remember. "Miss."

"Is dad home?"

He nodded. "In his study."

She went to the second level. The study was large, with big windows, and held hundreds of books that nobody had read. Her grandmother, Shirley Pryce, had hated it when people touched them. One pale green wall had portraits of the Pryce grandparents.

Salazar was in a plushy armchair. The smile from the previous evening was gone, along with the sparkle in his eyes. His shoulders were slumped, his face slack like the skin was about to slide off it. The usual crispness of his clothes was gone, leaving him looking...sloppy. He was Dorian Gray after the mirror had broken, showing every year of his age.

Vanessa swallowed a gasp. How could he have changed so quickly? If she hadn't known how arrogant and proud he could be, she might have suggested he go see a doctor.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 63

“Congratulations on your marriage,” he said without getting up. A small smile ghosted on his lips. “Realized I wasn't cheery enough yesterday. Justin Sterling is quite a catch.”

“He is, but the ‘catch’ factor isn't why I married him.”

“Right, right. I heard you're pregnant. He had to do the right thing. Barron would've disowned him otherwise.”

Ignoring the jab, Vanessa sat on a couch perpendicular to his chair. “Dad, is there something you want to announce to the family?”

He frowned. “Like what?”

She sighed. “Have you been getting calls from a woman named Peggy?”

“Not that I know of, but Kim handles those things.”

Breathing deeply, Vanessa gave herself time to prep what she was about to say. “I saw your daughter today.”

He squinted, some of his usual sharpness coming back. “What?”

“Yep. Came up to me in yoga class, introduced herself as my half-sister. She said her mother's sick with cancer. She wanted to know if I could help out.”

“She's lying. If she approaches you again, call the police.”

Vanessa gasped. “How can you say that? Her mother's your former lover.”

“If I ever slept with her, which I doubt. Where is she from and what’s her mother’s name?”

“Her name’s Peggy Teeter, and I don’t know her mother’s name. But she’s from Provo, Utah.” This was probably futile. According to gossip, Salazar had lovers in every city in the country.

“I don’t recall ever sleeping with anyone named Teeter, and I never took a lover in Provo. Just because I have a reputation doesn’t mean I’m not discriminating.” He gave an offhand flick of his fingers. “Uptight religious girls aren’t really my thing.”

“So it’s just that simple to you?” Outrage suddenly seared through her. “I’ve never seen you act this cold toward women before. Are you worried about being responsible for the cancer treatment or is it something else?” She shook her head before he could answer. “No, wait. You want to deny everything, so you’ll look better in the court of public opinion and Mom won’t have as strong a case. Is that it?”

Suddenly Salazar blinked. “Wait, did you say Provo? And this woman claims she’s your sister?”

“Yes.”

“Not my daughter? Just your sister?”

Now that she thought about it, Peggy actually hadn’t said anything about Salazar. “Yes, but—”

He laughed. The sound was nasty but some animation came back to his face. “Oh, this is good.”

The sudden change in demeanor was startling. “What?” she said warily. “What’s good?”

Salazar shook his head mirthfully, wiping his eyes. “Well, honey, the fact is, you’re not related to this Peggy through me. You’re related through your mother.”

“Through...mom?”

“Oh yes. Peggy’s father was one of your mother’s boy toys.”

Vanessa’s jaw loosened, and her thoughts scattered. “Mom had a baby with another man?” But how could Ceinlys have hidden it? Peggy looked to be about Vanessa’s age.

A look of half regret and half pain passed through Salazar’s face. “Your mother had an affair, found herself pregnant and seduced me so she could pass the child off as mine. Except I knew it wasn’t.”

“How,” she whispered. “How could you be so sure?”

Salazar looked at her levelly. “Because I had a vasectomy right after Shane was born.”

Right after... Vanessa felt like somebody had punched her in the stomach, forgetting all about Peggy. An icy fist gripped her heart. “You’re lying.”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 64

“Fraid not.”

“But...why didn’t you let everyone know I’m not yours? It would’ve been so easy.”

“Ah, I didn’t want to make a big deal about it. What’s one extra mouth to feed?”

Her eyes burned. “Dad...” she whispered, but her voice was so low, she didn’t know if he heard her. She couldn’t breathe. One extra mouth to feed. Was that all she was to him?

“Don’t look at me like that. I’ve always been fair to you. If you want to know about your biological father, you’ll have to talk to Ceinlys. And I’d prefer that you didn’t advertise the fact that you aren’t mine. That would be embarrassing to your mother.”

“And to you.”

He shook his head. “Men have more leeway. Call it unfair all you want, but that’s the way society works. Ceinlys would be judged.”

“Why would you care?”

“Until the divorce is finalized, she’s still my wife. And my wife is my concern.”

She started shaking. How could her father sit there and talk in such a calm tone? “If Mom is really your concern, why did you hurt her by having affairs? Why did you stop loving her? You said you loved her when you proposed. You sent her hundreds of love letters and dried rose petals.”

All the warmth and humor left Salazar’s face. He looked as unyielding as a statue. “Because she hurt me first. She betrayed my love. The only thing she loved about me was my money. So she got it. But nothing beyond that, because she didn’t deserve it. Do you know what it’s like to sleep with a woman, knowing all the while she doesn’t want you?” His voice gained volume. “No, you wouldn’t. Because you’re young and stupid and idealistic and you think people only have sex for love or some such ridiculous reason. Listen very carefully, Vanessa. People have sex because it’s useful. It’s a tool you can use to cut or soothe, depending on your mood, and every time I had sex with your mother it cut me to the core. So I started having sex with other women to cut her back.” Suddenly he clicked his teeth shut and glared at her like it was her fault he’d said so much. “Out. Now!”

When she didn’t move fast enough to suit him, he threw a glass. It exploded against the wall behind her.

“Get out!” Veins stood in stark relief on his forehead.

Vanessa jumped to her feet and rushed out. She couldn’t believe what she’d heard. This had to be a horrible dream. She just hadn’t woken up yet. Soon her alarm would go off, Justin would smile at her, and she’d laugh at how crazy her

subconscious mind could be.

Her feet tangled, and she fell forward, landing on her palms in the hallway.

Al rushed up the stairs, his normally impassive face pale. “Miss, are you all right?”

Nausea that had nothing to do with morning sickness rolled through her. Dragging in air seemed impossible with the tight vise around her chest. She croaked, “Bathroom.”

He reached down and helped her up. They reached a small guest bathroom, and she threw up her breakfast. Her gut continued to clench and unclench like it wanted to expel every morsel, every drop. Even when nothing was left, her body kept spasming. Closing her eyes, she wished she could get rid of her shock and misery as easily as the food she’d had.

Finally she fell back on her heels, her head lolling listlessly against the cold tiled wall. Her insides felt like somebody had raked them clean. She crawled to the sink and gripped the porcelain edge, pulling herself up. Then very slowly, she flushed the toilet and cleaned herself up. The mirror showed her an awful reflection. Red blotches mottled her pale face, and tendrils of hair hung limp with sweat and water.

A small glass of ginger ale appeared in her vision. “This should help,” Al said.

“Thanks,” she said hoarsely. She took a small sip of the cold, sweet drink. Her throat hurt too much to finish it. “I’d like to go home. And if you heard anything, don’t tell anybody. I’ll deal with it later.” She had no idea what she was going to say about the news.

“Of course.” He glanced down at her still unsteady legs. “Would you like me to help you to your car?”

“Please.”

He escorted her down the stairs, his hands on her elbow and at the small of her back. She was grateful for the support. She didn't think she could've made it on her own.

She climbed into her car. Her hands were trembling so badly, it took her a couple of tries to start the engine.

Salazar—dad—isn't my dad after all. And she wasn't who she'd thought she was all her life.

Her parents hated each other, used sex to hurt each other. All the love they'd professed for each other had been a big fat joke, lies spun to lead them on the most miserable path imaginable.

No wonder her father had seemed preoccupied whenever he was dealing with her. He probably wondered about the other man every time he looked at her.

Hot tears streamed down her cheeks and wet her shirt. She'd never suspected her parents' marriage was something this foul. And never once did she expect to see her father lose control like that. Her father embodied cool, easy charm. Nothing...absolutely nothing had been able to ruffle his feathers.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 65

Vanessa put her hands on the steering wheel, but she was too shaky to drive. Her legs felt stiff and heavy, and there was no way she could drive back to her condo in her condition.

She managed to pull out her phone and speed-dial Justin. "Can you come get me?" she asked as soon as he answered.

"What's wrong?" His voice was tight. "Where are you?"

"Outside my parents' house. Hurry."

* * *

Justin cursed. Vanessa sounded awful, her voice thin and weak. He'd never heard her like that before. What had happened to her? And why was she at her parents' place instead of the yoga studio?

He wasn't familiar with L.A., but by taking directions over the phone as he drove he was able to reach the Pryces' place within an hour. She was slumped over the steering wheel. He got out of his car and knocked on the window. "Hey."

She raised her head. He gaped at how wretched she looked. Her eyes and nose were red, and tears glistened on her cheeks and chin. Her misery was a kick to his gut, and he opened the door.

"Sweetheart...what's wrong?"

He got the seatbelt out of the way and wrapped his arms around her. Her control seemed precarious, so he simply cradled her head on his shoulder for the moment. Tremors ran through her; he whispered soothing nothings as he stroked her back.

A man who had to be Salazar's butler appeared.

"What happened?" Justin demanded, starting to stand up.

"No." Vanessa put a hand on his chest. "I just want to go home. Please?"

It was an effort not to grab the butler and start shaking answers out of him, but Justin took a rough breath and nodded. He grabbed her keys, purse and other items. "I'll send somebody for the car."

"That isn't strictly necessary, sir," the man said. "I can have it driven to her condo this afternoon if you'll leave me the keys."

Justin nodded in agreement. That would be easier. He didn't want to leave Vanessa even for a moment.

She sat in the passenger seat, letting Justin take care of every detail. That more than anything else worried him. Vanessa was normally far too independent to just let people do things for her.

Her eyes were closed the entire time he drove, but he knew she wasn't asleep. The sound of her breathing was erratic, and every so often she'd wipe at her eyes.

When they reached the condo, he made some hot lemon tea and handed it to her. She took a few sips, leaning against the kitchen counter. Then wordlessly, she put the mug down and went to the bedroom, shoulders slumped and feet dragging. She barely managed to kick off her shoes before she fell on the bed and curled up, hugging a pillow. Justin spooned her, breathing in the soft scent of her shampoo and sweat.

The part of him that went out and fixed things wanted to grill her until she told him everything. Then he would know what to do. But the empathetic part could see that whatever had happened must've been pretty traumatic, and so it would be better to wait until she was ready to talk.

One thing he knew: whoever had hurt her was going to pay. People always said it was Barron who had no sense of proportion, that he was the meanest and most vengeful son of a bitch on the planet. They had no idea. Justin hadn't just learned from the old man, he'd surpassed him. Just because he kept his claws and fangs hidden didn't mean they weren't there.

"I met...my half-sister," Vanessa said finally.

He frowned. It was no secret her family had a half-brother named Blaine, who was Salazar's by-blow with some woman in Tennessee. "Blaine has a sister? I thought he was an only ch—"

"No. It's not Salazar's. It's"—she inhaled and exhaled—"hers. My mom's."

Justin looked up at the ceiling, thinking Uh oh...

"Her name's Peggy. My new half-sister."

He'd always known Ceinlys had lovers. Not that he'd ever blamed her for that—Salazar was the worst kind of playboy and would've driven Mother Theresa to cheat on him. But Justin had thought Ceinlys would be more careful. She had a lot more to risk by cheating. The prenup she'd signed ensured she'd lose everything if she misbehaved.

“So...this woman just looked you up out of the blue?” he asked.

“Not exactly. She wants some money.”

He sighed. He should've anticipated this and created a way to insulate her from greedy acquaintances and so on. People were going to know—already knew, in fact—that she was married to him, which to them was like winning a jackpot. Money brought out all the roaches. “I'm sorry. I hope you told her to contact my lawyer.”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 66

She snorted. “I don't know your lawyer. And I thought she was Dad's, so I wanted him to take care of her. She says her mother has cancer.”

“Let me guess. She wants you to pay for some expensive chemotherapy. Or no, wait...some new kind of experimental drug. One that costs a lot because it's not in mass production yet.”

She turned around. “That's pretty cynical.”

A frown was pulling her eyebrows together, and he put his forefinger on the spot. “Because honey,” he said gently, “that's always how it is. So what happened?”

“Dad told me she wasn't his kid because he'd never slept with anybody in Provo, the city where she's from. He also said”—her breath hitched—“I wasn't his.”

“What?”

“He knew about Mom’s affairs. He had a vasectomy after Shane was born. He said there was no way I could be his, but he looked the other way because he didn’t mind ‘another mouth to feed.’”

If Vanessa hadn’t needed him right then, he would’ve driven back to the Pryce mansion and beaten the crap out of her father. Salazar Pryce had lost the right to judge and say cruel things the moment he’d decided to cheat on his wife. Everyone knew he hadn’t even tried to be faithful. He’d started banging other women within a year of the marriage.

Vanessa’s gaze lowered. “He told me to get out. But it explained so much about how he’s treated me.”

“Was he nasty to you?” Justin asked, mentally starting a list of Salazar’s sins.

“It was more like he was always...preoccupied whenever I was around.”

“Bastard.”

“I thought maybe he was busy. I mean, he already had four rambunctious boys... Anyway, I think I was just in shock when Dad told me.”

“Do you want me to take care of your sister?”

“What do you mean by ‘take care of’ her? Don’t ignore her or send her away. She might be telling the truth.”

“Even so, I don’t like opportunistic parasites.”

“She might be desperate to save her mom. I don’t blame her.”

Justin sighed. “Okay. Let me check her out. If she’s who she says she is and her mother really has cancer, I can see about helping them. But if not, I’m going to make sure she never bothers you again.” It wouldn’t end at that. He would make sure she paid for causing Vanessa pain.

“Okay. Her cell phone number is in my purse. She wrote it on a napkin.”

Justin nodded.

“And Justin?”

“Yeah?”

She reached out and took his hand, twining their fingers together. “I’m glad you’re with me.”

His heart swelled so fast and so unexpectedly, it was like his chest would burst. “So am I.”

“I think I want to nap. Will you stay with me until I fall asleep?”

“Of course.” He kissed their linked hands and watched as she went drowsy and then, eventually, slept.

How odd that things ha

d gotten so much more complicated. He’d assumed that once she was his and their marriage had been made public, their lives would settle down into a simple rhythm and her worries would ease. Instead, circumstances were conspiring to pull her away from him emotionally.

For the first time, he had the thought that marriage and a baby might not be enough to keep her.

Chapter Nineteen

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 67

Out in the living room again, Justin gave himself a few minutes to consider Vanessa’s situation. He wanted to get started on this mysterious half-sister, but the whole thing had to be handled delicately.

Very delicately. Salazar apparently knew about Ceinlys’s other men but had been decent enough not to use the information against her. However, if it came out publicly that she not only had other lovers but had passed

off one of their children as her husband's, then the divorce would almost certainly become uglier. Justin didn't want that, as much to protect Vanessa as to protect Ceinlys herself.

He could use his family's usual investigator, but the man was a long-time friend of Barron's, and Justin didn't want his great-uncle knowing about any of this. It was none of his business.

He considered. The Lloyds have an investigator who won't say anything to anyone...

Justin called Kerri. "Hello, beautiful."

"Hello, handsome. What's up? I thought you'd be on a honeymoon."

"I'm taking a bathroom break."

"Eww. Are you calling me from a bathroom?"

He chuckled. "I'm actually at Vanessa's place right now. I was hoping you could call Pattington and give me a referral."

"What's the matter?"

"It's some delicate stuff that I don't want anybody knowing, especially Barron."

Kerri made a sympathetic noise. "I totally hear you on that. He can be so nosy."

"Tell me about it. So, Ms. Lloyd, how's pregnancy treating you?"

"Not too bad. I feel nauseous, and sometimes I get emotional, but other than that it's fine."

"You get emotional? Wow."

"It's the hormones," she grouched. "The stupidest thing can set me off. It's, like, a thousand times worse than PMS."

“Poor Ethan.”

“I know. Thankfully he loves me enough to put up with it.”

“A man among men. All right, listen, just hook me up with Pattington, and I’ll owe you.”

“Give me about ten minutes. And here’s his number.” She rattled off the investigator’s digits. “Good luck.”

Justin waited exactly ten minutes and dialed Pattington’s number. A man said, “Hello?”

“Justin Sterling.”

“Kerri told me to expect your call. What’s the problem?”

“Peggy from Provo.” He looked down at the napkin he’d fished out of his wife’s purse and read the numbers. “That’s her cell. She’s in L.A. right now. She claims to be my wife’s half-sister. Apparently Ceinlys Pryce had an affair.”

If Pattington was surprised, it didn’t show in his tone. “And you want me to check her out with an eye toward...?”

“Nothing in particular. I just want to know about her for the moment. Get a reading.”

“Anything else?”

Justin was about to say that would do, then he remembered how worried Vanessa had been about Shane’s whereabouts. “Find out where Shane Pryce is. You can bill everything to me privately. Do not send anything to my office or my assistant.”

“Is this your private cell phone?”

“Yes.”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 68

“Got it.”

* * *

When Vanessa awoke, she was alone in the bedroom. She lay there, staring at the ceiling. Her eyes felt gritty and painful, her throat numb and achy—fallout from her conversation with Salazar. Thank god Justin had been around to listen and help her deal with it.

Her stomach growled, and she finally got up. She’d lost her breakfast, and hadn’t eaten anything since. Despite occasional morning sickness, her appetite seemed to be stronger than ever, and she was doing her best to eat food rich in nutrients.

In the kitchen, Justin slapped five huge slices of roast beef on whole-wheat bread and topped the whole thing with horseradish sauce and another piece of bread. “Hey. Feeling better?” he asked.

“A little.” She went closer. “That looks good.”

“Want some? I can make another.”

“Mmm... Half would be about right.”

He nodded and cut it diagonally. He put it with a pickle spear and pushed the plate her way. “Anything to drink?”

“OJ if we have any.”

“We do.” He served it out of the fridge. She glimpsed tons of food inside and tilted her head.

“Did you go shopping?”

“Yup.”

“I didn’t know you could find your way around a supermarket.”

He gave her a strange look. “Where do you think I get my food? Mars?”

“I thought, I don’t know, that you had people who did that kind of work for you.”

“Yes and no. I may not be a gourmet cook, but I can fend for myself.” He pulled out the ingredients for another sandwich. “And yes, I know how to buy groceries.”

She nodded and started nibbling on the sandwich. It was surprisingly good. “I wonder how I’m going to tell my brothers about Peggy...and what Dad said.”

Justin’s hands went still for a moment. “Do you want to tell them?”

“I don’t know. There’s a part of me that says they have the right to know, but I’m also afraid that it’s going to change our relationship.” She bit her lower lip. “Even if Mom had an affair, we’re still siblings through shared experience. I mean, they’re the only brothers I know.” Even Dane—infuriating and insensitive as he was—meant something to her.

“Yeah, I understand.”

She eyed him warily. “Do you want to tell your family?”

He waved her concern away. “It’s none of their business who your real dad is. All that should matter to them is that I chose you.”

But had he? He always seemed to know exactly what to say to make her feel that honeyed warmth, but he was fudging the details of their marriage. There never had been any choice. It had been about her getting pregnant unexpectedly and him doing the right thing.

“You all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she said, forcing a smile. The timing didn’t seem right to discuss the mess that had thrown them together. Maybe one day, when she didn’t feel as though something was coming to take back what had

been given to her, she would be able to talk to him more openly. “I think... I think I should tell my brothers what Dad said.”

“Want me to be there with you?”

“Yes, that’d be great. And afterward we can decide what we can do about Peggy. I don’t want to ignore her.”

“Don’t worry about that. I already took care of it.”

“You did?”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 69

“I’m going to check out her story first, make sure she’s not trying to take advantage of you. Then if she’s being honest, I’ll give her some money to help with her mother’s care.”

“Thank you. I know you don’t have to.”

“If she’s really your half-sister, she’s family. And it’s just money. It’s not like we don’t have enough of it.”

She nodded, but she knew the truth. The money was Sterling money, not hers. She knew better than to rely on anyone. It’d been drilled into her since she’d been old enough to understand what her mother was saying—if she didn’t earn it herself, it wasn’t hers.

Before she lost her nerve, she texted her brothers about getting together to talk. She emphasized how important it was, to ensure Dane would come. Her oldest brother had the annoying habit of avoiding family gatherings. She’d also let them know it was just them, no parents. That might encourage her oldest brother to show up.

“Do you mind entertaining yourself for a bit while I go over to Mom’s?” Vanessa said. She needed to talk

to Ceinlys.

Justin gave her his rental keys. “Take this.”

“Thanks.” She kissed him. “I’ll try not to ask you to come pick me up this time.”

“No, you should call me if there’s any problem. That’s what being married means—taking care of each other.”

She nodded with a small smile. It was sweet that her husband believed it, but experience had taught her that marriage had nothing to do with taking care of each other.

* * *

Vanessa slowed down outside her mother’s condo, looking for a parking spot. She found one not too far from her mother’s Mercedes and sighed with relief. Don’t know why I didn’t call first. Ceinlys was busy, with a calendar full of social obligations.

Her mother buzzed her in, and soon Vanessa was standing in the living room.

“If I’d known you were coming, I might have bought some orange juice. Nothing else calmed my stomach,” Ceinlys said. She was dressed casually in a slim black and white cotton dress that went down to mid-shin. “I only have water, milk...a little wine.”

“Water’s fine. Sorry to drop in like this, but it’s important,” Vanessa said, sitting down.

Ceinlys brought out a glass. “What could be more important than your secret marriage?”

Vanessa’s face grew warm at the reminder of her elopement. In a way, she could see how her mother might be just a teeny bit peeved about not being able to have a grand wedding for her only daughter. On the other hand, would her father have been okay with it? She wasn’t even his.

“Why didn’t you tell me I wasn’t Dad’s?”

The smile on her mother's face didn't change, but her eyes shuttered. "What are you talking about?" she asked, her diction a tad too precise.

"Dad had a vasectomy after Shane was born."

A small spot on her mother's cheekbone twitched. "You must be mistaken. Of course he did nothing of the sort."

"There's no mistake. My step-sister came to see me."

"Your step-sister? Vane—"

"Peggy Teeter. From Provo."

"Oh, her." Ceinlys's mouth set in a stubborn line. Vanessa knew that look. Her mother wasn't even going to entertain the idea. "The woman is an extortionist. She approached me first, asking for money. When I told her no, she said I owed her and that she'd get what she was due no matter what it took. If she approaches you again, call the police."

Vanessa shook her head. "I thought she was another one of Dad's, so I went over to confront him."

"Well, you shouldn't have."

"Why not? It was important to me. That's when he told me I wasn't his daughter."

Ceinlys closed her eyes. "I told that boy never to mention my name."

"Who was he? What was he like?"

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 70

"A poet I met at a party. He was dashing and interesting, and unlike Salazar, he had no money or prospects. But he made me feel like I was the most precious thing in the world. Which is probably why I fell for

him that night.” Ceinlys shook her head. “And it was only the one time. I told him it was over and never to approach me again. He was upset, but he accepted my decision. That’s the convenient thing about those wounded artist types. They think nobody understands them and the whole world is against them.” She shook her head. “It was quite easy to persuade him I was a mercenary harlot who was too interested in money to be with him.”

Vanessa flinched, hating the way her mother talked about herself. That was the same horrible stuff that some jerks whispered behind her back—Ceinlys Pryce loved Salazar’s money too much to divorce him. But given how much her mother doted on her children, Vanessa suspected it was losing custody that had kept her with her husband in the early years. “What was his name?”

“He called himself Klein.”

“Is that his real name?”

“I have no idea. Never particularly bothered to find out. It wasn’t important.”

Vanessa bit her inner cheek. What little patience she had was seeping away, but it would be pointless to take it out on her mom. “Did you tell him about me?”

“No. I didn’t want to give him an excuse to cling. He couldn’t have been with me in any case. It simply wouldn’t have worked.”

“But the daughter he had with another woman seems to have found me somehow.”

“You don’t know if she’s telling the truth. She might be conning all of us. I’d ignore her if I were you. Or, if she proves persistent, obtain a restraining order. It wouldn’t be difficult.”

“I plan to check her out before I do anything,” Vanessa said. Then unable to help herself, she asked, “Did you love him?”

Ceinlys shook her head. “I enjoyed the way he made me feel, but I never loved him. By then I knew too much about how relationships worked to give in to a silly fantasy.”

Vanessa thought back to Justin, how he made her feel safe and cared for, and how that turned her insides gooey and warm. “How do you separate the two?”

“Quite easily. I remind myself of the one time when I didn’t, and how it hurt me.”

“If you regret marrying Dad, why didn’t you divorce him earlier? Even if you didn’t get anything in the settlement, you would’ve been able to start over with another man. One who might have loved you and given you children.”

Ceinlys’s eyes were sad even as she smiled. “Once was enough, dear. I couldn’t do it again.” She folded her slim hands together. “Are you going to tell your brothers?”

“Yes. They should know.”

“I see. Well, that probably is the right thing to do.” Ceinlys uncrossed her legs and placed both feet flat on the floor. “Is there anything else you want to know?”

“Yes. How is everything going for you?”

Ceinlys’s smile was genuine this time. “Oh, marvelously. I’ve never been better.”

Chapter Twenty

After a brief internal debate, Vanessa decided to have the meeting at her place. Mark offered one of his restaurants, but that was too public. She bought some pre-made finger foods and hors d’oeuvres from the local organic grocery store and laid everything out. Her brothers could eat like horses, although she wasn’t sure how much appetite they’d have once she dropped her bomb.

She rubbed clammy hands down her denim capris. Nerves fluttered in her belly, and jittery energy crackled along her skin.

Justin laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Hey, it’s going to fine.”

“Yeah,” she said tightly, and forced a smile. “Of course.”

They didn’t have to wait very long. All her brothers—except Shane—showed up within five minutes of each other, entering her living room one after another. Jane and Hilary had also come, since they were more or less family now as well.

Vanessa had always thought of her place as large and comfortable, but with so many people inside she felt claustrophobic.

Breathe. You can do this.

“Thanks for coming, everyone,” she said, rubbing her hands together.

“I don’t know what’s so important that we have to talk face-to-face,” Dane said, his voice cool. “You could’ve just emailed us.”

“This is...extremely personal,” Vanessa said. “Why don’t we sit down?”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 71

“You mind if I grab something to eat first? I haven’t had a bite since ten thirty,” Mark said.

She shook her head, amazed her restaurant owning brother went hungry. “Yeah, fine. Let’s get some food and sit down then. I think it’s better I say it when you’re seated.”

Dane gave her an odd look. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” she muttered.

“Did you hear from Shane?” Iain asked.

“No. But I saw Ginger with some other guy.”

A stunned silence filled the room. Then Dane erupted. “What?”

“Justin was there too.”

“That bitch.”

“I wouldn’t be too quick to judge,” Justin said dryly. “She said Shane dumped her.”

“She’s lying,” Dane said. “That boy’s been whupped since high school.”

“Maybe he became un-whupped,” Vanessa said. “Regardless, if he decided he no longer wants her and broke it off cleanly, it’s all good. They’ll be spared the expense and hassle of a wedding.”

Dane’s cold look said he still held Ginger in the wrong, but Vanessa ignored it. He’d think whatever he wanted, and the issue between Shane and Ginger wasn’t something she wanted to talk about.

“So is that why you wanted to have us here?” Iain asked.

“Dane’s sort of right about this one. You could’ve just texted us,” Mark said.

“No. Ginger is actually kind of...minor news. Please sit down.”

They did, including Jane and Hilary, who were looking at Vanessa with concern.

Vanessa stayed on her feet and clasped her hands together. “There’s no easy way to say this, so... I met my half-sister recently.”

Everyone except Justin and Dane froze. Dane sighed and said, “Do you suppose we can sue the condom company Dad used? This is getting ridiculous.”

“Is this half-sister for real?” Iain asked.

Mark gulped down some water. “Does she want fifty million bucks too?”

“No. She’s actually, um, not related to Salazar at all. Or...you.”

“Huh? But if she’s your half-sis—”

“She and I share a father. And it’s not...Dad. Mom took a lover back in the day and she’s his daughter.” Vanessa looked around. “Just like I am.”

Dane’s expression twisted like he’d just eaten a bug. “Let me guess. Now that she found out you’re a rich man’s wife, she wants to share in the bounty.”

She flinched. That was the first thing Dane was worried about? “It wasn’t quite like that. She said her mother had cancer.”

“What does that have to do with you?” Dane asked.

“She asked me to help pay for her mother’s treatment.”

Dane laughed. “Don’t tell me you fell for that line. You’re a lawyer!”

Vanessa scowled. “What does being a lawyer have to do with this?”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 72

“Because I’m sure you’ve heard the sorts of lies people tell to get something for nothing. Haven’t you dealt with cases that are essentially legal extortion? Everyone has a mother or child with cancer when they discover a rich relative.”

She hated it when Dane was right, if for n

o other reason than that it only made him more cynical. “I’m pretty sure she’s not expecting me to wire her money right this minute.”

Dane snorted.

“I’m having her investigated,” Justin said. “So don’t worry.”

“Well, it’s nice that somebody’s thinking things through. No matter what, I still wouldn’t give her a penny. If you do, you’re going to be inundated with people giving you the same sob story,” Dane said.

“I doubt that,” Mark said.

Dane’s lip curled. “Do you think Mom’s only had one lover? If they think there’s money to be had, they’ll all come out of the woodwork with their hands open. Mark my words, Vanessa. You’re going to draw a big fat target on your back if you’re not careful.”

“Fine. I’ll take that into consideration.” It was better to give in than to argue endlessly with Dane. He saw the bad in everyone.

There was a general silence that stretched. Finally, Vanessa couldn’t take it any longer. “Is...that all any of you have to say?”

“Did you expect something else?” Dane asked.

Hilary spoke up. “I think she means the thing about how she’s not Salazar’s daughter.”

“What’s there to say?” Iain shrugged. “Did you think we might not consider you our sister because of that?”

“You’re still our sister.” Dane’s tone was flat as though he was reciting an encyclopedia entry. “Same mother.”

Mark rolled his eyes. “Could you be any less sensitive?” He turned to Vanessa. “You’re our sister. Nothing’s changed. The years we spent growing up together didn’t vanish because you learned that you’re not Dad’s daughter.” Suddenly, his eyes widened. “Is this why you wanted to talk here? You were worried about our reaction?”

Vanessa nodded. “I didn’t take the news very well when I found out.”

“Aw, jeez.”

“It’s pretty shocking news,” Jane said. “But I don’t think people are going to love you any less for who your father is. Or isn’t. You had no control over that.”

Tears sprang to Vanessa’s eyes. Sniffling, she wiped them away impatiently. It was so silly for her to cry when there was nothing but relief in her heart. It had to be the pregnancy hormones.

“You shouldn’t have stressed about it. It’s bad for you and your baby,” Hilary said. “Happy thoughts. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Vanessa nodded, praying Hilary was right.

* * *

Hilary and Jane decided to stay with Vanessa, so Justin asked Dane for a ride to the Pryce mansion to pick up her car. The butler hadn’t returned it yet, and he didn’t feel like waiting any longer.

As the Lamborghini made its way through the traffic at exactly the speed limit, Justin said, “Don’t ever try to manipulate Vanessa again.”

A beat, then Dane said, “What’s this about?”

“Her drive to make partner.”

Dane laughed, the sound dry. “And she wonders why lawyers have shitty reputations. Did she tell you what she was originally planning to do?”

Justin tilted his head.

“Child advocate. Rewriting happy endings for kids with fucked up family lives...like that would retroactively change her childhood. But going into that field wasn’t going to work.”

“Why not?”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 73

“Grandmother would’ve staged a heart attack...and probably blamed Mom for it. Mom would’ve been mortified. Dad probably would’ve found another woman to bang so he could pretend everything was fine. And Vanessa would’ve realized soon enough nothing can change the past.

“She’s better off working for the bloodsuckers. They don’t give you false hope or pretend to be something that they’re not. But now that she’s your wife, I’ll let you deal with her.” Dane stopped the car in front of the mansion.

Justin climbed out, and Dane drove away. Was he right about her family’s potential reaction? Given how close she was to her mother, the whole mess would’ve been devastating for her.

It was strange to think Dane had actually done her a favor by challenging her—in his own way—to make partner. He wasn’t the nurturing, caring type.

Shaking his head, Justin looked at the mansion. It was brightly lit, illuminating a garden full of animal-shaped shrubs and a cheery water fountain. But what dark shadows lurked inside.

When Justin rang, it was a middle-aged housekeeper who answered. She was short, with a comfortably rounded face. A polite smile didn’t do anything to alleviate her homeliness, something Ceinlys had undoubtedly taken into consideration. It was one thing for her husband to have mistresses in other cities, something else to have one under the same roof.

“I’m Justin Sterling.” He gestured at Vanessa’s Mercedes. “Here to pick it up.”

“Oh, you’re her husband.” The housekeeper’s smile gained warmth. “Is she all right? I heard glass breaking while she was in Mr. Pryce’s library.”

“What are you talking about?”

Lines deepened between her eyebrows. “I think he might have thrown something against the wall while yelling ‘Get out.’ An awful argument.”

“Are you sure?” Salazar knew Vanessa was pregnant. How could he throw things at her?

“I cleaned up the broken glass.”

Fury like an Arctic storm whipped through him. “Where is Salazar?”

“In his study. The second floor, fourth door to the right.”

Justin took the winding stairs two at a time to the upper level, where the ceiling was as high as a cathedral’s. The study had double doors, and he wrenched them open.

“Justin. What a surprise,” Salazar said from his desk. His rolled up sleeves revealed ropey arm muscles underneath age-thinned skin. He smelled faintly of shower gel, and moisture glistened in his hair.

“Is it true you threw a glass at my wife?”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

“She’ll try to protect you, so she won’t tell me the truth.”

“Why would she do that? She’s not even my child. Didn’t she tell you?”

Tension tightened Justin’s neck and shoulders. The nerve at the back of his head throbbed. He dragged in some air. “Even though you raised her as your daughter, thankfully she’s not like you. But I’m different. Don’t you ever raise your voice or use violence against my wife.”

Salazar's eyebrow rose with an arrogance that could only have come from a lifetime of living impervious to harm. "Or what?"

"I'll ruin you."

"Ruin me? That's a good one. You're too much like Vanessa, always too soft-hearted for her own good. That's why she married you, isn't it?"

Justin gave him a cold smile. "I'm Barron Sterling's heir. Not even her pleas would change my mind should I decide to destroy you. Surely you've heard why Barron's wife never tried to know what he was up to."

Everyone knew the story. Ethel Sterling hadn't wanted to get involved in her husband's dealings because her interference or suggestion for leniency would only egg him on to be harsher than he'd intended.

Justin continued, "Vanessa is my wife, not to mention pregnant with my child. You'll show her the respect she deserves. Do you understand?"

Salazar glared at him, and Justin glared right back. Finally the older man sat back and waved negligently. "Fine."

Justin breathed in with satisfaction and left the house in Vanessa's car. Underneath the leather was the scent of her. It was good that he'd come and found out about Salazar's unacceptable behavior toward Vanessa. But she should've told Justin from the beginning. He didn't want to worry that she was hiding things from him, especially if they were things that hurt her. His parents had always been open with each other, and he had a sinking feeling that without that, their marriage was a house built on a crumbling foundation.