

# The Billionaire's Secret Wife

Chapter Twenty-One

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Since Vanessa was forced into a long vacation, she decided she and Justin should go out of town. It wasn't often she was given two

weeks off—in fact, she couldn't think of the last time—and she didn't want to stay in town and risk running into Peggy again.

She didn't seem dangerous, but now that Vanessa was calmer, she realized Justin and Dane had valid concerns about the woman's true motives. Besides, the way Peggy had revealed herself only when she thought she could get something and the way she'd made the first contact under false pretense weighed on Vanessa's mind. There was probably some desperate anxiety on Peggy's part, but at the same time, Vanessa would've preferred honesty from the very beginning. Now she felt like she couldn't trust Peggy entirely. She was like a witness behaving badly—withholding information here and there, only divulging more when she had no choice. Witnesses like that often changed their stories as well.

“You know, we should visit your mother,” Vanessa said in the dark, her voice low and mellow. Justin had taken her so tenderly earlier, and her body was still quivering from the liquid pleasure that lingered. She pressed her back closer to him. She liked the way he enveloped her at night entirely too much, but she couldn't pull away. “I'm sure she's heard about our wedding and wants to see us face-to-face.” She'd met Blanche Sterling socially years ago, but didn't really know much about Justin's mother.

“She called me a few days ago. She wants to see you too.”

“Are you up for a trip? I don’t know what your schedule is like.”

“My schedule’s flexible. We can go whenever you feel like.”

Vanessa frowned as a thought occurred to her. “Do you think she’d rather fly out to see us?”

“No. She doesn’t travel anymore.”

“Why not? I remember how she used to travel a lot with your father.”

“After he passed away, she sort of became a hermit. She doesn’t even travel for family Thanksgivings.”

“I’m sorry. That’s kind of tough. Where does she live now?”

“Harrisburg. It’s a small town in Ohio. But Nate and I visit her after the festivities. She really doesn’t mind being alone. I think she enjoys the solitude.”

Vanessa turned around to look at Justin. In the dark, she could barely make out the sharp, clean lines of his face. It was amazing how he was hers. She felt like this was a dream and she’d wake up alone without him or the baby.

What kind of a mother would she make?

Her only role models were her own mother and grandmother. Ceinlys loved her children—of this Vanessa had no doubt—but she didn’t always express that affection very well. And she always seemed distracted and discontent, even though she faked happiness well when she knew people were watching. Nobody would’ve known how miserable Ceinlys was by looking at her. And she’d relegated almost every aspect of taking care of Vanessa to the nannies.

Then there was Shirley Pryce. Nobody was meaner or more cutting under the genteel exterior. She’d always made it clear that she considered Ceinlys to be beneath Salazar. Contemptible even.

She had also repeatedly told Vanessa a girl should never try to be too smart, too educated or too outspoken. A woman should strive not to embarrass her man, that was all.

“I don’t blame you for making that mistake,” her grandmother would say. “It’s not your fault. How can you know any better with a mother like Ceinlys?”

And unlike her brothers, Vanessa was the child who often did wrong according to her grandmother. Had Shirley, old but still very sharp, suspected Vanessa might not be Salazar’s?

“What are you thinking?” Justin asked.

“Nothing.” Vanessa wrapped her arms around him, not wanting to spoil their time in the dark by talking about her family. “Nothing at all.”

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Blanche’s place in Harrisburg was a cozy cottage on a five-acre lot, a small section of which was a vegetable and herb garden. The house exterior was made of rough, earth-tone rocks, and the bright sun beat down on a red roof. A couple of apple trees grew in front, and a few long-eared rabbits hopped away as Justin’s car pulled up.

Vanessa took in the house. It wasn’t anything like what she’d pictured. She’d assumed Blanche would live in a mansion almost as grand as Barron’s in Houston. She could certainly afford one. But Harrisburg wasn’t even conveniently located. Vanessa and Justin had driven their rental for two hours after landing along lonely, deserted roads, some of which apparently didn’t even have names.

“Why here?” Vanessa asked. “She could live anywhere she wants.”

“To make sure it won’t be easy for Barron to bug her or summon her.” Justin put a hand on the small of her back. “Just a little rebellion against him for taking me from her.”

“What do you mean?”

“She wanted to keep me at home, but Barron wanted me with him, so he could ‘groom’ me.”

“Not many women would object to their son inheriting twenty-five billion dollars.”

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“Mom’s not cut from the usual cloth.” Justin’s hand tightened behind her.

“Watch your step.”

“I’m fine.” The path leading to the house was made of smooth pebbles, but Vanessa was an expert stiletto walker.

The aroma of bubbling soup and fresh biscuits hit her the moment Justin opened the heavy wooden door, and she had to smile at her own preconceptions. She’d assumed the place would be like her family’s mansion with its cool, wax- and cleanser-scented air.

The interior was all warm earth-tone tiles and rugs and old wood with off-white stucco walls. A painting in the living room featured a view of the ocean; a sunset spilled orange over the water and palm trees swayed in the breeze. It somehow didn’t quite seem to go with the rest of the place.

Justin noticed her gaze. “That’s the place where she met my dad,” he said. “She was working at a resort there.”

Blanche came out of the open kitchen, her sneakers quiet. Stove heat had turned her cheeks rosy. Her hair spread out around her face like a fluffy silver cloud. She wasn’t wearing a single piece of jewelry, but her dark eyes sparkled. She wore a pink long-sleeve shirt and blue jeans, all simple cotton. The white and green apron on her read Home, Sweet Home in a fire-truck red.

“Welcome!” she said, extending her arms.

“Mom!” Justin gave her a tight hug, his large frame enfolding Blanche’s much smaller one.

Vanessa stood behind him, her hands clasped. Justin had put on a casual shirt and khakis, but she’d chosen a discreet black designer dress, a brand new pair of stilettos and the pink pearls Ceinlys had given her when she’d graduated from Stanford Law. Suddenly she felt overdressed and ridiculous—despite being in a favorite outfit that had never failed to boost her confidence. Still, she pasted on a polite smile.

“Introduce me to your wife,” Blanche said, finally pulling away after a moment.

“Mom, Vanessa. Vanessa, Mom.”

“How do you do?” Vanessa said in her smoothest debutante voice. Thank god her grandmother had insisted on her completing an etiquette course. At that time she’d thought it was the silliest thing ever, but now she clung to every lesson.

“No need to be so formal, my dear.” Blanche clasped Vanessa’s hands. “That’s what Barron expects, not me. I’m just family.” She gestured at the dining table. “Please, sit. I know it was a long drive from the airport. Do you want some soup? Or if you prefer, I have whole wheat bread and biscuits with organic butter.”

“Soup and bread sounds lovely.” Vanessa sat at the table.

“What about lamb?” Justin asked, taking a seat next to her

“That’s for dinner, silly boy.”

Blanche served everyone. The soup was homey, with a light broth, had delicious vegetables and beans, and was topped with shredded cheese.

“It’s too bad you have to leave tomorrow,” Blanche said.

“Work. What can I say?” Justin popped half a biscuit into his mouth.

“Barron’s basically retired, even though he won’t formally announce it.”

“That’s so like him. Thank heavens he doesn’t bother me with family events anymore.”

“He can’t make you travel.”

“Especially since I don’t care about his money.” Blanche turned to Vanessa. “Justin can tell you, I value my privacy now. Too old to be gallivanting around. I heard you’re pregnant. If anything’s not to your liking, I can always get you something else.”

“That won’t be necessary. This is perfect.”

“I’m so glad you’re here, Vanessa.” Blanche beamed. “Never thought Justin would marry, what with him unable to date any girl for long.”

Vanessa forced a smile, then busied herself with eating. If Blanche only knew about their dating history, she wouldn’t be as kind. She’d believe Vanessa had used her son, stringing him along. Having grown up watching her grandmother, she knew how things were perceived, especially by mothers-in-law.

But at the same time she couldn’t help but wonder if Blanche would be different from Shirley Pryce, who would have died rather than be seen in a kitchen...or wearing an apron.

As the day went on, it became obvious that Justin adored his mother. While Vanessa rested on the living room sofa—having been practically ordered to do so—he went to the kitchen to help Blanche with cooking and clean-up. They laughed often, their voices light.

Blanche must be a great mother. All Vanessa’s brothers—except possibly Dane—loved Ceinlys, but their interactions with her were always subdued, with a hint of strain. If they laughed once, it was a good time. Twice? Well, bring out the champagne.

The only child-rearing method Vanessa knew was handing kids off to nannies. Given how affectionately Blanche had treated Justin in just the few hours they’d been together that afternoon, Vanessa doubted that would be acceptable.

It was unfortunate there was no bachelor's degree in child rearing. Vanessa had hoped she could bumble along and figure things out without anybody judging her. But she'd thought wrong. Justin's mother was the standard by which h

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e would judge her. And Vanessa didn't think she was going to measure up.

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"I like her," Blanche announced, while she watched Justin scrub the pan she'd used for the lamb chops. "She's smart...quiet, too. Thought she'd be more vivacious."

Justin looked at her. "Why?"

"Never known an attorney who didn't like to talk" She mused while munching on a stick of celery. "Maybe it's the pregnancy. I know how tired I was when I was expecting. No wonder she went to bed early."

"Must be," Justin agreed, bending to his work.

The dinner had been great—his mother's lamb chops were fabulous as usual—but Vanessa hadn't said or eaten much. Thankfully he was able to fill the silence with stories about their acquaintances and friends and family. Maybe Vanessa was just nervous. Understandable—if his experience with family dinners had been anything like hers, he would've been nervous too. And then there was the unfinished business with Peggy. It had to be weighing on Vanessa's mind, especially after Salazar's bombshell announcement. Fortunately, she was taking another nap on the living room couch.

He rinsed the pan and dried it. Blanche was old and frail now, but she didn't want to have a housekeeper around even though he'd offered to pay for one.

"So tell me about Ceinlys," Blanche said, starting the coffee machine. It gurgled. "I didn't want to ask right in front of Vanessa, but is she really divorcing Salazar?"

"Yes. It's true."

"My land. I can't believe it. They were meant to be together forever, even with all those mistresses of his."

"Everyone thought that."

"What changed?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea. Iain might know, but he didn't say."

"Well, no need to probe. I just hope it's not too stressful for the kids, especially your lady out there. Stress is terrible for pregnant women. I'm sure I don't have to tell you this, but be extra gentle with her. Pregnancy hormones are brutal." Blanche frowned. "I hope she can take some decent time off work. Lawyers work too much."

"Don't worry. She's on a special case at the firm."

"Really?" Blanche cocked her head, and Justin cursed inwardly. He never had been able to put anything past his mother. "Would that have anything to do with you?"

"Well." Justin cleared his throat. "It might."

"Justin. Does she know?"

"No, and she doesn't need to. It's not like it's going to affect her career there. This was during the time she wanted to keep our relationship quiet and secretive."

"Weren't you already married at that point?"

“Yes, but it didn’t matter. She didn’t want anyone to know we were a couple.”

“How very odd,” Blanche spoke slowly. “Did she tell you why?”

“Something about wanting a partnership on her own merit, not based on who she’s married to.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Your Aunt Annabella is a lawyer, and it took her thirteen years to make partner, and you know how smart she is.”

Justin nodded. Not just smart, Annabella had graduated from Yale Law with honors.

“Vanessa’s a bit too young—she’s been with the firm for, what, about ten years?”

“Yeah.”

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“The chances of her getting a partnership are very slim, and soon everyone will know she’s pregnant anyway.” Blanche tapped neatly trimmed nails on the Formica counter. “I’m sure there’s another reason.”

A frown tightened his forehead. He’d wondered, but he’d chosen to accept Vanessa’s decision at face value. But his mother was right. “Why would a woman want to keep something like that a secret?”

Blanche poured herself a cup of strong coffee, black, no sugar. She didn’t offer any to Justin; he never drank it late in the evening. “Maybe to surprise somebody? Or maybe because you don’t expect it to last? I didn’t

tell my parents about your father until he actually proposed. I couldn't believe he'd want to marry a girl from a lower middle class family when he could have had any woman he wanted."

"But we're marr—" Even as the words left his lips, it hit him. In Vanessa's experience, marriage didn't mean commitment and respect and love. It was a peculiar sort of trap that forced two people to stay with each other when they might be happier apart.

But she can't possibly think our future will resemble her parents'. He'd never done anything to make her believe he'd be like Salazar.

Blanche put a hand on Justin's sleeve. "Sometimes a woman needs reassurance. Maybe you should tell her how you feel."

"How did you know?"

"Oh, a mother's intuition. You're too proud, and as much as you want to believe you're not like Barron, you are very much like him from time to time. You're waiting for her to tell you first, aren't you?" Blanche took a slow sip of her coffee, her eyes on his. "A successful relationship is not like a business negotiation. Sometimes you have to make the first move, show your cards."

Justin nodded, more than a little perturbed by her observation. Was he really treating the marriage like a business arrangement? And more importantly, did Vanessa really expect it to fall apart? Justin was a firm believer in the power of both positive and negative thinking, of self-fulfilling prophecies, and it took more than one person to make a marriage work.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

It definitely took more than one to make a marriage work.

Justin feigned an interest in the latest financial reports from Sterling & Wilson as they flew back to L.A. the next day, but he knew something was wrong. Vanessa had been asleep by the time he'd returned to their

bedroom the night before, and since then she'd been aloof, maintaining a physical distance from him.

Now she was sitting across from him, eyes closed, arms crossed and chin down. But given the tension in her posture, he knew she wasn't sleeping.

At first he'd assumed she was just tired from the trip...and of course the pregnancy. She could be moody from time and time, and it wasn't a big deal. But she was shutting him out, and that he didn't care for.

"Let's have it. What are you upset about?" he asked.

She didn't open her eyes. "Not upset. Trying to sleep."

"You slept for over ten hours last night."

"Pregnant women sleep a lot."

"Not you. You never slept much anyway."

She sighed and cracked one eye open. "Pregnancy changes you. Besides, it's not like I have tons of work to do, so it's better I figure out something else to occupy my time." Her tone held an edge.

"If you're bored, maybe you can do some volunteering. Pro bono work or..."

"Can't take on anything like that. You never know when Highsmith will decide he needs me for something. And who knows? My current client might just get sued and actually need some genuine, honest-to-god legal help." She got up. "I think I'm going to lie down. I have a headache."

Justin watched her slip into the stateroom and reined in his temper. It would be ridiculous for him to confront her right now. Besides she might really not be feeling well. She was paler than usual, her manner subdued.

He checked his email and raised an eyebrow when he saw one from Pattington. The man had come through with information about Peggy Teeter.

Everything checks out. She has a mother in a cancer center. Lung cancer—bad, but treatable. Her father was a poet, and he lived in L.A. for two years when he was in his thirties. Details in the report (attached).

Justin scanned the report Pattington had sent. So Peggy really was Vanessa’s half-sister.

Glancing at the closed door to the bedroom, he dialed Peggy’s number.

“Hello?” came a tentative voice.

“Peggy Teeter?”

“Yes...”

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“This is Justin Sterling, Vanessa Pryce’s husband. I

want to arrange to have your mother’s cancer treatment taken care of.”

“Oh. Hi. I...didn’t realize she’d involve you.”

Justin frowned. What had she thought Vanessa would do? Take care of the matter on her own? He was her husband. “Can you send the details to my assistant?” He gave her the email address.

“Of course.” There was a pause. “Would you mind if we meet in person?”

Justin considered. “I have some time this afternoon, but it’ll have to be quick.”

“Sure. Do you mind if I pick the time and place? I’m returning to Provo to check up on my mother later today.”

“That’s fine.”

“Can I text you at this number?”

“Use this one.” Justin rattled off the public mobile number that he used with his executives and workers. “I’ll bring Vanessa as well.”

“No, please don’t. Thanks, Justin.” She hung up.

\* \* \*

As soon as they arrived back at the condo, Vanessa changed into a casual dress and went out again. She didn’t think she could talk to Justin without losing control. The conversation between him and his mother echoed in her head. She’d overheard it from the living room; when he had emerged from the kitchen she’d pretended to be asleep instead of confronting him in his mother’s home. And now the things he’d said were simmering in her mind like a witches’ brew.

She spotted Felix the moment she entered the Starbucks near the office. She waved at him while standing in line to get a decaf latte, then went over to his table.

“What’s up? Hope it’s not an emergency,” he said. “I was surprised to get your call.”

“It’s not. You look good.” And he did, sitting there in his conservative, perfect-for-the-office suit. Bitterness spread in her heart. Unlike her, he had a career of his own, without anybody meddling in it.

“Can’t believe you’re still in town. I thought you’d be in Acapulco or somewhere by now.”

She forced a laugh. “Just because I have two weeks off doesn’t mean Justin does.” She leaned forward. “Hey, I know you’re busy, but I need to talk to you about something you said.”

He frowned. “Okay.”

“You remember how you said how that silly forty-hour work I was doing was more important than it looked?”

“Yeah...”

“What made you say that?”

He shrugged. “I heard rumors that the work had something to do with Sterling & Wilson. A couple of the secretaries were talking about it.”

The latte sat like poison in her belly. “The secretaries know too?”

“Well, it’s just a rumor. But yeah, they’re plugged in. All the work they do for the partners.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I can’t believe this.” Her cheeks flushed as humiliation mixed with anger.

“Why are you so upset?”

“Do you know why I wanted to keep my marriage to Justin quiet?” She didn’t wait for a response. “I didn’t want it to affect my career at the firm. Justin knew that too, but he hired Highsmith, Dickson and Associates anyway, and I’m sure the partners figured out there was something between us.” Highsmith hadn’t become head of the firm by being slow. “When I’m offered a partnership, I want it to be because I’m good at what I do, not because I’m married to Justin Sterling!”

“People knowing who your husband is doesn’t make you a bad lawyer all of a sudden.”

“No, but the—”

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“Vanessa, hey. Calm down. Nobody makes partner in only ten years these days. And if you do, it’ll be because the firm expects you to pull in enough business to justify that decision.”

“It’s just business? That’s what you’re saying?”

“Well, yeah. It’s okay to use family connections for that. People hire people they like.”

She choked back a hysterical laugh. She couldn’t even use her family name anymore because she wasn’t a real Pryce. Salazar wouldn’t hire her firm, no matter what, and now it became clear why he’d warned her about that before.

Felix was giving her a shrewd look. “Are you sure there isn’t another reason why you’re upset about people knowing about your marriage?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why do people keep their relationships secret? Like us, when we were dating.”

“It would’ve been awkward if people knew, especially since we were dating casually. It wasn’t serious.”

“Exactly.” Felix smiled, a tinge of nostalgia in the curve of his lips. “We didn’t want everyone to know when our relationship ended. So what about your marriage? It’s not like getting hitched to somebody like Justin Sterling is a badge of shame. My guess is you didn’t want anybody to know in case you went your separate ways.”

“You do the pop psychology thing as a sideline?”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Felix, there’s no way our divorce would stay quiet.”

“If you can marry somebody like him in secret, you can divorce him the same way.” Felix finished his cappuccino. “And mock me all you like, but the fact is, everyone wants to keep their failures hidden from the world. You’re a smart woman, Vanessa. Be honest with yourself.”

Vanessa reached for her latte and held it like a shield. Honesty scared her; it usually told her something she'd rather not know. Sometimes illusions were better for one's peace of mind.

Except now it was too late.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

After Vanessa walked out, Justin spent a few fruitless minutes trying to figure out what was bugging her, then gave it up as hopeless. Instead, he got in his car and drove to a downtown hotel lobby.

He checked his watch as he walked in. Right on time. A woman who matched the photo Pattington had sent was seated in a plush leather armchair that seemed to swallow her slim frame.

She wasn't gorgeous the way Vanessa was. If it hadn't been for Ceinlys's admission, he would never have guessed that this woman was related to his wife. Peggy had shaggy brown hair, styled with care and wax. Her features were even and pretty, but not exceptional enough to stand out. Still, she seemed to fit in with the luxury marbled surroundings somehow.

She got up when she noticed him. "Thank you so much," she said. "I know you're a busy man. And sorry about the venue, but I wanted to make it quick before I have to get back to my mother."

"I thought you were living with a boyfriend."

"Wow. You were thorough, weren't you? We broke up yesterday, and I moved out."

They sat down, taking two chairs near a hotel phone.

"So. What is this meeting about?" he asked.

"I just wanted to say thanks. And I'm curious about the man my half-sister married."

“There are more than a few profiles and articles about me.” He kept his voice matter-of-fact. The first thing he’d learned was that people rarely wanted to see him just for shits and giggles.

“All carefully edited to help you maintain an image. I know how the media game is played.” Her gaze roamed his clothes, shoes, watch, haircut, giving him the uncomfortable but familiar sensation of being catalogued for assets. “It’s amazing, isn’t it? That she and I are related?”

“You can always take a paternity test if you’re so astounded,” he said somewhat unkindly. She could try all she wanted, but he wasn’t giving her anything more. If it hadn’t been for her cancer patient mom, she would’ve gotten nothing.

“That won’t be necessary,” Peggy said finally with a smile that felt oddly empty.

Enough of this. “Have you contacted my assistant?”

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“Yes. She said everything’s been taken care of.”

“Then it looks like our business is concluded.” He stood up.

“I’ll walk with you. I’m leaving too anyway.”

They went out together. In front of the main door, she turned to him.

“This means the world to me. You didn’t have to help.”

“It’s been my pleasure.”

Placing a hand on his cheek, she rose on her toes and kissed him. “Thank you and good-bye. You know, when I first came to L.A. to try and get help from Ceinlys, and then Vanessa, I thought it was sort of unfair. They have

this great life, and my mom's sick with cancer. But I see that maybe that's not the case. Vanessa's good fortune became mine."

Not much to say to that. He rubbed the back of his neck as it tingled suddenly.

Peggy laughed, breaking eye contact. "If you're ever in Utah, look me up. Bring Vanessa too if you like." Then she climbed into a waiting taxi.

\* \* \*

Easing up on the gas, Vanessa blinked, then stole another glance in the rearview mirror. The man was definitely Justin, the woman now gone in the taxi.

Why was he meeting Peggy alone at a hotel? And unless Vanessa was mistaken, Peggy had kissed him.

The car behind honked, and Vanessa accelerated. Justin hadn't said anything about going out or meeting Peggy. He'd said he was having her investigated, but if everything had checked out, he should've told Vanessa...shouldn't he?

An old image of her father coming out of a hotel with one of his many mistresses flashed in her mind. The blonde had kissed her father's cheek chastely, like somehow the gesture would hide the fact that they'd been in a room, screwing each other's brains out. Vanessa had been too young to understand, but she supposed everyone else had...and had pitied her as a result.

Suddenly the dam she'd used to contain her doubts burst, and she started shaking. There were so many things that had gone wrong. By now, her firm probably fully expected her to bring the Sterling & Wilson business. And everyone knew about her marriage to Justin, so anyone who'd seen him with Peggy just now would probably start talking about her now the way they had her mother. And the baby...

She put a hand on her belly. Would it have the same kind of awkward and emotionally lonely childhood she'd had? Would she wind up like her

mother, having more and more children, first to ensure her husband didn't stray, then to fill the enormous hole left by his inattention?

Maybe she should've never told Justin about the baby. Then none of this would've happened.

/> Tears filled her eyes, and she wiped them away impatiently. This wasn't like her. She didn't cry like a little girl at the prospect of trouble. She'd find a way around it or over it...or through it if she had to.

Nothing more, nothing less.

Stopping at a red light, she put on a headset and dialed Justin.

"Hey, Vanessa," he said, his voice washing over her like warm caramel.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"On my way home." He paused. "Are you downtown? If so, we can eat out."

She tried to think of a way to approach the matter delicately, but couldn't. "Did you have the firm put me on a restricted work schedule?"

There was a short pause. "Vanessa, it's not like that."

"Okay. Did you get an update on Peggy?"

"Yes. She checked out. So I'm going to pay for her mother's cancer treatment. It's not that much money anyway."

And how did she thank you? Vanessa swallowed the question. "That's generous of you. Even more generous to see her in person to do it."

Another pause. "She wanted to thank me in person, that's all."

"Mmm. And you had to meet at a hotel to do that?"

"Are you accusing me of something?"

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“I’m not accusing you of anything. Just wondering.”

“Vanessa, nothing happened.” When she didn’t say anything, he added, “Don’t you trust me?”

“It’s hard to trust you when you did something behind my back and didn’t tell me. Like an idiot, I even complained to you about my work.”

“I didn’t know how you’d take it.”

“So if you don’t know how I’ll take something, you can lie about it? Tell me this then: How do you think I’d take it if you told me you cheated on me?”

He cursed. “I’m not going to pay for your father’s sins. Do you understand? I’m not him. The fact that you’re even thinking that I’d break my vow to you is an insult to my character. You’re being insecure and unreasonable.”

Blood rushed through her, roaring in her ears. She could barely hear what he was saying. “I’m neither insecure nor unreasonable. Don’t try to make it sound like I’m just being a hormonal woman.”

“You are. You’re always looking for reasons not to fully commit to anything because you’re afraid. Guess what? I’m tired of your waffling. When you walked out on me in February, I put myself on a detox program to forget you because it’s not possible to be with a woman like that.”

Vanessa’s jaw locked. He meant a woman like her. The only reason why he’d ever wanted her was the baby.

The precious heir to the Sterling & Wilson fortune.

Justin continued, “How can I carry the relationship by myself when you won’t open up? When you want to treat it like some shameful thing? I have to be in an airplane accident for you to—”

Suddenly she heard a loud, continuous honk to her left. Her head swiveled. A huge black SUV was coming toward her. It was slowing down, but it wouldn’t be quick enough.

Panic surged in her veins. Blood roared, and she raised her arm like somehow she could block the steel doom.

The impact of metal slamming into metal shook her like a rag doll. Glass shattered. Her arm snapped back and hit her in the face; her headset flew off her ear.

Pain seared through her. Then she drowned in black.

\* \* \*

Everything was hazy, drowned in blinding light. There was the scent of disinfectants and bodies. People were shouting. Their voices sounded professional, authoritative.

Vanessa wanted to close her eyes again, but she couldn’t. She wanted Justin with her right then and there, but he might not come, not after she’d accused him of cheating on her with Peggy.

Why had she reacted that way? She’d seen how easy it would be to lose him when his plane crashed in San Francisco. But instead of cherishing every moment together, she’d lived in fear of losing him—if not to an accident, then to another woman. He’d been right to accuse her of being insecure and unreasonable. And he shouldn’t have to pay for Salazar’s mistakes.

The gurney rattled, vibrating under her. Her face throbbed, and her chest and stomach felt like they’d been punched repea—

Her stomach.

The baby!

A sour tang of panic filled her mouth and throat. She couldn't lose the baby. It hadn't even had a chance at life.

Tears wet her eyelashes. It had to be her fault she was losing the baby. Instead of being grateful for the miracle, she'd questioned it, fretted over it and wondered if she truly wanted the responsibility of motherhood. She felt like she was being punished for those doubts. Why did it have to come to this before she realized what she really wanted?

She raised her hand. "My baby..." The words were barely a whisper.

"It's all right. We got you. Just relax," a nurse said, her voice more efficient than soothing.

No, they didn't get anything. Vanessa couldn't relax. Fear surged in her heart even as her grip on consciousness faded, and she slipped back into the dark.

#### Chapter Twenty-Four

Justin buried his face in his hands, willing it to be a bad dream. Vanessa's three brothers, the two fiancées and Ceinlys sat with him. Nobody said anything.

The hospital smelled too much of chlorine and alcohol. Underneath was a stench of despair. The nurses and doctors were brisk and efficient, but their workmanlike competence did nothing to soothe his shock or calm his panic.

Tags:

Source:

## **The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 82**

He'd been frustrated with Vanessa, and having her accuse him of something he hadn't done had frayed his temper. But the possibility that his harsh words might've had something to do with the accident ate at him. If she'd been one hundred percent focused on driving, maybe she would've noticed the SUV sooner and done something to avoid it. The

cops hadn't said much except that the driver had been texting and run a red light.

"She's going to be okay," Iain said.

"You didn't see her when they brought her in." Justin had only a glimpse of her bloodied and abused body. She looked half-dead.

"A lot of times it looks worse than it is," Iain said, "especially if there's blood. See it with fights all the time. But she'll probably be okay. This is a great hospital, and the doctors are excellent."

"Here, have some coffee," said Jane. "It might help."

He took it gratefully and sipped the strong dark brew. It didn't do much to warm his cold inside, but it was nice to hold onto something so he wouldn't tear out his hair. "She's pregnant, you know," he said.

"Did they say anything about the baby?" Ceinlys said, her voice thin. Her face was pinched and pale, and her lipstick had worn off, leaving her lips bare and grayish pink.

"No." Justin forced his hands to relax around the coffee cup. He'd give anything to keep her and their baby safe. But his mind whispered money wouldn't be able to solve this problem. It hadn't been a lack of money that had killed his father. Just a careless teenage driver who was too busy fooling with his new GPS to pay attention to what he was doing. The kid had survived, but Justin's father hadn't.

Justin rose, unable to sit still anymore while morbid possibilities swirled in his mind. This wasn't like him. He never obsessed about all the what ifs. That was one of the biggest reasons why Barron had decided to groom him as his heir.

"Lemme know if you hear anything," Justin said. "I need to—"

Iain stood. "I'll go with you."

Justin nodded, and they walked along the linoleum-covered hall together, their shoes clicking. Another group of harried looking staff rushed past

them, and Justin paused and stared at their disappearing backs. Were they going that way because Vanessa was getting worse?

“She should be okay,” Iain said. “She’s a fighter.”

“She was bloody. Soaked in it.” Justin realized his hands were shaking, and he clenched them.

“I’m telling you, tha

t can be anything. Maybe she cut herself during the accident. She needs you to be strong.”

“We were arguing when she got hit.”

They resumed walking.

“Do you love her?” Iain asked quietly, then raised a hand. “No, don’t tell me. But if the answer isn’t a hundred percent yes, let her go. Don’t end up like my parents. They have a fucked-up marriage, no other way to say it. Big waste of a couple of lives. They could’ve been happier if they hadn’t stayed together for the kids.” He blew out a breath. “Joint custody, right? What I’m saying is, you don’t have to lose the child just because you aren’t married to Vanessa.”

“Your parents really did a number on you guys, didn’t they?”

“They probably did what they thought was best. But it wasn’t always comfortable. And yeah, I’m sure it had something to do with the way we are. Everyone’s shaped by their parents.”

Justin said nothing. He knew all about Iain’s issues with his parents. All of the Pryce siblings had gone to extreme lengths to be a certain way. Mark had been a notorious playboy until he got engaged, Iain had been far too controlled, Shane had committed himself to a girl too soon only to drag his feet about the wedding and disappear, and Dane was an insensitive asshole. And Vanessa...she had married her career—like it was going to fill the void in her heart—and distanced herself from everything.

Just because she'd been raised in moneyed luxury didn't mean she had the same advantages he did. She hadn't had his stable family life and upbringing. He should have been more understanding. She was his wife.

And he loved her.

The awful things he'd said to her haunted him. His meeting Peggy like that had undoubtedly looked suspicious to Vanessa. He shook his head, angry at himself. I should've told her about Pattington's report first, discussed what I was planning to do. Gotten her input, instead of being high-handed and expecting her to accept my decisions. He'd thought their marriage was doomed because she wouldn't carry her weight, but it was his autocratic nature that was killing it.

\* \* \*

Vanessa opened her eyes. The walls in her room were white...with scuff marks...and the air smelled of disinfectant underneath the heady scent of fresh flowers. Machines beeped and pinged, and the metal frame bed was...narrow.

She didn't hurt all over anymore. What kind of medicine had they used? What about her baby?

A nurse came in and smiled at her. "How are you feeling?"

"Not in pain." Vanessa licked her dry lips. She wanted to ask about Justin—had he come by? But instead she asked, "Is my baby okay?"

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"Yes. Your baby's fine. You sprained your wrist, and there were quite a few minor cuts—nothing serious—plus a blow to the head that gave you a heck of a nose-bleed. Basically, you're banged up and you're going to have raccoon eyes for a week or so, but you're fine. We checked everything thoroughly."

“Thank you,” Vanessa whispered. “What time is it now?”

“Ten thirty. Your brothers dragged your husband out to get him to eat something.”

He was here! Vanessa sagged. Even after I was so stupid.

The nurse went on: “He didn’t want to leave you alone. I’ll let them know you’re awake.”

“No, let them finish eating first.”

“All right. Are you hungry?”

She shook her head. “Just tired.”

“If you need anything, all you have to do is press the button here.” The nurse showed her the call button and left.

Vanessa relaxed against the pillow and swallowed. Her baby was all right. Justin was here. Everything was going to be okay. She could feel it.

She dozed for a while. Then the door opened, and Justin walked in. She almost wept, her heart fluttering with relief. Mark and Iain followed, along with Hilary and Jane. Even Dane came. And her mother was there too. The only noticeable absence was Salazar.

Justin settled next to Vanessa and held her hand. Fatigue lined his face, but his eyes were warm. “I thought the nurse was mistaken when she said you were awake.”

She smiled, linking her fingers with her husband’s. “Nope. Awake and totally fine now.”

“Oh, thank god.” Ceinlys burst into tears.

“Mom, you’re going to cry now?” Mark said weakly, while Iain handed her a handkerchief.

Hilary and Jane turned to Vanessa. “We’re just glad you’re okay.”

“You could look worse,” Dane said, which Vanessa took as equivalent to her mother’s reaction.

“I want to go home,” Vanessa said. “Now. The nurse said I’m fine.”

“Whatever you want, sweetheart,” Justin said, kissing her forehead.  
“Whatever you want.”

\* \* \*

Justin was somehow able to get her discharged so fast that they were on their way home within forty minutes. He was quiet as he drove; she held his hand, wanting the reassurance of physical contact.

He helped her get out and walk from the car. She gasped when she finally noticed her reflection in the mirror-shiny elevator door. “I look like a boxer. A boxer who just lost.”

Justin squeezed her hand. “No, you won. You survived. Besides, you still look gorgeous.”

“You are such a liar.”

She yelped when he swept her off her feet and carried her over the threshold. “Isn’t it a bit too late for this?” she said with a laugh.

“It’s never too late. Where do you want to go?” he asked, turning on the light.

“I want to sit on the couch. I’m tired of lying down.”

“Okay, but only for a bit,” he said. “You need to rest.”

She nodded. “Okay. Half an hour then.”

Her legs felt rubbery, and her knees had started aching. She’d probably banged them against something in the accident. She didn’t remember much of it.

Tags:

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“Do you want anything?” he asked.

“OJ?”

He returned with a glass of juice and sat next to her, taking her free hand. “Hey, listen...I’m sorry.”

She stopped in the middle of raising her drink. “For what?”

“The things I said. I shouldn’t have. And I should’ve told you about Peggy’s situation before I went to meet her.”

Vanessa shook her head. “I’m sorry I lashed out at you too. You were right; I was trying to make you pay for my father’s...indiscretions.” She blinked back tears. “When they took me to the hospital, I was so scared I’d lose you and our baby both. I was sure you wouldn’t want to be with me anymore.”

“Vanessa. I’ve wanted you since forever. I’m not going to give up on you over an argument.” He turned her hand over, running his thumb over the wedding band. He kissed her on the mouth gently, careful of her bruises. “I love you, Vanessa. I’ve loved you for years and I’ll always love you, no matter what.”

“I love you too, Justin. I don’t know why it’s taken me so long to figure that out.” Then she shook her head. “Actually, I do know. I was too afraid to take a chance.”

“Do you think we can start over? I know you’re worried we’re going to end up like your parents, but I believe we can be better than our parents. And our child will be greater than us.”

This time she let the tears fall. “You say the sweetest things.”

“How can I not?” He put the glass of juice on the side table and took her gently into his arms. “We have the sweetest future.”

## Chapter Twenty-Five

The singer’s voice soared as she sang “Cheek to Cheek.” The orchestra provided a romantic accompaniment.

The ivory hall was full of great food, drink and fresh flowers. In the center was a champagne fountain surrounded by ten layers of plumerias in full bloom. Liveried servers milled around with silver trays, making sure no guest went without the proper libations. Even though everyone in Vanessa and Justin’s social circles had wanted an invitation to the reception, she’d chosen to keep the event on the smaller side, with only the people who mattered most to them—their friends and family.

Vanessa had quit her job soon after the accident. Working ridiculous hours for clients chosen for their ability to pay the most money no longer appealed, even if it meant she’d never be a partner. Better to start doing something meaningful with her life. She’d told Justin about her non-profit and her wish to be actively involved in it. Without hundred-plus hour weeks, she would finally be able to give it the attention it deserved. He’d offered to fund it, but that had ended up being unnecessary. Not when Gavin Lloyd had been managing its assets. She’d heard that he had the Midas touch, but the amount of money currently in Just and Proper Help’s coffers was almost beyond her ability to comprehend. And it was all hers to help those in need.

Vanessa and Justin swayed to the song. Others came onto the dance floor, and Barron showed off some surprisingly fancy steps with Stella Lloyd.

Vanessa was almost into her second trimester, but she didn’t show much, not with the white empire-waist dress she was wearing.

“This is exactly how it should’ve been done from the very beginning,” Vanessa whispered into Justin’s ear as he expertly led her. “I should’ve never try to hide our marriage.”

“You had your reasons.” Justin grinned. “Only two things matter now.

“What?”

“One, our baby is doing well.”

She had to agree with that. “And two?”

“That you’re mine.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “I love you.”

He took her hand and laid it over his heart. “I love you.”

Epilogue

The man stood out on the sand, feeling the gritty scrunch under his toes. The weather was getting hot now—too hot, really—but he didn’t want to stay inside the beach house.

He couldn’t remember his name, but somehow he knew the house’s security code. It still astounded him that no one had tried to stop him from using the credit cards in the wallet he’d found in his pocket. They all bore a name he didn’t recognize, but—somehow—they were his. And so was the U.S. passport; there had been no trouble using it to go through customs in several different countries.

In the last few months, he’d visited the places he’d found stamped in the passport, hoping that something would jog his memory. Nothing did, but then

again he couldn’t exactly walk around asking people for help. He apparently had a lot of money—it was obvious from the kind of clothes in his bag and the treatment he received at airports and hotels. If he admitted that he couldn’t remember who he was, he’d become a target.

Tags:

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Five men walked toward the beach. He watched them, wondering who they were. They didn't look like locals. They were white, fit and had the hard look of professionals. There was a housekeeper who called him "mister," but otherwise nobody had come to the place in the time he'd been there. A cold frisson of warning tingled at the back of his neck.

"Shane Pryce?" one of the men said.

Maybe. "Who are you?"

"Dane sent us."

"Who's Dane?"

"Your brother. It's time you come home."

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