

The Billionaire's Secret Wife

Chapter Three

Justin cursed under his breath. When Vanessa was like this, it was like all the hurtful words had never been spoken. He went weak for her even though he knew how bad she was. If any of his friends had had the kind of relationship he had with Vanessa, he would've advised them to get the hell out.

But none of that mattered when she was in front of him like this.

He pulled the flimsy blouse out of her skirt and unbuttoned it. She unhooked her bra and tossed it on the floor. Need thrummed deep inside his belly at the sight of her. He wanted to tell himself it was only because he hadn't had sex since they'd broken up, but that would be a lie. Even if he'd had a dozen orgasms the night before, he'd still be hot for her.

“Justin...”

He undressed her the rest of the way, then carried her to the bedroom and placed her on his bed. Her crimson hair spread around her like fire. The sight of her there stroked a deep, primal urge in him. For the first time, she was in his bed. Hotel beds had their appeal, but this was more.

His fingers moved on auto-pilot. His shirt buttons came undone, cuff links dropped into a small crystal bowl in the closet. Shoes and socks disappeared, and his slacks and underwear vanished.

Vanessa's eyes never left his body as he undressed. A deep flush tinted her cheeks, and her pupils grew impossibly wide and dark.

He moved over her, tracing the smooth curves of her calves and thighs. Her breath hitched as his fingers traveled upward, then he stopped, blowing gently at the black curls between her legs. She was already wet.

He dropped a soft kiss on her belly. “You look perfect.”

“So do you.”

With a little smile, he kissed and licked along her legs. They were lean and trim from daily jogging, and he loved their shape and strength.

He gently ran a finger along the seam at the juncture of her thighs. She was scorching hot and wet. He put her juices on his tongue and groaned at the pure honeyed taste.

Propping her legs on his shoulders, he feasted on her. Her back arched at the feel of his tongue, and he hummed with satisfaction at how responsive she was. Maybe her firm had kept her so busy since November that she hadn't had a free moment to think about another man, much less actually get laid.

Jealousy spiked, but he kicked it down. This wasn't the time. Vanessa was in his bed, moaning under his mouth.

He swirled his tongue over her clit and pushed his finger into her. Her inner muscles clutched at him, and he groaned at how responsive she was as he moved it in and out of her in that erratic rhythm she liked so much.

As much as he wanted to draw the moment out, he couldn't wait much longer. His cock throbbed with the need to be inside her, and he wanted her limp and pliable from a powerful orgasm before he entered her.

Her hands twisted the sheet, and her breathing took on a staccatoed, panicked tone, like she was afraid he'd abandon her now when she was so close. He didn't understand why; he'd never left her unsatisfied.

“Justin!” His name on her lips was the sweetest sound ever. He kept up the pressure as she rode wave after wave of the first of many orgasms he planned to give her that night. She was so beautiful, abandoning herself to the pleasure.

Finally she brought him up for a deep kiss. He lay over her, anticipating what was to come, and his cock grew even harder. She reached between

their bodies and ran her index finger over the slick blunt tip of his erection, then put it in her mouth. “Mmmm. Yummy.”

“Wicked,” Justin murmured.

“And I live in L.A.”

“The wicked wench of the west.”

She laughed, the sound husky. Then she whispered into his ear, “Less talk, more action.”

* * *

Vanessa smiled when Justin gave into his need and trailed his lips along her neck, his hands traveling over her torso, moving closer and closer to her breasts. He made her feel so free in bed, like she could do or say anything and it would be all right. Maybe that was what kept their time together so fresh and hot. Nothing else could explain why she still wanted him like this after ten years of an on-and-off relationship.

Justin’s firm hand cupped her breast with exactly the right amount of pressure, making her draw a sharp breath at how amazing it felt. He flicked his finger over her aching nipple, and she clenched her inner muscles as she grew slick between her legs.

He took his time with her breast. Where was he getting the patience? She could feel his cock throbbing against her. She licked her lips. She wanted him inside her probably more than he wanted to plunge into her.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 10

Finally he pulled her nipple into his mouth, trapping the hard point between the roof of his mouth and tongue. The edge of his teeth scraped against the soft skin, and she tunneled her fingers through his silky hair

as desire heated rapidly in her belly, like she hadn't just had a powerful orgasm.

When he finally released her breast, she kissed him and rolled him over. As he watched her, she got on her knees and gripped the headboard. Then very deliberately, she spread her thighs and arched her back.

He nuzzled the gentle slopes of her buttocks, his hot breath fanning over her heated skin. She pushed herself toward him, and he stroked her clit. "You're gorgeous like this." He nipped her, sending a sharp tang of want along her spine. "Good enough to eat."

"No more talking. Show me."

With a soft laugh, he opened a drawer by his bed and put on a condom. Once protected, he gripped her pelvis and pushed into her, delicious inch by delicious inch.

She bit her lower lip at the sweet invasion, the way he stretched and filled her. When he was hilted, she moaned. It was incredible how having his cock inside her could make her feel so connected to him. "Justin..."

He pumped his lean hips, moving in and out of her in a rhythm she found irresistible. As the pleasure built, her lips parted in a silent cry. Something close to fear slid over her mind at how vulnerable and open she was to Justin right now. A small part of her wanted to pull back, but she couldn't. The pleasure he gave her was so addicting, she was helpless to deny him.

Justin reached around and rubbed her clit. "Come for me."

"Yes!" She screamed his name as a powerful orgasm consumed her. It was like being electrocuted with pleasure, and she felt like she would black out from the intensity of it.

His grip tightened as he thrust into her with more power and speed. She hung on to the headboard for dear life. He shouted as he climaxed, his body taut and strong.

She turned to watch him over her shoulder. He looked so primal with pleasure twisting his handsome face, and s

he held back a secret smile of satisfaction at knowing that she was the cause.

Some time later when his breathing slowed, he got up and went to the bathroom. Afterward, he returned to bed and wrapped his arm around her. Spooning her, he pressed his face against the back of her neck. "Spend the night with me. I'll have my pilot take you to L.A. in the morning."

She linked fingers with him, then waited until his body grew lax with sleep. There were so many reasons why she should leave...and just one reason why she should stay. But that reason seemed to trump all the others.

She turned to watch his face as he slept. Justin was just too perfect. She should never have come to Chicago or slept with him, no matter how right it'd felt. No other man had ever given her that panicked sensation of total vulnerability, whereas Justin never failed to arouse it.

If she wasn't careful, he might take up a permanent spot in her mind. And that wouldn't do. She knew what happened when people let themselves become that exposed.

* * *

Seven hours later, Justin woke up alone in bed. There was a small memo on the bedside table, and he reached for it.

Thanks for everything.

- V

He didn't have to get up to make sure she was gone. It was a typical Vanessa post-coital good-bye. A fist over his eyes, he cursed. He really needed to get a woman who was better for him. This gut twisting feeling Vanessa gave him simply wasn't good. And he was getting tired of the

whole messed up hot-and-cold thing they had going, no matter how irresistible it was.

If a business associate had treated him like this, he would've cut the person out of his life instantly. Personal affairs weren't exactly like business, but maybe he should make an exception for Vanessa. After all, hadn't he learned that nothing was absolute, how there was an exception to everything?

Decision made, he sat up and scrolled through the huge list of women on his phone. Then he found the number and dialed.

* * *

Vanessa stuffed the panic away as she returned to her office from the bathroom. Still no period, and she wasn't feeling even the slightest bit of premenstrual cramp.

The most she'd ever been late was one week. It had been five weeks since she'd left Justin's bed.

"Are you all right?" her secretary Zoe said, looking up from her laptop screen with a newsfeed scrolling on the bottom. Something about some reality TV show star getting pregnant. "You look a little pale."

"I'm fine."

Zoe's middle-aged face pinched, deepening the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. "They're working you too hard. A hundred and twenty is much too much."

Vanessa flashed the smile she always gave people who worried about her working too much. "Don't let the partners hear you say that."

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She closed the door to her office and sat behind her desk. A mountain of documents related to Solaris Med demanded her attention, but she couldn't focus on anything. She hadn't been sleeping well, and she'd been busy. Like Zoe had said, a hundred and twenty hours might actually be too much, and that would explain why she hadn't had a period in five weeks.

Instead of trying to come up with wishful reasons why she wasn't having her period—menopause was not a plausible explanation—she picked up her purse. She had to know. “Zoe, I'll be gone for an hour or so.”

“But you have a conference with Felix,” she said.

Oh crap. That was right. They were supposed to discuss the sexual harassment case and strategy. “Can you reschedule? Tell him I'm sorry.”

“Okay.” Zoe frowned, her dark eyes owlsh behind rimless glasses.

There was a drug store not too far from the office. She bought a pregnancy test and went into the bathroom at the back of the store. After following the instructions, she stared at her slim watch as the seconds ticked by. She couldn't be pregnant...she just couldn't...

She glanced at the result box on the stick, and all the air whooshed out of her. She put a hand on the stall door for support as her knees turned to pudding.

She was.

Chapter Four

“Have you heard? Kerri's pregnant.”

Justin looked up from a pile of documents as his great-uncle Barron walked into his living room on a Saturday. “What? No. Congratulations.”

“I imagine it's a boy.”

Barron took a seat without waiting for an invitation and pulled out a box of sugar cookies and a tumbler full of Earl Gray tea. They were his favorite, but he knew Justin didn't keep any at home.

Despite his age, Barron looked as solid as ever, glowing with good health. If Justin hadn't known better, he might've thought Barron had found an elixir of eternal youth. As usual, he wore a bespoke suit, hand-tailored in Europe. The dark navy of the silk looked good on him. His watch flashed on his wrist. It was an old, inexpensive piece, but he'd never thrown away any of his late wife's presents.

Justin was happy for his cousin, but at the same time a sharp envy formed in his gut. It seemed like everyone was with the one they wanted to be with except him. And he hated this pathetic, lousy feeling of jealousy and self-pity. Neither was like him. Damn you, Vanessa.

"How far along is she?" Justin asked, forcing a small smile. Nobody needed to know about his personal problems. He'd already made up his mind to move on.

"Only six weeks." He held up an index finger. "But I have a hunch about this child."

Justin nodded, leaning back in his seat. "What can I do for you, Barron?"

His great-uncle wouldn't have flown all the way to Chicago just to talk about Kerri's pregnancy. As much as Barron adored his granddaughter, he was a busy man, busier now with a new-found love. Shocking that he actually felt something for another human being. More shocking that a woman actually genuinely liked him. Most of the women who'd buzzed around him did so because they wanted his money and influence.

Barron pulled out a sugar cookie. "When are you going to produce a child?"

Justin suppressed a sigh. This again. "When I find a woman who wants me, not my money."

The older man snorted. “I’m surprised none of your exes thought to get pregnant. That would’ve been the easiest way to get you to marry them.”

“Child support is cheaper and infinitely preferable. Besides, I’m sure our lawyers would win the custody battle.”

“They better, given how much they’re paid.” Barron expected the very best from everyone who worked for him—that was to say, to give him everything he wanted when he wanted it.

“If that’s all—”

“If you don’t find a wife soon, I plan to find one for you.”

“Please, no matchmaking.”

“There are heiresses who wouldn’t want your money.”

“How many who are worth twenty-five billion?” Justin steeped his fingers. “You know how it is. No limit on greed.”

Barron sighed. “You know why I groomed you myself, don’t you? To carry on the family legacy. Grow it, for subsequent generations.”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 12

Justin nodded.

“And that means you have certain responsibilities to me, as well as to the family. One of which is that you marry and produce an heir whom you can groom yourself. I’d like to see this before I die.”

“If you ever die. I swear you’re going to outlive us all.”

Barron laughed his booming laugh. “You say that now, but I’m not young anymore. I’ll die soon enough. I mean what I said, Justin. Marry that London girl you’re with.”

Justin narrowed his eyes. London Bickham had a sizable trust fund, and she was funny and nice, but she sometimes bored him. Still, she was a good distraction to help him forget Vanessa.

“Don’t give me that look. London’s a good girl. Pretty too.”

The intercom buzzed, thankfully giving Justin a small reprieve. It was London.

“Speak of the devil.” Barron smiled, his eyes twinkling.

“We have a lunch date,” Justin said.

“When I was your age, I picked the girl up at her house.”

“She’s a modern woman. Has her own driver’s license and everything.”

A few minutes later the elevator doors opened, London strolled in. Many assumed it was her golden hair and wide blue eyes that made her look like a child’s doll, but Justin disagreed. It was her eyes, completely devoid of intellect or a single original thought. Still, he preferred his rebound to be the polar opposite of Vanessa.

London’s hips swayed, making the hem of her pale green dress swirl around her thighs. Her unbound curls cascaded over her slim shoulders, and she didn’t show any surprise at the sight of Barron. “Hello, Justin. Barron, I didn’t know you were going to be in Chicago.”

“Don’t mind me.” He brushed invisible cookie crumbs from his clothes.

“Are you joining us for lunch?”

“No. I have to return to Maryland.”

London smiled blankly at Barron, while Justin relaxed. Maryland meant only one thing—he was going back to Stella Lloyd, the new love of his life. Justin made a mental note to send her a big basket of gourmet European chocolate and flowers. Barron was technically retired, but in actuality he was semi-retired, always nosing around at Sterling & Wilson. It had the unfortunate side effect of undermining Justin at times. But ever since

Barron had met Stella, he'd been too busy in Maryland to drive Justin insane, and for that the woman deserved a lifetime of chocolate and flowers.

"You two lovebirds have a good time," Barron said, heaving himself up and leaving.

"He's so sweet," London said.

Justin hid a cool smile. "He's not bad."

Most people who'd ever worked for or with him would never call Barron "sweet." He was a faithful disciple of Machiavelli—make people fear you and crush them when they mess with you so they could never rise up against you, ever. And unlike Justin, Barron was fully capable of applying it to everyone, including his own family.

After putting on a coat, Justin placed a hand at the small of London's back. She smelled heavily of a pricey perfume, nothing at all like Vanessa, who rarely wore any. "Shall we go?"

Five weeks and two days of not seeing Vanessa Pryce. After a year or two, he might stop thinking about her.

* * *

Taking a deep breath, Vanessa parked her rental in front of Justin's condo. She needed to get out of the car, but fear and apprehension kept her stuck in her seat. She didn't know how to start the conversation. Amazing really, when you thought about it—as a lawyer she wasn't exactly the tongue-tied type. But Justin wasn't an opposing counsel or a hostile witness.

The clouds sat dark and heavy, their bodies swollen with impending rain. Vanessa hoped the rain would hold off until she returned to the airport for her flight later.

What if Justin refused to see her?

Every kid needed a father. Vanessa had seen what the absence of one could do from the pro-bono work she did. Even Salazar had always been there for her and her brothers, while preoccupied with chasing every pretty face he saw. And she knew Justin would love his child.

She'd been so cowardly the last time they'd met. Sneaking out like a juvenile had been foolish, but she'd panicked when she'd woken in the pre-dawn light and realized she didn't want to leave.

Rumor had it that Justin was dating London Bickham now. For the first time since Vanessa had broken up with him in Vegas, he'd been with someone for over a month. Still, she couldn't help but wonder what Justin saw in her. As pretty as the heiress was, she could make a Valley Girl seem like Marie Curie by comparison.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 13

Maybe I should've texted first to set up an appointment. They'd never socialized in public or barged in on each other's lives unannounced. Well, that wasn't technically true. She'd shown up five weeks ago. And they'd interacted briefly when he'd visited her office last November. How her coworkers had talked!

Vanessa's going to be a partner no matter what. Did you see how Justin Sterling looked at and talked to her? You don't think the partners noticed?

Her jaw tightened. When she made partner it would be on her own merit, not because of who her family and friends were.

She pulled her hat lower, then made sure the face net covered her properly. Her red hair was pulled tightly and most of it was hidden under the hat. The black dress was something her mother might wear, but she didn't care. She wanted to make sure she was difficult to recognize...and unapproachable.

Feeling like a stalker, she stepped out of her rental. The March Chicago wind nipped at her. She shivered, pulling her long, black coat closer. No matter how she prepared herself, the chill of the Chicago winter never failed to surprise her. She wished she had Justin's coat around her again, then shook herself. This was why she shouldn't be with him. This pathetic needy side of her was unwelcome, appalling.

As she locked her car, a couple of familiar figures emerged out of the condo. She stopped and looked. It was Justin and London.

They made a handsome couple. Justin's dark head was lowered, and he whispered something in London's ear. The blonde's laughter rang out, bright and merry. Justin placed a hand on her shoulder, and she leaned into him.

Vanessa's hands shook as another image superimposed itself over the view in front of her.

Her father Salazar's head dipping, a blonde in his arms laughing at something he'd said... They'd left a downtown hotel together as Vanessa watched. She'd been six at the time, but she'd understood what the woman meant—a betrayal of her mother. By the time she'd been born, nobody was bothering to hide what her dad was up to. And when she was a few years older, she'd realized what they'd been doing in the hotel room.

Uncertainty bled into misery. She should just leave, before anybody noticed her. She should—

“Vanessa!”

She flinched at the high-pitched squeal. London rushed over to her. “Oh my gosh, look at you! What are you doing in Chicago?”

“Meeting some friends,” Vanessa said smoothly.

Justin followed London over. His eyes had gone as cold as the wind.

Ignoring him, Vanessa cleared her throat. “You look great, London.”

“Thanks. Justin and I were about to go to lunch. Wanna join us?” She turned to Justin. “Wouldn’t that be great?”

He didn’t look at Vanessa. “I’m sure she’s busy, dear.”

Vanessa pasted on a smile. “Very.” She made a show of looking at her watch. “In fact, my flight’s leaving in less than two hours.”

“Oh, darn. You know what? We’ll do lunch next time I’m in L.A.,” London said.

“Of course,” Vanessa said. “Well, gotta go.” She slipped into her car before she lost her composure completely and told Justin why she was in Chicago in front of his girlfriend. Then with more force than necessary, she yanked on her seatbelt and stomped on the gas.

* * *

Justin watched Vanessa’s maroon Taurus disappear into the Chicago traffic. What the hell. London seemed to have bought Vanessa’s story about work in the city, but he didn’t. Why was she back in Chicago?

If it was for another night of sex, she could forget it. He was doing quite well on his detox program.

Still...

There had been dark half-circles under the layers of careful eye makeup. And her face had seemed paler than usual, her cheekbones more prominent. Probably working herself to death.

She’d been unusually tense as she’d spoken with London, and if it had been any other woman he might have considered it jealousy. But Vanessa Pryce never felt jealousy over a man. The only thing she cared about was her career, “making partner.” It’d become an obsession during her law school years, although he didn’t understand why. It wasn’t like she needed the money. If she wanted to be a law firm partner, she could’ve just created her own. That would be the easiest way, given her background and financial situation. It didn’t have to be at her current law firm.

“Justin, are you all right?” London asked.

He blinked and looked down at the petite heiress. “Sorry. Thinking about a new project.” He forced a smile. “Let’s go.”

He was going to get through week five and day two of his Vanessa detox program.

Chapter Five

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 14

The rain poured down as though somebody had slit the clouds’ fat bellies. No matter what setting she used for the wipers, Vanessa couldn’t see anything in front of her. There was no way she was going to reach O’Hare in weather like this.

She pulled over and stared outside. Shudders went through her every time a car sped by, making her rental rock. It didn’t look like the rain would let up any time soon. There wasn’t even a sliver of blue on the dark horizon. She pulled out her phone to check the weather in Chicago. Rain for the rest of the day. Great.

Maybe she should just call Mark and ask him to arrange for a pickup. Her brother would do it, and unlike Iain he wouldn’t ask annoying questions. She didn’t want to discuss why she was in Chicago with anybody. Her business was strictly with Justin.

She pressed her head against the headrest and tapped the edge of her phone. Maybe she didn’t have to tell Justin. It wasn’t like she wanted him to get involved with her life. He seemed to have moved on, and it looked like London might be the one for him, given how long they’d been dating.

And the idea of him being with London—or any woman—twisted her heart. Vanessa rubbed her forehead. When had she turned into a dog in a

manger? It wasn't like she was going to start dating him if he just ditched everyone else.

She put a hand over her belly. Even if she wanted to keep it quiet, this wasn't something she could hide...not to mention the child would want to know about its father.

Before she lost her nerve, she typed I'm pregnant and hit send. As soon as her phone showed "sent" confirmation, she cursed. What the hell had she been thinking? This was what happened when she was tired and sleep-deprived and stressed.

She check

ed the settings on her phone. There had to be a way to recall that text before Justin saw it.

Nobody needed to know whose baby she carried. She could just say she didn't know, and it wasn't like she needed anybody's approval. She made her own money, and she had an amazing career. She could raise the baby on her own, and it would never lack for anything, even if it didn't have the Sterling family's level of wealth.

Money wasn't everything in life.

She stared at the phone. No response from Justin. Maybe he didn't see it. Maybe he'd lost his phone or changed his number.

Or he might just laugh it off. He'd probably think she'd sent it by error or something. They'd been so careful, always using birth control. He would think it was a prank, a bad one, but prank nonetheless.

Weren't there dozens of reason why she shouldn't be with him anyway, even if London hadn't been in the picture? He was too handsome, too sexy, too good in bed, too popular, too rich and too likely to influence her career. But most importantly, he was too likely to break her heart. She knew herself. If she stayed with him for too long, she'd fall for him and nothing—not even love—was enough to make relationships last.

She looked at the water streaming down her windshield. The rain would let up at some point. When it was light enough for her to drive again, she'd either make her way to the airport or check into a nearby hotel.

Whichever was safer.

* * *

Justin smiled at London. She'd been chattering about shoes for the last half-hour. She had to be an alien whose mind and logic defied human understanding. What else could explain her obsessive desire to talk about leather used to make shoes in Italy?

The lobster bisque was unexpectedly excellent and provided great distraction from the monologue. Rain ran down the windows in rivulets, and he took a brief glance at the wet pavement. Was Vanessa going to be okay driving to the airport? She was a prototypical Californian—the most inclement weather she could stand was cloudy.

“So what do you think?” London asked, jerking his attention back.

He managed a smile. “I think it's great.” A great non-answer, guilt needled him. He shouldn't care about Vanessa's driving in the rain. What she did wasn't any of his concern. He was on a date with a woman who actually liked having a relationship with him, and she didn't slice away a bit of his heart every time they met. But somehow his mind rebelled at being in the restaurant, and he controlled his breathing. Vanessa was like a bottle of booze to a recovering alcoholic. One sip and he was done for.

When his phone buzzed in his pocket, he excused himself to check it. Anything to delay London from launching into the merits of stilettos.

His mood grew as dark as the weather outside when he noticed a text from Vanessa. He should delete it. It was probably something that would upset him. Or tempt him.

But he recalled her pallor. She'd looked absolutely wretched and tired, and he'd never seen her like that. Was her parents' divorce weighing her down? She was close to her mother, and he knew the situation with her

parents had always bothered her. Even though their marriage had been a joke of cosmic proportions, everyone had assumed Salazar and Ceinlys Pryce would always stay married to each other.

Cursing himself, he thumbed the screen. Then blinked.

I'm pregnant.

His heart thumped, and the words jumbled in his mind. It couldn't be...

He stared at the text again, willing it to make sense. But no. It was still the same two words.

His body went slack. Now he understood why she'd been at his place. She probably wanted to talk about the baby. He remembered how she'd smiled her lawyer smile at London and climbed into her car as soon as possible without appearing rude. What else could she have done with the other woman there?

Closing his eyes, he let out a soft sigh. So many thoughts tumbled through his mind, but one thing was clear. He couldn't let her go now.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 15

“London, I’m sorry, but it’s an emergency. Do you mind?”

“No, not at all,” she said. “Business?”

“Something like that. I’ll call you a car.”

“You’re so sweet.” She smiled at him, her eyes semi-vacant now that they were no longer talking about shoes. “Thanks.”

Her simple understanding made him feel lower than dirt. She might not be the most brilliant or interesting woman he knew, but she was one of

the sweetest. He couldn't continue to sit with her and fake-laugh and fake-talk his way through the lunch. She deserved better.

And he and Vanessa were having a baby.

He took care of the meal and climbed into his Bentley. He dialed Vanessa's number, but she didn't pick up. Damn it.

Grinding his teeth, he texted Vanessa. Where are you?

A little bit later, he got a response. Did you see the text I sent you earlier?

Yes.

That was a mistake. I meant to send it to somebody else.

He snorted. Who? I wanna send onesies. When she didn't respond, he scowled. Vanessa, if you don't tell me where you are, I'm going to get the cops out looking for you.

You wouldn't.

I can and I will. Guess who's on my speed dial? Not to mention the tons of money he'd donated to the memorial funds and others for Chicago's finest.

I'm pulled over on I-90. Other than that, no idea where I am.

Stay right there. Justin instructed his driver to take I-90 toward O'Hare and look for a maroon Taurus on the shoulder.

It didn't take that long to find Vanessa's rental. It had the emergency blinkers on. Thank god she couldn't drive in the rain. Otherwise she would've left the city by now. In Los Angeles she was a speed demon.

Justin jumped out of his car and ran to it before his driver could bring out the umbrella. The icy rain soaked him instantly, and he pounded on the passenger door. Vanessa unlocked it.

“You’re going to ruin the seat,” she said, staring straight out the windshield. Her voice was tight.

“I don’t give a damn.”

She sniffled. The obvious signs of fatigue and her loss of weight hit him again, but this time they took on another dimension.

“Are you eating and sleeping well?” he asked, trying not to show his exasperation. “You know, all those things pregnant women should do.”

“Of course.”

She was lying through her teeth. Knowing her, she probably did billable work in her dreams too. “The baby’s the reason why you came to see me,” Justin said.

“I didn’t. I don’t even know what made me text that.”

“Really.”

“You aren’t even going to question whether it’s really yours?”

“Who else’s could it be?” She wouldn’t have texted him if it wasn’t his.

Her throat worked. “It doesn’t change anything.”

“How can you say that?”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 16

“Justin, go back to the restaurant. It’s not nice to ditch your girlfriend in the middle of lunch. If you want”—she finally turned to face him—“I’ll draw up some papers releasing you from parental responsibilities.”

He reined in his temper. “What kind of man do you think I am? You think I’m worried about paying child support?”

“It’s not about you.” Her shoulders slumped for a moment, but she squared them, her mouth tight now. “Unscrupulous women generally demand more.”

Except Vanessa wasn’t unscrupulous. She probably wished she’d never come to Chicago or told him she was pregnant. She obviously didn’t want him involved, as though he had nothing to do with the baby they’d created.

“No,” he said. “It’s my baby. I’ll be a father to it.”

“Justin, you don’t have to. Whoever you end up marrying won’t like it that you have a child with somebody else.”

“Remarkable, that you know so much about this woman,” he said sarcastically. It was either that or blow up on her as she spoke of him marrying another woman while she was carrying his

baby.

“I’m a lawyer, remember? When you have the kind of money you do, people always think way, way ahead. To the estate. It’s not cynicism, it’s reality.”

“You’re right.”

“Thank you.”

“There’s only one thing left for us to do.” He smiled, watching her eyes narrow. “Get married.”

* * *

Vanessa sucked in a breath. “Definitely not. I didn’t tell you so you’d marry me.”

“So it’s something else then?”

“Look, I just...didn’t want this to be a surprise later on. I know what something like that can do to a family.”

“You’re referring to your stepbrother?”

She nodded. Her father had a son with another woman and had brought him into the fold. Vanessa didn’t have any hard feelings against Blaine, since it wasn’t his fault Salazar was a womanizer. Ceinlys had been absolutely furious, of course, and Vanessa suspected it had added another dimension to her mother’s sudden desire to divorce.

“Salazar didn’t do the right thing because he was already married. I’m not.”

“Justin—”

“Don’t make me fight you over this. If it goes public, it won’t be just me after you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Barron has been after me to marry and ‘produce an heir.’ Well, this baby is it. Heir to the Sterling & Wilson fortune.”

Vanessa bit her lower lip. “I want to keep our marriage quiet.”

“Quiet?”

“Quiet. Undercover, on the sly, in secret. Get it done outside the country or something.”

The muscles in his jaw flexed. “I’m not going to continue what we’ve been doing the last ten years. We’re talking about marriage here.”

“It’s important.”

“Why?”

Because it’s going to end soon...and badly, she thought. Justin couldn’t even pretend he felt anything that was strong enough to compel him to suggest matrimony to her. Her parents had loved each other to pieces, and their marriage had eventually become a train wreck. The divorce was

going to be just as bad with a bunch of over-priced lawyers squabbling over every penny.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 17

Justin was her kryptonite, and unlike Superman she was too stupid to stay away from him. One day when she least expected it, he'd destroy her. And probably the child too. She put a hand over her belly. Children were always collateral damage in their parents' battles.

She dropped her gaze to stare at the bottom of the steering wheel. "I don't want who you are to affect my career."

"I don't see how it's related."

He had to be joking, but maybe he honestly didn't get it. Everyone knew he'd been hand-picked by his great-uncle to lead Sterling & Wilson. He'd been groomed from a very early age to be what he was today, and nobody whispered that the only reason he'd become Barron's heir was dumb luck or anything other than his hard work and intellect.

"If I were a man," Vanessa began, "who I was married to wouldn't be a big deal. But for women, it is more important than what they accomplish. When a woman is discussed in a professional capacity, they talk about her marital status, whether or not she has children. If she's pregnant, they discuss whether or not she's taking maternity leave. It's sexist and unfair, but that's the way it is, and I have to work within that."

She could never forget what Dane had said: It's not like they're hiring you for your brain. You can probably make partner without winning a single case, so long as you give them the Pryce family business.

She'd rather die than prove Dane right.

"If you're worried about maternity leave..."

“It’s not the leave. If people see that I’m married to you, they’re going to wonder how much your name has affected the kind of cases, performance evaluations and raises I get. I made it clear to my firm from the beginning that I would never bring my family’s business to them, and I’ve worked very hard to nip any hint of favoritism at the bud. And so far, I think it’s worked. But you’re different.” She raised her chin. “When I make partner, it’s going to be based on my professional accomplishments, not because I’m married to you.”

“You’ve been at the firm for ten years, right?”

She nodded.

“I’ll wait until July. That’s when you have your eval, right?”

Her eyes widened. “How did you know?”

“You mentioned it once. I’ll wait until then, and if you make partner, great. If not…” He shrugged. “I won’t wait beyond that.”

“But—”

“No buts. This is non-negotiable.” His eyes were cold, and his tone even colder. She’d never seen him like this before, and his hard expression killed her objections. “You won’t be able to hide your pregnancy by then anyway. And we’ll be living together as a couple.” He put a finger on the tip of her nose. “Discreetly.”

“I’m not moving to Chicago,” she said quickly before she lost all control of the situation.

He shrugged. “That’s fine. I can be in L.A.”

“You don’t have an office in L.A.” Sterling & Wilson’s California office was in San Francisco.

“I am Sterling & Wilson, not some building.” There was a quiet surety and confidence in his voice.

Her mouth dried. “Are we going to Vegas?”

“Nothing as clichéd as that. Take next Friday off. I’ll send a jet to pick you up in the morning.”

“If you tell me where we’re going, I can arrange for my own trans—”

“Don’t. I’m meeting you most of the way, Vanessa. So humor me on this. Also we should go back to my place and get you fed and rested.”

“Can’t. I have tons of work to do, and I don’t want another associate to suffer because I’m not pulling my weight.”

“Felix Peck?”

She nodded.

“Fine. I’ll send you home on my jet then. And don’t even think about driving in this weather.” He pulled out a credit card and handed it to her. “Put whatever you need on this.”

She stared at the black AmEx. This was too fast, and panic knotted her belly. “What about London?” she said, desperate to throw up whatever obstacle she could manage.

“I’ll take care of her. All you need to do is show up.”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 18

Chapter Six

Sitting in one of the conference rooms at Highsmith, Dickson and Associates, Vanessa checked her phone again. Justin had to have gotten her text that morning, but so far there was no answer.

Sighing, she pushed the thoughts of Justin out of her mind and tried to concentrate on the mountain of papers in front of her. She needed to

review them all. The opposing counsel was being a jerk. Apparently he'd decided to kill her with kindness by sending her every minute document.

Soon Felix strolled in with two Starbucks and a paper bag filled with fries. A Yale graduate, he reminded Vanessa of a hungry lion with burning dark eyes and brown hair streaked with golden highlights. His thin lips looked like he disapproved of everyone, especially when he set them in an unsmiling line. They worked wonders when he wanted to intimidate witnesses or difficult clients.

As usual, Felix was in another of his classic Armani outfits, although he'd dressed on the casual side for the weekend. Unlike Vanessa, he had come from a lower middle class family in Cincinnati, and he was extra aware of the image he needed to project even though he didn't mind food slumming with her on difficult cases. In return, Vanessa hooked him up at La Mer or Éternité, two of the most exclusive restaurants in the city owned by her brother Mark.

"You sure you don't want to take some time off this weekend?" Felix said, handing her her tea. "You look like hell."

"No, but thank you for the compliment."

"You know what I mean."

Vanessa knew exactly what he meant. She looked and felt like hell. Apparently crackers didn't agree with her, and now she was craving French fries with the heat of a thousand suns. "I'm a little behind. Besides, I have tons of work to do before next Friday."

"I can't believe Harry gave you another day off," he said, taking his seat. "I was sure he'd say no. What's the secret?"

"It's conditional." Dickson had made it clear if she got everything done by Thursday, she could take Friday off. Otherwise, she had to keep her ass in her seat and get the work done.

“Yeah, right!” Stan Rivers stuck his head through the open door and snorted. “You’ll be able to go even if you don’t finish anything. Everyone knows that.”

Vanessa gave him a long, hard stare. A couple of years older than her, Stan was the most likely associate to make partner next, although there was some whispering that Vanessa might take his spot. She hated how people tried to pit them against each other, but most importantly she hated how smug and annoying Stan was. He was always bringing up the fact that she was a Pryce girl and knew a lot of people. He even talked about how she’d been invited to Barron Sterling’s granddaughter’s wedding—in a not so subtle way—to hint that she was being promoted at the firm only because of her connections.

It was just her luck he wasn’t even a terrible lawyer. He wasn’t great, but he was better than average—good enough to survive at the firm. Plus he knew how to be slick with partners and clients. He always dressed well and swaggered around like he knew he was a shoo-in for the promotion.

Which made her jaw ache.

“If I had the influence you think I do, you wouldn’t be working here.” Vanessa reached for her fries. “Felix, do you mind shutting the door? We have a lot of billable”—she looked pointedly at the pile of documents to review—“work to do.”

With an overly sympathetic smile, Felix shut the door in Stan’s face. “Can’t stand that guy.”

“You and me both.”

“I hope you make partner before him. I don’t think I’ll be able to stand it if he does.”

“He’s not a bad lawyer.”

“That doesn’t make him great.”

Vanessa nodded and almost jumped when her phone buzzed. It was a text from Justin.

Why do you want my lawyer's contact info?

Narrowing her eyes, she t

yped, So I can tell him where to send me the prenup.

A moment later, he responded, Send YOU a prenup? Isn't it usually the other way around with the Pryces?

She sighed. Don't be dense. At 25 billion and counting, Justin was worth more than her entire family.

No prenups.

You need to protect yourself.

If I wanted your legal advice, I would've signed a retainer agreement.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 19

She glared at the screen. Felix looked over, his head tilted. "Who's that?"

"A friend who's refusing my legal advice."

He snorted. "Not smart. I'd take your advice, especially if it was free. Does she have any idea how much you bill?"

"I know, right?" Vanessa typed, Fine. Have it your way. Don't blame me if things go south.

Go south. As if. A moment later there was another message. Bring a white dress.

Stupidly arrogant. But she should've expected that from Barron's heir. Everyone had assumed her parents' prenup was iron-clad...except her mother's lawyer Samantha, shark that she was, had found a way to chip

away at it. Now she was questioning the validity of the document in the first place, which was dragging out the horrendous divorce process.

Her phone buzzed again. Vanessa glared at it, then picked it up just in case it was a real client who actually wanted legal advice from her. Instead it was her mother.

I'm finally all moved and settled. There will be a housewarming party on Saturday at six. Bring a date if you can.

Vanessa rolled her neck, trying to relieve the tension. Her mother had been avoiding her and her brothers for the last few weeks, and now came this last-minute notice for an event that was more or less obligatory.

Felix took a big gulp of his coffee. "You okay?"

"Yeah. It's just my mom."

"How's she doing?"

"Great, apparently. She wants to have a housewarming party."

"Oh." He knew—like everyone else in the legal community and Vanessa's social circle—that Ceinlys Pryce was divorcing her husband of almost four decades. "Are you going?"

"I guess. I don't know."

It depended on Justin's plan, which he wasn't telling her.

"I understand your dad's contesting the divorce," Felix said slowly, each word carefully chosen in that lawyerly way of his.

Grunting, she nodded. She didn't know the details of her father's strategy. Her parents weren't talking to her or her brothers about the divorce at all. It hurt her she couldn't talk to her mother about her impending secret wedding and motherhood or her doubts about Justin. Her mother wasn't the best mother—Vanessa knew that much—but it would've been nice to talk things over with someone.

Vanessa sighed and turned her attention to the documents, which had to be finished if she wanted to elope. She had a feeling if she didn't show up at the airport like she was supposed to, Justin would send a platoon of his minions to drag her to wherever he wanted her.

And what a spectacle that would make.

* * *

On Tuesday, she bumped into Bobbie, wife of John Highsmith and a partner in her own right, in the break room. A lot of people underestimated her at first glance because she was petite with soft babyish white-gold hair and a pixie face. Nobody who'd ever faced her in a legal battle thought her small and cute though. She was the kind of lawyer Vanessa wanted to be when she grew up: fierce, respected and smart. Not to mention that Bobbie was a straight shooter and never held a grudge. If she hated you, you knew about it. Vanessa, luckily, was on the "like" side.

"Long time no see," Vanessa said.

"Yeah." A bleached smile plumped Bobbie's rosy cheeks as she poured coffee. "How you doing, Vanessa?"

Other than the stress of elopement and a baby? "Oh, fine."

"Good. I heard about your new case with Felix. It's a good one, very important for the firm."

Too bad the client's guilty.

Vanessa's feelings must have shown on her face, because Bobbie gave her a look over the rim of her coffee mug that said I can eat babies for breakfast if it's billable. "The kind of thing that can get you noticed if you handle it right."

"I understand. Listen. Um, do you mind if we chat privately?"

The other woman shrugged. "Let's go to my office."

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 20

Vanessa grabbed her tea and followed Bobbie to her corner office. The place smelled faintly of paper, leather and old coffee. It was one of the three largest ones on the floor, with the great view of downtown L.A. Stacks of papers, accordion files and legal tomes covered her desk and two tables, while the shelves were occupied by neat rows of leather-bound books. On the desk by her small laptop, she kept a small, framed photo of herself, her husband and their son. They were smiling for the camera, and the boy looked happy. Bobbie was the woman who had it all.

Vanessa closed the door, then took a seat across from the partner.

“So, what’s going on?” Bobbie said.

“There’s something I’ve been wondering about.” Vanessa wrapped her hands around her cup. “Marriage and motherhood as a female lawyer, you know.”

“Are you getting married?” Bobbie’s gaze dropped to Vanessa’s empty finger.

“No, it’s a friend from Stanford.” Vanessa cleared her throat. “But it got me thinking. I’m not getting any younger.”

Bobbie snorted. “Neither is anybody else. Well, what can I tell you? Husbands aren’t too terrible if they understand the demands of our career. So I’d say generally it’s best if you get hitched to another lawyer or someone similar. As for a baby, I suppose it’s doable, but for a brilliant lawyer with a bright career ahead of her, it can be difficult. Babies are more demanding than any client, and you can’t do a damn thing about it. It’s not like you can give them back.”

Vanessa laughed, and Bobbie smiled.

“Unless you find the lawyer work a cakewalk or you feel some kind of unshakable compulsion to have a child...or your man is okay being a house-husband...I generally advise female attorneys not to do it. It can derail your career. And unfair as it is, child-rearing generally falls on the woman. It’s not easy juggling a child and demanding career.”

“But you have a son.”

“What I had was John’s parents. They practically raised the boy. I’m sure you know how it is. You had nannies growing up, didn’t you?”

Vanessa nodded. She and her older brothers had had a series of nannies, most of them young. Her mother hadn’t kept any of them for long, especially when she suspected they might attract Salazar’s attention. Even though Ceinlys knew about his affairs, having it happen under her own roof was just too much.

“They can make things easier. But still, the actual pregnancy and labor and recovery are all on you, and you might resent the fact that the baby’s in the way, or that your career’s keeping you away from your child. It’s not always logical or emotions we’re proud of, but it’s there. It makes things more complex.” Bobbie’s smile turned rueful. “Any of that help?”

“Yes.” Vanessa nodded. “Thank you.”

“Anytime. My door’s always open.”

As Vanessa left though, she couldn’t help but think her situation wouldn’t be the way Bobbie had described. Justin knew how her job was. And the baby could have all the best nannies in the world—there was a lot of Sterling money, and knowing Justin and Barron, she doubted they’d be stingy.

But she didn’t know where she might fit in. All she had was a sinking feeling that she wouldn’t be in the picture for long.

Chapter Seven

Justin’s jet arrived to pick Vanessa up from the small Long Beach airport. Fresh flowers added a nice accent to the luxurious leather and wood-

grain interior. He must've had it done specially for the occasion, but she couldn't relax and enjoy it.

Since their texts about the prenup, he hadn't contacted her once. Not that she'd been standing around waiting for something

to come through the fax machine. She'd been swamped with work. Solaris Med was an important case, and it was already drawing a lot of media attention with accusations of wrongful termination and sexual harassment flung at the client. It wasn't easy or uplifting to discredit the plaintiff when she knew they were right.

However, she'd managed to draft a fairly good prenup agreement in her very small amounts of spare time. It wasn't her specialty, but she had a few to model from, like her parents' own infamous version. Justin's assets held little appeal, but she wanted a fair custody arrangement for the baby should they divorce.

Or, given what she'd seen in her own family, when they divorced.

The jet stopped in Chicago to pick Justin up and then flew on toward god only knew where. She couldn't believe how high-handed and resolute Justin was. On the other hand, what had she expected? This wasn't just any baby.

The heir to the Sterling & Wilson fortune.

Sterling & Wilson was worth billions and had tentacles into the most profitable sectors of six continents. Justin's great-uncle, Barron Sterling, had built it into the massive empire from nothing, and he'd hand-selected Justin to lead the company since he'd been a toddler. Barron and Justin had every important person in the world on speed dial, and there was nothing they couldn't do if they set their minds to it.

It was no wonder Justin had reacted the way he had at the news of her pregnancy. His family tended to be conservative and straight-laced about things. Even if she'd offered to give him the baby no-strings attached, he probably would've insisted on marriage. Then there was Barron's reaction. The man had destroyed people—including some of his own

family members—for displeasing him. Vanessa had heard how he'd virtually exiled his own granddaughter Kerri to boarding school for something or other. How would he react if he found out Vanessa wouldn't marry Justin while carrying his child?

She stared at herself in the small window. Her black skirt suit was positively funereal. She'd never wanted to marry. Ever.

Marriage was the most miserable institution in the world, not only for the couple but for their children.

Maybe Justin thought it'd be a good idea to marry, legally speaking. She didn't know much about pregnancy, but she knew there could be serious complications. One of the associates at the firm had gotten pregnant last year, and she had to take six months off due to some problems. As her husband, Justin would have more legal rights in emergency situations, and it made sense he'd want to be in charge of her and their baby just in case.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 21

But after the baby was born, there would be no reason for them to stay together. Couples didn't have to be joined at the hips to raise a child—she knew from experience—and there wasn't even love at the base of their relationship. They could have a clean and simple resolution, with each of them keeping what they'd brought to the marriage. She didn't want a penny of Justin's mon—.

“A penny for your thoughts,” Justin said, linking his fingers with hers.

She tried to pull her hand, but he merely tightened his grip. “My billing rate is a little higher than that.”

His lips quirked into a smile. “So bill me.”

Divorce probably wasn't something they should talk about right now. She combed through possible topics to bring up. "I was wondering if your lawyers know what you're up to."

He sighed. "Are you still worried about the prenup?"

"Aren't you?"

Justin waved his hand. "I'm sure you can draft a simple prenup saying we don't want each other's assets."

"Never trust a lawyer who isn't billing you." She pulled out the prenup she'd drafted. "Here."

"What are you asking for? Half of everything I own?"

She snorted. "I don't want your money. Just a fair custody situation for the child." Her mother had stayed to be with her children. The Pryce prenup was clear: in case of divorce, her mother would not only lose custody, but wouldn't even be able to visit or get in touch with her children until they turned twenty-one.

Then a sudden realization hit her: Ceinlys had stayed way past that point...

For what?

Justin arched an eyebrow. "What about what I might want? Shouldn't you consider some protection as well?"

Vanessa gave herself a good mental shake. This wasn't the time to think about her parents' marriage. "I doubt you're interested in anything I have."

* * *

Justin looked over at Vanessa, who had closed her eyes as if that would block out the world, including him. Maybe she was dreaming about him shoving a prenup in her face.

Her obsession with the agreement amused him. He didn't intend to have one. He didn't want Vanessa to feel that they were less than completely equal in their marriage. If that meant he was being stupid or that he might end up losing half his money, so be it.

Justin watched her softly breathing. It looked like she hadn't slept well in the last few days. The semi-circles under her eyes looked bigger and darker than the week before, and her cheekbones seemed more prominent. He didn't know much about pregnancy, but of course it could be rough on women, especially during the first trimester. And she hadn't told her law firm, so there obviously wouldn't be any accommodation from that end. He made a mental note to take care of it. His wife wasn't going to work herself to death while pregnant. The case she was working on was getting some publicity, which would mean increased pressure to perform.

Vanessa's idea about his not being interested in anything she had contained one glaring blind spot. It was true that none of her material possessions interested him. But he wanted her. And not just her, but the life that he knew the two of them could have together.

It astounded him that she didn't believe that was possible. Or maybe it wasn't that incredible, given her background.

To say that her parents didn't have an ideal marriage would be an understatement. A terrible waste since they should've been happy. Salazar must have loved Ceinlys to marry her despite strong opposition from his family, especially his mother, Shirley Pryce. Not even five beautiful grandchildren had been enough to ameliorate her dislike of Ceinlys. Justin didn't understand the old woman's logic; what made it acceptable to love her grandchildren but despise the woman who'd given them to her?

So over the years, Shirley had berated Ceinlys, Salazar had had numerous affairs, and Justin was certain the rumors of Ceinlys's men were true. A situation more or less guaranteed to mess up the children.

Justin didn't want the past to affect what he and Vanessa could have together. They deserved the very best life possible, and he wanted to give

it to her, even if it meant hiding their marriage until July against his better judgment. Vanessa seemed worried about her job, but he had no doubt her firm would be understanding of her situation. If not, she could always go someplace else. Hell, he'd buy her a damned law firm if that would make her happy.

If he'd had it his way, everyone would know she was his. They'd be married in a grand ceremony as big as—if not bigger than—the wedding his cousin Kerri had had in Thailand. He would've given her a wedding other women could only dream of.

He rested the knuckle on his left index finger against his lips as he considered. Maybe they could have another ceremony after the baby was born. Something romantic and sentimental, with all their family and friends in attendance... It would be just the thing. Maybe rent out the Ashford Castle in Ireland where they'd had their first vacation together...

The cabin attendant came over. "Sir," she spoke in a low voice. "We'll be landing soon."

He nodded, then glanced over at Vanessa. Her face was lax in sleep.

"That's fine," Justin said, "but we won't be deplaning immediately." He checked the time. "We have about half an hour or so before we need to get going."

"Yes, sir." The cabin attendant slipped away.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 22

Justin pulled out his phone and started typing instructions for his lawyers. Two of the newer associates were coming to join them, but Justin didn't want to discuss what he was about to do with them. Ken Honishi, one of the senior partners at the firm, would be a better choice to take care of the matter.

Vanessa would probably blow a gasket when she found out, but he wanted her to know he was dead serious about this marriage even if she seemed unsure.

Thirty minutes later, he placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “We need to get going.”

Startled, she blinked. “Mm?”

“We’re here.”

“Oh.” She sat up, smoothing her hair. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“Probably needed the rest.” He looked at her belly meaningfully. “Want to get going?”

“Yeah, sure.” She got up with care, and they exited the plane together. A gleaming black stretch limo with dark tinted windows waited for them outside.

“You’ve thought of everything,” she said.

“Wanted to make sure you’ll be comfortable.”

They climbed into the limo. Vanessa settled in the luxurious interior as the driver pulled away from the airport and sighed softly. “So. Are you going to tell me where we are?”

“Canada.”

She jerked her head back. “Seriously?”

“We’re about to get married over Niagara Falls.”

* * *

Vanessa blinked, unsure if she’d heard him correctly. She’d known they weren’t in Vegas—the air was too moist—but this? “There are too many people here. I wasn’t kidding about keeping this quiet.”

“Relax. We’ll be getting married in a helicopter while it’s flying over the falls. I’ve already arranged for it, and a minister’s ready as soon as we pick up the marriage license. There will be only two witnesses—junior associates from a law firm on Sterling & Wilson’s retainer. They won’t talk unless they want to be fired and sued.”

Her lips parted. Justin had been busy, thinking of everything. Sterling & Wilson’s lawyers wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize their retainer.

“This is the best I could arrange on short notice

e. I know it’s nobody’s dream wedding, but we can have a real, grand ceremony later after the baby.” He pulled out a dark navy box and took her left hand. Inside the box was a diamond ring. The simple platinum setting showed off the size and superior cut and clarity of the stone surrounded by smaller sapphires the exact color of her eyes. “For the engagement. I wanted to get something custom designed, but there wasn’t enough time.”

“It’s perfect,” she whispered as a sudden lump formed in her throat.

He put the ring on her finger and kissed her knuckles. The sparkling gem made it seem so much more real. She was really getting married.

Her mother had a similar piece in her jewelry box, although the stone types were reversed—a huge sapphire in the center surrounded by small diamonds. It was her engagement ring, which she hadn’t worn in ages. Vanessa knew her father had proposed in the most romantic setting he could manage and professed undying love. She’d seen his letters.

My love for you will never die. So long as you love me, we’ll be happy and together till death do us part. Ceinlys, I know you’re worried about my mother’s reaction, but it isn’t her life, it’s ours. Will you take a chance? I’ll make you the happiest woman in the world forever and ever.

“Vanessa?”

She jerked her chin up and looked at Justin’s frowning face. “Sorry. I sort of zoned out.”

Justin's frown melted into an ironically skewed smile. "Is the rock disappointing?"

She smacked his arm. "No! It's so big, it's almost vulgar."

"I was going to get a four-carat stone, but I thought it would look wrong on you." He traced her ring finger. "Your hands are so delicate...you need something simple, elegant and graceful."

She licked her lower lip. His words seeped all the way to her bones in syrupy sweetness, and her mind shivered with longing and a sliver of fear.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 23

"Vanessa... I swear to you, I'll make you happy...as happy as I know you're going to make me," he said.

His gaze was absolutely steady. He wasn't just talking, carried by the moment. Cold sweat filmed her palms and the back of her neck. Hadn't Ceinlys often spoken of the madness of deriving happiness from others, how Salazar had let her down? That could easily be Vanessa's future too. Justin had all the things that had made Salazar irresistible to women: a charming personality, looks, money and power.

And all the beauties who used to grace his arms wouldn't give up just because he was married. Just look at all those women throwing themselves at Salazar. How could Justin's situation be any different? Vanessa would be one of many stars that orbited around him, while he was the center of her universe. Panic balled in her gut.

"Vanessa?" Justin prompted.

"Yes?"

"You're zoning out again."

“Sorry. I was just wondering...” She took a deep breath, then held the air in her lungs so she wouldn’t start hyperventilating. “How long were you planning to be in Toronto? I need to go back to L.A. on Saturday.”

“Didn’t block out any time for a honeymoon?”

Cringing, she shook her head. “It’s not like we can have one. Our marriage is secret, remember?”

“That sounds so clandestine.” He gave her a meaningful look. “Secret Wife.”

She looked away as her heart squeezed. What a ridiculous reaction. She wasn’t thrilled at being called “wife,” secret or otherwise. This was temporary, and she was not going to end up like her mother.

Because she looked so much like her mother, most people thought she’d marry well and have everything catered to her. Except she knew better. Her grandmother had often lamented about how poisonous and ephemeral her mother’s looks were.

“If Ceinlys had been just slightly less beautiful she would never have been able to marry Salazar. Mark my words, as she grows older, her hold on him will weaken. Fading youth can never keep a man’s heart. One day he’ll wake up and wonder what he ever saw in her. And she’ll be sorry. But by then it will be too late.” She raised a wrinkled but absolutely steady finger. “This is why you look at the pedigree. The character. You never marry a woman solely for her beauty.”

Vanessa pushed aside her grandmother’s conversation. Shirley Pryce hadn’t limited herself to just her sister’s ears. Vanessa also knew how disappointed Shirley was that she looked so much like Ceinlys.

“If only you’d gotten the Pryce eyes or nose...” Shirley had sighed, searching Vanessa’s face. “If you’d been a boy, at least you could’ve had the Pryce profile. Ah well, at least you’re pretty. Good men will marry you for that...assuming you don’t overeducate yourself.”

Vanessa snuffed the memory and concentrated on the present. “Mom’s having a housewarming party on Saturday,” she said to Justin, “and she wants me there. I couldn’t beg off, especially with all my brothers coming.” Short notice or no, they’d wanted to attend. “Well, except for Shane, of course.”

Justin frowned. “Where is Shane anyway? I haven’t seen him in months.”

“You or anyone else. He went to South Africa in May, but since then...nada.” She shook her head. “He’s never pulled something like this. Dad’s thinking about sending men out there to drag him back to L.A.”

“That’s pretty high-handed.”

“I know. Shocking, given that it’s Dad.” Vanessa snorted. “But in this case, I actually agree with the idea.”

Justin shrugged. “Well let me know if I can help. In the meantime, if you want, we can get married today, then fly out to L.A. together tomorrow. I want to see how Ceinlys is doing.”

“But—”

“Don’t give yourself an aneurism, okay? She invited me too.”

Vanessa’s eyes widened. “She did?”

“Yeah. She apparently heard something about my relocating to California.”

“Justin! I thought you were staying in Chicago.”

“Why would I do that when my wife and child are going to be in California?” He gave her a small, smile. “Don’t worry. She won’t have any idea. I’m going to be in San Francisco. I even rented a corporate condo, not that I plan to actually live there.”

“Where are you going to be?”

“In L.A. With you.”

“Everyone’s going to know then.”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 24

“Leave it to me to keep it quiet,” Justin said, his tone absolutely unshakable. “I can be very discreet.”

Chapter Eight

It took no time at all to get the marriage license. The clerk looked only politely interested as she processed the paperwork and gave them their document. “Here you go. Congratulations.” Her tone indicated it was the fiftieth time she’d said it that day. Vanessa was just relieved she didn’t seem to connect the dots.

She and Justin went to their hotel afterward to freshen up before the actual ceremony. Justin had booked a sumptuously decorated suite overlooking the Falls.

Since she didn’t want to draw any attention, she’d brought a lacy white cocktail dress with matching shoes and the pearls she’d inherited from her grandmother. Justin put on a tux with a white tie, while she commandeered the vanity to touch up her makeup and hair.

She kept her hand steady as she applied a thin coat of lipstick. It felt so surreal to think that soon she’d be a missus. She pressed her palm against her still flat belly. At least Justin hadn’t accused her of lying about her pregnancy or denying that it could be his child. He’d treated her right, and the least she could do was return the favor.

So long as they were married...so long as he was faithful, she’d be a good wife.

“Hey, you look beautiful,” Justin said from the doorway. One arm was held behind his back. He walked over, sweeping the arm out with a

magician's flourish and producing a large plumeria blossom. "Here." He put it carefully into her hair. "Your favorite."

Something she couldn't quite identify welled in her chest, and it felt like her ribcage would snap. "Where did you get it?" Her voice shook slightly despite her

best effort.

"Concierge." He gave her a quick kiss on the mouth, careful not to smear the lipstick. "We have to get going now."

She draped a long black coat over her shoulders and left the suite with Justin. Their limo took them to a helipad not too far from their hotel, where a helicopter was waiting. The setting sun streaked the sky with orange, gold and purples, and the shining white finish on the helicopter reflected the warm colors.

A young woman in a pink dress came over with a bouquet made with fresh tropical flowers and white roses. The plumerias matched the one in Vanessa's hair, and the florist placed a boutonniere on Justin's tux.

Four men stood outside and said hello at the sight of Justin and Vanessa. The oldest was in his mid- to late forties, his face round and plump with laugh lines forking out from the corners of his eyes. He wore a cheap but well-fitting suit, and his receding hair was slicked back from his face, making his forehead look exceptionally large.

The second oldest was probably in his early forties, his face weathered and uneven like avocado skin. He wore a suit that was a size too small, and thick blue veins covered the back of his hands like spider webs. He snapped a few photos with a huge black camera.

The other two were younger, in their mid-twenties. Their suits were identical—dark and expensive but not necessarily better fitting than the older man's. They carried well-cared-for briefcases. Their expressions were relaxed, but something about them told Vanessa they didn't smile much. She knew without asking that they were the lawyers Justin had been talking about.

The oldest man introduced himself as Aaron, and turned out to be the minister. “You make a beautiful couple.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The other two handed out business cards embossed with their firm’s name. She put them in her coat pocket and climbed into the helicopter with Justin’s help.

The interior was all cream leather with tropical blossoms and pale pink and white ribbons. The walls were lined with padded panels. The air smelled of sweet flowers and powdered sugar.

Aaron and the photographer took a seat facing Justin. She slowly lowered herself next to Justin and consciously relaxed each of her muscles. The lawyers sat behind them. The door shut when everyone was settled, and the pilot started the engine.

The helicopter was much quieter than Vanessa had expected, better soundproofed even than her father’s helicopter.

The sound system played Wagner’s “Here Comes the Bride” as they flew over the falls. The dark water churned and foamed underneath. Water drops spread out in a white mist and split the sun into rainbow arcs.

After some time to appreciate the scenery, the music faded and Aaron started the ceremony. His voice was surprisingly resonant and carried clearly over the muffled sound of the blades chopping the air. He didn’t drag out the ceremony with a flowery speech about true love and commitment, which relieved Vanessa—this had nothing to do with love—but he didn’t seem to rush things, either.

As a hammer beat inside her head, she focused on the majestic natural surroundings and drawing air into her lungs in a steady rhythm. This isn’t permanent. It was just for the baby. She wasn’t like her mother. She didn’t need a husband to afford a decent lifestyle. She could opt out at any time and still create an excellent life for herself and her baby.

There was simply no reason to worry about the marriage or her future.

She blinked when Justin poked her gently on the side. She glanced at the minister and blushed. “I do,” she said, hoping that was the right answer.

He beamed at her and moved on to the next part of the ceremony.

Relieved, she let out a soft sigh and slumped in her seat until the minister ordered them to exchange rings. He held a pair of simple platinum bands.

Her hands grew clammy and started shaking.

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 25

Justin squeezed them and kept his eyes on hers. “I give you this ring as a symbol of my commitment to you. Know that from now on, all that I am, all that I have are yours.” He slid the band on her finger. “Wear it with happiness and think of my vow to you.”

Her mouth dried. She hadn’t prepared a vow. She’d been so busy working and trying not to think about their elopement. One would think she should be able to extemporaneously come up with something clever, given her experience and education. She was one of the best lawyers in the state!

But the only thing her hormone-addled and sleep-deprived brain could come up with was, “With this ring, I thee wed.” So she murmured the six words and put the ring on his finger.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

The joyous tune of Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March” burst from the helicopter’s sound system. Aaron and the lawyers clapped, while the photographer snapped more shots.

Justin linked their left hands together and kissed her. Her mouth parted like it couldn’t wait. Maybe it was something in the state of her mind that made her want to cling to him. What had just happened felt like a scene

from some surrealist's imagination, and Justin was the only thing that felt normal and sane in a world where the clocks were melting.

Before she could prolong and deepen the kiss, Justin pulled back. A bemused smile ghosted on his face. "Wife."

Because it was the right thing to say, she murmured, "Husband."

Her stomach jittered, and she managed to smile while locking her jaw. Even if it wasn't something she'd ever wanted, she wasn't going to throw up at her wedding ceremony.

* * *

"Is there anything else planned for the evening?" Vanessa asked, as their limo glided toward their hotel.

Justin nodded. "We have a dinner reservation."

"Okay."

He frowned. She seemed listless and her voice lacked its usual vigor. On the other hand, she hadn't been herself all day. She'd been so tense, her skin cool and clammy. He'd chalked it up to her uncertainty about their marriage. But now it seemed like it was more. When Vanessa sighed, Justin looked at her more closely in the dying light. Tension marked her lips, and her eyes seemed to have sunken deeper into her skull. There was something wilted about the way she slumped in the seat and let her head loll.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Besides, I have to eat. Right?" She patted her belly.

Justin cursed himself. Knowing her, she'd probably half-killed herself to finish up all her work to take the day off. A lot of people thought she wouldn't take her career seriously, given how wealthy her family was and the big trust that she inherited when she'd graduated from college, but she worked harder than anyone he knew.

“We can always get room service,” he said. “It’s no big deal.”

Relief flashed through her eyes. “You don’t mind?”

“Nope. We can go next time. Let me cancel it.” He texted his assistant, telling her to cancel everything booked after the wedding ceremony.

“Thank you.”

“You’re my wife. You come first.”

She nodded, but she broke eye contact. Her face seemed frozen in disbelief and wistful resignation. She was probably preoccupied with all sorts of thoughts, most likely about what this marriage meant to the two of them, what sort of family they would create together. With the Sterlings, it was Barron at the center of all sorts of rollercoaster dramas. He could be delicate when he had to, but in general he had the finesse of a bull in Pamplona. With the Pryces, it was Salazar, Ceinlys and Dane, the oldest of Vanessa’s four brothers. Salazar had cheated on his wife ever since Justin could remember. Because of the prenup, Salazar had been brazen about his other women. Justin was certain Ceinlys had had her share of lovers. He’d heard hushed whispers, and he didn’t blame her one bit for wanting some affection while her husband flaunted his mistresses.

Justin wondered what it would’ve been like to grow up with parents like that. His parents certainly hadn’t been perfect, but they’d been deeply committed to each other. His father would’ve considered it dishonorable to break his wedding vows.

The limo pulled up in front of their hotel, and a smartly uniformed man opened the door. Justin climbed out and extended his hand, helping Vanessa out. She swayed a bit on her feet. “Sure you’re okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine.” She gave him a wan smile. “Just hungry.”

Justin nodded and took her to their suite, keeping a hand at the small of her back. She seemed more fragile, like she’d lost weight. “Are you having morning sickness?” he asked when they were in their suite.

“No. I can’t eat a lot, but I’m not nauseous or anything.” She sat on the love seat, her whole body sagging in relief. She stretched out her legs. “What are you in the mood for?”

“I’m pretty simple. Meat and potatoes should do it. How about you?”

“Maybe...some lightly prepared fish, if they have any? Nothing too heavy.”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 26

Justin picked up the room service menu and glanced at it. They had salmon in a tarragon cream sauce, but it was probably not what she wanted. He didn’t know if the kitchen had anybody who could make decent seafood. Vanessa was undoubtedly spoiled by her brother’s chefs. He dialed and placed their order, instructing them to prepare Vanessa’s fish lightly without the cream sauce. He added an order for extra bread and hung up.

“That was a pretty picky order.”

He sat next to her. “So? It’s their job to make you happy.”

Wordlessly, she rested her head on his shoulder, and he put an arm around her. Peace settled over him. He’d been on the edge ever since Vanessa had left Chicago the week before. Even though she’d agreed to the marriage, he hadn’t been completely sure she’d show up on Friday. Over the ten years they’d spent together, she’d been fickle in her affections, changing her mind frequently about their relationship.

But now she was officially his.

* * *

Some time later their room service arrived. Justin got up to sign for it, and Vanessa sighed, missing him next to her. The server disappeared,

and she moved over to the table to have dinner. She wasn't that hungry, but she knew she had to eat for the sake of the baby growing in her womb.

The table was beautifully set with two red roses in the center. She picked one up and inhaled. It smelled fr

esh and dewy.

Then she suddenly stopped, feeling Justin's gaze on her. She raised an eyebrow, but he merely gave her a devilish smile.

They sat at the table. Justin had ordered a steak for himself. He looked at her salmon and asked, "Let me know if you don't like it."

She took a bite of the firm orange flesh. It was moist...and perfectly seasoned and prepared. "Mm. Good." She smiled, her fingers toying with a glass of mineral water. "It's so weird to eat without any wine." Unless she was working, she always had a glass of wine. "You should've ordered some champagne."

"Let's wait until the baby's born. Then we can enjoy it together."

Her smile faltered. It seemed unreal, both to think about the baby's birth and the idea that Justin would be with her till then, and that he would want to drink champagne with her. That was a long time to be committed to a woman. She'd seen some associates at her firm who'd gotten huge during pregnancy. Would he still find her attractive? Or would he want somebody who didn't waddle?

If one of her friends had been having the kind of doubts she was having, she would've told her that any man who didn't worship the body of the woman who was pregnant with his child was a worthless jackass. But she couldn't seem to muster the same certainty for herself. What a hypocrite, she thought.

She made a mental note to talk with Mark's fiancée, Hilary Rosenberg. Out of all the women close to her, Hilary was the one who would know what Vanessa was going through the best.

“So. Living arrangements,” Vanessa said as she broke off a decent-sized chunk of fish with her fork. “Where do you exactly plan to live in L.A.? Have you found a rental?”

“Nope. I plan to stay at your place.”

“Justin... People are going to notice and talk.”

“I doubt it. I checked out your building already. It’s mostly occupied by young professionals. Lawyers, doctors, consultants and so on.”

“You checked it out.” She had an image of him lying on the roof of the building across the street, with a telephoto lens and access to a private detective. “Okay, so what if you did?”

“When was the last time any of your neighbors said hello to you?”

She thought back. “I don’t know. Maybe a few days ago when I ran into Sarah?”

“Uh huh. And how often do you run into someone?”

“Not that often,” she admitted. Being a young professional meant long hours. When she’d moved in, probably half a month had gone by before she’d met anyone in the building.

“Right. So, no real issue. And if anybody sees me at the airport or anything, they’ll just assume I’m in L.A. on business. But I doubt it’ll be a problem. L.A. isn’t interested in me. Too preoccupied with Hollywood.”

That was true enough. The media had better stories to chase.

“Don’t look so serious. Besides, if you want a pregnancy buddy—do women have those?—you can always ping Kerri. She’s expecting, too.”

“Really? I had no idea.” Vanessa had been to Kerri’s wedding at Barron’s invitation. The Sterlings were family friends, but she’d never been overly close to Barron’s granddaughter. They lived too far apart, and Kerri had been out of the country for most of her life. But now they were cousins by marriage.

“Barron told me last week. You two are at about the same stage, too. I think she’s six or seven weeks along now. If her kid’s anything like her, it’s going to drive her insane.” He smiled as he dragged his knife through the meat. “Don’t worry. I was a complete angel.”

Tags:

Source:

The Billionaire's Secret Wife - Page 27

“That remains to be seen.” Vanessa ripped a small piece of bread. “Do you ever think about your future, like ten years down the road?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?” She’d assumed he thought about his future all the time. He was one of the few who had everything he could hope for. Why not think about it?

“Because nobody knows what’s going to happen ten years from now. But I don’t let the uncertain future take away the certain happiness of today.”

And that inexplicably touched her. The day had been beautiful, thanks to Justin. He’d done so much to make it special even though they were eloping on short notice. It embarrassed her she hadn’t prepared anything. She couldn’t even blame her work since Justin was just as busy as she was.

After they finished dinner, Justin led her over and opened the door to the adjoining bedroom. Vanessa gasped at the scented candles flickering everywhere in the room. They cast a romantic glow, and she felt herself start to melt. “You’ve thought of everything.”

He hugged her from behind. “It’s our wedding night. I wanted it to be special.”

“It’s already special.” She blinked away the sudden moisture gathering in her eyes. She didn’t know why she felt so weepy all of a sudden. This was such a sweet gesture.

If you're not careful, you're going to fall in love with him.

And she didn't want that at all. Nothing was more seductive and dangerous than the belief that love conquered all. The reality was that love could lose out to an awful lot of quotidian circumstances. Couples broke up over money, although she knew money wouldn't be an issue in their marriage. But there would be other things. There were always other things.

Justin buried his face in the crook of her neck. "You smell like heaven. I can't believe you're finally mine."

Her heart thumped. She swallowed and turned around. She wasn't the only one who "belonged" now. He was hers.

She thought about the effort he'd put into making the day as perfect as possible for her. She couldn't be like him and only focus on the happiness of the present, but she didn't have to let the worries about their future ruin the moment. The least she could do was appreciate it and make the night as memorable as possible for both of them.

She put a hand to his cheek; the stubble scraped her skin. Cradling the back of his head, she pulled him down for a kiss.

His firm, sexy mouth slanted over hers. She swallowed a gasp at the possessive way his large hand traveled under her skirt and cupped her butt. It certainly wasn't the first time they'd made love—they were intimately familiar with each other's bodies—but this was the first time she felt like he was really making his stake clear.

A small knot of fear unfurled.

His tongue ran over the seam of her mouth, skittering her anxiety, then it probed gently, seeking an entry. Grateful he was pushing away her doubts, she pulled it into her mouth and rubbed her tongue against it, sucking it. She could feel the beginning of a moan vibrate in his chest, and her nipples beaded almost painfully. They were ultra-sensitive now that she was pregnant.

He unzipped her dress. His eyes filled with glittering desire and reverence as the silk whispered down her body, revealing creamy skin. The bra and thong she wore were bridal white, delicate with lace. She flushed, suddenly shy. This was...different from all the previous times. This was a step toward their entwined lives.

“You look divine,” he murmured. His lips traced every slope and curve of her exposed body, and warmth pooled in her core, making her slick and needy.

His eyes on hers, he took off his clothes. He was gorgeous, his sculpted, powerful chest dusted with crisp hair that followed his tight, ridged belly to the junction of his muscular thighs. Vanessa licked her lips. Again, this felt different—like this was their first time.

He deposited her on the bed and covered her body with his. Their hands linked, and he kissed her again, deeply and hungrily. She kissed him back, unable to help herself. His hard, thick length settled against her wet folds, and as he rocked, his chest brushed against the pointed peaks of her nipples, sending electric shocks of pleasure along her spine.

Their breaths mingled, and she was unable to look away as he slipped inside her, filling and stretching her. Her inner muscles clamped down on him, needing more. Despite his hungry kiss earlier, his thrusts were measured and steady, as though he knew exactly what to do to drive her insane. Pleasure built,

at first slowly and steadily, but then it seemed to gain a momentum of its own, growing bigger, faster...all consuming.

The pleasure was drowning her, but unlike before, she couldn't break free, keep control of any part of herself. It was Justin—his scent, his sound, his warmth, the knowledge of his vow—that pulled her deeper and deeper. Even as the orgasm shot through her with a blinding intensity, she drowned in him.

And when he joined her, his voice hoarse as he cried out, they drowned together, their limbs tangled. And she was afraid she might never reemerge.