

# The Billionaire's Secret Wife

## Chapter Nine

Vanessa opened her eyes. The room was dark but warm, and she was alone in bed. Had the wedding been a dream? No. She was in a hotel room, and her body was pleasantly sore from loving the night before.

She turned and saw a bedside clock glow: ten thirty-three. She wondered briefly if it was p.m. still, then bolted upright and covered her mouth as nausea hit her. Clenching her teeth, she ran to the connecting bathroom. She managed to reach the toilet before she lost everything in her stomach.

Feeling wrought out and gross, she slumped. The toilet flushed, and a big hand rubbed her back.

She closed her eyes. Of all the things for Justin to witness. “Help me up.” Her legs felt like wet noodles.

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He pulled her up easily, and led her to the sink as though he'd read her mind.

“Can I have a few minutes in private?” she asked.

“Sure. I'll be right outside if you want anything.”

She nodded, but she wouldn't be needing him again. There was nothing in her stomach now. Sighing she rubbed her face. She didn't know why her body decided to start having morning sickness all of a sudden. Maybe it was the strange city and bed. Once she went home, she'd feel better.

After brushing her teeth, she took a quick shower. Morning sickness or no, the hot water cleared her head, and a good night's sleep had put a lot of things into clearer perspective. She would talk with Hilary as soon as she could, but at the same time she wouldn't be so gloomy about the marriage. What was done was done. Hadn't she known that becoming pregnant with Justin's child would bring about changes to her life? She couldn't deny either Justin or the child a chance to bond with each other. They had the right, and she had a feeling Justin would be a good father.

She put on the hotel robe and went out with a towel wrapped around her hair. Justin was at a desk, working on his laptop.

"Anything urgent?" she asked.

"No. You want to eat? I already had something, but didn't order any for you because I wasn't sure what you might be in the mood for."

Ugh. Food. "How about... some hot lemon tea and dry toast. Maybe with some fruit?"

Justin ordered while she dried her hair. She could hear his voice over the whirring of the dryer. Her toes curled at the deep, masculine tone. He hadn't been cold to her after he'd found out she was pregnant. It was like some switch inside him had been flipped. Maybe there was another switch inside him that could make him permanently faithful, sweet and perfect.

When her hair was dry and falling in sleek layers around her face and shoulders, she went outside without bothering to pull it up. It seemed like too much work.

The breakfast was waiting. Justin had also ordered a pitcher of freshly squeezed orange juice. "Just in case." He kissed her. "Take your time. Our flight doesn't need to leave until noon anyway to make your mother's party."

Vanessa snapped her fingers. "I knew I was forgetting something. I have to buy her a present."

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

“Really? What are you planning to get in my name?”

“A high-end espresso machine. Ceinlys likes her coffee.”

Her eyes widened. “You noticed?”

“Of course.” He tapped the tip of her nose. “I notice a lot more than people think I do.”

She frowned and nibbled on her toast. Justin had met her mother maybe five times.

“Don’t worry. Everything I notice about you is positive,” he said, his voice light.

Wasn’t that positive back in November. But she didn’t want to bring up their fight. “I’m glad. And I see I need to perfect my poker face.”

“I like it better when you’re open.”

“I’m a lawyer. I can’t have everyone reading me like that.”

“It’s not everyone. Just me.”

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Justin didn’t know exactly how to explain it, but he knew nobody else understood Vanessa the way he did. It was crazy how he could just look at her face—no matter how impassive—and perceive her feelings. Just moments ago, when her guard was down...he could almost read her thoughts. And he liked it that he could understand what his wife needed without her having to say it.

He hadn’t been kidding about making her happy. His vow had been one hundred percent in earnest. He was dead serious about his commitment to their marriage, and he knew it could work great given how compatible they were, sexually and otherwise.

His own parents had gotten married because his mother had been pregnant. They grew to love each other in a quiet, calm way and had an amazing marriage that lasted until his father had passed away. Justin didn't believe in over-the-top emotional love being an essential part of a relationship.

Love like that was irrational, uncontrollable and impulsive. It also produced too much influence; all he had to do was look at his cousin Kerri's parents to know why that kind of love was a terrible idea. When Kerri's father had died, her mother had lost it. Not even Barron's money and connections could fix whatever had broken inside her, and she hadn't been able to look at her own daughter with affection after that.

Justin wasn't going to let anything weaken him like that. He had responsibilities, and the only way he could manage them well was with a cool, rational mind.

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So was it the cool, rational part of your mind that helped you fuck Vanessa last night?

Justin forced the thought aside. He hated it when his subconscious tried to overanalyze his personal life.

\* \* \*

Vanessa arrived at the housewarming party alone, with Justin scheduled to show up anywhere from half an hour to an hour later. Ceinlys's new place was on the top floor of a condo complex equidistant from her three children's homes. Currently Shane didn't live in the city, and Dane might as well not have had a place either, given how rarely he occupied his penthouse.

The sound system played Debussy, her mother's favorite composer. The place was sparsely but elegantly appointed with comfortable cream and

champagne couches and soft rugs over hardwood flooring. A few expensively framed photos of Vanessa and her brothers sat on the shelves. There was no sign of Salazar anywhere.

Her brothers Iain and Mark were already there with their fiancées Jane and Hilary. Iain and Mark both had the classic profile the Pryce men were famous for. Jane and Hilary glowed, and Vanessa felt sort of guilty about getting married before Mark and Hilary. They'd set their date for a June wedding. At least she wouldn't be stealing their thunder since she and Justin would keep their wedding quiet until July.

She greeted everyone, and her mother emerged from the open kitchen.

Ceinlys was in a chic Chanel dark blue dress that stopped half an inch above her knees. Her glossy hair was twisted into an elegant bun, and a sapphire hairpiece glittered under the recessed lights. She hugged Vanessa. "I wasn't sure if you could come, what with your firm working you half to death."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Good, good." She peered at Vanessa. "Have you lost weight? You look so tired."

"I'm fine." Vanessa wasn't telling her mother she was pregnant. "Nothing a few good nights' sleep won't cure."

"See that you get some sleep tonight then."

There was another arrival, and Ceinlys went to meet them.

It looked like her mother had invited everyone in their social circle. The place became packed with people both young and old, every one of them dressed to be seen and admired. Maybe they were privy to something Vanessa wasn't, because as far as she knew, her mother had a horrible prenup that left her with nothing. Or maybe they wanted to see how the female half of The Eternal Couple was doing. So many had assumed it would be Salazar leaving Ceinlys, not the other way around.

“They’re probably wondering when her boyfriend’s going to show up,” Iain muttered from behind her.

“You’re such a cynic,” Vanessa said.

“I actually agree with him,” Mark said. “They’re probably wondering who she’ll marry once she gets rid of Dad.”

“You two are awful. Where are Hilary and Jane?”

“Making themselves scarce,” Iain said.

Sure enough, they had vanished. They were never sure how Ceinlys would receive them.

“But this isn’t as bad as I thought.”

“What do you mean?”

Mark grew thoughtful. “At least nobody’s shunning her. They’re treating her like a genuine friend. I think she could use a few right now.”

Shame dampened Vanessa’s mood. She’d been too worried about her mother’s prenup to ask how she was doing. No, it had been worse than that. She’d questioned her mother numerous times about the divorce, whether or not she’d thought it through. And that wasn’t what her mother needed. “You think she’s happier?”

“Who knows? She’s not talking about it, but I think she’s doing better than before. Don’t you?”

Iain finished his wine. “Anything has to be better. I don’t think Dad made her very happy.”

“Do you think he ever truly loved her?” Vanessa asked before she could bite her tongue.

Her brothers stared at her like she’d grown a third breast...between her eyes. “No. Never,” Iain said. “He probably married Mom because she was the best-looking woman he could find.”

Mark nodded.

Vanessa said nothing as she watched her mother hug a friend. Salazar must have loved Ceinlys at some point. She didn't know what had killed that love. She never got the sense that their feelings had merely cooled with time. If so, they could've at least been polite and considerate. But there was always a subtle undercurrent of meanness to what her father and mother did and said, like the

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y wanted to hurt each other.

The back of her neck prickled, and Iain whistled. "Hey, Justin's here."

"Huh," Mark said. "Maybe that explains it.

"What?" Vanessa said.

"Mom invited London Bickham, but she declined. Maybe she said she couldn't because she knew he would be here. Awkward."

Vanessa cringed, then let out a relieved sigh. It would've been more than awkward to face London here. If she hadn't told Justin about her pregnancy, he'd still be with her. Vanessa pushed away a flash of hot jealousy at the thought.

"Not that I ever thought they'd last as a couple. London's a little...bland," Mark said.

A dry laugh came from behind them. It was their oldest brother, Dane. "Is that the new euphemism for brainless?" He was in a rumpled dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He was a carbon copy of their father, with classic features and cool gray eyes, but he had none of Salazar's charm. Nobody knew where he'd inherited his abrasive personality.

Mark's mouth turned into a flat slit. "She's a family friend, Dane. You don't have to be so nasty."

"Truth is painful, not nasty." Dane glanced at Vanessa. "I've been hearing rumors, baby sister. You're going to make partner for sure if you can prove Solaris Med is"—a cynical smile lifted a corner of his mouth—"innocent."

Grinding her teeth, Vanessa reined in her temper. It killed her that she had to defend a client who was unquestionably guilty. She might be their counsel, but she had her standards.

"Of course you wouldn't be required to do that if you'd climbed the ladder of family connections." Before she could snap at him, he turned to Iain and Mark. "So how come Shane's not here?"

Iain shrugged. "Tried contacting him a few times, but he never responded."

"Whatever's in South Africa must be damned interesting," Vanessa muttered as a pang of envy reverberated through her. She wished she could just disappear for months and months too.

"He's not in South Africa," Dane said. "I checked. He's in Morocco."

Vanessa felt her jaw drop. "Doing what?"

Dane shrugged. "Don't know, but I should bring him home. It's only fair he suffer with the rest of us through this."

Then in her peripheral vision, she noticed Justin laughing at something a slim blonde had said. Vanessa couldn't tell exactly who the woman was—she had her back to Vanessa—but her well-fitted dress showed off lovely curves and a tight butt. And unlike Vanessa, the blonde was tall with seemingly endless legs.

"Did Mom invite a lawyer?" Mark asked. "You look like you just spotted an enemy."

“No.” She forced a smile. “Just thinking about something. Excuse me. I’m going to go snag a drink.”

Vanessa made her way around the room, trying to get a look at the blonde without being obvious. The woman was gorgeous in front too. Maybe she’s an aspiring actress or something. L.A. was filthy with them.

When the woman laid a hand on Justin’s sleeve, Vanessa ground her teeth. She wanted to slap the bitch, but she and Justin were trying to keep their marriage secret. Nothing would get them outed faster than public jealousy.

Still, Justin didn’t have to look quite so happy while flirting with the woman!

Vanessa poured herself a glass of ginger ale and stuffed her mouth with a miniature appetizer, wishing she could leave.

\* \* \*

Justin looked around. He swore he’d seen Vanessa chatting with her brothers, but now she was gone.

He sighed impatiently. Once it got around that Justin Sterling was in the room, everyone wanted to talk to him. A few people asked how he knew Ceinlys, like they wanted to figure out how they might be able to use their connection to her to suck up to him. Even so, he smiled at everyone politely and laughed at the appropriate moments. Unlike Barron, he didn’t believe in baring his talons...until he had to gut somebody. His great-uncle thought everyone should fear him. Justin reserved that for those who worked for him or who dared to cross him.

Finally he found Vanessa in the kitchen corner, hidden from everyone. She had a tray of finger food and cubed cheese.

“Ah ha! So you got all the good stuff,” he said.

“Not really. What are you doing here?”

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“Looking for you.” He popped a cheddar block into his mouth. “This is great cheese.”

“I’m glad you approve.” Her voice crackled with fight. “I had nothing to do with it.”

He frowned. “You angry with me for some reason?”

“No.” She didn’t meet his gaze, and immediately started drinking her ginger ale.

He narrowed his eyes. “You know, you’re supposed to be honest with me. Wife.”

“Shh!”

“Tell me, or I’m going to keep using the W-word.”

“Fine. I don’t like your shirt.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my shirt!”

“There is now.”

Her face set in a mutinous line, and he laughed. “Fine, fine. I’ll get out of it. Tonight.” He abruptly stopped laughing. “Now, tell me what’s wrong.”

Sighing, she sagged. “I just don’t feel well.” She looked down at her belly meaningfully. “But I’m going out to mingle. So why don’t you try to do the same?”

Justin watched her leave, but she didn’t fool him. She was upset about something, even if she didn’t want to tell him. Sighing, he rubbed the back of his neck.

“Justin! There you are.”

He pasted on a smile for Ceinlys and gave her a tight hug. “You look good.”

“Always the flatterer. Thank you so much for coming. I wasn’t sure if you could.”

“I can always make time for you,” he said. Even though he couldn’t tell her yet, she was his mother-in-law and Vanessa was fond of her. That meant she was important to him as well.

“The painting arrived today. It’s gorgeous. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” He didn’t tell her Barron’s new art curator, Catherine Fairchild, had selected the piece. Catherine was engaged to Blaine Davis, who was Salazar’s child by another woman. Justin didn’t think it prudent to mention the fact.

“More than a few guests have been asking to meet you, but if you like, I can arrange things to avoid all the introductions. I know it can be tedious,” Ceinlys said.

“Thanks, but that won’t be necessary.” She could probably maneuver things to ensure he wouldn’t be bothered. She was an exceptional hostess from years of trying to live up to the exacting Pryce standards. But it wasn’t like he could hang out with Vanessa at the party, and he didn’t want to stand around in a corner by himself all evening long.

“Well, then.” Ceinlys looped her arm through his. “Shall we?”

\* \* \*

Peggy Teeter scowled as Stan lit his cigarette in their bedroom. It was technically his bedroom, but she thought of it as “theirs” since she was sleeping there too. “I told you, no smoking in the house.”

“Just one.”

“No.” She glared at him. “I mean it.”

“It’s a stress reliever.”

“We just had sex! If you need more stress relief, go exercise.”

“Why are you so weird about it?”

She pressed her lips together. An associate at a law firm, Stan liked to argue and could negotiate his way out of almost anything. For once she wished she’d never met him, not even to pump him for information. “My mom has lung cancer.”

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That shut Stan up. He stubbed out the cigarette. “Sorry.”

“Not your fault. Just don’t smoke again in the house.” She cleared her throat. “What’s got you so upset anyway?”

“It’s one of the associates at the firm. I told you already. Vanessa Pryce.”

Peggy’s heart thumped oddly at the mention of the name. “What about her?”

“She’s been taking too much personal time off. It’s such bullshit. And you know what? There are rumo

rs that she’s going to make partner this July.”

“I thought you were next.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know the right people, not the way she does anyway. The firm only cares about how much business you can pull in, and they think she can do it.”

“Aren’t you a better lawyer than her?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “But she’s not bad. At the end of the day, that’s all that matters—be good enough and bring in the business.”

“Doesn’t she have to buy a stake in the firm?”

“Not an issue for somebody like her. She can just tap her trust fund or something.”

Peggy nodded, only half-listening to Stan’s complaints about Vanessa. The woman seemed loaded, but then her family was rich. Lung cancer treatment was expensive, and Peggy had done everything she could to finance it. But now she was out of options, and Vanessa seemed like a perfect person to help.

She just needed to find a good approach.

## Chapter Ten

Vanessa had stayed behind at her mother’s place to help clean up, and Justin slipped into her condo with the spare key she’d given him on the flight from Canada. The party had gone spectacularly well, with Ceinlys clearly asserting herself as a soon-to-be-single woman.

Vanessa’s condo surprised him. He’d always assumed she’d buy something as swanky as the penthouses her brothers owned. Vanessa’s place was upper-middle class, something a successful law associate might buy, but not what one would expect from an heiress. It didn’t even come with a doorman.

A few pots and pans sat in the kitchen along with a set of plates and bowls. It was obvious she’d barely used any of them. The fridge held a few essentials—cream for her coffee and some fruit and yogurt. Justin shook his head. Vanessa needed to eat better.

Her bedroom was simple, with a king-sized bed and pink sheets with small yellow roses and blue hyacinth patterns. Her walk-in closet was full of shoes and clothes without any room for his stuff. He shrugged. She hadn’t known he’d be living with her when she’d left the day before.

He showered and changed into a Stanford T-shirt and shorts. It was quite warm in L.A. He'd gone straight to Ceinlys's party after doing some supposedly urgent work. Every time somebody wanted his attention, they threw around the "emergency" label. He made a mental note to shake things up at the office. He wasn't going to babysit his executives, no matter how nervous they were about his replacing Barron. They needed to understand Barron wasn't in charge anymore, and their aim should be to make him happy, not his great-uncle.

He sat and reviewed a few items in his inbox. A few minutes later, keys jangled and the door opened and shut. "So you got here okay." Vanessa kicked off her shoes.

"Yup."

She scowled at his phone. "Who are you texting?"

"Just some emails."

Her eyes narrowed. He didn't buy her complaint about how she hadn't liked his shirt, and whatever had been bugging her was still there. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Vanessa, it's going to be difficult to be happily married if we aren't honest with each other. I'm trying very hard to be a good husband."

She regarded him. Finally she said, "I don't like blondes."

The pieces fell into place, and he gaped at her. "You're jealous?"

Red flushed her cheeks as her mouth turned flatter than a hyphen. Finally she snapped, "Don't be ridiculous."

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“You are!” Absurdly enough he liked her jealous. It meant she felt possessive about him. “You shouldn’t have worried.”

“Why not?”

“Because no other woman has my wedding band in her jewelry box.” He rose and wrapped his arms around her. “You’re the first and only.”

“Hmph. I hate blondes anyway.”

She pulled him down for a hot, carnal kiss. Her mouth attacked his aggressively, and he responded in kind.

Suddenly she broke away. “Take off your clothes.”

He pulled the T-shirt over his head and tossed it behind him. His shorts went two seconds later.

“You aren’t wearing any underwear.” Her pupils darkened as she took him in.

“Saw no reason to.”

“Good.” She licked her lips.

Justin turned her around and unzipped her dress. The pale violet chiffon pooled at her feet. She was in nothing but a thong, garter belt and a pair of lace-edged stockings that ended at mid-thigh. He cursed as his cock grew so hard it almost hurt. “Is that how you dress on weekends?”

“Depending on what I’m planning.” She walked toward him until her bare breasts pressed against his torso. “Right now I want to show you I have more than just your ring.” She reached between their bodies and wrapped her hand around his throbbing shaft. He hissed—it felt too damn good, and she hadn’t done anything except kiss him and put her hand there.

She rubbed herself against him, her pointed nipples raking his chest. Her cheeks were flushed, and she licked her mouth again.

He crushed her to him and kissed her—almost too roughly, for teasing him and doubting him. Unlike some men, he took his wedding vows seriously. He cupped her ass and squeezed the firm flesh. She gasped, and he stabbed his tongue deep into her mouth, invading her and letting her know who was in charge.

She rocked against him, her hand moving over his cock. His pelvis pumped, and he stopped. “Let go.”

“No,” she whispered.

“We’re not doing this in your living room.”

Understanding dawned on her, and she let go. He swung her up, into his arms, and carried her to the bedroom and laid her on the sheet. Her hair spread out, she looked like a wanton angel.

Mine. My wife.

He moved over her and claimed her mouth in a possessive kiss. She wasn’t the only one green-eyed with jealousy. She worked in a firm crawling with men—and she wouldn’t let anybody know she was already taken. If he hadn’t trusted her, he would never have allowed her to keep their marriage a secret.

He ran his finger along the seam of her sex, hot and wet through the thong. He swallowed a groan. It was unbelievable how responsive she was, how sexy.

She gripped his shoulders, her nails digging into his muscles. Her thighs parted, and he fitted himself closer, his mouth fused to hers. He could stay like this forever, pleasuring her and loving her.

Suddenly she pushed him over on his back. She straddled him, her hot core resting over his cock, making it pulse. Her cascading hair looked like a river of fire as she gazed down at him with a feline smile on her lips. “I like you like this. I feel like I can do anything to you.”

“So do it,” he said, his voice passion-husky.

She raked her nails over his chest, just enough to make him feel the sting. “I believe I will.”

\* \* \*

Vanessa had been stewing about him and the other women at the party, and now that she had him under her, her inner self crowed. She wanted him so turned on that he wouldn't even remember his name.

She traced his body with her mouth. He was so lean and hard all over, his muscles so responsive to her lips. She remembered how much he loved having her hair caress his skin, so she made sure it followed the same path her mouth did.

Her fingernails flicked his nipples—making him gasp—then her tongue laved them one by one to soothe the hurt.

“How does that feel?” she whispered.

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“Great.”

She hummed gently and pulled a nipple into her mouth, sucking it hard. His breathing roughened, and she smiled with satisfaction. To make sure its twin didn't feel neglected, she rolled it and pinched it with her fingers. His cock grew even harder and it pulsed between her legs. She rocked gently against the hot length, enjoying the slickness her own juices and his pre-cum created between their bodies.

Finally she made her way along his ridged stomach, kissing each section with loving care. Justin always took such good care of his body, and she loved the sheer maleness of it. There was absolutely nothing she would have changed about it.

As she traveled lower, his breathing deepened and became more erratic. Probably he expected her to kiss the blunt head of his penis. Well, that would come, but not just yet.

She cupped his balls, weighing and scratching them gently as she kissed his inner thigh. He groaned. "Vanessa."

"Shhh. Patience."

She moved over to the other side and wrapped her hand around his thick shaft. She could feel blood pulsing through the steel-hard length, and she smiled. Using his pre-cum she ran her thumb along the purple-blue veins along his cock. His hips jerked upward, seeking more of her. She pulled back with a smile. "Not yet."

"Wicked woman."

"No." She shook her head, making sure her hair brushed over his thighs. "What I am is a possessive woman."

Tendons in his neck and joints stood out in stark relief as she moved her hand up and down his shaft, making sure to stimulate the soft flap of skin underneath his head with her thumb. He was close. His body was as tight as a coil under tension.

"Sit on my face," he gasped out.

She stopped. "What?"

"Lose the thong and sit on my face while you do that. I want to taste you when we both come."

Her whole body clenched with need. She stood up and slowly took off her thong, letting the elastic travel down her legs. Justin watched her with dark, glittering eyes. She got back on the bed and straddled him, facing away downstream. This felt a bit more intimate and exposed than him going down on her.

"Move closer," he said, his voice low but no less commanding.

She scooched down until she could feel his breath on her bare ass.

“A little more. I’m so close.” His tongue flicked over the lower crease of her butt.

Moaning softly, she slid down toward him, her hips swaying back and forth. His mouth closed over her, and she shut her eyes and arched her back at how good it felt. “God.”

“You taste amazing.”

“

Mmm.” She opened her eyes. Justin’s cock dripped clear pre-cum all over his tight belly. She ran her hand along his shaft, then she pulled the head of his penis into her mouth.

It was all Justin with a hint of salt. She used her lips and tongue and cheeks and hands to give him pleasure. He braced his feet against the mattress and thrust into her mouth in a controlled way, dipping his head into her mouth then pulling out. Meanwhile his fingers opened her up shamelessly, and he thrummed her clit and stabbed her pussy with his tongue. His cock in her mouth muffled her loud moan, but she was so, sooo close...

He dipped a finger into her, then ran it along the opening of her anus.

“Justin!”

She came, clutching his hips to prevent herself from grinding into his face too hard. Her scream echoed against the walls. She felt like even the tip of her hair was tingling from the force of her orgasm.

Justin shifted underneath her, and she found herself flat on her back. He linked his fingers with hers and slowly sank into her. “You have no idea how beautiful you are when you come.” He slid easily into her until she felt his balls resting against her bare flesh. “I could watch you come forever.”

He kissed her deeply as he moved slowly inside her. Her inner muscles were still shaky from the orgasm, but the feel of him between her legs was like an elixir, and she felt herself starting to build again.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him closer. He increased his tempo. He had to be close... She'd gotten him so worked up.

He lifted his torso and changed the angle so he could stimulate her clit with every thrust. She gasped as the pleasure began to crescendo again, pushing her closer to the edge once more. He watched her, his eyes passion-glazed. As she gazed up at him, it was like he was a black arts warlock who'd cast a spell on her—to own her completely.

“Come for me, Vanessa.”

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Her back arched at the darkly whispered command, and she came with a soundless scream. Somehow it was sharper and more intense, like the previous one had just been an appetizer.

Justin groaned as her inner muscles flexed around his cock and he came, his head thrown back. He clenched his teeth, and he looked like a savage god over her.

Rolling so she'd lie on top of him, he wrapped his arms around her. When his breathing slowed, he kissed the back of her neck. “You're a hell of a woman.”

She laughed.

“What are you doing tomorrow? If you want, we can fly to Mexico for a one-day honeymoon,” he said. “We can take our honeymoon one day a week until we've had our requisite month.”

She gasped. “Month? Nobody has a honeymoon for a whole month.”

He kissed her. “We do. You’re worth it.”

She gently pushed back the hair that fell over his forehead. “I can’t. I have to work tomorrow.”

“Boo. It’s Sunday.”

“I’ve been taking a lot of days off recently. I have to make up for it somehow. It’s a really long shot, but I might be able to make partner this year. I don’t want to screw it up.”

“Does this mean you’ll be billing over a hundred hours a week? I don’t think it’s healthy for a pregnant woman to work so much.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s not like I’m on my feet all day.”

“Still.” He put a hand over her belly possessively. “Junior might not like it.”

“Junior, is it?” Would he be disappointed if it was a girl?

“We’ll see. I don’t care, so long as it’s healthy.”

“You don’t want a boy just like Barron?”

Justin shuddered. “One Barron is plenty.” Justin brushed the tip of his nose against hers. “I want our child to have the best traits from both of us.”

Vanessa smiled. “You’re so sweetly sentimental. I never knew.”

“Don’t tell anybody. It’ll ruin my reputation.”

Giggling, she snuggled closer...and wished the moment would never end.

## Chapter Eleven

After Vanessa had left for work the next day, Justin pulled out his phone and dialed John Highsmith’s personal mobile number.

Justin wasn't a client yet, but Highsmith seemed eager to earn Sterling & Wilson's business. The company needed a new legal team in California, and the firm was one of the best.

"Hello?" Highsmith's voice was smooth but guarded.

"This is Justin Sterling."

"Justin! How good of you to call."

Justin smiled. It was lunchtime on a Sunday. He doubted there was anything good about the timing. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Not at all."

"Oh, good. There's something I need a little help with."

"If it is within my power," Highsmith said, relishing his vowels. He sounded like he was auditioning for an Elizabethan play.

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"I want you to pull Vanessa Pryce off all her cases." Especially the ones she was working on with Felix Peck. "I'd like her to work on a special project for us instead."

"That can certainly be arranged."

Justin smiled. Highsmith didn't even try to argue, and he liked that. Lawyers should work to please him. "Have her work no more than forty, but feel free to bill a hundred. Keep my name and the Sterling & Wilson connection out of it—this must be absolutely confidential. You can send a retainer agreement to my office in Chicago. Have it addressed to my assistant."

"It will be my pleasure to do so."

Justin could feel the man crow over the phone. Highsmith was a weasel—a very good one—and he was Justin’s weasel now. He would do whatever Justin told him to keep Sterling & Wilson as a client.

Justin hung up, fully satisfied.

\* \* \*

Vanessa went to the office early. Since it was an off day she wore a black T-shirt with a shark across her chest and khaki shorts. A few of the associates working over the weekend were also casually dressed. Felix waved from a conference room, and Vanessa went over.

“Get that shit-eating grin off your face,” Felix said. “Highsmith’s been looking for you.”

Vanessa blinked. “He has?”

“Yeah. It kind of felt urgent.”

She cursed under her breath. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” She didn’t work closely with him, but she knew his reputation: impatient and exacting. “Why didn’t you call?”

“He didn’t want me to. He just asked you to join him in his office as soon as you get in.”

That’s weird. John didn’t believe in wasting even a second of his time. Non-billable moments had no place in his life. “Okay. Thanks.”

She walked down the hall and stopped in front of the dark wood door with a golden plaque that read: John P. Highsmith. She took a moment to gather her thoughts, then knocked.

“Come in!”

The corner office had a priceless antique mahogany desk with a leather executive chair. The windows had a spectacular view of downtown Los Angeles, and the pristine cream walls had built-in shelves with what probably amounted to a metric ton of leather-bound legal tomes and

awards. A sleek silver laptop and a phone took up the right side of his desk, while four accordion folders sat on the left.

“You wanted to see me?”

John nodded, his eyes shrewd. He’d always reminded Vanessa of a big bruiser, the kind of a guy she might see working as a bouncer at a popular club, except he always wore suits no bouncer could afford and a superior smile that said he never lost. Given his reputation, he probably actually hadn’t lost a lawsuit in at least the last decade.

“Have a seat.” He waited until she lowered herself onto a plush armchair across from him. “I understand you’re working on the Solaris case?”

“Yes. Harry Dickson assigned me to it, along with Felix.”

“Mm. Well, I’m pulling you off it.”

She frowned. “Why?”

“It’s in the best interests of the firm to do so. You’ll be working on a highly confidential case instead.”

“Is Harry a  
ware of this?”

“Yes, but he couldn’t tell you this in person since he had to fly to Florida. His mother had her monthly crisis.”

Harry’s mother’s “monthly crises” were infamous at the firm. They required her only son to fly to Miami to see her. One time he’d ignored her, and she’d supposedly had a heart attack.

“So who’s the client?” Vanessa asked.

“As I said, the case is confidential. So I’m afraid I can’t disclose the name.”

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She raised her eyebrows. “I need to know to do what I do best.”

“I understand, but the client’s a bit eccentric.”

“If I can’t even know who the client is, what am I doing?”

“Nothing too complicated. You just need to”—he raised his shoulders in a careless shrug—“review some documents that the in-house counsel’s been working on.”

“That won’t take me any time at all.”

“Oh there are quite a lot of them. Fortunately, there’s no real rush. So you won’t need to work more than forty billable hours a week on this.”

“So I can still work on the Solaris case.”

“No.” John sighed. “The new client will be your only one. For the time being.”

“You can’t be serious!”

“Vanessa. I assure you, this won’t count against you.”

“Right.” She knew how the game was played. If other people had more billable hours than she did, she’d look bad in July, no matter what John said now. She gave him a hard stare. “Are you doing this because you have somebody else in mind for July?” she asked point-blank.

John started. “What? No, of course not. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Then there’s no reason for you to take me off the Solaris case. Put somebody else on this new thing. Like Stan.”

“Vanessa—”

“You know this is going to hurt me. I’ve dedicated my life to this firm.”

“Yes, I understand that. But I give you my word, this won’t be a black mark on your record. Quite the contrary. We’ll be counting your billable hours at two and a half times the actual rate. So even though you’ll be putting in forty, it will count as a hundred.” He spread his hands and beamed at her.

Vanessa gasped. “You can’t do that. That’s unethical.”

John’s smile collapsed. “I’m aware of the ethical aspects, thank you. This is what the client wants.”

“The client told you to limit the work to forty hours, but to bill them for a hundred?”

“Correct.”

“And you expect me to believe this?”

He leaned forward, his previous bonhomie gone. “I don’t care what you believe. I expect you to follow my instructions. And before you think about reporting me to the bar, everything I’ve said in this room is true. If you cause trouble, you’ll end up jobless. Most likely you’ll have to start fresh at some other firm...assuming you can find one that will have you.” He waved her away. “Now run along. Everything you need to look at is in Conference Room 2B.”

Fists clenched, she left. What a bunch of... John had to be lying through his teeth.

Or did he? She thought about it, her feet slowing as she walked down the hall. The firm was doing great. He was doing great. There was no reason to risk tarnishing the firm’s reputation, much less his own. And Vanessa had never seen him lie to an associate before. Why would he start now?

On her way to the conference room, she stopped by Felix’s desk. “I can’t believe it.”

He gave her a concerned look. “What happened?”

“He put me on another case.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. And he won’t say who the client is or anything.”

“That’s weird.”

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“Right? Anyway, so I’m doing—” she shrugged helplessly “—something. I have no idea what. Have you heard...?”

“Nope. Not a thing. I had no idea he was going to pull you off the case. Otherwise I would’ve waited until you finished the deposition,” he joked lamely.

She made a face. “I’ll send you everything I have.”

“Thanks.” Felix hesitated. “Look, I just want you to know that the work you’re going to do is important, even though it might look sort of lame at the moment.”

She tilted her head. “You know something I don’t? Or are you just trying to make me feel better?”

“Hey, just saying. Nothing this firm does is inconsequential. You know that better than anyone.” He flashed a quick smile.

She nodded with a smile of her own. “Yeah, and we all know there’s no news in the firm you don’t hear first.”

He waved it away, but it was true. He was popular among the secretaries, and they loved to include him in their gossip. Maybe somebody had let it slip that the work really was important.

Conference room 2B had a big desk and two plastic chairs. It wasn't one of the fancier ones since it was a work room, not a "shock and awe the clients" room.

She opened a leather folio. Inside was a computer print out that read: Review and file in chronological order. She stared at the ten boxes in front of her. This had to be some sick joke. This was the kind of work you might give to an intern, not an associate. Had she pissed off one of the partners or their cronies?

The documents' letterheads were blacked out. She glared at the papers and started reading them. Just because the partners were determined to screw her didn't mean she had to roll over. She wasn't giving them any reason to ruin her eval come July.

The back of her neck prickled like a centipede was crawling across it. She turned and saw John tapping his Rolex at her. "You've got to be kidding me," she muttered as he jerked his chin toward the door.

If he wanted her gone, fine. She'd leave. She picked up her phone and texted Justin. Have you had lunch yet?

Not yet.

Let's have Chinese then. Order me sweet and sour pork and fried rice. I'm heading home now.

\* \* \*

Justin glanced at Vanessa's text and ran his teeth across his lip. Hmm. That didn't sound good. He padded barefoot to her kitchen, looking for a menu. She must have one from her favorite Chinese delivery.

He didn't have to wait long after placing their order. Vanessa showed up, her eyes flashing fury and her mouth flat and disapproving. If their lives were drawn in a cartoon, steam would've been hissing out of her ears.

"I thought you were going to be at the office all day," he said conversationally. If Highsmith had screwed up, Justin was going to kill him.

“Well, things have changed.” She tossed her purse and briefcase on the couch and started pacing. Her jaw muscles worked as she clenched her teeth. “That jerk pulled me off the case.”

“What case?”

“An important one. That’s all I can say.”

“Maybe they had an even more important task for you to do.”

“No. They put me on something that should be an intern’s job. Seriously. Filing stuff in chronological order? And this mythical client wants to pay more than twice my billing rate? I don’t think so.”

Justin scratched the tip of his nose. “What’s so unbelievable about that?”

“Because it’s stupid to pay that much! Besides, I can’t waste my life filing when I should be working on important cases and make sure the partners know how valuable I am to the firm. I need to show what a great lawyer I am, how I can charm clients and win more business. You know, things like that.”

“If you want to bring in business, why don’t you use your family connections?”

“Because I’m not going to climb the ladder of family connections to the top like some brainless moneyed idiot!” she burst out, then clicked her mouth shut. Flushing, she blinked a few times. “Maybe it makes me sound arrogant,” she began, her words slow and measured, “but I want to do it on my own. I want my career to be...entirely mine. Dane, you rat bastard.” Suddenly she buried her flushed face in her hands.

Justin didn’t know how her oldest brother figured into all this, but he could guess. As if being an asshole wasn’t enough, Dane was very good at manipulating people, somewhat like Barron. Justin pulled Vanessa down onto the couch and held her.

“Every family has a rat bastard,” he said, tucking tendrils of her hair behind her ears.

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She laughed humorlessly. “But not like Dane. He played me all along, egging me on, telling me I could never be a partner on my own. And I wanted to prove him wrong so bad I spent the last ten years of my life doing exactly that.”

“Isn’t partnership what you want though?”

“Yes,” she answered reflexively, then shook her head. “Maybe.” She huffed. After a moment, she added quietly, “I don’t know. I just wanted to do it on my own.”

That Justin could understand. Her family was wealthy and influential, and he bet it cast a long shadow everywhere she went. He didn’t see anything wrong with her wanting to be free of that. He’d always had the same desire himself.

He felt slightly bad about his role in her getting put on the “boring” work, but he couldn’t believe Highsmith hadn’t done a better job of spinning the work so it sounded ridiculously important. Like it was an honor to be on it.

Maybe he should have a quick conversation with the partner. Highsmith was to make sure Vanessa didn’t work too much, not piss her off by giving her scut work.

Their lunch arrived; Justin paid and brought it to the dining table. He’d ordered egg drop soup as well since she liked it, and settled down to decimate his Kung Pao chicken.

Vanessa chewed her pork. She seemed to have a good appetite now. Maybe the morning sickness the day before had been an aberration. Women threw up during pregnancy, but it couldn’t be optimal to lose one’s food when eating for two.

“Are you doing any work today?” she asked.

“No.” He’d cleared his calendar until Monday.

“What were you planning to do all day?”

“Oh, this and that.” He gave her a wicked smile. “Why?”

“Now that I can’t work, I don’t know what to do with myself.”

He chuckled. “I can think of a few things.” He washed down his chicken with Coke. “Actually, I was

going to take a nice hot shower...while thinking about you.”

She raised an eyebrow like she wasn’t affected, but her eyes were darker now. “Is thinking all you were going to do?”

He winked. “I don’t fist and tell. But I’ll let you watch.”

She licked her lips. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

## Chapter Twelve

Vanessa couldn’t believe how turned on she was at the idea that he masturbated while fantasizing about her. She was slick and tingly between her legs, like they hadn’t done the dirty-and-sweaty the night before.

Justin started the water in the shower. Her master bathroom had a separate shower stall encased in glass. He brought a stool in. “Sit.”

She plopped down. He stripped off his shirt. Her breath caught at the hard, rippling muscles on his back and torso. The bright light showcased all his masculine perfection. He got rid of his shorts and underwear, and

she pulled her lips in at how hard he was already. Long and thick, his shaft stood up, the head of his cock so close to his flat stomach.

He strutted around, shamelessly flaunting his body. He was gorgeous, his movements gracefully economical, like an athlete in his prime.

With a grin, he went inside the stall. The water sluiced down his body in rivulets, tracing every line. He shampooed his thick dark hair, and white suds skimmed down his strong back. He grabbed a bar of soap and ran it over his body.

“I think of you all the time, constantly.” His voice was low but clear over the sound of running water. “You come to me at the most inopportune moments at times, but it always makes me happy to think of you.”

One big, strong hand wrapped around his shaft, and Vanessa forgot to breathe. She’d never considered herself very visual or a Peeping Jane, but watching Justin start to pleasure himself with his eyes on her made her go instantly wet.

The water droplets beaded on the glass, and the steam fogged it, making it harder to see him, but it didn’t matter. It only added to the surreal sexiness.

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“Take off your shirt,” he said, as his fist moved slowly up and down. “Let me see you.”

Keeping her eyes on him, she took it off. At his rough intake of breath, she grew bolder and undid the front clasp of her bra and let it slide down her arms and fall.

“Jesus.”

“I want to see you come, Justin,” Vanessa said, her mouth dry. She couldn’t believe how brazen she was—completely out of character. But it was so freeing to watch him hard like this for her.

His ass tightened as he pumped into his fist, his eyes on her. “Play with your tits,” he said, his voice rough. “Imagine it’s my hands on you. Now.”

She cupped her bare breasts. They were fuller than before and more sensitive. She grazed the pointed nubs with her thumbs and gasped as an electric sensation shot through her, leaving her tingling all over. She pressed her legs together, feeling the aching emptiness there.

“Fondle them the way I would,” he said, his thrusts faster now.

Swallowing hard, she remembered the way he liked to play with her breasts, shaping them, testing their softness and teasing their tips until she moaned and writhed underneath him. It felt ten times naughtier to do it to herself while Justin watched. Her hands were softer and smaller than Justin’s, but the effect was the same. Maybe it was the intensity of his gaze as it followed her hands; she felt branded to the core.

“Slip your hand inside your panties and play with yourself. Put your fingers inside yourself and pretend it’s my cock fucking you.”

Beyond caring now, she did as he asked. Her clit was so wet and swollen, and she was so primed it was easy to slip two fingers in. He cursed and whispered dark encouragements. “Yes, baby, that’s it. Make yourself feel so fucking good.”

She watched him through slitted eyes. He was close, she could tell. But he was holding back, his formidable control not letting him go. The plump head peeked out every time his fist pumped, and she licked her lips at how it glistened.

“God, I wish I was doing this with your cock in my mouth,” she said.

Justin’s face twisted as his control shattered. He shouted as he ejaculated in a long, ropey spurt. She watched it, absolutely mesmerized at the way

pleasure tightened his face. His hand on the wall fisted, and he rested his head against the foggy glass, his eyes on her.

A moment later, he straightened and turned off the water. The glass door opened, and he came out, water beaded on his skin. “You haven’t come yet.”

“No.” Her hand was still between her legs, but she hadn’t done anything to push herself over the edge. She’d been too enthralled by his performance.

He pulled her up, getting water on her bare torso. She moaned as his chest rubbed against her nipples. It was incredible to have him on her like this. He unbuckled her shorts and dragged them and her underwear off in one impatient movement. He took her wrist and brought her wet hand to his mouth and sucked the juices off her fingers. “You taste amazing.”

With a jerk, he perched her at the edge of the double vanity. The marble was cold against her heated skin. He dropped to his knees before her and inhaled her scent. “I can never get enough of you.”

He pushed her thighs wide and breathed gently over the slick, pink flesh. “You’re too damn hot.” He buried his face between her legs and feasted on her, his mouth ravenous. Pleasure spread through her, and her toes curled. She threw her head back, her fingers buried in his wet hair. The man was irresistible, his lips and tongue and teeth always knowing exactly what she needed the most.

Ecstasy coiled inside her, and she clenched her teeth to contain a groan. A sheen of sweat covered her, and she became desperate, so close to what she wanted.

He sucked on her clit hard, pushing three fingers inside her. The invasion was nothing like her smaller and more delicate digits.

“I’m coming,” she moaned.

His response was to pump his fingers faster and suck even harder on her clit. She screamed his name as an orgasm seared its way through her. Her nerve endings felt fried; she couldn't have remembered her name as Justin licked and kissed her on the way back down.

“Oh wow...” She fell forward and her hands gripped his shoulders as the bathroom spun. She blinked a few times. What was that about?

“Are you okay?” he peered at her.

“I'm fine. Just a great orgasm.” She laughed, unwilling to ruin the moment. The momentary dizziness was probably nothing. “So what else are you planning to do now that you've showered?”

His grin was pure wickedness. “Why don't I show you?”

\* \* \*

Justin rolled his shoulders after replying to his marketing department's latest proposal with a large red exclamation mark. Maybe it would've been easier to hire monkeys to do their job because that was about the level of deliverables coming from them. They were scared of screwing up—he got that. But he hadn't hired them to copy what everyone else was doing.

Hopefully his response would generate the results he wanted. If not, he had no problem replacing the entire department. He'd done it once already, with another department, and he could do it again. Nobody was irreplaceable.

He plowed through the rest of the initiatives and proposals. He couldn't wait to wrap up everything so he could fly to L.A. The previous seven weeks had been some of the best of his life. Who would've thought marriage would agree with him so perfectly?

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“Sir, your brother’s here,” came Rita’s voice over the intercom.

“Send him in.”

Nate was a couple of years younger than Justin, but he’d never shown any interest in running Sterling & Wilson. If there had been even a hint of such interest, Barron would’ve plucked him out of his happy life and molded him into what he considered to be “executive material.”

Nate appeared in an expensive shirt and slacks. He dressed with more care when he visited Sterling & Wilson, apparently to maintain the image Ba

rton wanted of him. Justin leaned back in his seat. “What’s up?”

“What I was gonna ask you.” Nate took a seat. “What are you up to these days?”

“Busy. You know.”

“Hmm. Yeah. With the sudden relocation to San Francisco and all. You hate the city.”

“I get tired of the weather in Chicago.”

Nate snorted. “Yeah, right. If you liked it any colder and nastier you’d be a penguin.”

“Okay. Which one of them have been whining to you?”

“All of them.” Nate sighed. “I don’t know why they think I can influence you in any way. They’re better off begging Barron.”

Justin scowled. The executives trying to figure out whether they should please Barron or him were annoying as hell. Barron was in Maryland full-time now. That meant it was Justin who was in charge.

It might have been easier if Barron had made his retirement official, but that old dog hadn’t done that yet. If he’d been a petty man, Justin might have thought his great-uncle was delaying on purpose. But most likely

Barron just didn't think it mattered—that it was the executives' job to figure out who was in charge and behave accordingly.

“But I'm not really worried about the executives,” Nate said. “I'm wondering why you're flying to L.A. every night.”

“Are you stalking me?”

“Ha. No, I read the auditors' report and talked to your pilot. You know we have a corporate penthouse in the city, right?”

Justin scowled. He hadn't expected his pilot to talk, but then again he hadn't bothered to swear the man to secrecy. A mistake he wouldn't make again. “Got things to do in L.A.”

Nate chortled. “Things, or a girl? She must be super hot to have you flying out every night. I don't remember you acting this bad, not even with Vanessa.” He knew about Justin's on-and-off relationship with her. “And V's hot with a capital H.”

Justin tried for a bland expression. Telling his brother to watch his mouth wouldn't do any good, and he'd promised to keep the marriage quiet until July. “You know, I actually do have work to do. Why don't you go visit Kerri? See how she is? She's pregnant, you know.”

“Oh yeah, I know. Don't worry, she's doing fine. She has Ethan, the prototypical over-protective husband, plus her sister- and mother-in-law fawning over her. Barron, too.”

“I almost feel sorry for her,” Justin said. “Barron must be impossible to deal with.”

“I think Ethan's doing a pretty good job of handling him.” Nate tapped his lip. “It's going to be you next, you know.”

“Me?”

“Baby.”

Justin narrowed his eyes, wondering if Nate suspected something.

“You’re the Heir Apparent, so it’s your duty, hahaha. Barron’s already muttering about it. Carry on the family legacy, and all that. I’m not interested, of course. Gonna be single forever and leech off my inheritance.” Nate smiled like a cat with a bowl of fresh cream. “Anyway, I’m leaving now. Got a party to catch.”

Which explained why he was in San Francisco.

“And if you want to keep your little affair a secret,” Nate leaned in from the doorway and affected a stage whisper, “you might not want to expense the trips.” He left, waving a hand.

Justin cursed. Rita generally took care of his expenses—personal and otherwise—and she’d probably assumed his trips to L.A. were work-related. Besides, her default mode when it came to his expenses was to assign them to Sterling & Wilson. He made a mental note to talk to her about that. Hopefully Barron was too distracted to read the auditors’ report carefully. He didn’t want his great-uncle wondering what he was up to.

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\* \* \*

“So tell me how you have the time to join us for yoga,” Hilary asked, doing a final stretch on her mat. Sweat from the session glistened on her skin.

Jane nodded. “Yeah. I thought you were the career-minded one.”

“Oh, I am.” Vanessa sat up. “But now I’m on strict orders not to work more than forty hours a week. And everyone at the firm hates me.” Well, not quite everyone, but it was pretty close. And the feeling wasn’t always hate. Many of them pitied her, convinced she was going to get screwed in July. She shared the sentiment, despite what John had said.

“Why can’t you work overtime?” Hilary asked.

“No idea.” But the work had gotten a bit more challenging. Now she was writing a series of articles on some of the finer points of sexual harassment.

“That’s weird,” Jane said. “But Iain told me you work too much, so maybe your firm is trying to help you not burn out.”

“Hah. It is to laugh. Believe me, Highsmith, Dickson and Associates doesn’t care about burned-out associates.” Any associate who burned out was welcome to leave. If they didn’t leave on their own, the firm “counseled them out”—a nicer term to describe a pink slip.

“Is this a subtle hint to get you to do more pro bono?” Hilary asked.

Vanessa snorted. “Doubtful. The partners think I do too much volunteer stuff as it is, except they don’t say that out loud because they don’t want to sound like jerks. The second I pick up a juicy pro bono case is one half-second before they dump an important ‘one hundred and twenty hours a week’ case on me.” She sighed softly. “It doesn’t matter. At least I got a good workout with you guys.”

“Definitely.” Hilary nodded. “And hey, I think it’s great that you’re working fewer hours. You positively glow these days.”

Vanessa forced a smile. If they only knew! “Hilary...do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“Go ahead.”

Vanessa hesitated. It seemed a little rude to bring up the past, when Hilary had run the other way from Mark, but this was important. Now that she had so much free time, all she did was google Justin’s old girlfriends and dates and mull over those gorgeous women, thereby proving the saying about idle hands true. But she couldn’t help herself.

She knew, intellectually, that she was pretty, thanks to her mother. But all the others who buzzed around Justin had won a similar genetic jackpot. How could he resist all those beauties? Her father hadn’t been

able to, not when he was married to one of the most gorgeous women of her generation, not when he'd professed to love her.

Swallowing, Vanessa chose her words carefully. "Mark's reputation's always been pretty bad when it came to relationships..."

Hilary laughed. "That's putting it mildly."

"So... what made you sure he'll be different with you?"

"He loves me."

"That's it?"

Hilary shrugged. "That's all I need to know." She leaned closer. "Why? Are you having issues?"

"No, not at all." Vanessa wasn't telling Hilary and Jane about her secret marriage. "Just wondering if you had some kind of concrete proof. I mean, how can we know for certain what's in people's hearts?"

"Sometimes it's just a matter of trust. If I didn't believe him, I wouldn't be with him, no matter how many times he told me he loved me."

Vanessa scraped her bottom lip with her teeth. Hilary spoke so beautifully and bravely. But unlike her, Vanessa didn't have the courage to make that leap of faith. The sweeter and more magnetic Justin acted, the greater her fear grew—the day might come when she wouldn't be able to derive a drop of happiness without him. Would she become one of those women she saw in her pro-bono work—the ones who put their men's approval and happiness over everything else, including their own children's welfare? Cold terror brushed her as the possibility unfolded in her mind. To be so...dependent... "I'm going to get some water and go home. How about you?"

"I'm heading out too. I have a lot of work to do tomorrow," Hilary said.

"Ditto," Jane said.

Hilary worked for one of the richest and busiest men in the world, and Jane was becoming better known as a private chef. Vanessa stopped herself from asking how Hilary could have faith in Mark, knowing his history as an impossible playboy. Even though Hilary was the perfect person to talk to about her doubts, Vanessa didn't know how to broach the subject while keeping her own marriage secret.

She waved them good-bye and went to the water fountain. She peed more now, but was also thirstier than usual. Her doctor had advised her to make sure she wasn't dehydrated.

Vanessa waited for her turn. A willowy brunette in front of her started to put water into a bottle. She turned around. Freckles dotted her face, and her nose was just a tad too large for the rest of her features. "Hi. Sorry, my bottle's sort of big."

Vanessa smiled. "No problem. You were in the yoga class, right?"

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"Yeah. I figured I'd join to meet some people. I'm new in town." The brunette's plump pink lips curved into a shy smile. "I'm Peggy Teeter."

"Vanessa. Where are you from?"

"Provo. In Utah? I got a job in L.A., so I moved out here about three weeks ago. It's so different here, and it's not always easy to make friends." She flushed. "Oh my gosh, look at me babbling. Sorry."

"Not a problem. I know how it can be when you're new."

Peggy moved aside when the bottle was full.

Vanessa started filling hers. "My brother just got engaged. Next time, I'll introduce you to his fiancée. She's not from around here either, and I'm sure she'd appreciate a friend."

\* \* \*

Watching Vanessa leave the studio, Peggy drew in a long, steady breath. She'd thought Vanessa would be spoiled and snotty given how she'd grown up and what Stan had said, but she was actually really nice. Peggy had wanted to ask to talk with her privately, but for some reason hadn't been able to. Nice or not, something about Vanessa intimidated her.

Peggy recalled Vanessa's look of pure concentration when they'd been doing the yoga. She was all class and money and unbelievably beautiful. Even without any makeup post-shower, she was still stunning. If she hadn't become a lawyer, she could've been in fashion magazines. Nobody would believe she and Peggy had anything in common.

But there was something. Even if Vanessa had everything Peggy didn't.

She swallowed bitterness. Ceinlys thought she could be stingy and get away with it. She'd soon learn otherwise.

\* \* \*

Justin was home by the time Vanessa returned from the yoga studio. He was in a dress shirt and slacks, his tie loose. She smiled to herself at how sexy and handsome he looked, then she pulled back and tried to study him with a more objective eye. No matter how hard she searched, there was no hint of meanness, just solid security and something that was too big and deep to be called mere affection. He would love his child to pieces and... And just maybe he'd love her one day too.

"You seem to be in a pretty good mood," he said.

"I got to exercise with Hilary and Jane."

"Nothing too strenuous?"

"Yoga. Not that bad." She kissed him on the mouth. "Have you eaten?"

"No."

“Let’s get some Chinese then.”

“Again?”

“What can I say? I’m craving sweet and sour pork with fried rice.”

Justin raised a hand in surrender, pulled out his phone and ordered Chinese for two.

She cleared her throat. “I have something to show you.” She dug through her purse and found the print-out of the baby. “Here. From the visit from this afternoon.” She handed it over and shifted, leaning close.

As he looked at the tiny dot, awed happiness suffused his expression. Her heart squeezed, and she almost couldn’t breathe.

“I can’t believe how small he is,” he whispered, his voice full of reverence. “And...he’s such a handsome dot.”

He reached for her and held her tightly. She hugged him back, her eyes closed as she savored the sweetness of the moment.

“Dr. Silverman said everything’s progressing well,” she murmured.

“How good is this doctor?”

“Very. She delivered Gavin and Amanda’s baby.”

Justin nodded. Gavin Lloyd was a billionaire who insisted on nothing but the absolute best for his wife. “I wish I had been able to go with you.”

Tags:

Source:

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Vanessa squeezed his hand. Her phone beeped, but she ignored it. Probably just work. She sighed, wondering if she was being overly insistent about her promotion being all on her own merit. At the same time she couldn’t help but mull over the fact that John put her on a series

of odd assignments. Perhaps he was testing her to see if she'd use her connections to make him stop or something.

If she'd brought in her family's or the Sterlings' business, maybe he would quit driving her insane. On the other hand, she didn't want to get promoted based on that. She never wanted anybody to wonder if she had become successful because of her family. She'd worked too damn hard to allow that kind of talk.

"Who spat in your soup?" Justin asked.

"What?"

"You looked like somebody spat in your soup."

"It's nothing."

She didn't want to talk about it with Justin in case he decided to "help" by intervening with her partners. He'd become extremely protective recently. The one good thing about only working forty hours was that it preempted Justin from calling the firm and telling the partners that they were driving her too hard. A sudden thought crossed her mind, but she dismissed it immediately. Not even Justin would be able to make Highsmith put a perfectly good associate on a forty-hour week schedule. If the mystery client wanted to pay a hundred hours for only forty of real work, Highsmith would have had her put in the remaining sixty on other cases. There was always something to do at the firm.

"Really. I'm fine," she added when Justin looked skeptical.

"Okay. Hey, have you thought about moving?"

"No... Why?"

"The place is too small for a family of three. And I know we haven't talked about it, but I think you should get someone to come in for housekeeping. Maybe once a week or so."

She made a face. "You're risking the couch, you know, with your thinly-veiled criticism."

He laughed. “Just thought it’d make your life easier. It’s going to get harder and harder for you to move around.”

“Let me think about moving. But in the meantime, I guess we can have housekeeping.” Actually Vanessa had been wanting to scrub the place from top to bottom. She just never had much time after work and yoga, and she didn’t want to waste her evenings with Justin.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it? We’ll find a trustworthy service that can come in, clean and do the laundry and so on while you’re at work.”

“Perfect. You think of everything.”

“Somebody’s got to.” He kissed her. “You have no idea how anxious it makes me that we can’t announce to everyone we’re married already. If I had it my way, you’d be on leave from the firm to rest with your feet up all day long.”

“You’re sweet when you get all protective. But the doctor said it’s okay for me to work. Apparently it’s actually good that I get out and not bore myself to death. The baby can feel my moods. I don’t want a bad one to affect it.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m going to quit worrying. You don’t know what you and this baby mean to me.”

When he spoke like that, she could almost forget her doubts about their future and impending motherhood. She snuggled close to him and held his hand. Was this what a good, loving relationship was supposed to feel like? She tightened her grip on him. “I’ll be careful, Justin.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Vanessa went to the office the next morning. Justin had left early, promising to come back as soon as he could. Now that she couldn’t work weekends, he’d reintroduced the idea of flying to Mexico for a getaway. She’d agreed. She was going stir-crazy without anything to do at the firm.

“Hi, Zoe,” Vanessa said to her secretary, but Zoe didn’t even raise her head to say hi back. She was staring at her monitor in rapt absorption. “Zoe?”

“Oh my gosh! I didn’t see you.” Zoe put a hand on her chest. “Did you hear the news?”

“What news?”

“There’s been an accident. A private jet lost control and skidded off the runway in San Francisco and crashed into a crane.”

“A crane? At the airport?”

“It says they were doing some expansion work.”

A cold dread formed in her belly. “Whose plane?”

“Justin Sterling’s.”

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Spots swam in front of her. Her knees buckled, but she caught herself against a filing cabinet. They’d just kissed each other good bye only a few hours ago. She couldn’t believe it might have been their last one.

Zoe jumped to her feet and grabbed Vanessa. “Are you all right? Vanessa?”

She blinked, trying to clear her vision. “Did anyone...were there any survivors?”

“So far only one seriously injured, and two with minor injuries. They didn’t say anything else.”

“Nobody...died?”

“I guess not. I don’t know.” Zoe’s face was filling her vision, looking concerned. “Here.” She handed Vanessa a tissue. “Wipe your tears.”

“Oh.” Vanessa hadn’t realized she’d been crying.

“Do you know Justin?”

Vanessa nodded.

Zoe’s face tightened. “I hope he’s all right.”

“Thanks.”

Vanessa managed to drag herself to her office, locking her door. She was shaking so violently that she finally collapsed on the carpeted floor, feeling like she was going to throw up. Was it Justin who was seriously injured?

Hands over her belly, she rolled onto her side. This was all her fault. She’d been so resentful of his high-handed act in Chicago that she’d insisted on keep their marriage secret, claiming she didn’t want her in-laws to affect her career. Now that she thought about it, she could’ve just told her partners she wouldn’t be used to bring in her in-laws’ business either. If her refusal to persuade her family to bring its business to the firm hadn’t hurt her, a refusal to get the Sterlings for Highsmith, Dickson and Associates wouldn

’t have either.

Her fault, her fault.

She pressed a fist against her mouth, trying to muffle a sob.

My god...Justin...

She should google for updates on the accident. But every time she tried to sit up, nausea hit her. She lay back on the floor and prayed harder than she’d ever prayed before.

\* \* \*

Justin paced in the hospital. His pilot was seriously injured, while he and the cabin attendant had some bruises. There would be an investigation into what had actually caused the accident, but he was certain it was due to the poor visibility at the airport with thick and heavy fog.

He wanted to call Vanessa, but he'd forgotten to charge his phone the night before, and there was no juice. And now they were keeping him at this damn hospital.

"I'm fine," he told the doctor again.

"We have to make sure," the man said. A pair of rimless glasses sat on his long, pale face. "You may feel okay at the moment, but you might have other injuries you may not be aware of."

"People are going to worry."

"We notified your brother, Mr. Sterling. And I'm sure your family will be just as relieved to hear you were a model patient."

The doctor was smiling, but Justin wasn't in the mood for levity. Nate didn't know about Vanessa, and she would undoubtedly hear about the accident. Hopefully she wouldn't worry too much. "Fine. Make it quick."

The doctor scheduled an MRI and CAT scan among other things. Justin wanted to bang his head against the wall, but he couldn't blame the man for being thorough. He knew who Justin was. If anything happened to Justin because of medical negligence, Barron Sterling would descend upon the hospital with a horde of lawyers. Everyone knew what a vindictive asshole Barron could be.

It wasn't until noon that the doc finally told him what he already knew. "It's a miracle." Still the doctor prescribed some painkillers, just in case Justin felt sore, and discharged him.

"To your office, sir?" his chauffeur asked.

"No. To the airport."

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His chauffeur drove extra slowly, testing Justin's patience. He reined in his temper, and called his assistant from the car phone. "Rita—"

"Oh my gosh, Justin, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, but my laptop's toast. Ship a replacement to my address in L.A. Make sure it gets there before COB today. And I need a new charger. Have it waiting for me at SFO." He didn't have Vanessa's number memorized—an oversight that was going to be corrected ASAP—and his personal cell was the only phone that had it.

"Anything else?"

"Cancel all my appointments for today and tomorrow. If anybody calls, I'm not in. And get me on the first flight to L.A."

\* \* \*

Vanessa ended up going home, where she sat trembling in front of the TV. None of the news stations had anything about the crash in San Francisco. She googled, but that didn't yield much either. Everything was speculative—one early report said a man had died, then published a correction. It seemed like nobody knew what was really going on. Probably more interested in posting something first, she thought angrily, rather than something accurate.

Frustrated, she undid her hair and started pacing. Jittery energy and tension gripped her. Even now Justin's family might be preparing for a funeral.

She hugged herself. No. She wouldn't be negative.

But she still hadn't heard anything about the accident, and his phone kept forwarding her to the voice mail. Surely, if Justin was okay, he would've called.

Maybe there was some other reason why he couldn't call. Maybe he'd lost his phone in the accident. She picked up her phone and scrolled through her contacts. The names of clients, friends and colleagues flashed by. Her family probably didn't know any better than her, and she didn't know the numbers for Justin's family.

Of course, she could find it easily enough. But it seemed awkward to call one of the Sterling & Wilson offices and ask, "Hey, did Justin survive?"

She was Justin's wife. She should be the first one to know. And if she hadn't been so damn insistent about keeping their relationship secret, she would have been.

Keys jangled at the door, and she turned sharply. Justin walked in, and for a moment her brain couldn't process what it was seeing.

"Hey," Justin said, opening his arms.

"You're not dead!" She jumped into his arms, linking her hands behind his neck. "You're not dead."

"I'm fine, baby. I'm fine." He wiped his thumbs over her cheeks, and she realized once again that she'd been crying.

"I thought... I couldn't reach you and nobody knew anything."

"I know, I'm so sorry. I forgot to charge my phone last night."

She shook her head. "No, it's all okay now. Are you hurt?"

"Nah. A couple of bruises, nothing to talk about. It's almost a miracle."

She pressed her palms against his cheeks and brought his head down for a kiss. She couldn't believe he was with her, healthy and whole.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

He kissed her back, his mouth desperate for her, and she poured her soul into the moment.

Without breaking the kiss, he carried her to the bedroom. They stripped each other out of their clothes, hands hurried and clumsy. His fingers tunneled into her hair, coiling it around them. He gripped her pelvis, and she spread her legs, wanting to feel him inside her so much, to know he was really here with her.

He pushed into her, his thick cock gliding into her right where it belonged. There was no slow savoring, just desperate relief and joy that they had cheated death.

He adjusted the angle, grinding into her sensitive nub with every thrust. Legs wrapped around him, she held onto his wide, solid shoulders, and sobbed out her relief and pleasure.

He let go, his face stark in climax. She put her hand against his flushed cheek.

Mine.

\* \* \*

Tags:

Source:

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After a few moments Justin rolled off so he wouldn't crush her. She turned to face him, her hair spread around her. "Justin..."

"Yeah?"

"I don't think it's working."

Something cold wedged in his heart, turning the post-orgasm glow to ashes. "What do you mean?" he asked, keeping his voice neutral.

“It drove me crazy, not knowing. When nobody contacted me. If people knew I was your wife, they would’ve called me first.”

“That’s true.”

“So...maybe we should out ourselves. You know, announce the marriage. Then we could’ve avoided all this. You wouldn’t have to sneak around or risk your life.”

Justin smoothed a hand over her creased forehead. “This wasn’t your fault. It was the weather. The Bay area can get pretty foggy. Visibility was poor, and my pilot made a mistake. It’s not like I’m flying into a battle zone every day.”

“Still—”

“I’m serious. I know how important this July is for you. Didn’t you say you wanted to get promoted based on your own merits, and not because you’re married to me?”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t matter. I’m not getting promoted this year.”

He pulled back slightly. “You’re not?”

She shook her head. “The partners are giving me BS work. They also aren’t letting me do more than forty hours a week. You know what that means at a law firm?” She didn’t wait for his response. “It’s a not-so-subtle hint that I have no future there.”

Put it that way, it did look pretty bad. But he’d done it to ensure she wouldn’t work too much, and he didn’t want to change the way things were, not even to appease her self-esteem. A hundred billable hours a week was ridiculous for a pregnant woman. When would she find the time to see her doctor or eat regularly? He remembered how Gavin Lloyd’s wife had a pregnancy scare, and the woman had staff waiting on her. “Have they said anything to you directly?”

“No, but...”

“Well, you know what happens when you assume. Maybe your partners have a reason.”

“I guess.” She sighed, as though in resignation, but her thoughts were going a mile a minute from the way her eyes flashed.

“Hey. It’s okay. Everything’s going to be fine.”

She smiled. “You’re right. What do I have to complain about when you’re back safe and sound?”

He smiled back, swallowing the guilt twisting his gut.