

5 Top-selling Authors

Billionaire Erotic Romance

BOXED SET

7
FULL LENGTH NOVELS

The Sandstone Affair

Bonds of Attraction

Winner Takes All

Bound by Fate

One Last Dance

His Every Touch

His Secret Desire



EROTIC ROMANCE
BILLIONAIRE
BOXED SET
7
FULL LENGTH NOVELS

MONA

WINNER

MAZEXO

STONING

SCANDAL

NOVOT

SECRET

Billionaire Erotic Romance Boxed Set

Featuring Novels by:

Priscilla West

Alana Davis

Sherilyn Gray

Harriet Lovelace

and

Angela Stephens

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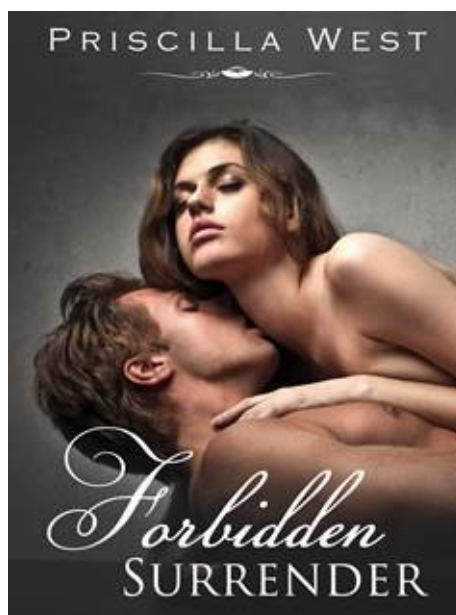
All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

~~Warning: This work contains sexual content and is written for adults only (18+). All characters depicted in this story are over 18 years of age.~~

Bonus Content

Exclusive teasers and excerpts for Priscilla West's highly anticipated Surrender Series are available after every novel, make sure you don't miss them!

Also, check out the teaser chapters of Forbidden Surrender at the very end of the collection!



Reviews for the Surrender Series (4.5 out of 5 stars on Amazon.com):

“Wow!!! Love this series. Vincent has shot to the top of my BBF list... READ THIS SERIES , you will not be disappointed.”

- Jenny D.

“I think Secret Surrender solidified this series as a must-read. The emotions evoked in this book are so much more dynamic, than in the previous one. And for those of you wondering, it is still on the short side, BUT with so much going on it didn't feel lacking at all! I will warn you though, there is a cliff hanger, and I kind of saw it coming but that didn't stop my heart from almost beating out of my chest and there is a possibility that I yelled "Oh, come on! Seriously?!?!" Yes, I was a bit angsty with this ending. HOWEVER, the finale is coming out in late October! Yay!!! I am in love with this series, and cannot wait for the conclusion!!”

-Emily McGee (Same Book Different Review Blog)

Description:

"What gives you a thrill Kristen?"

The minute I saw Vincent Sorenson, I knew he was trouble. Billionaire. Bad boy. And dangerously sexy. He was everything I craved, and nothing I needed.

Unfortunately, I couldn't just avoid him. The higher ups at my company decided they needed his business, and I was on the team to bring him in. Vincent Sorenson didn't seem as interested in business as he was in me, but I knew that was a door better left unopened. If I got involved with him, it would only unearth the pain I spent years trying to bury.

I thought I had it under control, but I seriously underestimated Vincent's seductive charm and silver-

tongue. I would soon find out how delicious it would feel to let myself fall into this forbidden
surrender.

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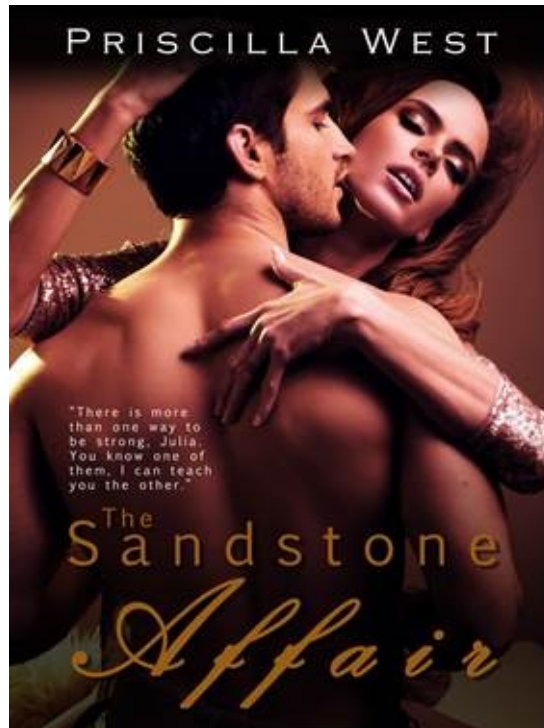
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The Sandstone Affair

by Priscilla West



"There is more than one way to be strong, Julia. You know one of them, I can teach you the other."

Julia Sharp has always been a strong woman. Her strength is what helped her through the days when her fledgling company struggled through the grip of a global recession.

Since that time her business has grown tremendously, aided in part by the investment firm, Sandstone Ventures.

For once in her life, she feels like she has everything she could ever want, but fate has other plans for her.

In the span of one day, everything that Julia has worked for crumbles in front of her.

With no other options, she turns to the wealthy and enigmatic partner of Sandstone Ventures, Mark Stone, for help.

What Mark Stone asks of her will delve into her darkest fantasies and test the very limits of her strength.

Sign up for Priscilla West's mailing to find out about when the next boxed set will be released!

http://eepurl.com/C_R6P



Prologue

“Honey, we should talk about some options.” Dad’s weary eyes searched for mine.

“Stop it. Just stop it. You’re starting to sound like them.” My eyes wandered across the room, settling on the quietly beeping heart rate monitor next to the bed. I couldn’t look at him, especially when he started talking like this.

“You can’t keep going on like this, throwing away your money on an old man.”

“Dr. Vatel thinks the new treatment will work.”

“He said there was a possibility it *could* work, Julia.”

I studied the pattern on the linoleum tiles, trying to calm myself down. Every so often he’d bring this up again, and it never ceased to rile me up all the same. I think it was when the pain got bad for him. I tried to ask the doctors to increase the dosage on the morphine drip, but they said it was too dangerous.

“Stop talking like that. I’m not going to lose you like we lost Mom. I’m going to continue paying for Glenvale and that’s final!” I stared down at my hands, trembling slightly. I gripped the plastic handle on the hospital bed, my vision starting to blur with wetness.

I needed to be strong. I needed to be strong for Dad. Mom made me promise that to her when she was in the hospital, when she had lain in that antiseptic room just waiting for the disease to take her. It was hard on both of us, but Dad took the worst of it. I was too busy building up Lynx, the magazine company I founded, to have much time to think about her passing. Every day I would rush over to the hospital after work to check on her, but Dad was with her all the time. He practically slept in that hospital room. We tried every treatment that the insurance covered, but it wasn’t enough to save her in the end.

And now it’s happening all over again.

No. This time it’s different. Lynx is no longer the scrappy magazine operating out of a basement apartment. It doesn’t matter if Dad’s insurance won’t cover the new experimental treatments. Now, I can make sure he has the best treatment that money can buy.

“You were always so headstrong.” Dad chuckled lightly, realizing that he wasn’t going to win this argument. “So how’s your world?”

Thank God, he’s finally dropping the subject.

“Good Daddy, everything is good.”

“How’s the big story? Ready to go to press?”

“Soon, there are a few more things to sort out, but it’s getting there.”

“What about that handsome young man? Blake.” His eyes twinkled at me.

“You mean Mark? He’s the only one you met. He’s fine I guess, I don’t see him around that much. He’s been getting on my case, but at least he doesn’t hold the fact that they own the majority stake in the company over my head constantly.”

“You owe them a lot you know. Especially Mark.”

“I know.”

Blake and Mark Stone of Sandstone Ventures had saved Lynx in 2008 with an injection of capital, when the recession pretty much froze the news stands. No one was buying magazines. It was the right decision at the time to take their offer, but I couldn’t help but regret losing full control over Lynx. It was my company, my child, my life.

Even though Mark had never been heavy handed when giving me “advice”, I knew that ultimately they could force the company to go in whichever direction they wanted. I followed Mark’s advice when it made sense, but sometimes I had to ignore him.

Mark had never been able to convince me to give up my feud with the larger and more popular Ladies World. I knew that Sandstone Ventures had a stake in Ladies World, but that didn’t stop me from undercutting them, scooping the heck out of their reporters, and calling them out on their vapid articles.

I knew I should have given him a break, especially since he got my father into Glenvale when the hospital director had claimed that all of the beds were full.

“Mark’s a good man, Julia. Why doesn’t he come around anymore?”

“He’s very busy Dad, he was just being polite when he came to visit.”

Truth was, Mark had been adamant about visiting my father with me and insisted on speaking to the hospital director to make sure that Dad had the best doctor on his case. It was one of the only times in recent memory that he hadn’t hounded me about leaving Ladies World alone.

“Oh please, Julia, I saw the way you two looked at each other last time he was here. He can’t be so busy that he doesn’t have time for my lovely daughter.”

I had always been attracted to Mark, and he really went out of his way to help me out so he must have felt something for me too, but neither of us ever acted on those impulses. I guess he always seemed so composed and distant. Thinking about Mark’s square chin and piercing eyes was sending uncomfortable waves of heat between my thighs and I wasn’t quite ready for those feelings again. No did I want to have to justify my relationship status to Dad yet again.

“Listen Dad, I have to get to work. I’ll be around to visit later tonight okay?”

“Okay, bye honey.”

“Love you, Daddy.”

Chapter 1

Something's different today. I can tell the second I walk in the door to the office. Instead of the usual noise and chatter of reporters and designers brainstorming and teasing one another, or the frantic scurry of interns running photos to various cubicles, there is a hushed and focused pall across the room. I see Jeff mouth, "She's here" to the layout manager.

Crossing the room in silence, acutely aware of the absence of clicking keyboards, I push this morning's conversation with Daddy out of my head and put on my business face.

Janice stands up as I approach. That's not normal.

"You need to wait here," Janice says in a quiet but heavy voice. I try to push past her.

"Why would I do that? I need to be in my office."

"Julia. Stop!" Janice jumps between me and the door. "Just stop a moment."

"What on earth?" I try to control my confused reaction. Janice has been my administrative assistant since the first issue of Lynx went to press. She's a good employee and an even better friend. When we're at yoga, lunch or anywhere else she calls me Julia. But in all these years inside this office I have always been "Miss Sharp."

"Julia, I don't know what's going on, but some lawyer from Sandstone came in today with security guards. They've been going through the stuff in your office all morning, I tried to stop them but—"

"Janice, what the hell is—"

"I'm sorry Julia, I have to let them know that you're here."

"Miss Sharp has arrived," Janice says into the intercom and sits down looking at the desk. Before I can get a grasp on what any of this means, two armed security guards emerge from my office. One reaches out toward me and motions me into the door.

"Did something happen here?" I ask the somber guard. "Have I been robbed?"

"Oh, someone was robbed, Miss Sharp," the oily voice I recognize at once calls from the inner office. "But, it wasn't you."

"Mr. Allen." I shudder when I say his name. As one of Sandstone Venture's attorneys, and the personal lawyer of Blake Stone, Kenneth Allen is more of a pompous bully than an officer of the court. He's been insufferable ever since I turned down his clumsy attempts at courtship.

"How nice of you to visit. What brings you here, and why have you commandeered my property?"

"You're wrong on all counts, Miss Sharp," Kenneth drawls, his voice thick with superiority. "This is neither nice nor a visit, and nothing here is your property. This magazine and this office are the property of Sandstone Ventures. Of course, if you had known that we wouldn't need the added security."

Kenneth is standing behind my desk, his meaty paws thumbing through folders he has pulled out of

my drawers and placed all over. Red tags cover my computer, my file cabinet and even my lunchbox left over from yesterday. I pull at a tag to see the word “EVIDENCE” written across it.

“Evidence? Evidence of what?”

“I’m sure if you search your soul deep enough, you’ll figure it out,” Kenneth says. He talks to me like I’m three years old and it always sends me into a tailspin.

“Drop the act and tell me what is going on or get the hell out of my office.”

I hear the click of the office door as the security guard closes it, shutting out the prying eyes and ears of my entire staff. Mr. Allen reaches into his briefcase and brings out three legal sized manila folders placing them in a line. The last folder is red.

“We’ve been watching Lynx for some time, Miss Sharp. Or, should I call you, ‘Miss Shark?’ That’s what your staff calls you. We saw it all over their inter-office instant messaging. We also saw some... shall we say... irregularities in the account management. We aren’t sure what we’re looking at yet, but if it’s anything serious you will be the first person we notify.”

“Irregularities? That’s bullshit. Where’s Mark? Why isn’t he here telling this to my face?”

I can see the gloating fire behind Kenneth’s eyes. “Mark is no longer in charge of your accounts. He turned all the necessary documentation over to Blake last week.”

Another news flash that hits me between the eyes.

“Why would he do that?” It’s like trying to put together a puzzle where none of the pieces match in any way. I’m drowning in new information and none of it makes any sense.

Stop. Calm down, Julia. Breathe. You need to think.

“Because Mark is in charge of functioning properties, and this magazine no longer meets the criteria. Blake is in charge of acquisitions, transfers, mergers and—in your case—closures.”

A surge of fury and something else, betrayal, clenches in my stomach.

“Closures? You’re closing Lynx? You can’t do that! I still own forty-nine percent of this company, damn it. You can’t just come in here with some bullshit charge and then shut us down! I have some time for legal recourse.” This can’t be happening.

Kenneth opens the first folder. “You’re right, Miss Sharp. Of course, you’re always right, aren’t you? Enclosed is a copy of the injunction barring Lynx Magazine from any independent publication, action or pursuit until the terms of closure are finalized. The magazine can function *only* under the direction of Blake Stone until your time for rejoinder is finished.”

I stare at the stack of legal nonsense in front of me. I need to sit down but the only chair in the room has a box filled with files in it. I grip the back to steady myself as Kenneth opens the second folder.

What? There’s more? I’m trying to clear my vision.

“What you see in this document is the closure of Lynx Magazine, and transfer of contracts, staff, projects in development and all resources to another of Sandstone’s properties.”

Kenneth smiles like a hungry alligator.

“Everything here, except for one element, will be transferred to Ladies World under the direction of Valerie James. And finally,” Kenneth clears his throat, smiling broadly as he opens the red folder. He pretends to offer it to me then pulls it back. The security guard has both my arms behind my back so he knew I couldn’t take it in the first place. “Well, I can see you’re upset. I’ll just read it.”

“Yes, please do,” I snarl.

“Julia Sharp, by executive order of Blake Stone, Co-President of Sandstone Ventures, due to the pending closure of Lynx and transfer of its resources to a magazine that already has an editor-in-chief your position has been declared redundant and your services are no longer required. Pursuant to contract section V paragraph 3A—you are hereby terminated from your position.”

He hands the folder to a guard and sits down behind my desk while his superior smile still gleams. I look around the silent room, struggling to hold back the fire that I feel building up in the pit of my stomach. A loud throbbing noise fills my ears as I try to contain it. The flames build in intensity until they sear a hole through my chest, surging forth in an uncontrollable torrent.

“I built this company from nothing! This is my company. *I* landed those stories while eating ramen in a basement! *I* stalked those celebrities to get those interviews. *I* hustled my ass off to sign on those advertisers! And you think that Valerie James over at Ladies World will know what to do with it? You can’t just come in here with some trumped up bullshit and get rid of me!”

Kenneth nods and the guard starts tugging at my arm.

“These gentlemen will walk you to your car. Good day, Miss Sharp.”

I struggle against the guard’s grip, trying to get away. “This isn’t over, if you think it’s going to be that easy to take Lynx away from me, you’re wrong!”

I’m rushed through the door and look to see the entire staff, some with mouths hanging open, watching me being escorted from the building like a petty thief. The guards don’t let me go until I’ve been deposited in the front seat of my car.

I slam my hands against the steering wheel. What the hell just happened in there? Why was there no warning of this? It didn’t make any sense! Mark made no mention of this when I last saw him. Those goddamn wolves. Was this the plan all along? String me along with promises of independent governance and then send me out the door with some bullshit, so they could have Lynx to themselves.

No. It can’t end like this. Maybe it would’ve been better if we had gone bankrupt in 2008, I could have taken that. We would have fought the fair fight and lost. But this, this is something else.

I look at the red folder the guard gently placed in the passenger seat on top of my old mail and Daddy’s hospital bills. Shit. How am I going to pay for Glenvale now? There’s no way insurance is going to cover a private hospital like that. I feel the first hot tears begin to pour down my cheek. Daddy. I can’t lose him too. Not when I had missed so many of Mom’s last days because I was caring for my struggling company. No. I need to be strong for Dad.

I’m pretty sure Kenneth Allen is watching me from my own office window. I want to flip him off and drive out in a show of bravado, but I can’t seem to get my arms to move. I grip the steering wheel

until my knuckles are white, imagining my hands around the throat of Kenneth.

The tears keep coming, one after another until I put my head on the steering wheel and collapse in a heap of breathy, heaving sobs.

Oh my god. What am I going to do?

Chapter 2

It's hard to drive with tears, anger and confusion all taking turns steering your brain. Amazingly, I manage to get home in one piece. I go over and over everything that sleazeball attorney told me and can't find anything I can use to make this go away. Some of it isn't unexpected. I know Blake hates me, and favors supporting Ladies World because it's bigger and older. I know Kenneth is a slimy henchman who will do anything to put Blake on top. I know at forty-nine percent, I am at their mercy.

I open a bottle of wine and pick at a salad for dinner. After cataloging the "knows", I turn my attention to the things I don't know and my anger begins to override the numbness of the shock. What are they looking for in my computer?

Why didn't Mark tell me when he turned over my account? Why didn't he call me? I thought Mark was supposed to be on my side! The questions build inside me until I've given a name to everything I don't understand: Mark Stone.

With a fury, I grab my keys and get in the car. All I know is that Mark Stone better be working late, and he better have some damn good answers.

Sure enough, there's only one light in the office on the 6th floor of the building holding Sandstone's offices. It's Mark's. I blitz through the lobby past security, the memory of the former security guard causing my wrist to ache, and hit the elevator for the sixth floor. The nameplate informs me the Law Offices of Allen and Martinez are on floor five, but their windows were dark. I'm sure Kenneth and Blake are out having a cocktail, toasting to the end of my future. I practically jump through the elevator door when it opens and find myself in the front hallway of Sandstone.

I enter quietly and turn down the hall to his office. Opening the door to his outer office, I see a light coming through the crack of the door to his personal office. The secretary's chair is empty, her desk neatly organized with manila folders of deals and financial sheets. The quiet methodical tapping of the keyboard drifts through the silent office, and I pause for a second.

I should go. I'm a wreck. I can't let him see me like this. Mark is the one person in this whole company I want to respect me, and truthfully, I've always wanted him to be interested in me for a little more than work.

I pace in his outer office, listening to him working on his computer. A framed picture of Mark, Blake and their father hangs on the wall. They're posing next to a large swordfish, on the deck of a white yacht, the leather seats visible in the background. The rich bastard was supposed to help me, but instead, he pushed me down, stabbed me in the back and left me bleeding all over his tidy account register.

I storm forward, pushing open the door.

His untied tie hangs around his neck, and his shirt sleeves are rolled up to his elbows. His sandy-brown hair and muscular chest give me a moment's pause.

"Julia." He looks up slowly as he sees me enter his office. "Are you okay?"

"Do you think I'm okay, Mark?"

“No,” he says somberly. “I’m sure you’re not. I’m sure it’s been a rough day.”

“A rough day? Is that what you call it? *A rough day*? Your firm closed down my office! Your lawyer humiliated me in front of my whole staff! You’ve taken away everything I ever had and will ever have. Yes, Mark, I’ve had a fucking rough day!”

“To be fair, Julia,” Mark says with his signature sense of accuracy and control. “Ken Allen is not my lawyer. He’s Blake’s.”

“Lynx was your account. The magazine was in your hands. Protecting it was your responsibility.”

“Why don’t you sit down?” He rises from his chair and walks around the desk. I can see my words have stung him. He’s not making eye contact. “There’s a lot here that you don’t understand.”

“Of course I don’t understand, Mark. I don’t understand why I’ve just lost my life’s work.” In my anger, the jabs turn mean and petty. “But you wouldn’t understand that, would you? Because this isn’t your life’s work, is it? No, it’s your Daddy’s life work. It was passed down to you and Blake to carry on the Stone dynasty. You’ve had everything given to you your entire life. All you’ve ever had to do was make Daddy happy.”

“That’s enough, Julia! Sit down.”

I know I’ve gone too far, but I can’t stop now.

“No! You sit down. I’m tired of taking orders from Sandstone executives. This is your fault, Mark. Yours!”

Mark opens his arms to try to catch or guide me into a chair, but I propel myself at him, hitting him in the chest with my fists. I feel my hands hit the solid muscle of his body, and I strike at him again and again. He catches my arms and pulls me close to him, close enough to catch his strong masculine scent of smoky cinnamon and leather. With his red, angry face inches away from me, he spits as he spews his defense in my face.

“Dammit, why do you have to be so stubborn, Julia? You think this helps? You think refusing to listen to anybody else but yourself is going to get your position back? Let me tell you something. Your ‘boobs of steel’ act where you play the tough broad breaking the glass ceiling with her bare hands isn’t what made you a success in this business. You’ve just been getting by with it, and now it’s pushed you right out the door. ”

I struggle against his arms, his words piercing holes into me.

“If anyone is to blame here, it’s *you*, Julia. I told you to stop going after Ladies World. I begged you to let your feud with Valerie go. I sent you memos and messages and warnings that we would always take the side of the big magazine over the upstart small one. But you wouldn’t listen. You had to pursue it. You had to fight. You had to win. Julia, you walked into something way over your head, and you refused to listen to any advice!”

Overcome with emotion, my wrists still bound in his hands, I bring my foot up and kick him squarely in the shin.

“Bastard!” I scream at him and kick him a second time as he grimaces in pain.

His eyes turn to ice as he towers above me, locking me in his stare. I hear my heartbeat throbbing in my ears, wondering if I'd gone too far, wondering if he was right and I had just lost my only hope of figuring this mess out because I was too stubborn, too emotional, pushing away the only ally I've had since the buyout in a fit of rage. A silent flash passes between our eyes, and he grabs my shoulders with strong hands, holding me in place. The thought of escape flees my mind as he leans down and crashes his lips into mine.

I open my mouth to him, crushing my lips up against his for a moment, his rough tongue searching inside me, opening me in a way I never expected. How many times had I fantasized about the feel of those lips on mine? We find harmony for a second, and then my brain kicks back in. I bite his lip, and he jumps back.

He glares at me. Wrapping me up in his strong arms, he kisses me a second time. My body alternates between struggling and inviting. I slap at his back and arms, but then my lips follow his, pulling him closer and closer into me as all strength to resist dissipates into where our tongues entwine. He reaches down and pushes the papers off his desk, backing me into it. Still holding and kissing me, his hand shoots to my breast. My hand lifts to hit him once more but weakens into grabbing at his shirt. Then I start shaking him back and forth.

"I needed a fighter! I needed someone as strong as I was! I needed someone with the balls to stand up for me!" I cough up mountains of anger and frustration on him as he continues to hold and press against me, kissing any part of me that isn't fighting back. He leans in my ear.

"I know exactly what you need," he says and turns me quickly, bending me over the desk. His hand holding my back and his kiss still warm on my lips, he folds me like paper. I feel the pressure of his body behind me. He lifts my skirt and pushes it up on my back, pushing me harder against the desk.

"This is what you need."

"Mark..." I say as I stretch my arms forward to grab the front of his desk. His briefcase falls with a crash as I feel him pushing against me again.

"This is what you need," he leans over whispering, his hot breath in my ear, his body pressing against me as he pulls down my panties and reaches between my trembling legs. The wetness of my desire is unmistakable. Still in my ear, he says, "This is what you want."

"Yes," I whisper softly, almost hoping he doesn't hear me, but I feel his fingers probing me, finding their way inside.

"Is this what you want?" he asks. I hear his zipper going down with one hand as the weight of him still firmly presses me against the hard wood. His hips are already starting a motion against me. I am lost to the moment.

"Yes!" I scream. "God help me, yes!"

He enters me quickly, his cock splitting my opening and pushing its way through my body. My head drops down on the desk as his rough thrusts begin pushing deep into me, smacking me with his power and strength. My narrow long-neglected passage comes alive around his shaft, gripping and pulsing as he thrusts over and over. I can't tell if he's taking me or punishing me or just loving me but the rough sensations sweep me along the surge of his lust.

Grabbing my hips, he thrusts into me like a man possessed, each thrust pushing my breath out in loud bursts as he growls through gritted teeth.

The buildup of energy, the sensation of my clit being pushed and rubbed by his thrusts against the hard desk, his cock pounding me again and again to the rhythm of his control—filling my body and soul—is too much. My back arches and I buck underneath him. I clamp my mouth shut, unwilling to allow him to hear the pleasure I'm getting from his merciless cock, but the spasms of my body surge against his shaft. He slams into me with several halting hard jerks then moans loudly as his semen floods my raw insides.

Mark pauses long enough to catch his breath, then withdraws, leaving me sore, filled and stunned. The moment passes in silence with only our ragged breaths providing a clue to our presence. He pats me on the rear gently and pushes a Kleenex box toward me as I hear his zipper go back up. Propelling myself up on weak arms, I return to an upright position. He looks out the window as I lean down to pull my panties back in place.

I stand before his desk like a paddled schoolgirl. The glorious feelings of afterglow fill me with such peace and ground me into the reality of the moment. I am content just to stare at him and feel his phantom presence in my core.

"I...um...I..." I can't talk. I don't know how to respond, and the endorphin rush in my head is making any decision impossible.

Finally, he looks up and speaks in a clear, crisp detached tone.

"Listen to me Julia. There are things at stake here that you don't understand. I don't even understand all of it yet. I can't promise you that I'll be able to help you, but I'll promise to try. What I need from you is trust. You can't just operate like a lone wolf if you want me to help you." He continued through his panting. "I will look into the files to see what Blake has planned for Lynx, and if there's anything that can be done about it."

Stunned, speechless, I turn to walk toward the door. With each step, my raw and stretched body reminds me of what just took place. I'm amazed that I can walk at all.

"And Julia," Mark calls sternly from his desk.

"Yes?" I turn and force myself to look at his face.

"I did fight for you. Otherwise we would've had this conversation six months ago."

I look at his eyes, creased with lines of fatigue. For the first time, I notice a streak of grey in his hair that I had never seen before.

"One more thing. Don't try to contact me here again, if I'm to help you, we can't be seen together. I can't tell you more than that for now, but the answers will come soon. Understand?"

"Yes, Mark," I say softly, as if an odd spell has changed my entire demeanor. He smiles reassuringly then turns to pick his work off the floor.

Chapter 3

It's noon and I'm still sitting at the kitchen table, which is covered in paperwork. Old mail, notes, and the documents Kenneth Allen gave me the day I was fired all sit in front of me in one intimidating lump. Normally I can focus and get things done, but I'm so distracted by my feelings about Mark and what we did that I can't really think at all.

Did that really happen? I shift positions in my chair and the soreness winds throughout my lower body reminding me that Mark Stone fucking me over his office desk was all too real, indeed.

How on earth did I even get in that position? Did I want it? Did I need it? Most importantly, no matter what I think about my wants and needs, what does Mark think about me? I go into his office screaming like a madwoman and end up gripping the edge of his desk begging him to take me. I needed his help and respect, and now I'm not sure I have either.

That's not really fair though. I mean, that kind of dance takes two. How unfair is it of him to take advantage of my clearly unhinged state and toss me over the desk? Why wasn't he looking out for my company in the first place? I'm mad at Mark, and I'm mad at me. We somehow managed to take a bad situation and make it worse. Anger isn't a bad thing; it's fuel and it propels me to do something with the stack of crap in front of me besides stare at it.

Grabbing a cup of strong coffee, I move out of my haze and sort the mail from the rest of the pile. Nothing too interesting: a few bills, some sale flyers and a copy of Inc. Magazine for business owners. Guess I have to cancel my subscription to that. Then I see one of the bills is marked "Glenvale Cancer Treatment Center." That's not good. I rip the envelope open to confront one of the many facts of my situation I had not wanted to face.

An outrageous sum for chemotherapy and care for the past two weeks is due by Friday. I have this payment and maybe two or three more, then I'm out of money. Dad isn't responding to anything they were doing for him at Mercy General and his Medicare cap is getting close. They wanted to put him on "comfort care" and let the cancer run its course. Mark helped me find Glenvale. It's an experimental cancer treatment center that offers drug trials and in-patient treatment but isn't covered under insurance. So, I've been footing the bill. The scary part is, I'm not sure how much longer I can keep this up without a job.

The phone rings.

"Julia Sharp," I answer with my usual business voice. Just because I'm unemployed doesn't mean I have to sound like a pauper, particularly to the scheduler from the Sunrise Yoga.

"Julia, it's Janice. I'm at the yoga place."

"I can't come to yoga right now, Janice. I've got things on my mind, if you haven't noticed." My tone with her is crisp and snide. I guess I can't blame her for continuing to work at Lynx, but it would have been a comforting gesture if my good friend would've stood up for me and left.

"I don't care about yoga. It's the only safe place to call you from."

“What?”

“Kenneth All-Slime and Blake the Snake are in the office all the time. I can’t call you from there, and I’m kind of afraid to use my cell. Everyone is really tense.”

“Well, that’s what you get when you decide to stay in the gutter with the rats,” I say without compassion. Does she really think I should feel sorry for her? It’s my life that’s a mess.

Janice gives me an annoyed sigh. “I just wanted to let you know I got it out of the office before they found it. When you’re ready for it, it’s secure.”

“You’ve got what?”

“The story, of course. That’s what all this is about isn’t it?”

“I don’t know what it’s about, to tell you the truth. But keep the story safe. And, thanks Janice.”

A hot bath, a glass of Merlot, and some nice music is the best medicine I can afford right now. While some folks use those things to relax, I’m using them just to keep myself going. I’ve got to find a way to get my head around what’s happening. I admit I’ve had my eye on Mark Stone for some time, imagining what a joint venture with him would be like in the boardroom and in the bedroom. But right now I’m as far from the boardroom as I could possibly get, and while I’ve certainly been on the receiving end of his attention, it’s not like he’s inviting me to the bedroom.

The wine takes the edge off, and I realize he’s right. I am afraid to ask for help, and I don’t like giving in. I do put on an act and try to bully people into my way. It’s the only way I know to get ahead in the publishing game. There’s no room for the weak. Valerie James is just as ruthless and cutthroat as I am. She just does it with a smile. Somehow that’s worse.

Finally relaxed, I mull my options. I’ve got a lawyer looking for a loophole in the original Sandstone Ventures contract, but he’s already said it looks airtight. I do get a chance to file a rejoinder, but I don’t even know what grounds I could file under. I have Mark’s mysterious plan, which I can’t even fathom—let alone count on. Finally, I have the Wall Street article Janice managed to save from Blake don’t know what to do with any of these but there has to be a way. The phone jars me out of my focused state.

“Julia Sharp,” I say, hoping it’s not Janice again calling me from the laundromat or Burger King.

“It’s Mark,” he says with that deep beautiful voice. I can see him in my mind’s eye and my body begins tingling in response to the very sound of him.

“What do you want?” I say far too rudely for my own good.

“Meet me at the fourth level of the parking deck at Monroe and Seventh Street around nine o’clock tonight. Come alone.”

“Do you want me to wear a cloak and carry a dagger?” I respond sarcastically. Mark just hangs up the phone leaving my attempt at humor hanging in the air like a bitter pill. Part of me thinks I should nip this in the bud right now and stand him up. That will back him off. Yet another part of me that resides noticeably lower in my body, wants to meet him and see what he can do.

I arrive about ten minutes to nine, and I’m the only car parked on this level. Mark pulls up in an

Escalade at nine on the dot. He's such a careful and exacting man. He gets out of the driver's seat, opens the passenger side back door, and walks around to the driver's side, getting in the back. I look around, and climb in the back.

"Close the door, genius," Mark says with a smile. "You're not very good at this sneaky stuff."

"Before Sandstone Ventures came along, I didn't have to be," I retort as I pull the door closed. What about him that makes me want to rebel and obey all at the same time?

"Where's Jose?" I ask. I had never seen Mark driving himself before.

"At this point, it's better if no one knows that we're meeting."

"Even Jose? I thought you trusted him." The older man always had a smile and a joke for me whenever he drove us to visit Glenvale.

Mark's silent look is answer enough to that question.

Mark turns on the map light in the back. It's a surprisingly roomy vehicle for a single man to drive around in. Maybe it's his mobile office. He reaches into the door side pocket and pulls out a folder with copies of the same documents Kenneth Allen gave me.

"Have you read these?"

"Yes," I reply, unwilling to admit I can't make heads or tails out of most of them.

"Then you know what the problem is, right?" Mark speaks in a clearly controlled focused manner. It's hard to sound professional in the back seat of an SUV in an empty parking garage, but he pulls it off nicely.

"I know I lost my company, and it's a problem," I respond petulantly, and then remember he doesn't have to help me at all. "Honestly, I really don't know much about what they say. It's all legalese to me."

"They say you have thirty more days, four weeks, to save your company."

"Thirty days?"

"That's how long you have to file a rejoinder. About four weeks. If you don't find a reason to file, or don't file on time, Lynx Magazine's assets, talent, stories and resources all become the property of Ladies World."

"What do I need to file?"

"You need evidence that you were wrongfully put out of the company because of corruption, personal gain, or by an inappropriate system, and you want the matter legally reviewed. If you have evidence, a judge can stop the merger to Ladies World. But you need real proof, not just theories and venom."

"I don't have it. Do you?"

"No, but I have a plan. It's going to take almost all thirty days, and it's risky for me, but I think I might be able to find something you can use to file. However, I'm going to need your help and I'm going to need you to trust me."

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