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# Archer's Way

Ava McKnight

*Mystical Sign Series*

*Ava McKnight*

**Mystical Signs: Sagittarius  
ARCHER'S WAY**

**BY**

**AVA McKNIGHT**

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## ARCHER'S WAY

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## ARCHER'S WAY

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ISBN: 1-59836-413-8

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## Chapter One

As far as scandals went, the one Kate Perry had just found herself embroiled in was a doozie. No doubt her fall from grace would be immortalized for all of time. CNN broke the news early this morning, and now Kate's photo—the one Archer Enterprise's PR guru had snapped of her at last year's Winter Solstice Gala—accompanied the "Breaking News" segment on every TV station she flipped to.

There she was, all pearly white smile, her long blonde hair piled on top of her head in an elaborate cascade of shiny curls. She was dressed to the nines in a designer gown that was the perfect shade of red. The sparkly, spaghetti-strapped bodice, which accented her full breasts, gave way to a long satin skirt that had just the right amount of flare to it. Elegant, yet...*racy* at the same time. Funny how that latter descriptor had never entered her mind when she'd bought the dress.

Nor had she stood in front of the mirror six months ago—as she's surveyed herself from every angle before she'd left for the gala—and thought she looked sexy.

Sophisticated and polished, yes. Sexy, no.

But clearly, the rest of the world saw her that way, particularly given her scandalous predicament. The news anchors were now referring to Archer Enterprise's youngest up-and-comer as *provocative*. A word Kate had never wanted associated with her. Especially when related to her professional life.

She was smart enough to know, though, that the media would sensationalize her involvement with the prominent Chief Financial Officer of Archer Enterprises, who's smiling face was right next to her in that now infamous photo.

"Sex sells," she muttered in disgust.

Picking up the remote, she switched channels and there she was again. Standing next to a twenty-foot, elegantly decorated Christmas tree, with Kenneth McDugan, III at her side.

Kate narrowed her eyes at the photo that remained on screen. "Seriously. A man is dead and all you can talk about is an 'alleged' affair that you can't even *confirm*? And

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what? Nothing more newsworthy has happened in San Francisco—or the world—today? This is insane!”

She threw her arms up in the air in shock and dismay as the newscaster continued to weave a sordid tale of the “morally defunct executives who had deeply scarred the pristine image and once solid reputation of the *Fortune 50* company, Archer Enterprises.”

“Oh, for the love of God.”

She snapped off the TV and dropped the remote on the coffee table in her living room. Crossing to the enormous, open kitchen that occupied a good third of her loft, she reached for the bottle of Meritage she'd uncorked half an hour ago when she'd first discovered she was the star of the five o'clock news.

She'd yet to pour a glass, but now was definitely the time for a little fortification. Sliding a wine glass from the rack that hung over a portion of the granite counter, she filled it to the rim and started to drink. Maybe if she got good and drunk it would salve the sting of her professional—and personal—mudslide.

But even as she settled onto a tall barstool and continued to sip, she knew alcohol wasn't the answer. Sure, it may help to curb her anger, but that would certainly be the extent of its therapeutic effects. Just as she knew the media would beat this story to a bloody pulp, she also knew that nothing could save her from this horrific fall from grace. No amount of wine could soften the blow or make her feel less vulnerable.

Kate had never drowned her sorrows in a bottle before and, despite the fact that she desperately wanted to this time, she knew she had to face the music.

That meant walking into John Archer's office tomorrow morning and delivering her resignation.

Emotion instantly welled inside Kate. Tears threatened her eyes.

*Goddamn it.*

She had worked so long and so hard, and this was how her rise to the top was going to end? By being labeled Kenneth McDugan's *mistress*? A conniving corporate ladder climber?

Or worse...the slut who'd tainted the immaculate image of Archer Enterprises.

Unable to control them, tears flowed down her hot cheeks. If only there was some truth to the lies, to the wretched things being said about her. Then she could slink off to a far corner and hide. Just Kate and her endless amounts of shame and disgrace.

But the fact was, there wasn't a shred of truth to the tale of infidelity the media wove.

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Admittedly, the evening news anchors reported an accurate assessment of what had happened last night at the Fairmont. Kate *really* had accompanied Kenneth to his regular suite at the prestigious hotel following a business dinner at the restaurant downstairs. She *really* had been with him at two o'clock this morning. And, she *really* had been the one to dial 911 when he'd suffered a massive coronary and died.

Right there in his suite, in her arms.

But, contrary to all reports and public opinion, Kate Perry had *not* been having an affair with Kenneth McDugan, III. Nor had she intended to ever engage in sexual relations with the man. He was her boss. Her mentor. Her friend.

Nothing more.

Yet, the rest of the world had instantly jumped to the conclusion that Kate had been in his hotel room last night because they were embroiled in a hot, elicited affair.

The thought left a bitter taste in her mouth. She sucked down another big gulp of expensive wine, hoping like hell it would somehow chase away the nasty aftertaste of being the star of this year's top sex scandal.

It didn't.

In fact, all Kate felt was rage and sorrow. A difficult combination to reconcile. On the one hand, she wanted to run out into the street and scream at the top of her lungs that everyone was wrong about her. She wanted to crash a local newscast, commandeer the microphone and explain to the American people that she was not a whore. That she had never once had an affair with a married man, let alone one who had five beautiful children and a doting wife at home.

She had not, at any time during her six years of working with Ken, become sexually involved with him. Nor had he ever encouraged her to.

Ken had never come onto her. He'd never said anything suggestive or inappropriate. He'd never even given the impression that he was interested in her sexually.

But who the fuck would believe her?

Conversely, she wanted very much to crawl under the covers and bury her head. She wanted to weep for a week. She wanted to ignore all the horrible, wretched things being said about her.

*About her and Ken.*

Above all else, she wanted to have the time to mourn her loss. Ken had meant the world to her. He'd been kind and compassionate, and she deserved a little peace from the world, some time to mourn his passing.

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Unfortunately, that would not happen for her.

Kate set aside the glass she'd nearly downed.

Time was of the essence. She had but a small window of opportunity to state her case. To defend herself. To prove that she wasn't the harlot... the home wrecker... the *whore*... the world now thought her to be.

To hell with the news reporters. She had one person to convince of the truth.

One chance to redeem herself.

One chance to save hers and Ken's reputations.

Snatching her purse from the hallway table, she left her loft and took the elevator to the private underground garage that, thankfully, was monitored by a professional company. Luckily, no reporters had breached security. Yet.

Slipping into the leather seat of her sporty Mercedes convertible, she backed out of her reserved space and raced out of the garage. It was Sunday night, but she knew the person she needed to see would be in the office. He'd left two email messages on her Blackberry and one message on her voice mail today. He was waiting for her to come to him, she knew it. She could feel it deep in her bones.

And despite the fact that he likely wouldn't believe a word she uttered, Kate knew there was only one person who had to hear the truth.

Directly from her mouth to his ears.

John Archer.

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## Chapter Two

John Archer hated two things in life. Losing and being wrong about someone he'd hired.

This weekend, both of those loathsome things had happened to him.

First, he'd lost the best senior executive Archer Enterprises had ever had the good fortune to employ. Kenneth McDugan, III had been a Godsend from the beginning. Smart, determined, motivated, driven. He'd been with Archer, personally, for eleven years, ever since John had taken the reigns of the company in his own hands, following his father's untimely demise. Back then, at the age of twenty-three, Archer had been an extremely young and inexperienced Chief Executive Officer. Ken had stood by his side every step of the way.

Archer had practically grown up in his father's office, so he'd had the knowledge base to step into his father's shoes. Sure, he'd had to grow up fast and learn how to convey his authority without stepping on the toes of the seasoned, older executives. But his father had been grooming him since Archer could walk, and taking over the company had come naturally for him.

Not that he hadn't experienced his fair share of setbacks and obstacles along the way. But he was an Archer... and all Archer's possessed the diligence and inner strength to overcome even the most difficult of challenges.

He persevered, no matter what.

This weekend, however, he'd encountered something he'd never anticipated. Of all the unexpected, sordid situations to find himself in... John Archer had never, in a million years, believed he would have to deal with the kind of bullshit that now threatened his company's stellar reputation.

Just thinking of the sex scandal that rocked the very foundation of his organization made him irrational. Annoyed beyond all belief.

Pushing a hand through his dark brown hair, which was likely disheveled from the past ten times he'd raked a hand through it in a restless manner, he tried to get a grip on

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his emotions. But it was moot, he knew. Archer was half out of his mind over the news that had broke early this morning.

Kate Perry—the woman he'd recruited two years before she'd even graduated Princeton, for Christ's sake—and Ken Dugan, his father's hand-picked CFO, who had been with the company for nearly thirty years, had been having an affair.

*An affair!*

Right under his nose!

*Goddamn it!*

He stalked over to the wet bar in his spacious, opulent office on the thirty-third floor of the Archer Building in San Francisco's Financial District and set about mixing a batch of vodka martinis. He was in need of a little fortification, though to be perfectly honest, Archer couldn't say what vexed him the most.

Was it the fact that Kate and Ken had been an item and he hadn't even known about it?

Admittedly, Archer made it a point to know everything that went on in his company, and it did not sit well with him that something so scandalous had occurred right under his nose and he hadn't had the vaguest idea it was going on.

Or, was he beside himself with jealousy that Ken had been sleeping with Kate when Archer had been fantasizing about her for the past eight years?

From the first day he'd met her at a career event at Princeton, when she was a twenty-year-old junior, Archer had been captivated by the beautiful woman who'd been valedictorian of her graduating class.

Of course, Kate had no idea of Archer's fascination with her. And that's exactly how it should be. He was her boss.

Still. It rubbed him raw to know that she'd gone against all the principles he'd been certain she held fast to by having an office affair. With a married man, no less.

But what really drove him to the edge of sanity was knowing she'd chosen Ken over him. A man twenty-five years her senior, for Christ's sake.

As he gulped down his first martini, a soft rap on his open office door drew his attention. Setting his glass aside, Archer glanced over his shoulder.

The vision behind him jolted him. Standing in the doorway, looking lost and completely inconsolable was Kate Perry. She wore jeans, a white Oxford shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and stylish black boots. Her long, pale blonde hair was pulled back, the loose curls secured at the nape of her neck.

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Kate's usually vibrant green eyes were clouded and the whites were bloodshot, as though she'd been crying all day. Chances were good that she had been. The dark circles under her puffy eyes told him she hadn't gotten any sleep since this horrific ordeal had begun.

She opened her mouth to say something, but when his phone began to ring, her full lips pressed together. Archer had never seen her without lip gloss. Something about her bare pink lips made him think of nothing else but kissing her. She had the kind of lush mouth any sane, hot-blooded man would fantasize about. It was meant for kissing...and so much more.

*Christ, Archer. Now's not the time to be thinking about Kate's mouth on your dick.*

Thoroughly disgusted with himself—and his overactive libido where Kate Perry was concerned—he reached for his martini and slammed the rest of it. He filled two glasses and then turned to her.

His phone continued to ring, as it had been doing since the scandal broke. Archer ignored this call, as he'd done all the others. He paid his vice president of Public Relations a small fortune to handle crises such as these.

Not that Nolan Short had ever had to worry about crisis management where Archer Enterprises was concerned. The unexpected death of Archer's father years ago was the most devastating thing to happen to the company thus far. Archer, and his father before him, was much too civic-minded and professionally responsible to warrant a negative backlash of any orientation from the public.

Until now...

Lifting one of the glasses in the air, he said, "You look like you could use one of these."

She studied him a moment, then, ignoring his offering, asked, "You're just going to let your phone ring?"

Archer had been fielding calls all day. He'd already met with his board twice via conference calls, and he'd composed a brief yet eloquent email to his employees that would be waiting for them in their inboxes tomorrow morning.

He knew the calls he received this afternoon were from reporters, and he had no desire to talk to any of them.

"I have a press conference scheduled for ten tomorrow. Nolan has advised the media that I'll speak to this...*incident*...at that time."

"Incident?" She smirked. "Interesting terminology."

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He crossed to his large, glass-topped desk and set both martinis on the corner. With a gesture of his hand, he invited her into his office. She hedged, seemingly reluctant to enter his domain. Several tense moments ticked by, but Kate eventually conceded, as he knew she would. She'd sought him out, after all. And besides, the Kate Perry he knew never backed down, especially when she had a stand to take.

Entering his office and closing the door behind her, she slowly made her way toward him. The guarded look on her beautiful face intensified, and her chest suddenly rose and fell a bit faster, as though her breathing had quickened the moment she'd decided to meet him head on.

Again, he motioned to the martini he'd poured for her. When she reached his desk, she said, "I think I've caused enough of a fervor today. If anyone were to come in and see us having martinis together, your face would join mine and Ken's on the evening news."

Archer scowled. "What I do in my office is my business, no one else's. Besides," he said as he reached for his glass and took a sip. "No one else is here. And I've got a legion of security personnel in place to ensure it stays that way."

Kate eyed the martini he'd offered, then reached for it. After taking a long sip, she said, "If only this would take the edge off. Or salve the sting. But..." She shook her head, took another sip, as though eternally optimistic that the alcohol would do exactly as she'd wished.

"At the very least," he said, "It'll settle your nerves."

Her eyes lifted from her glass and their gazes locked. "I'm not nervous. I'm...pissed. Upset and angry. But not nervous. I have nothing to be nervous about, John. I didn't do anything wrong."

Archer could bluff the best of them, but he knew his look was one of pure shock. Her words caught him completely off guard, and he knew his expression not only conveyed his surprise, it also reflected his disbelief in her.

He knew it by the return look she gave him. Disappointment and betrayal wreaked havoc on her lovely features.

Setting the glass back on the desk, she planted her hands on her slim hips and said, "You believe the bullshit they're saying about me and Ken on the news? You really think...?" Her voice trailed off. She let out a harsh breath and nearly doubled over, as though he'd just delivered a physical blow to her midsection. Straightening, she glared at him and said, "Of all people, I thought you would be on my side. I thought for sure you

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would at least *question* what was being said. Even if you weren't sure, I thought you would at least give me the benefit of the doubt. Allow me to explain."

"I am allowing you to explain."

"But you've already made up your mind about me. Just like the rest of the world." The hurt that shone in her green eyes made Archer cringe. "I can't believe you'd jump on the bandwagon so easily."

Archer let out a long sigh. He went round the desk and sank into his black leather chair. "The facts are rather glaring, Kate. Concrete, even. Do you dispute them?"

"No." She began to pace in front of his desk. Shaking her head, she said, "I don't dispute the events of the evening. I *was* with Ken last night, in his suite, following dinner. You know that because I was the one who called 911. And you." She drew up short and speared him with an intense look. "But I wasn't there to have sex with him. I've *never* had sex with him. Nor would I have in the future. I was there strictly for business purposes, John."

He rested his elbows on the arms of his chair and pressed the tips of his fingers together, forming a tall steeple. He took a moment to study her carefully. Archer had not become the success that he was by allowing those he trusted to snow him. He was shrewd and diligent in his professional matters. And he was good at reading other people.

Something about Kate Perry's stance, and the determined look on her face, told him there was much more to her story than what the press had latched onto. Exploited, even.

"Okay," he said, holding his hands up in a placating manner. "Tell me what happened."

Kate looked momentarily taken aback. For the briefest of moments, Archer had the urge to go to her. To pull her into his arms. She looked as though she could use the support.

But Archer had never done more than shake her hand. To touch her in any other capacity would be...detrimental, he was sure. Though he prided himself on his steel resolve, something about the beautiful and mysterious Kate Perry told him she would test, and possibly strain, his otherwise determined nature. His strength and willpower.

Kate could easily make him slip. And that would be a disaster.

Suddenly, she dropped into a chair in front of him and said with conviction, "You know Ken was my mentor. We worked closely together, and with all the projects our division has been handling, we've been putting in a lot of hours. It wasn't uncommon for

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us to meet following a dinner or other business function, no matter how late it was. Sometimes we didn't have a choice if we needed to go over data together."

Archer understood his CFO's—correction, *former* CFO's—responsibilities were vast and time-consuming. He knew Ken had put in eighty-hour weeks for the past several years. And Kate had generally worked alongside him, logging the same hours.

"It's budget time, John. You know we were racing against the clock to meet deadlines. We have financials due to the Board next week. So Ken and I were working together every chance we got. Since he was staying in the city last night, rather than returning to Sausalito, we thought it was an opportune time to go over the reforecast."

Admittedly, Archer could find no cause to doubt her story. "Go on."

She lifted her hands in the air and gave a little shrug. "That's it. I mean, there's really nothing else to say, except that he hadn't been feeling well all day and I thought maybe we should wait until the morning to continue working. But he insisted he was well enough to get in a few hours' of work. So we went up to his suite after dinner." She stood and fixed Archer with another of her intense, soul-baring stares. "You've seen his suite, John. It's enormous. There's a living room and a study. We were working in his study last night. We weren't in his bedroom, for Christ's sake. When the paramedics arrived, they found Ken *in his study*."

Archer considered this tidbit for a moment, but didn't interrupt her.

"The man outweighed me by a hundred pounds, John. I couldn't have dragged him into the study from the bedroom."

"I'm not claiming you did."

She crossed her arms over her ample chest and studied him for a moment. Then, suddenly making up her mind about something, she came round his desk and propped a hip against the beveled edge. The determination in her green eyes mingled with something dark and mysterious that Archer couldn't put a name to.

Leaning toward him, so that he could actually smell the faint yet intoxicating aroma of her perfume, she said, "You know me. I'm smart. I'm professional. I'm dedicated." Her soft voice taunted him, drawing him into the intensity of her plea. "Never once have I used my legs or my breasts or a flirtatious smile to get ahead at this company. I don't sit on the corner of my boss's desk and let the hem of my skirt ride up. I don't lean over the conference table so the men I'm meeting with can get a good look down my blouse. I don't speak in suggestive tones, nor do I accept anything more than professional, business-related invitations."

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Archer knew all of this. One more reason why hearing she'd been in Ken's hotel room last night had been so devastating.

She continued, her gaze still locked with his. "Everything I've achieved in my professional life, I've *earned*. I've worked hard, John. Harder than anyone else at my level. I've kept pace with Ken for six years. I'm where I'm at in your company because I'm dedicated to my job. I've sacrificed weekends and endless amounts of sleep for Archer Enterprises. And now you're going to sit there and *judge* me? You're going to diminish—*tarnish*—my accomplishments by believing I had an affair with my boss?"

Archer's jaw clenched. On the one hand, he didn't like Kate's accusatory tone. On the other hand...he couldn't exactly blame her for taking this particular approach with him. What if the roles were reversed? He sure as hell wouldn't take the offense lying down. He'd fight back...no matter who the hell it was that he had to convince of his innocence.

Despite the fire in her eyes and the disgust in her voice, Archer was left with a feeling of pride. He had to admit, the woman had balls. And self-respect.

Yes, he was definitely proud of her.

Kate had been his choice for Ken's protégé and, despite his temporary lapse in judgment today, he had not been wrong about her.

Relief washed over him as he realized Kate Perry was telling the truth. She hadn't been sleeping with Ken.

Pushing himself out of his chair, he stood and did some pacing of his own.

Okay, so he'd let her down. He could understand that his lapse in loyalty would hurt her. But he would make it up to her.

He abruptly turned to her and said, "I want you at the press conference tomorrow. We'll move it to noon. That'll give you some time to collect your thoughts and prepare. Nolan will help you with your statement."

Her mouth gaped open for a brief moment. "You mean...*speak* at the press conference?" She gave a quick shake of her head. "Uh, no. I don't think so."

"Why the hell not?" he suddenly demanded. "Do you enjoy having the world think you were trying to sleep your way to the top?"

Fury flashed in her vibrant eyes.

*Good. Get pissed, Kate. Use that anger to convince the world the way you just convinced me!*

She appeared to be at a loss for words. Archer broke one of his cardinal rules by reaching out to her and latching onto her toned biceps. The jolt he got when he touched

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her was the only thing that registered in his mind for a few moments. Being this close to Kate, so close that he could feel her breath on his skin, did crazy things to his mind and body. His breath suddenly came in sharp pulls, as though he'd just run a marathon. Every inch of him responded to the nearness of her.

Archer wanted nothing more than to close the scant distance between them and press his hard body to her soft one.

Biting back a groan of desire, he forced himself to concentrate on the reason for her being here. The scandal that rocked his company was not a matter to be taken lightly. Nor could it take a backseat to his infatuation with Kate.

But as he lifted his gaze and his eyes met hers, he felt the familiar stirring deep in his soul that told him he wasn't going to come out of this encounter unscathed. Kate held his stare—and her breath—for a moment, then her gaze dropped to his mouth. She licked the full, luscious lips he longed to kiss.

As though entranced—spellbound, really—neither said a word.

Then the unthinkable happened. Their bodies gravitated toward each other of their own volition. When the tips of her breasts brushed his chest, fire roared through Archer's body. His fingers tightened around Kate's arms, as he fought to hold her back. He couldn't give into his desire for her! He had to be strong. For both of them.

*Christ, Archer! Now really is not the time for this sort of thing!*

Suddenly, her breath came in shallow pants, and her chest rose and fell quickly against his. Her eyelids dipped, as though they'd grown heavy with desire. Her gaze remained on his mouth, and for the briefest of moments, Archer thought she was going to kiss him.

But then, just as quickly as the intimate moment had descended upon them, she seemed to snap back to reality. With a slight shake of her head, as though to clear a passion-induced fog, her eyes moved up to meet his and she stared curiously at him.

"I'm sorry," she said in a soft voice. "You were saying something?"

She looked lost. As though she truly had been entranced, against her will, and had no idea what to make of the intense moment that had passed between them.

Actually, she gazed at him as though only *she* had been entranced. Had she not noticed that he'd been equally captivated? Drawn into a web best avoided?

Making his way through muddled thoughts, Archer said, "I lost my train of thought for a moment. But the issue at hand, Kate, is clearing yours and Ken's names."

*Not peeling off every article of clothing you're wearing and letting me worship that gorgeous body of yours.*

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Archer's groin tightened at the mere thought of making love to Kate. He groaned inwardly, forced himself to get a grip.

Releasing her arms, he took a step back and raked a hand through his hair. What the hell was the matter with him, anyway?

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### Chapter Three

Something had just happened.

Kate had no idea what it was. From the moment she'd met John Archer, eight years ago, she'd found herself drawn to him in an inexplicable way. How could she not? He was tall and athletic and devastatingly handsome, with silvery-blue eyes that deepened to pewter when he was angry. The transformation was a fascinating one.

He was also brilliant, which made him all the more attractive in her mind.

Granted, her feelings for John had intensified over time, but she'd never let herself indulge in romantic thoughts of him.

Except for this one time...

Whatever had just transpired between them had been mutual, she was sure of it. Well, not at first. But then a little flicker of awareness had entered his eyes, as though he, too, knew there was an undeniable attraction between them.

But, no. That couldn't be.

And even if there was something between them, Kate had to ignore it, as she knew John would.

Wouldn't it make her a hypocrite to explore the chemistry that had always existed between them when she'd spent the entire day ranting and raving and *crying* over being mistaken for an unscrupulous slut? Here she was trying to prove to John Archer that she wasn't a vicious corporate ladder climber or a home wrecker and yet...thoughts of making love with John weren't the least bit unwelcome.

*Oh, for God's sake.*

She was losing it. Plain and simple.

"Am I right?" he asked in his low, rich, sensual tone. John Archer had the kind of voice that was meant for erotic whispers behind closed doors.

Distracted by his voice, it took a few moments for Kate to search her mind in hopes of figuring out what he was talking about. Latching onto his previous statement, she said, "Yes, clearing mine and Ken's names is what's most important right now."

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“Okay, then.” He returned to his desk and sank into his big leather chair. “I want you to meet with Nolan first thing in the morning. I’ll give him a heads up so he can begin a draft of your statement, then work with you to refine it.”

She nodded. “All right. I can handle that. I think.”

Archer’s look softened. “The best you can do is tell the truth, Kate. Whether the world believes you or not is beyond your control. But if you speak to the media with the kind of conviction you used with me, I’m sure you can sway public opinion. You have integrity, Kate. It’ll shine through.”

He smiled at her and Kate’s heart did a little flip-flop. Knowing John believed in her made a world of difference. In truth, he was the only one she needed to convince of her innocence.

When his smile skewed to a frown, her heart sank. “What?” she asked.

John shook his head, then said, “I owe you an apology, Kate. Here I am talking about your integrity--knowing it’s an integral part of you--and yet...I doubted your innocence.” Coming out of his chair, he crossed the room to where she stood and gripped both her hands in his. With a compelling look that tugged at her heart, he said, “I know you’re honest and morally grounded. I’ve always known it, Kate. Since the day I met you. I just...lost perspective, I think. I...” His frown deepened to a scowl. “I doubted you because...well, I guess because I didn’t like the implication of you and Ken having an affair. The thought made me crazy, Kate. Half-out-my-mind crazy.”

The breath escaped her on a hard rush of air. Kate blinked. Once. Twice.

Had she heard him right? Had he *really* just said...?

Shaking her head and letting out a soft laugh, she said, “Of course it bothered you, John. You trust me. You were the one who took a chance on me all those years ago, hand-picking me as an Archer Enterprises executive before I’d even graduated college. You believed in me long before I’d fully proven myself. So naturally, you’d be disappointed if I let you down.”

“Yeah,” he said as he suddenly released her hands. “That’s it.”

He turned away from her and reached for his forgotten martini. He downed the remainder and then set the glass on his desk with a bit more force than he’d obviously intended. The ring of glass on glass echoed in the quiet room and startled Kate.

She eyed him curiously for a moment. Was it her imagination or was he still half out of his mind over thinking she and Ken had had an affair? And what, exactly, troubled him about this? The fact that he thought she’d been promiscuous? Or the thought that she’d been promiscuous with someone other than him?

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*Whoa!*

Where the hell had *that* thought come from?

Shocked to the core that she'd even considered such a possibility, Kate did the only thing she could. She changed the subject.

Made a beeline for the door, was more like it.

"Well," she said in a rushed tone, "I'd better start thinking about tomorrow's press conference. And I'm sure you've got plenty of work to do tonight." Halfway across the vast office, she drew up short and turned back to John.

She couldn't run off. She still had so much to say to him.

But she wasn't inclined to spend much more time here with him...alone. So, she simply said, "I'm sorry about all of this, John."

He eyed her curiously, as though her sudden exit strategy intrigued him. Then he gave her a friendly smile and said, "I don't blame you for any of this, Kate. And we'll get through it. Right now, I just want to set the record straight. I've already given my condolences to Jenny McDugan. Archer Enterprises will support her and her family in everyway possible. Next, I need to find someone to fill the enormous void Ken is going to leave."

For a moment, Kate had the overwhelming desire to return to his side. John suddenly looked a bit lost, and Kate knew exactly why. He and Ken had been friends. Close friends. Confidantes.

"Oh, John," she said on a rush of air. "I'm so sorry. I know how much he meant to you..." Her own grief washed over her in a wave of emotion that left her a bit off-kilter. "He was such a wonderful man. I can't imagine..." Tears instantly welled in her eyes. "I've been so pissed off that I haven't even stopped to let the reality of the situation sink in."

*Ken is dead.*

Suddenly, Kate needed a chair. Her knees threatened to buckle beneath her. Her gaze landed on the sofa in the corner, but she knew she'd never make it that far.

"Oh, shit," she mumbled, suddenly lightheaded and dizzy. "I think I'm going to faint."

## Chapter Four

Archer stalked across his office in several long strides. Kate swayed on the heels of her boots, but he managed to reach her just in time. She collapsed into his arms, falling against him. Swearing under his breath, he scooped her up and carried her to the leather sofa. After placing her gently on the couch, he brushed back strands of long blonde hair that escaped her ponytail.

He'd broken the majority of his rules today. Seeing Kate in such distress was certainly doing a number on him. He couldn't help but console her, help her, hold her.

*Fuck.* He was digging a huge hole for himself, but seemed incapable of stopping. As his fingers skimmed her cool cheek, his groin tightened. Just being this close to her, touching her, was enough to make his body yearn for her.

But he couldn't have her.

Why the hell did he have to keep reminding himself of that? It should be emblazoned on his brain by now.

But damned if he didn't want to let all his personal convictions and cardinal rules fall by the wayside so that he could be with her. Holding her, touching her, making love to her.

A myriad of emotions warred inside him as Archer stared at her pale face. Her eyelids were closed, but her breathing was steady enough to not cause him alarm. She'd come to any second now. And the last thing she needed was to find him hovering over her, likely looking shaken to the core.

Which he was.

Hell, even his palms were sweaty. He was seriously worried about Kate.

Wiping his hands down his legs, against the black jeans he wore, helped. Then he unbuttoned the sleeves of his white shirt and rolled them up to his elbows. Propping his body against the edge of the sofa, he leaned over Kate and brushed away another lock of hair.

Her eyelids fluttered, then slowly opened. As she gazed up at him, looking a bit confused and befuddled, Archer's heart wrenched. He hated the hell she was in right

## ARCHER'S WAY

now. Never mind his own personal tragedy and the threat to his company's reputation. Archer knew Kate was hurting. And it damn-near killed him.

"I'm okay," she whispered. It seemed to take some effort for her eyes to focus on him. "I haven't eaten anything since dinner last night and I haven't slept. I guess it's all catching up to me."

He forced a grin, hoped like hell it was a casual one, though he doubted it. He was feeling pretty grim right now.

"You shouldn't have come, Kate. You should be home in bed."

A soft laugh escaped her parted lips. "I'm not good at burying my head in the sand, John."

"I know. And I'm proud of you for wanting to set the record straight. With me, with the public."

A serious expression crossed her lovely features. "I have to set the record straight with Jenny McDugan, too. She's a friend. I don't want her to think... Oh, hell. Of course she thinks I was sleeping with her husband. How could she not?"

Archer's fingers swept over her cheek, up to her temple. He wished he could brush away the worried look on her beautiful face. "Jenny is a strong woman. When I spoke with her this morning, she said she had family coming in. She's likely too preoccupied right now to think about the rumors of you and Ken."

"I hope you're right." She closed her eyes and Archer was pretty sure she'd just sent up a silent prayer for Jenny and her brood.

"You're a good woman, Kate," he suddenly said.

Her eyes opened. The usually vibrant, green irises were clouded. John's heart constricted again.

"Kate," he whispered as he leaned just a little bit closer to her. Unable to stop himself, he said, "Sweetheart, everything is going to be okay. I promise."

Kate's gaze dropped to his mouth. Her breathing quickened. "John...?"

"Shh." His head dipped and his lips brushed hers.

The first thing that registered in Archer's mind was how soft her lips were. In the next instant, everything about Kate Perry seduced his senses. The entrancing scent of her perfume. The warmth that emitted from her skin. The sound of her shallow breathing. The feel of her lips on his. She overwhelmed him, sending him into sensory overload.

He welcomed the erotic sensations she evoked.

Excitement crept up on him, tempting him. His desire for her unfurled slowly, seeping through his veins until he was fully enrapt.

*Ava McKnight*

His passion sparked, Archer suddenly felt an unfamiliar sense of urgency grip him. His mouth pressed more firmly to hers and she let out a soft whimper that spurred him on. When her lips parted, Archer accepted the invitation. His tongue slipped inside her warm depths, sweeping over her tongue.

Tasting her only served to heighten his arousal.

He groaned, deep in his throat. His cock swelled behind the fly of his jeans.

But Archer forced himself to retrain control. Even as Kate's arms snaked around his neck and she pulled him down to her, until their upper bodies were pressed together, Archer held fast to his composure.

Was this just a moment of weakness on her part? Was she simply in need of some physical contact following the day's harrowing experience...or was there more to her response to him? Did she want him as much as he wanted her?

He had to know.

Breaking the kiss, though he was reluctant to do so, Archer pulled away slightly and stared down at her. Kate's eyelids fluttered open and a soft *oh* escaped her lips, as though their kiss had caught her completely by surprise.

"Kate," he said in a soft voice, forcing himself to sound calm, though his pulse echoed throughout his body and his heart thundered in his chest. "I shouldn't have kissed you. But I'm not going to apologize for it. I've wanted to kiss you for so long."

Her eyes searched his for answers to unasked questions. Several moments passed, then she said, "This is wrong, John. But..." She shook her head. "How could that be? It doesn't feel wrong. In fact, I can't think of anything else in my life that has ever felt so right."

Archer's lips grazed her temple. "It is right, Kate." His mouth covered hers again and he drew her into another deep, erotic kiss. His hand swept through her hair, to the back of her head. Fumbling with the clip at the nape of her neck, he released her loose curls and twined his fingers in the silky strands. He'd always known her hair would be this soft, this luxurious.

As his tongue tangled with hers, his desire mounting to a nearly unbearable degree, Kate's body bowed off the sofa and melded to his. Her breasts pressed to his chest, making him painfully aware of the clothing that created a barrier between them. Archer wanted nothing more in life than to feel Kate's gorgeous body, her silky skin, against his.

## ARCHER'S WAY

The hand that had been resting on her waist began to move upward. Over her ribcage to the full mound of her breast. Archer's heart thundered in his chest and excitement tore through his body as he palmed her breast.

Kate tore her mouth away from his and gasped. Her breath came in hard pants and her green eyes were wide and questioning.

But it wasn't his actions she questioned. It was her body's response to his touch that had her staring inquisitively at him. Of that, he was certain.

Desire shone in her eyes, which glowed vibrantly for the first time since she'd entered his office. Her hands slid from his neck to his biceps, her fingers curling around the muscles. She held him to her as she stared at him.

For the briefest of moments, Archer thought he'd gone too far. But then Kate's gaze dropped to his mouth once again and he knew what she wanted. Another kiss.

More than happy to oblige, his lips skimmed over hers again, teasing her until his mouth sealed with hers and he kissed her deeply. She responded with equal fervor, which drove Archer half out of his mind with wanting her. With wanting to be inside her.

His hand moved to the line of buttons on her blouse and he worked them quickly. When he leaned back slightly, she came with him, her body still pressed to his. He pushed the white cotton material over her shoulders and down her arms. When she was free of it, he tossed the shirt onto the chair adjacent to them.

*Oh, thank God!*

Finally, his hands, which itched to touch every inch of Kate's body, were able to explore her bare flesh. His fingers skated over her skin, tentatively at first, as he gauged her response to his intimate touch. When his fingertips skimmed the lacy cup of her bra, she let out a soft moan. Peeling back the thin material, Archer dipped his head and licked one perfect, pink bud.

"John," she gasped. Her grip on his biceps tightened. Her chest rose and fell in rapid beats.

Archer was unable to stop, unable to give her but a moment to assimilate to his touch. He had to taste her. Pulling her tight nipple into his mouth, he sucked it gently, eliciting a small cry from her.

Kate's head fell back on her shoulders as she surrendered to him. Archer seized the opportunity. He licked and sucked her nipple a few moments more, then his mouth sought the tempting column of her long neck. As his lips grazed her skin, his teeth gently nipping at her, his fingers teased her still-damp nipple. First one, then the other. He

*Ava McKnight*

toyed with the tight peaks until she was panting in his ear and writhing in his arms. Then Archer's hand slid down her body, over her flat belly to the waist of her jeans. Lower still until his fingers were pressed against the apex of her legs, which she had parted for him.

"Oh, yes," she whispered. One hand left his bicep and her fingers threaded through his hair. "Touch me, John. *Please.*"

Archer came just a bit undone. His restraint began to slip.

Applying just a bit more pressure at the heart of her while his mouth continued to explore her neck seemed to spike her arousal. She moaned softly as she arched her back, her body seeking his.

Archer was in desperate need of her, but somehow he found the strength to not tear the rest of her clothes off. Kate had been through a lot over the past twenty-four hours and he was not only mindful of that, he was respectful of it.

Nor did he want to rush this, in the event she suddenly determined it was something she didn't want.

Lord, how he prayed she wouldn't change her mind!

But her earlier concerns seemed to have dissipated. It seemed to Archer that she was as enrapt as he was.

"John." She said his name in a soft voice, but her tone was steady.

He glanced up at her, thankful to still see the desire in her eyes.

Her gaze locked with his. Her hand eased away from his hair and slid over his shoulder and down his arm until it covered the one between her legs. "I've loved you since the first day I met you," she whispered.

Archer's heart slammed against his ribs. "Oh, God, Kate."

He was rendered speechless for several seemingly endless moments. How long had he dreamed of hearing those words from her? How long had he waited?

*Too long.*

Regaining some semblance of composure, he said, "You have no idea how much those words mean to me. To hear you say them..." For Christ's sake. He was completely blown away. But he knew now was his chance to tell her how he'd always felt about her. "You mean so much to me, sweetheart."

A soft smile touched her lips, warming Archer's heart.

"Oh, Christ, Kate. I've wanted you for so long. I've...loved you...for so long..."

Tears welled in her eyes and slid down her cheeks. "Will anyone ever understand, John? About us?"

## ARCHER'S WAY

"I don't give a damn about anyone else, Kate." He knew the look he gave her was sincere and compelling. "The whole Goddamn world can talk about us. It doesn't matter to me, Kate. All that matters is that you feel the same way."

"I do," she said without hesitancy. "I have. For so long. I just...didn't want my feelings for you to convolute our professional relationship. I didn't want you to think..."

"I know." He kissed her softly, then added, "You wanted to make it on your own, without my help. And you did. But now, Kate. Now everything is different. I'm going to see you through this scandal and then we can be together. To hell with what anyone says."

"John," she said on a sharp breath. "You'll be risking so much for me. Especially with this scandal looming over our heads. I could..."

"You're not," he said in a firm, steady tone.

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"Yes, I do. You were going to say that you could ruin Archer Enterprises' reputation. That you could somehow damage mine. But it's not true, Kate. Especially, when I stand by your side tomorrow at the press conference. Not only will we convince the world that you weren't having an affair with Ken, but we'll prove that our united front is real and lasting."

"You believe this?" she asked in a breathless voice.

"With every fiber of my being, sweetheart."

Kate smiled suddenly. "I wish we hadn't waited so long to make these revelations."

He nodded. "I know. But...maybe, it was necessary. Maybe we both needed to have our feet firmly on the ground before we sought each other out. It's been a long road for us both, Kate. But you, sweetheart, are worth the wait."

"Your charm is breathtaking, John Archer."

"Your beauty is breathtaking, Kate Perry."

Her eyelids fluttered closed, but the smile lingered on her face. "I can't believe something so extraordinary has come out of this nightmare I'm embroiled in. But I'm so glad something good has come of all of this."

"Me, too." He bent his head to hers and kissed her, long and deep.

When he pulled away, she whispered, "Make love to me, John."

*Ava McKnight*

## Chapter Five

Never in a million years would Kate have believed this day—or her reputation—was salvageable. But damned if John Archer wasn't doing everything in his power to save both.

To save *her*.

Love swelled in her heart. She loved John. She always had. From the moment he'd approached her at Princeton, she'd been smitten. That infatuation had grown into something deeper and more substantial over the years. It was now a part of her. A strong, lasting emotion she carried with her always.

And now she knew that he felt the same way.

Knowing this changed her entire world.

"I love you," she whispered again as his mouth descended upon hers.

His kiss was as deeply stirring as all the others had been. But it conveyed so much more than she'd ever dreamed possible. There was reassurance in his kiss. Love. Commitment. Everything Kate had hoped for where John Archer was concerned.

As he kissed her, his fingers still pressed at the heart of her, she knew she belonged to him.

She was his in every way.

"I want to feel you inside me," she said when he broke the kiss. "I need you, John."

He let out a low groan. "I need you, too, sweetheart."

His hand moved up to the waist of her jeans and he unfastened the button. Anticipation mounted in Kate. Her arousal escalated. John moved away from her as he worked the zipper on her jeans. She lifted her hips as he dragged the denim downward. Quickly divesting her of her boots and socks, he pulled her jeans the rest of the way off and tossed them onto the chair where her shirt lay.

His gaze swept over her, hot and bright. His silver-blue eyes deepened to a smoldering gray that excited her all the more. His breathing picked up, as though looking at her spiked his arousal.

## ARCHER'S WAY

The thought made Kate's heart flutter.

One large hand eased up her calf and over her knee to the middle of her thigh. Kate's eyelids grew heavy as John's gaze continued to devour every inch of her.

Night had descended upon the city and his office was now a forest of dark shadows. The lamp on his desk provided a soft yellow glow in the opposite corner of the room, but mostly, the moon offered the only slivers of light as glittery, golden rays filtered in through the picture windows that showcased the bay.

John moved between her legs and Kate's breath caught. His hands teased the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs, making her stomach quiver and her pulse race. The dull throbbing between her legs intensified the closer he got to that particular part of her. When his fingers skimmed over the lace of her thongs panties, Kate felt the initial stirrings of what would surely turn into the most powerful orgasm of her life.

His hand pressed to her mound as his lips and tongue wreaked havoc on her inner thigh. Then his thumb slid under the scalloped edge of her pale pink panties and Kate lost all touch with reality. A deep moan fell from her lips as John toyed with the sensitive nub between her legs, the pad of his thumb rubbing it in a lazy, circular motion that had her panting within seconds.

Kate's fingers twined in his thick, soft hair. His head moved slightly and suddenly she felt his hot breath at the heart of her. His thumb moved away, to be replaced by his mouth. His tongue lapped at her, then his lips pressed to hers. Kate let out a soft whimper of need and desire as John licked her. The rough material of her panties, the pressure of his tongue and the warm breath that teased her sent her racing toward a release she desperately needed.

"Oh, yes," she whispered as he stroked her through her panties.

Then he whisked aside the material with a finger and his mouth was on her, fully. Kate cried out at the erotic sensations that rocketed through her body, all of which culminated at the sensitive juncture between her legs.

As John's tongue flicked over her throbbing clit, he eased one finger inside her.

"Oh, God," she moaned as all the sensations coursing through her intensified to an almost unbearable degree.

Pushing deeper inside her, he drove her right to the edge. His teeth grazed her clit before he sucked gently on it. Kate felt all the exquisite feelings build and converge inside her. When John eased a second finger into her tight pussy, the explosive sensations consumed her.

*Ava McKnight*

She cried his name as she came. Her inner walls squeezed his fingers, holding them inside her as she rode the wave of ecstasy. Her back arched off the sofa and her hips thrust upward as she greedily accepted every ounce of pleasure he so generously offered her.

Before the sensations fully ebbed, though, John began to stroke her again. His fingers pumped in and out of her, much faster this time.

Disentangling her fingers from his hair, one hand clutched his rock hard bicep as he worked her pussy with determined strokes. His mouth continued to devour her sensitive, swollen clit. Kate felt her heart slam against her chest as John so skillfully commanded her passion.

“Oh, that’s so good,” she whispered.

Clearly spurred on by her soft moans and writhing body, John used his free hand to spread her legs wider. Then he slipped that hand under her ass and cupped a cheek. He gave it a gentle squeeze before his fingers moved toward the cleft and the pad of one finger covered the small hole.

Kate gasped. As inexperienced as she was, this move startled her. Yet at the same time, combined with all the other sensations that gripped her body, his finger on the entrance of such a forbidden area intensified her arousal more than she’d ever dreamed possible. A subtle, circular rubbing had her ready to scream in pleasure.

Desire tore through her. Kate suddenly wanted him to take her in the most hedonistic, decadent ways. She wanted John to love her in every way possible. However he wanted her. Her body craved his intimate, skillful touch and it was all Kate could do not to beg him to fuck her over and over again.

As it was, he was pushing her to that beautiful precipice once again. He had but to draw her clit into his mouth one more time while his fingers pumped in and out of her and she would come.

And he did... As though he knew exactly when and how to send her into that spiraling tailspin that would make her scream his name.

When her orgasm hit, it was twice as powerful as the first one had been. Kate literally saw flashes of light behind her closed lids. She cried out as her fingers tightened around John’s solid bicep.

“Oh, God!” The sensations that consumed her were more erotically delicious than anything she’d ever experienced before. Kate held fast to the moment, savoring it, deriving every ounce of pleasure she could.

## ARCHER'S WAY

But even as phenomenal as her first two orgasms had been, she knew innately they would not compare to the exquisite feeling of having John inside her.

"Please make love to me," she begged. "Please. I have to feel you inside me, John. Now."

He didn't hesitate. Pulling away from her, he quickly stripped off his clothes and boots. Kate found the view breathtaking. He was gorgeous from head to toe. His bronze skin, dark hair and sculpted face were enough to make a girl swoon. But John Archer's devastating features did not stop there. His broad shoulders gave way to strong, solid biceps. His chest was expansive and his well-defined pectorals were covered with a fine layer of dark brown hair. Corrugated abs made her fingers itch to trace the grooves of his rigid midsection.

Her gaze dropped to his lean hips and then she feasted her eyes upon the long, thick cock that stood ready to seek the haven she longed to offer it.

Kate's jaw fell slack. Her breathing grew shallow as excitement gripped every inch of her. It took several seemingly endless seconds for her to recover. When she finally came to her senses, her gaze lifted and met John's. He smiled wickedly at her.

Kate grinned. "I have to admit, you're even more gorgeous than I imagined."

He crooked a dark eyebrow. "Been fantasizing about me, Miss Perry?"

Heat tinged her cheeks. "I suppose it's pointless to deny it now."

John moved toward her, a predatory look in his smoldering eyes. "I don't want you to deny anything, sweetheart. Not your feelings for me, or the way I make you feel, for that matter. I want you to be completely open with me, Kate."

She had to admit, the concept was a liberating one. Kate actually let out a sigh of relief. "I can tell you anything?"

He moved between her parted legs, settling comfortably there as she lay back against the pillows. His hard cock nestled her belly and one powerful thigh pressed against the heart of her.

"Yes, Kate. You can tell me anything. You can say anything." His lips grazed the top of her breast before his tongue swiped her hard nipple through the lacy cup of the bra she still wore. Which he promptly removed.

"In fact," he continued in his low, sexy voice as he tossed the garment aside. "You can beg me to do anything you want me to do. Anything at all, Kate. I'm all yours. A slave to your erotic bidding."

*Ava McKnight*

Her breath caught. The image his words conjured up sent a jolt through her body that targeted her throbbing pussy. Rising above the intense sensation, she asked, “And what do you want, John?”

His gaze lifted from her chest and locked with hers. “You, Kate. I want you. With me always. In my bed, in my life, in my heart. Forever.”

Tears suddenly stung her eyes. Her mouth quivered as words she wanted so desperately to say all converged at once, overwhelming her.

“Hey,” he said as he reached up and brushed a lock of hair from her forehead. “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

She smiled as the tears rolled down her cheeks. “They’re happy tears. I promise.”

He grinned at her. Then he kissed her. Kate felt her whole world slowly fall into place. Everything was going to be alright. John loved her. He believed she hadn’t been having an affair with Ken. He wanted her. He...

*Loved her.*

Her arms wrapped around his neck and she held him to her, savoring the feeling of his weight on her, his naked body pressed to hers. In the eight years she’d fantasized about him, never once had she dreamed they would form an intimate bond so quickly. But it was as though they had always been together.

And, in many ways, they had. She’d just never allowed herself to indulge in the fantasies. John had been with her all this time, by her side. He had been so proud of her when she’d graduated valedictorian. He’d been right there in the front row, applauding her accomplishment. Then he’d taken her to dinner at her favorite restaurant.

In fact, he’d celebrated every professional coup with her.

It occurred to Kate that he had been with her during every important moment of her life—good or bad—since she was twenty years old. John had always stood by her. Encouraged her. Supported her.

That was why his support had been so important to her when she’d found herself embroiled in a scandal. Of all the people she wanted to know of her innocence, John was the one who stood out above all else. That was why she’d had to come to him tonight.

And she was damned glad she had.

“I couldn’t bear it if you thought I’d done something unscrupulous, John. If you thought I was having an affair with Ken...”

He stared down at her, a quizzical look on his face. “I don’t think that, Kate. I swear. In fact... I’m ashamed that I let my insecurity and my jealousy get the best of me.

## ARCHER'S WAY

I *know* you. I know you'd never do what the press is accusing you of doing. I know it in my heart, Kate. I'm just sorry I was too blinded by my own issues to see the truth. You shouldn't have had to come here to convince me of your innocence. I should have just known." He shook his head. "I *did* know. I just got a little...lost."

Her fingers grazed his cheek, his clenched jaw. "I forgive you."

Relief reflected in his eyes. "Thank you."

"However," she added. "If you don't make love to me *now*, I won't forgive you for that."

John chuckled. "Sweetheart, I *am* going to make love to you now. And about ten minutes after I'm done, I'm going to make love to you again. And then ten minutes after that..."

She laughed. "You're pretty cocky when it comes to your stamina."

"Oh, yeah," he whispered. His head dipped and his lips trailed down her neck to her collarbone. "But only because I've been saving up for this moment. I've waited so long for you, Kate. I'd like nothing better than to love you all night."

"Hmm. That sounds heavenly."

"You just lay back, baby," he said in a soft voice, "and let me drive you wild."

## Chapter Six

Archer could honestly say he'd never been so captivated by a woman. He'd never felt so hot. So turned inside out.

It was literally all he could do not to ravage Kate on the spot. But he forced himself to hang in there...to retain some perspective. This moment was a long time in the making, and he intended to savor it. More than that, he intended to give Kate everything she deserved, everything she could ask for. If it meant exhausting his entire repertoire of lovemaking—and maybe learning a few new tricks of the trade—he was going to love Kate Perry in the most decadent ways. He was going to prove they belonged to each other. And he was going to do everything in his power to leave her begging for more.

Because he never wanted to lose her. He wanted her to belong to him forever. And he wanted her to *want* him...forever.

His eyes moved over her, from her long blonde hair, fanned out against the pillow, to her full, beautiful breasts, with their perfect pink nipples, to her flat belly and slim hips. Lower still, his eyes feasted on the nearly bare mound between her legs. Her dewy flesh tempted him. Her small lips and swollen clit made his mouth water.

But what really drove him wild was knowing how incredibly tight that sweet pussy of hers was. Two fingers had stretched her taut. He could only imagine how she would encase him, sheathing him in her warm, wet depths. Squeezing him tight.

Archer groaned. His cock hardened even further, though he'd thought that impossible. Still, it throbbed and pulsed in wild beats, demanding some relief.

*Soon.*

The thought of being buried deep inside Kate made his pulse race and his cock throb even more.

Her hands eased over his shoulders and down his arms. One moved to his chest and she lightly touched his muscles, then ran her fingertips over his abs.

"You're perfect," she whispered, a hint of awe in her voice that made Archer's cock swell even more.

## ARCHER'S WAY

Jesus, she was doing quite a number on him tonight. His hands hooked the back of her knees and he spread her legs wide. "Sweetheart, *you* are perfection personified." He admired the erotic view sprawled before him a moment longer before he moved forward, the tip of his cock pressing against her opening.

Kate caught her lower lip between her teeth. Her fingers skimmed down his midsection to his shaft. Her fingers wrapped around it and her hand eased up down the length of him, wreaking havoc on Archer's control.

Her hips lifted off the sofa, thrusting upward, forcing him to penetrate her tight opening. Just a minor breach; he only eased into her an inch or so. But Kate let out a soft whimper that fueled the fire raging inside him.

"More, John," she whispered in a low, sensual tone. "Give me more. I want to feel you deep inside me."

Archer groaned. Lord only knew how he was going to survive this. Pressing his hips forward, he oh-so-slowly pushed himself into her wet pussy. His heart hammered in his chest as erotic sensations consumed him. Kate let out a small cry as he invaded her most intimate area. Her inner walls clutched him tight, clinging to him as he pulled almost out of her, then eased back in.

His jaw clenched. Fighting every impulse he had to thrust hard and fast into her warm depths, he somehow managed to retain some composure. But a bead of sweat broke out on his forehead.

It didn't help matters when she cupped her breasts with her hands and squeezed the plump globes. The fire that roared through Archer's body damn-near singed him to the core of his being.

He let out a low growl. "For God's sake, Kate. You're making it tough for me to keep it together here, sweetheart."

She smiled at him, her green eyes glowing with passion. "Stop holding back, John."

"I don't want to hurt you, sweetheart."

"You're not going to," she said, her voice a bit breathless as he continued to move inside her. "I'm not a virgin. It's just...been awhile."

Her hands clutched his biceps and she pulled him toward her, forcing Archer to release her legs. She promptly wrapped one around his waist, holding him to her. "Ah, that's better," she whispered.

Her hands tangled in his hair as Archer kissed her. Her hips moved in time with his, keeping pace with him as he made love to her with a slow, sensual rhythm. When his

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mouth left hers and trailed over her jaw and down the long column of her throat, she let out a soft moan that drove him wild. He took a small, hard nipple into his mouth and sucked on it as he pushed deep into her.

“Oh, yes,” she said on a sharp breath. “You feel so good inside me, John.” The long leg wrapped around his waist gripped him tighter. Her back arched, keeping her body pressed to his.

Archer picked up the pace, thrusting deep into her until she was panting and writhing beneath him, begging for more.

He never wanted this erotic pleasure to end. He wanted to make her come and come... But his own release was difficult to keep at bay. The feelings she evoked in him were all-consuming and impossible to ignore.

As he pumped in and out of her, he felt the tremble in her body that told him how close she was to coming. Within seconds, she cried out as the pleasure gripped her. Archer let out a low growl.

“That’s it, baby,” he groaned. “Squeeze me tight.” Her warm pussy held him captive as she milked him, pushing Archer over the edge. “Oh, Kate!” His orgasm hit him hard, stealing his breath and making his body convulse as her inner walls continued to clutch him.

For several seemingly endless moments, Archer lost all touch with reality. This was the stuff dreams were made of. This woman was a fantasy come to life.

And she was all his.

## ARCHER'S WAY

### Chapter Seven

Kate's arms were wrapped around John's neck, her leg was draped over his hips. She held him close to her, savoring every moment with him. His clean, masculine scent infiltrated her senses, mingling with her desire, filling all the spaces within her that had seemed so empty only hours before.

She never wanted to let him go. The weight of his strong body on hers, the feel of his hard cock inside her, the warmth of his breath on her neck as he, too, fought for normal airflow all felt too heavenly to relinquish. His arms slid around her and he held her tightly, as though, like her, he wanted this exquisite moment to last forever.

Kate smiled as her head nestled in the crook of his neck. She had always felt a bond with John, but now there was an intimate connection between them. Something powerful and life-altering that she would hold onto forever.

"I don't want to leave this spot," he whispered in her ear.

A little thrill worked its way through Kate's body, knowing John had been thinking the same thing...that he was as enthralled as she was. "No one's asking you to move."

"But I'm crushing you."

She laughed. "No, you're not. It feels wonderful to be this close to you. To have your weight on me. I don't want to let you go."

"No one's asking you to let me go."

She grinned. "Good. I think I'll keep you awhile."

He pulled slightly away from her, eliciting a whimper of protest. Staring down at her, he said, "Just awhile?"

"Well..." she teased him.

John chuckled. "Sweetheart, I've got news for you. You're stuck with me now."

"Oh, the hardship," she said on a sigh. She twined her fingers through his hair and added, "Does this mean I can have you whenever I want you?"

His grin was positively wicked. "Whenever, wherever, however... I'm all yours, baby."

*Ava McKnight*

Kate's heart swelled with love. She pulled his head to hers and kissed him.

When John finally broke the kiss, he asked, "How long has it been, Kate?"

She stared up at him, confused for a moment, but then she realized to what he referred. Sex. "Since I was eighteen," she admitted. "Ten very long years."

"Jesus." He whistled under his breath. "Why so long?"

"Fear," she said without hesitation.

John eyed her curiously. "I didn't think you were afraid of anything, Kate Perry."

She smiled at him. "Just one thing. Ruining my future. I dated a boy my senior year of high school who claimed his parents owed a house on the lake. A bunch of us went out there one Friday night and had a party. When the police showed up, they found Chris and I in bed together. I was mortified."

John laughed. "I can imagine."

"But even worse," she said, "was the fact that Chris' parents didn't own the house. He'd broken into it. Correction...*we'd* broken into it. Unwittingly, but still. There were six or seven of us there, and that made us as guilty as Chris."

"What happened?"

"My sister had to come pick me up at the police station, which was traumatic enough. She was really on edge back then because our parents had died a couple years' before and she was now responsible for me. She wanted me to have a good life, a good future. And there I was, sitting in the police station, waiting to be arrested for trespassing and breaking and entering."

John shifted on the sofa, moving off her, despite her protest. He settled next to her and pulled her into his arms. Her head rested on his broad shoulder and Kate found that she liked this intimate position as much as the previous one. Something about the way John held her, his hand lazily caressing her arm, made her feel even closer to him. Emotionally as well as physically.

Continuing her saga, she said, "Betsy had a complete meltdown right there at the station. She went on and on about how I was going to lose my scholarship to Princeton and I'd have a criminal record and no one would hire me. She said I'd be damned lucky to get a job at Dairy Queen."

John let out a little snort. "She's a bit melodramatic, isn't she?"

"A bit. Anyway, the owners of the house didn't press charges, thank God, because they knew Chris and they didn't want to ruin *his* future. But the whole incident left me reeling. I realized how important it was that I stay on the straight and narrow. And I guess I just concentrated all my efforts on school and my career after that."

## ARCHER'S WAY

"Hmm. Maybe you were just waiting for the right man to come along."

"That, too." She dropped a kiss on his chest, then skimmed the warm flesh with her fingertips, loving the silky feel of his chest hair against her skin.

"Well, here I am, baby."

She laughed. "And you were well worth the wait."

His deep chuckle reverberated inside her. "Glad to hear it."

He held her awhile longer, then made love to her again. Around nine o'clock, John suggested they return to her loft so she could get some rest. He helped her dress, then draped an arm around her shoulders as they left his office. He'd called the security desk and they'd ensured the parking garage was devoid of reporters. John told her several local and national reporters had tried to gain access to the building and the garage, but his staff had kept them out. As they left the building, however, they spotted several news vans sitting alongside the road.

"Will they follow us?" Kate asked.

"If they recognize your car." His gaze alternately shifted from the road to the rearview mirror. "How's the security at your loft?"

"The garage is gated. You have to have a code to get in. Plus, there's a security guard at the entrance. Without a sticker on the windshield, like the one I have in the bottom left corner there, he won't let you by."

"Good."

Kate's stomach clenched. "I wonder how long they're going to be staking us out."

"Until the next juicy scandal breaks, I imagine."

Kate's insides tightened even further. "What if *we're* it?"

John flashed her a quick grin. "I told you not to worry about that, sweetheart."

Sitting back in her seat, she said, "God, I wish had your confidence."

"Look." He placed his hand over hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. "We're not going to let the media create problems for us, Kate. We'll address the issue about you and Ken tomorrow, and then we'll move on. To hell with what anyone says." His gaze slid over to her as he added, "Trust me."

"I do," she said without missing a beat. "With all my heart."

"Okay then." His eyes returned to the road. "Everything's going to be just fine."

Kate sent up a silent prayer that he was right.

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*Ava McKnight*

Entering her loft turned out to be a piece of cake. The security of the garage and the front of the building prevented reporters from gaining access. No one spotted Kate and John as they made their way to her fourth floor loft. Once inside, she breathed a sigh of relief. Until she punched the button on her answering machine and learned she had forty-two new messages. The first dozen or so were from news stations. No big surprise. The next three were from Betsy, who was having one of her infamous meltdowns.

Kate shot John a look over her shoulder as he slipped out of his sleek, black leather jacket and draped it over the back of the sofa. She was about to make a flip comment about her sister being a drama queen, but the next message that played left her speechless.

“Kate, this is Jenny McDugan. I’m sure you’re screening your calls... I mean, I don’t blame you. I imagine your phone is ringing off the hook today, as is mine.” She let out a long sigh. Her usual perky tone sounded dull and flat. Kate could hear the fatigue and emotional wear and tear in her voice. “Look, I know this is awkward, but I need you to call me as soon as possible. It’s important, Kate. Call our private line. You have the number.”

Several more messages from reporters played on the machine as Kate stared at the small black box, her mind reeling.

“Kate?” John’s hand on her shoulder startled her, making her jump. “Hey,” he said in a low, calm voice. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” Her body started to tremble. That feeling of lightheadedness crept up on her again, as it had done earlier in John’s office. But she fought it off. “I can’t do this. I can’t talk to her. I can’t...*face* her.”

“You have to, Kate,” he said as he gently turned her toward him. Placing both hands on her shoulders, he stared deep into her eyes. “You’ve done nothing wrong, remember? You have nothing to feel guilty about. You have to speak with Jenny and tell her the truth.”

“She won’t believe me,” Kate said. Tears welled in her eyes. “Never in a million years will she believe me. She won’t understand what I was doing in her husband’s hotel room at two o’clock in the morning.”

“She will, Kate. You have to go see her in person. She’ll see the truth in your eyes, Kate. I promise.”

Kate didn’t want to face Jenny McDugan. She wanted to run into her bedroom and bury her head under a pillow. She wanted to run away from all of this.

But, of course, she couldn’t.

## ARCHER'S WAY

Another message from Jenny played on the machine. Then another. Each one sounded more urgent than the last, as Jenny's tone grew frantic. She absolutely *had* to speak with Kate, she said. Jenny begged her to call.

Tears rolled down Kate's hot cheeks. She hated like hell that she had hurt Jenny. That she had to convince Jenny—her friend—of her innocence and assure Jenny that her husband hadn't cheated on her. That he hadn't thrown away all their years of marriage and their happy family on Kate.

But would Jenny believe her?

Of course not. That was why Kate was so reluctant to face her.

Still, she knew she had no choice.

Her gaze still locked with John's, she said, "I know I have to talk to her. I'll call her now."

He nodded his head. His hands slid down her arms to her hands, their fingers lacing together. "Good girl. I'll be right here with you."

Kate was surprised by how much comfort his words brought her. She gave him a soft smile. "That makes me feel infinitely better."

John kissed her on the forehead, then relinquished her hands. Kate turned back to the answering machine and turned it off. Then she lifted the cordless phone from its cradle and hit a number and the pound sign. The fact that she had the McDugan's private number on speed dial created even greater anxiety within her. They were friends. She'd even spent holidays at their house in Sausalito. Jenny had welcomed her into their family with open arms, and it tore Kate up to think that Jenny might believe the terrible things being said about her and Ken.

Jenny picked up on the first ring. "Kate?"

Kate's heart leapt into her throat. For a moment, she was at a complete loss for words.

"Kate, is that you?" Apparently, she was at a loss for more than a moment. "Kate, please answer me!"

Something in Kate's head clicked. "Yes, Jenny. It's me."

"Oh, thank God! I've been calling and calling... Oh, Kate...this is such a nightmare." And then Jenny began to cry.

Which made Kate cry. She stared helplessly at John as she held the phone to her ear. *Goddamn it!* Kate was usually a rock in times of crisis. People relied on her to keep a cool, level head. She didn't crumble under pressure, yet here she was, incapable of keeping herself together when her close friend needed her the most.

*Ava McKnight*

Swiping at the fat drops that rolled down her cheeks, she managed to say, “Jenny, you have to listen to me. I wasn’t having an affair with Ken. I would never... *He* would never... Oh, Christ, Jenny. He worshipped you and the kids.”

*Ugh! The kids!* Kate’s palm smacked against her forehead. Those poor children must be so devastated!

“Kate,” Jenny said through her sobs. “I need to see you.”

Kate’s heart sank. So Jenny wanted to tell her in person what a lowlife, morally bankrupt person she thought Kate was.

The look she gave John must have been one of a drowning woman because he took the phone from Kate and walked away, speaking in a low tone to Jenny. Kate waited with bated breath as he paced in front of the sofa, rubbing the back of his neck the way he always did when he was tired and stressed.

This is all my fault, Kate thought. She was wreaking havoc on so many lives.

Why, oh, why hadn’t she insisted to Ken last night that they wait to work on the budget until the morning? If only she would have told him what she’d really been thinking—that he looked exhausted and pale and in need of a good night’s sleep—they would have avoided this. For all she knew, he would have rested and maybe he would have made it through the night and then consulted his doctor in the morning.

Guilt racked her body, making Kate shake from head to toe. She dropped into a nearby chair and tried to slow her racing pulse, her out-of-control breathing. She was going to hyperventilate, she just knew it.

But then John appeared by her side. Kneeling beside her, his hand cupped her face and he forced her to look at him, eye-to-eye. His very presence brought reassurance to Kate. But it was the look in his beautiful silver-blue eyes that calmed her fiercely beating heart.

“It’s going to be okay, Kate,” he said in a steady voice. “Take a deep breath, sweetheart.”

She did. Then another. And another. When she felt some of her composure return, she asked, “What did you say to Jenny?”

“I told her you came to my office today and explained everything. I told her I believe you and Ken weren’t involved, and I wanted her to be open-minded and listen to what you had to say.”

“To which she replied...?”

“She wants you to come to the house tomorrow morning. She said she needs to see you in person.”

## ARCHER'S WAY

“So she can call me a whore to my face?” Kate’s heart nearly seized up at the thought.

“No, Kate. That’s not it. I think she believes you. She didn’t say so much, but...” He shook his head. “Something in the tone of her voice...she was insistent about telling you something, more so than about hearing your side of the story. I think it’s important that you go see her, Kate. Imperative, even.”

His look was compelling. Because she trusted John, she said, “All right. I’ll go see her.”

## Chapter Eight

John's personal driver awaited Kate the next morning. With a half-dozen security guards brought over from the Archer Building, Kate was whisked out of her loft and into the Town Car with minimal incident. Although several reporters staked out her building, they weren't able to get close enough to her to ask questions. She slid into the plush leather seat in the back of the car, grateful for the tinted windows as they whizzed by news vans. Two of John's security personnel trailed behind them, in the event the reporters followed.

Ten minutes down the road, her cell phone rang.

"Are you all right?" John asked when she answered.

She smiled, despite the dismal predicament she was in and the unease she felt over seeing Jenny McDugan. "Yes, I'm fine. Your security did a great job."

"Good. I'm heading to the office now, in your car. Call me when you're done with Jenny. And, sweetheart," he added in a soft tone, "Remember that you're a victim in all of this, too. Not a guilty party."

She wished she didn't feel guilty, but it still lingered. "Thanks for your help, John. I don't know how I would have gotten through any of this without you."

"I love you, Kate."

She smiled. "I love you, too."

She snapped the phone shut then sat back against the seat, trying to compose her thoughts and keep her emotions under control during the drive to Sausalito. She tried not to think about Jenny or Ken or their children. Instead, Kate thought about John.

Her smile widened, her heart did that crazy little flip-flop that only John inspired. Everything about the man made her giddy. The way he made love to her, the way he spoke to her, the way he tried to protect her. John Archer's way was strong and steadfast, yet decidedly compassionate.

Despite the dire situation she was embroiled in, Kate still considered herself extremely fortunate. She had John on her side, after all. And he loved her.

## ARCHER'S WAY

Just thinking about how freely and sincerely he said those words made her heart soar. And what he'd done to her body last night! Kate stifled a giggle. She should be shamed to high hell for the things she and John had done in her bed. But she wasn't. Nothing about the way he touched her or made love to her made her feel ashamed. Rather, everything he did to her, including the way he held her in his arms while they slept, made Kate feel cherished. Protected. Special.

She held fast to the incredible feelings that swirled around in her heart as the car headed up the winding drive and pulled up in front of the McDugan residence, a sprawling estate befitting of Ken's professional success and social status. The driver opened her door and Kate stepped out of the car.

She suddenly wished that John was with her. But he had his own dilemma to deal with. He had employees to address, questions to answer, and a press conference to prepare for.

Steeling herself for what lay ahead, Kate walked up the cobblestone path to the steps of the front porch. Before she reached the door, it opened. Jenny stood in the doorway, looking as though she hadn't slept in days.

She likely hadn't.

Jenny was a petite woman of fifty-one with short, dark blonde hair, brown eyes and a pert nose. She wore a stylish yoga suit in a flattering shade of pink that helped to brighten her otherwise dull pallor. Stepping to the side, she gestured for Kate to enter.

Feeling as though she was a lamb being led to the slaughter, Kate tentatively preceded Jenny into the foyer.

"I have tea set up in the salon," she said. Kate had always found it quaint that Jenny used old-fashioned terms for every part of her house.

She allowed Jenny to escort her inside, knowing Jenny stood on ceremony when she had guests. Regardless of how good of friends they were.

When Kate was seated on the cream-colored sofa, Jenny eased into a chair adjacent to her. She poured tea, placed a china cup on its matching saucer and handed it to Kate, who graciously accepted the offer. Unfortunately, her hands shook slightly, causing the tea to slosh over the sides. Kate instantly set the cup and saucer set on the coffee table.

"Sorry," she mumbled as she reached for a napkin and sopped up the mess.

Although she hadn't been a bundle of nerves yesterday, she had certainly turned into one today.

*Ava McKnight*

Unexpectedly, Jenny's hand reached out and covered Kate's. "I didn't mean to make you anxious, Kate. I know I sounded dire on the phone yesterday. It's just that I'm so upset. And the kids..."

Oh, God. *Here we go...* "Jenny, I'm so sorry about all of this. I swear to you," she said on a rushed breath, "Ken and I were not involved. No matter what you hear, no matter what the reporters say, I give you my word that I was not having an affair with your husband. I mean, my God! You and I are friends. And yes, I should have thought about the repercussions of working late into the night with him...especially someplace other than the office. It's just that...it was so convenient to go up to his suite. He had that enormous study and..."

"Kate," Jenny's tone was incredulous.

Kate sucked in a sharp breath. It made her heart constrict, knowing Jenny didn't believe her, knowing Jenny wasn't even going to give her a chance to explain. In fact, she stared at Kate as though she couldn't believe her audacity.

"Jenny," she began again. But the other woman held up her hand, cutting her off.

"Kate," she said as she moved from the chair to the sofa. Sitting next to Kate, she picked up Kate's hand and gave it a quick squeeze. "I know you weren't sleeping with my husband."

Kate did a double take. She stared at Jenny a moment. Had she heard her right? "I'm sorry, did you just say...?"

Jenny gave her a soft smile. "Kate, you heard me correctly. I know you weren't sleeping with Ken."

"But I thought... I mean... Hell, everyone else thinks I am."

"John Archer doesn't."

"Well, at first, he did, but only because he was..." Kate's mouth clamped shut. She was just about to tell Jenny that John had let his jealousy get the best of him, making him doubt her. But, of course, she couldn't say that. She couldn't say anything about John, or the fact that they were in love. That was a can of worms best left unopened right now.

Jenny said, "John is on your side, Kate. And so am I. I don't care what the reporters say about Ken. Well, I do, of course, but my point is, I know they're just sensationalizing the story. I know your relationship with my husband was a professional one."

## ARCHER'S WAY

"I don't understand," Kate said, a bit befuddled. "Why did you have me come all the way out here? Not that I didn't want to see you, it's just that... It sounded as though you wanted to face me on your turf, which indicates that you had doubts about me."

"No," Jenny said as she shook her head. "I don't have doubts about you, Kate."

She patted Kate's hand, then stood up. She crossed to the fireplace and lifted a photo from the mantel. She gazed at it a moment, then returned to the sofa and handed it to Kate. The heavy silver frame sparkled under the soft glow of the table lamps. The photo was of the McDugans. Ken, Jenny and their five children. A son and two sets of female twins. The entire brood was dressed in holiday apparel.

"This was taken last Christmas," Kate said, remembering the photo from the Christmas cards Jenny had sent out.

"Yes. I love this photo. It conveys everything I ever wanted in life. A successful husband, beautiful children, a happy home. Ken gave me everything I wished for when I was a little girl growing up in Oakland."

Kate's head snapped up. "I didn't know you were from Oakland. I thought you were from the East Coast."

She gave a little shrug. "That's what I've always told people. The truth is, I grew up very poor, Kate. And then I met Ken and he opened up this whole new world for me. He gave me everything I dreamed of. And in return..." She took the photo from Kate's hands and returned it to the mantel. "I gave him everything he wanted, namely, a family. He loved children and he wanted a house full of them. So did I. But the truth is," she said as she turned to face Kate. "Ken was gay."

If Kate had been holding her tea, she would have dropped the expensive china cup on the Oriental rug at her feet. As it was, her mouth dropped open in a very unladylike, impolite manner. She was fairly certain her eyes had bulged as well.

For several moments, Kate was stunned into silence. It seemed to take an absurd amount of time for her to comprehend what Jenny had just said. Slowly, a thought formed in her head. "But how...?" Unfortunately, she was too couth to continue down the path.

Jenny smiled unexpectedly, obviously knowing what Kate wanted to ask. "In vitro. All three times."

"Oh." She took a moment to assimilate this, but also refrained from asking the obvious question, which Jenny went ahead and answered for her anyway.

"He had a male lover when we met nearly twenty-five years ago. Ken was already with Archer Enterprises and he was moving up fast. John Archer, Senior, was a

*Ava McKnight*

family man. He prided himself on having a stable of executives who were all devoted to their families, as he was to his. Ken feared it would be detrimental to his career if anyone found out the truth about him.” She gave Kate a compelling look as she said, “I know it seems like a façade, but it really wasn’t. Ken and I cared deeply for each other. And he loved his children. He had everything he wanted and we were happy, Kate.”

“But what about...the boyfriend?”

Jenny gave a slight shrug of her shoulder. “They were very discreet.”

“And what about you? I mean, all this time...?”

“Oh, well,” she let out a soft laugh and waved a hand in the air in a dismissive manner. But she added, “I’ve been extremely discreet, as well. Although, really, Kate, sex never meant anything to me. All I’ve ever wanted is security. And Ken offered that.”

“Wow.” Kate was stunned. But a thought suddenly occurred to her. “Do the children know?”

“No,” she said. “But I’m sure they have their suspicions. It’s never mattered, though. We’ve always been a happy family.”

Kate shook her head. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Jenny.”

“Thank you, Kate. And I’m so sorry your name is being dragged through the mud.”

“Well, now that I know Ken’s sexual orientation, I don’t think...”

“Oh, Kate, no!” Jenny suddenly sank into the cushion next to her again and clasped Kate’s hands in hers. “No one can know about this! Ken and I have kept this secret for twenty-five years. I can’t let it out now. I only told you because I wanted you to know that I believe that you weren’t having an affair with him.”

“But, Jenny, the press is implying we were involved!”

“I know, Kate. And I’m so sorry you have to go through this, but... Please. I’m begging you. You can’t tell a single soul about this. My God, Ken would be mortified if anyone found out. Believe me, people thinking he was having an affair with his beautiful employee is infinitely better than them finding out he was gay!”

“But, Jenny!”

“Please, Kate. You can’t say a word. Not even to John Archer. *Especially* not to John Archer. I don’t want him to think any less of Ken. They were close and I want him to remember Ken as the man he knew...not a man with a secret life.”

It was Kate’s turn to stand and pace. Shaking her head, she said, “I can’t keep this from John. Please don’t ask me to.”

## ARCHER'S WAY

"I'm not asking, Kate. I'm begging."

She drew up short and stared at Jenny. "You don't understand. I can't keep a secret from him. I *refuse* to keep anything from him, Jenny."

Looking determined to sway her, Jenny said, "We're friends, Kate. You know I wouldn't ask you this if it wasn't monumentally important. The fact is, Ken's lover will be severely impacted if you go public with this. He's a politician, Kate. Someone you know. Someone who has been in a lot of photos with Ken. It won't take much for people to put two and two together, and the damage could be detrimental."

The light bulb flickered on. "Senator Alexander Grayson."

"Yes."

Kate was dumbfounded. She stared at Jenny, her mouth gaping open yet again. Shaking her head, she pulled her thoughts together and offered, "In this day and age, Jenny, I'm sure it won't be such a disaster to Grayson's career if the public found out he was gay."

"Of course it will, Kate. People are not as open-minded as they claim to be. And a lot of Grayson's supporters have publicly stood against gay rights."

"Oh, this just keeps getting messier and messier." Kate sank into a nearby chair. "So I'm just supposed to let the press sling mud at me?"

"No. You can convince them you and Ken weren't having an affair. And I'll stand by your side."

Kate wasn't so sure how much that would help, but anything was worth a try at this point. "I appreciate that. There's a press conference at noon. Can you make it?"

She nodded.

"Great. There's just one problem."

"What?"

Kate fixed her friend with a serious look. "I can't lie to John Archer."

Jenny sighed. "I'm not asking you to lie. I'm asking you to not mention this to him."

"That's the same thing in my book."

Jenny crossed her arms over her chest. "Kate, please. I'm not just thinking about Ken or my family or Senator Grayson, but also about John. He'd been so disappointed in Ken. In fact, he'd feel betrayed that his closest friend hadn't trust him with his secret."

"He'd feel equally betrayed if he found out *I* hadn't trusted him with this secret."

*Ava McKnight*

She seemed to consider this a moment, then offered, "All right. I'll tell John. Just, let me do it after the funeral. I have enough to focus on right now, Kate. I can't bear this along with everything else."

How could she deny Jenny? The woman was about to bury her husband. "Of course. I understand. I won't say a word to John. I'll let you do it. When you're ready."

Nodding her head, Jenny said, "Thank you, Kate. You've always been a good friend."

"Thank *you*, Jenny. For offering to stand by my side through this."

"Of course." She stood, then added, "Just let me shower and change and I'll go to the office with you. The children are with their uncle right now."

"I'll have some tea while I wait, now that my hands are steadier."

Jenny smiled, then left the salon.

Kate poured a fresh cup of tea and sipped it, all the while wondering how she was going to keep her promise to Jenny.

## ARCHER'S WAY

### Chapter Nine

She was avoiding him.

Archer knew something was up when Kate called to say she would be another hour at the McDugans, waiting for Jenny to change so that she could attend the press conference and corroborate Kate's story. Although John thought this was a good idea, he could tell by the soft hitch in Kate's voice that something was amiss.

Now, she was MIA.

His driver had reported that he'd dropped Kate and Jenny off over an hour ago. Yet Kate hadn't stopped by his office, nor had she been in hers when he'd sought her out.

Stalking down the corridor to the executive wing, he asked everyone he passed if they'd seen Kate. Not much luck with that tactic. He returned to his office and sank into his chair. Reaching for his phone, he called her cell. No answer. He sent her an email, knowing she'd have her Blackberry with her. Even if she was with Nolan, refining her statement, she'd respond.

He picked up the phone again and dialed Nolan's extension, thinking maybe Kate was in with him. When Nolan advised Archer that Kate had left his office twenty minutes ago, and Kate had yet to reply to his email, Archer knew it to be true...she was avoiding him.

But why?

Because they'd declared their love for each other yesterday? Was she having second thoughts about their new relationship?

Or...had Kate been so distraught yesterday, so in need of an anchor, that she had said words she hadn't really meant.

Did she have regrets today?

Thinking back to the conversations they'd had this morning, both before and after she'd left for Jenny's house, he couldn't find even the slightest hint of trepidation on her part.

So what was it?

*Ava McKnight*

He sat and stewed over the predicament for a few minutes, willing his phone to ring or his own Blackberry to buzz. If Kate would just contact him, he wouldn't have to sit here driving himself crazy while he debated whether or not there was some sort of issue between them.

Was Kate embarrassed to face him following their very uninhibited, very erotic lovemaking? True, Archer had shocked her a few times with his dark desires—desires only Kate inspired. But still...Her passionate nature had shone through last night, and he was pretty damn certain they hadn't done anything Kate regretted.

Except...

*Oh, holy shit!*

How could he be so stupid? Now he knew what the problem was!

He hadn't used a condom last night with Kate.

They'd both been so swept away, so caught up in the moment—every lustful one of them!—that he hadn't even thought of their lack of protection.

Shit.

Archer had never been so careless before. And, considering Kate hadn't been with a man in ten years, he was pretty damned certain she wasn't on the Pill.

She was likely feeling guilty and panicked over their irresponsible behavior.

Archer had to speak with her and quick.

Sure, it freaked him out a little bit to think he could have gotten Kate pregnant last night.

Didn't it?

Well...no. Not so much.

Surprisingly, the thought settled rather comfortably in his brain. They were in love after all. Archer wanted no other woman. And to be perfectly honest, the idea of marrying Kate and having children had taken up residence in his heart a long time ago.

In fact, the more Archer pondered this, the more his spirits lifted. If Kate got pregnant...wow. That would change everything.

For the better.

With a grin on his face, he left his office and traveled down the hallway to the elevators. The press conference was in less than fifteen minutes. He needed to get to the conference center downstairs and prepare himself mentally for this next step in the sex scandal that, yesterday, had seemed like such a huge deal.

It no longer was.

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The great tragedy of the weekend was that he and Kate had lost a close friend. Jenny had lost a husband. Her children had lost a father. That was where the hardship lay. The sex scandal was nothing but sensationalism by the press, which they would all overcome. And with time, the hoopla would die down and everyone would get on with their lives where that issue was concerned.

The McDugans would suffer the most from this ordeal, and that was what Archer wanted to help with—he wanted to help ease their pain. And he wanted Kate to stop feeling like a moving target.

Prepared to do what John Archer did best, he walked into the conference center and down the hall to the largest of the rooms. Already, the place was abuzz with activity. Reporters were staking their claim around a table that sat fifty-six. At the head were several chairs, microphones and teleprompters. Although Nolan had fed Archer's statement into one of the teleprompters, Archer knew he wouldn't need it. He excelled at public speaking, especially when he was speaking from the heart.

Ever the professional CEO, he shook hands with some of the reporters and the few senior execs he'd invited to attend. Nolan waited for him off to the side.

"You ready?" he asked Archer.

"You bet. But...where's Kate?"

"With Jenny in the ladies room. Jenny is pretty shook up."

"As she should be. This is a somber day, Nolan. Tainted by rumors and innuendo that are unwarranted. But we'll set the record straight. By the time I'm done, people will be so much less concerned with who's arms Kenneth McDugan died in. They'll be in awe of the man, and that's the way it should be."

"I know he meant a lot to you, John."

Emotion welled within John, but he fought it off, as he'd been doing since he'd received that first phone call from Kate, at three o'clock Sunday morning. She'd sounded distraught, her voice hoarse and hushed as she'd explained to Archer what had happened. He'd immediately gone to the hospital, only to find that Kate had left when the reporters had shown up. A wise decision on her part.

But that was Kate. She had integrity and good grace.

Damn it. He was in desperate need of speaking with her. But he didn't have a chance to. Within minutes, the press conference was underway and Archer was weaving his special brand of magic, drawing attention away from the sex scandal and putting the focus where it belonged...

On a man that would be sorely missed by his family, friends and co-workers.

## Chapter Ten

Kate was speechless. Five minutes into John's statement and she was completely swept off her feet. At first, the tears had stung her eyes as he'd reminded the press and the American people what had *really* happened this weekend. The tragedy of losing Ken McDugan was still raw and painful to everyone who knew him and he asked for—no, he *demand*ed—respect for the family's privacy hereafter.

Pride swelled so quickly in her heart, it nearly stole her breath. The man was incredible. Something told Kate that even if she *had* had an affair with Ken, he would still be standing there, persuading even the most ambitious of reporters that they were barking up the wrong tree. That the true story was the loss of an incredible man, not an alleged affair that couldn't even be corroborated.

In that instant, Kate knew she had to tell Archer about Ken. She knew he wouldn't judge his friend. She knew he wouldn't think any less of Ken, as Jenny feared.

But as she slid a glance in Jenny's direction and watched as the woman nibbled absently on a fingernail that was already gnawed to the quick, she reminded herself that it wasn't her place to say anything. She'd made a promise to Jenny. And Kate could do nothing but let her friend explain Ken's secret in her own time.

She just hated keeping this news from John. She hated keeping *anything* from John. Especially after last night, when they'd both opened themselves up. He told her she could tell him anything. And she knew he would be hurt when he found out she'd kept something from him. Particularly news of this magnitude.

Which was why, she'd avoided him since returning to Archer Enterprises. If she wasn't alone with him, she didn't have to hold back. If she could just stay away from him until Jenny revealed her news, then she'd never have to say that she'd kept a secret.

Okay, she was stretching the truth a bit, but... It was the best she could do right now, because the thought of betraying Jenny's confidence and lying to John were just so much more than she could take right now.

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She still hadn't truly grieved the loss of someone who had been so important to her. She'd have time for that later, she knew. Right now, she had to hold it together. *Especially* right now, because John was introducing her.

Instantly, the faces in the crowd shifted from expressions of awe and respect to that of suspicion. Worse, some eyes lit up, as though these reporters really believed they'd just hit pay dirt.

The thought made Kate's stomach churn. It didn't help matters when John reached for her arm and drew her close to him. So close their bodies touched. Her hands suddenly began to shake, so she clasped them together in front of her to keep from fidgeting.

"I want you all to meet one of Archer Enterprises' most dedicated, talented, *professional* junior executives," he announced. "I personally hand-picked Katherine Perry for our executive program when she was a sophomore at Princeton and she has proven her weight in gold." He positively beamed. "By the way, Miss Perry was valedictorian of her graduating class. Quite an accomplishment."

His gaze shifted to Kate and he smiled at her with pride and love. So much so, that Kate gasped.

John Archer was going for broke.

Alarm registered in the back of her head, but she was too mesmerized by his stunning good looks and glowing silver-blue eyes to even remember where the hell she was and what the hell she was doing.

For a moment, no one existed but John.

But as the click of cameras penetrated her love-induced state of euphoria, she suddenly realized the press was getting one hell of a photo op!

*Oh, for the love of God!*

Kate rolled her eyes heavenward and prayed she hadn't been standing there for hours on end, drooling over John Archer in front of a roomful of photographers and reporters.

John merely grinned at her before he returned his attention to the media. "Let me assure you, the rumors being spread about Kate's association with Kenneth McDugan are not only false, they are highly offensive."

*Miss Perry!* Kate suddenly screamed in her head. *Not 'Kate'!*

M-I-S-S P-E-R-R-Y!

Holy shit! The press would have a field day with this one!

*Ava McKnight*

But John seemed supremely confident that he had everything under control. He continued on, saying, “During this time of grief, I would expect such responsible journalists as yourself to be diligent about your research, and I will be the first to confirm that Kate was with Ken when he passed away. However, as all of you know, tight deadlines can lead to some very late nights. We’ve all had those high-octane evenings when we’re surviving on caffeine and adrenaline, doing our damndest to meet whatever challenging timeframe we’re currently up against.”

No doubt despite themselves, many of the reporters in attendance nodded in agreement, and Kate felt a certain amount of camaraderie form between John and the media. She eyed him curiously as he effortlessly worked the room. “Unfortunately, Ken and Kate had a huge undertaking last week, and they were working practically round the clock to accomplish the tasks assigned to them.”

His voice turned solemn as he added, “Not only have I come to realize what a valuable asset Ken was to me, and what a promising future Kate has with the company, but I’ve learned from this experience that even the most driven executives have to find time for themselves, their families *and* their health. I won’t let the tragic death of my friend, Kenneth McDugan, the third, be in vain.”

Kate stared at him, shocked. John had just shifted all of the guilt to himself. At the same time, he’d convinced everyone sitting in the room that he was a responsible, conscientious CEO who recognized that too much work was detrimental to his employees’ health and personal lives. He had everyone in the room eating out of his hand!

Had they been alone, she would have told him how unbelievably charismatic and forthright he was. How compelling. How utterly...*sensational*.

Kate’s teeth clamped down on her lower lip as she fought to keep her opinion of John Archer to herself.

As he wrapped up his remarks and literally presented Kate to the media, she felt a peculiar sense of calm settle over her.

Everything was going to be all right. She could feel it. John had been right all along. He’d told her he’d help and support her. He’d told her he’d make sure everything was okay. And by damn...he’d done just that.

The suspicious, skeptical gazes that had greeted her previously had turned to curious interest. And a hush fell over the room as the press awaited her statement.

Feeling oddly comfortable in front of her judge and jury, she faced the crowd head-on. And smiled.

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The statement Nolan had helped her to craft was a heartfelt one that didn't patronize the press. Kate simply stated the facts of the evening and left it at that. When she stepped away from the mic and Jenny McDugan moved in to offer her support of Kate's story, she had a strong feeling in the pit of her stomach that the whole insinuation of an illicit affair was about to blow over.

Unfortunately, she had Ken's secret tucked under her hat.

Guilt welled inside of Kate. So much so that she had to look away when John's gaze caught hers.

Shit.

How was she going to avoid him until after the funeral?

## Chapter Eleven

Archer stalked to his office and slammed the door. Kate had left the building with Jenny. She'd actually had the audacity to have *Nolan* tell him she'd be gone the rest of the day.

What the hell was going on?

For the majority of the press conference, he'd thought he and Kate has reconnected. The way her eyes had shone so brightly when she'd stood beside him before the press had convinced him that they were on the road to a happy ending.

Not so.

He slumped into his chair and faced his PC monitor. He had a hell of lot of work to do. In addition to running his company, he had a lot of email inquiries to address and the Board wanted to speak with him again.

Of course, his romantic woes took a backseat to his professional responsibilities. With a disgruntled sigh, he forced thoughts of Kate from his head and went to work.

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At eight o'clock that evening, Archer stood on Kate's doorstep and pounded on the door to her loft. He'd pretty much made himself crazy today, unable to let go of thoughts of Kate and his concern that something had gone seriously awry between them.

When she opened the door, wearing a short lavender-colored silk nightgown and matching robe, he was momentarily sidetracked. But as his eyes worked their way up to her beautiful face and she stared at him with wide eyes and a gaping mouth, he knew his gut instinct was dead-on.

Archer's heart plummeted. But he forged on. Bracing a forearm against the doorframe, he said, "I know you're tired, but I needed to see you."

Kate's mouth clamped shut, her lips pressed together. Panic flashed in her eyes, which did not bode well for Archer.

Consternation built inside him. He fought the urge to grab her by the shoulders and demand she tell him what the fuck was going on. But he remained sensitive to all

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that she'd been through in the past forty-eight hours. He worked on keeping his anxiety simmering below the surface.

Reluctant as she seemed be, Kate stepped aside and let him in.

Archer's pulse raced. Why the hell did he have to keep convincing her that it was okay for them to be together?

He was just about to demand an explanation from her when she turned and blurted out, "Jenny asked me to keep something from you and it's killing me, John."

He didn't think her eyes could get any wider, but they did. She clamped her hand over her mouth as she stomped her bare foot on the hardwood floor.

"Goddamn it," she said when she removed her hand. "I have the biggest fucking mouth."

Archer couldn't help but grin. "No, what you have is a penchant for telling the truth. Which is just one of the many things I love about you, Kate." Relief washed over him, because he knew she was going to give him the answers he sought.

She stood before him, wringing her hands for a moment. Then she turned away and marched over to the kitchen. "I just opened a bottle of wine. Do you want a glass?"

"Absolutely." He slipped out of his leather jacket and tossed at the chair he passed. Joining Kate at the tall kitchen counter, he said, "So you've been avoiding me all day because Jenny asked you to keep a secret from me?"

"Yeah," she said. She poured two glasses and handed one to Archer. "I told her I didn't want to keep anything from you, but she insisted. Begged, really. How could I deny her?"

"Kate," he said as he accepted the glass of Merlot she offered, "If there's something Jenny doesn't want me to know, that's between the two of us. I sure as hell wouldn't hold it against you because she's sworn you to secrecy."

Kate let out a long breath. Her shoulders relaxed considerably and he could see that his words were a huge relief to her. "I don't want to keep anything from you, John. But I promised."

"So let Jenny and I work that out." She nodded, then took a sip of wine. Archer eyed her for a moment, then asked, "So that's it? I mean, that's really the reason you were avoiding me today? The *only* reason?"

"I figured if I wasn't alone with you, I wouldn't have the opportunity to say anything I'm not supposed to say and..." Her voice trailed off and she rolled her eyes. "Oh, shit. This is all so ridiculous."

*Ava McKnight*

He grinned. "Yeah. I guess so." He didn't know what it was that Jenny wanted to keep from him, but he did know that he admired Kate all the more for not betraying her friend's confidence....even if it meant keeping him in the dark.

More importantly, he felt all the inner turmoil slipping away, now that he knew why Kate had kept her distance today. And now that he knew she wasn't upset about the direction in which their relationship had gone.

Setting aside his wine glass, and then taking Kate's from her hand and setting it on the counter, he pulled her into his arms. Much to his delight, she came willingly, wrapping her own arms around his neck.

"Jenny will speak with you after the funeral," she said in a soft voice. "Is that okay with you?"

"Sure, sweetheart," he whispered in her ear. "I can wait to hear what she has to say. What I can't wait for, however, is to hear you tell me you love me."

She sighed against his neck, her warm breath tickling his skin. "I do love you, John. I always have and I always will."

"That's all that matters, Kate."

He kissed her long and deep. He knew they would get through Ken's funeral, and that eventually he would learn Jenny's secret. Until that time, he focused his attention solely on Kate. There was only more pressing matter to address and then Archer knew he'd have everything he ever wanted.

"How do you feel about children, Kate?"

She laughed softly. Staring up at him, her beautiful green eyes sparkling with love and desire, she said, "I want a house full of them. And I'd like to start sooner rather than later."

Archer knew his grin was nothing short of wicked. "Well, if we didn't get the ball rolling yesterday, I'm sure we'll kick it into high gear tonight."

Her body pressed to his and her soft lips grazed his neck as she whispered, "You'd better make love to me several times tonight. Just to be on the safe side."

"Whatever it takes, sweetheart," he murmured as his hands began to roam her luscious body. "Whatever it takes."

## ARCHER'S WAY

### About the Author

Award-winning author Ava McKnight resides in Arizona. She is the author of nine erotic romance novellas and short stories, the author of romantic suspense novels, and the recipient of the 2005 Over The Moon Award of Excellence for Best Erotic Sci-Fi Short Story. Ava also writes as Calista Fox and Avery McKnight.

Also available from Ava McKnight and Venus Press...

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