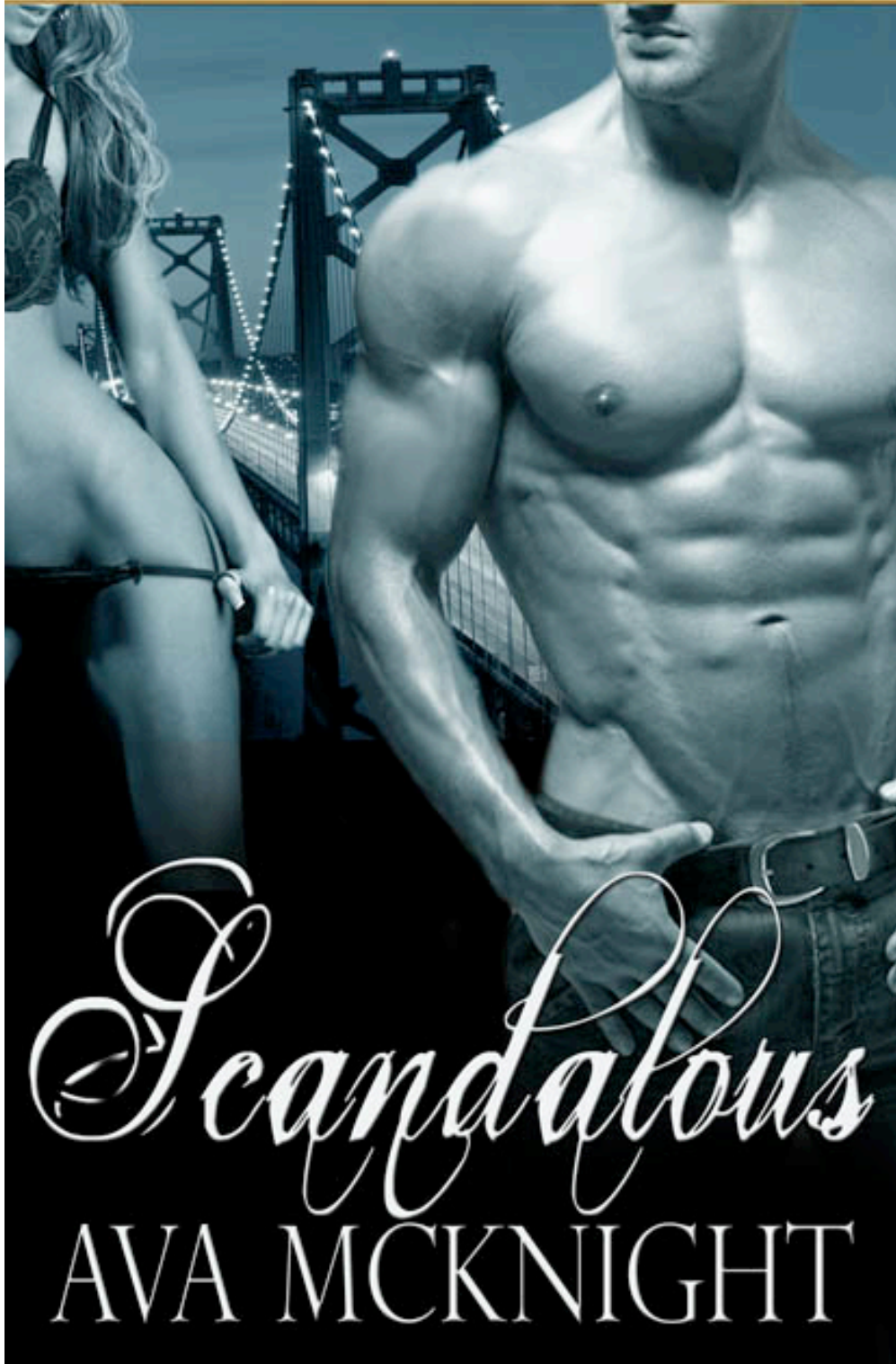


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Scandalous

Ava McKnight

Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

When Kate's professional reputation is muddied by a nasty scandal, the sexy CEO of her company comes to her rescue. John is a man who always gets what he wants, except when it comes to Kate, who's been out of his reach for eight long years.

Kate insists she's innocent of the accusations made against her. As the scandal unravels and shocking secrets are revealed, John finds himself caught between saving his company's reputation and having all of his wildest fantasies fulfilled by Kate. Wanting Kate has its repercussions. But when a man's heart and passion are on the line, what's he to do?

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Scandalous

ISBN 9781419932403

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Scandalous Copyright © 2011 Ava McKnight

Edited by Briana St. James

Cover art by Dar Albert

Electronic book publication January 2011

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

SCANDALOUS

Ava McKnight

Acknowledgements

San Francisco is one of my favorite cities and makes a great backdrop for any story. Every time I'm in the city, I end up with a few different story ideas. The one for *Scandalous* came about when I was at the bar at the very lovely Fairmont Hotel. A couple in the corner poured over files and laptops, working diligently, but their hands would touch from time to time and occasionally they'd stop what they were doing and stare into each other's eyes. I immediately pegged them as coworkers *and* lovers...thus a new story was born!

Thanks to Bree for her editing expertise. Such a pleasure to work with you!

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

BMW: Bayerische Motoren Werke Aktiengesellschaft Corporation

Fairmont Hotel: Fairmont Hotels & Resorts Inc.

Princeton: Trustees of Princeton University

Saks Fifth Avenue: Saks & Company

Skype: Skype Limited Corporation

Chapter One

As far as scandals went, the one Kate Vandell was now embroiled in was a doozie.

Much to her horror, her fall from grace would be immortalized for all of time. A local station broke the news of her boss's death early this morning, while also presenting facts that hinted at an affair between Archer Enterprises' married chief financial officer and one of its junior executives. Kate.

The company's CFO, Kenneth MacDougal III, was an iconic businessman in San Francisco, making his death a newsworthy story. His philanthropy and civic responsibility knew no bounds. He should be sainted, not disrespected by a scandal that had absolutely no truth to it.

Well, that wasn't entirely correct. Most of the media's account was accurate. Though what had happened at the Fairmont Hotel last night wasn't the least bit sexy or sordid. Yes, Kate *really* had accompanied Ken to his regular suite at the prestigious hotel following Archer Enterprises' annual Winter Solstice Gala, held in the ballroom. She *really* had been with him at two o'clock this morning. And she *really* had been the one to dial 9-1-1 when he'd suffered a massive coronary and died.

Yet instead of clarifying Kate's involvement, the press made it sound as though she'd been in Ken's hotel room because they were embroiled in an illicit affair. Despite the three laptops and foot-high stack of folders they'd been pouring over at the dining room table as they'd worked on the annual budget reforecast. Naturally, there'd been no mention of the office equipment and humongous pile of paperwork in the suite, evidence of the *real* reason they'd been ensconced behind closed doors 'til the wee hours of the morning.

Having the incident misrepresented was bad enough. Nothing quite compared to the fact that her boss was dead. Kate was devastated over the loss of her friend and

mentor. And it infuriated her that his reputation was taking a hit over the assumption he'd been having an affair. Ken was a stand-up guy. A family man.

God, what must his wife and kids be thinking?

Kate had tried several times to reach Jenny MacDougal, with no luck. She hadn't traveled with Ken in the ambulance because she'd feared how it might look. *And what do you know!* She'd ended up being placed at the scene anyway.

As the six o'clock news started, Ken's death—and her emergency call—was the headliner.

"What the *hell?*" she grumbled as she stared at the flat screen mounted to the wall in her living room. Though she certainly believed his passing was notable, she loathed that it was marred by a dishonorable accusation. A fact that continued to resonate, because the newscasts kept showing pictures of her and Ken together!

There she was again, 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 to complement her tanned skin. The sparkly, spaghetti-strapped bodice 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 until now—it certainly hadn't seemed racy when she'd bought the ridiculously expensive dress. Nor had she stood in front of the three-way mirror at Saks Fifth Avenue, surveying herself from every angle before she'd purchased the gown for last night's 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 Enterprises' youngest up-and-comer as *provocative*. Her!

Not a label she'd expected to be tagged with, nor had she ever wanted that term associated with her when it came to her professional life. She was a hard worker and

had made a name for herself in business by consistently demonstrating her skill and talent. Not by showing off her long legs and cleavage.

She was smart enough to know, though, that the media would sensationalize her supposed involvement with the prominent CFO of Archer Enterprises, whose smiling face was right next to hers in that now-infamous photo.

“Clearly sex sells,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. The proof was staring right at her, making it appear as though she’d fucked her way to the top.

Shaking her head in disgust, she picked up the remote and switched channels. But there was no escape. Another photo from the gala appeared on the screen. This time, she was standing next to a twenty-foot, elegantly decorated Christmas tree with Ken by her side.

If only Jenny had been there last night. The incriminating evidence might not have been blown so far out of proportion.

Kate snapped off the TV and dropped the remote on the coffee table. Crossing to the enormous open kitchen that occupied a good portion of her loft, she reached for a bottle of meritage and uncorked it. Sliding a wineglass from the rack that hung over the granite counter, she poured a healthy amount and started to drink. Maybe if she got good and drunk it would salve the sting of her professional demise.

But even as she settled onto a tall barstool and continued to sip, she knew alcohol wasn’t the answer. Sure, it might help to curb her anger and anxiety – mellow her out a tad so she could think straight – 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 no amount of wine could soften the blow or make her feel less vulnerable and professionally doomed.

She’d only answered two or three media inquiries this morning because the barrage of questions when she’d picked up the phone had been too overwhelming to respond to, let alone process in her currently muddled and distressed mind. Then she’d received

a call from Archer Enterprises' PR people, issuing a gag order until the company could put a crisis management plan together.

A crisis management plan!

For her!

She groaned. The dust was nowhere near settling and she had yet to stand up for herself, to tell her side of the story.

To hell with the news reporters. She had one person to convince of the truth. One chance to redeem herself. One chance to salvage her and Ken's reputations.

If she started at the top, the truth would trickle down, she was certain.

Abandoning her glass of wine, she snatched her keys from the hallway table and left her loft. She took the elevator to the private underground garage that, thankfully, was monitored by a professional security company. No reporters had breached the privacy gates. Yet.

Sliding onto the leather seat in her sporty BMW convertible, she backed out of her reserved space and raced out of the garage. It was Sunday night, but she knew John Archer would be in his office. She prayed he would believe her when she gave a full account of what had happened last night with Ken. Surely, if he heard it directly from her and saw how honest she was about the entire incident, he'd accept her side of the story and help her to right the wrong with the media, the company, her colleagues...and Ken's wife and children.

Her fingers gripped the steering wheel so tight her knuckles turned white. She refused to consider the consequences if John didn't believe her. He'd always been a reasonable man to deal with...though this wasn't a reasonable or even suitable situation. This wasn't a business deal gone awry, it was a supposed affair between a married senior executive and a single junior one.

He has to believe me.

She couldn't bear it if he resented her for damaging his company's image with this false scandal. She couldn't take it if he no longer trusted or believed in her. Talk about being devastated!

Yes, Kate was terrified to lose her job—and a tainted reputation wouldn't help her move onward or upward in the financial field. She had plans for the future that were built on her knowledge, expertise and professional standing.

At the moment, however, her heart was talking to her, not her bank account and lofty ambitions.

Though she could admit it to no one but herself, she secretly loved John Archer too much to lose his respect.

* * * * *

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

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. Ken MacDougal had been a godsend from the beginning. Smart, determined, motivated, driven. He'd been with the company for nearly thirty years. With John for eleven years, ever since he'd taken the reins following his father's untimely demise. Back then, at the age of twenty-three, John had been an extremely young and green chief executive officer. Ken had stood by his side every step of the way.

John 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 John could walk. 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 Archers 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 had never 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 foundation of his organization made him irrational. Angered 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 his emotions. No easy feat. He was furious that Kate Vandell—the woman he'd recruited as a summer intern two years before she'd even graduated Princeton—and Ken had been having an affair.

An affair!

Right under his nose!

Goddamn it!

He stalked over to the wet bar in his opulent office on the thirty-third floor of the Archer Building in San Francisco's financial district and mixed a batch of dry martinis. He was in need of a little fortification.

Kate and Ken had been an item and he hadn't even known about it.

Admittedly, John 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 before his eyes. And he hadn't had the vaguest idea it was going on.

He didn't mind office romances, when they were between colleagues of equal professional standing and both parties were legally single. Given the amount of hours

his employees put in, it was no surprise love connections were made between people who spent the vast majority of their day together. He'd even been invited to several weddings over the years.

There was no formal policy discouraging employees from dating at Archer Enterprises, but he did not condone affairs involving *married* associates. Especially those who sat at his executive table.

The double-edged sword was that he wasn't just angry over Kate and Ken's transgression. He was infuriated with himself for being jealous of it!

Unfortunately for John, from the first day he'd met Kate at a career event at Princeton, he'd wanted her. And not just as one of his executives.

She was striking in a very basic way. She wore minimal makeup and typically pulled her hair back in a loose ponytail at the nape of her neck, the long blonde strands softly curled. Tall and slender, she had a graceful way about her that mesmerized him. He respected her conservative nature and admired her intelligence. Everything about her stirred his senses. Made his dick hard.

He wasn't particularly proud to admit that he'd had some extremely erotic fantasies about her. Of course, Kate had no idea he felt that way. *Exactly how it should be.* He was head of Archer Enterprises. And even though there was nothing legally or formally wrong about dating her, John believed it was best to keep his feelings hidden and his dick in his pants. He didn't want to rock the boat with talk of a romance between him and one of his junior executives. Besides, he'd never taken Kate for the type to hook up with someone at work, particularly a superior.

Had he been wrong about her? Or was she not guilty of what the press alluded to as they reported she'd been in Ken's hotel room when he'd died?

John frowned. He really hadn't given Kate or Ken the benefit of the doubt today. When she'd called him early this morning to tell him Ken had died of a heart attack, they'd only spoken for a few moments before John had jumped out of bed, dressed and rushed to the hospital to be with Jenny and the kids. It really hadn't occurred to him to

ask Kate how she knew of Ken's death at two o'clock in the morning. Subconsciously, he must have thought the party had continued at the Fairmont after he'd left around eleven.

Then the news reports had started and it had been revealed that Kate had been in Ken's hotel suite at the time of his death. Damning evidence, and yet...

Were they really having an affair?

He'd been too wound up—jealousy and anger clouding his judgment—to consider another viable explanation. Though, in all honesty, the cold, hard facts were difficult to ignore. She'd been there in his room. At two in the morning. Doing *what*?

He took a large gulp of his martini. She hadn't answered any of his calls this afternoon, so he'd had to draw his own conclusions. As he ruminated over the situation, a soft rap on his open office door pulled him away from his dismal thoughts. Setting his glass aside, John glanced over his shoulder.

The vision behind him jolted him. Standing in the doorway was the object of his never-ending desire, Kate Vandell. She looked inconsolable, yet agitated at the same time. She wore jeans and a white oxford shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. The shirt hung open to reveal a white tank top that conformed to her shapely figure. Though the neckline was modest, the top accentuated her full breasts nonetheless, making his groin tighten. He had to make a concerted effort to keep himself in check so he didn't end up with a hard cock straining against the zipper of his dress pants.

True to form, her long, pale blonde hair was pulled back, the loose curls secured at the nape of her neck. However, her usually vibrant green eyes were clouded and the whites were bloodshot, as though she'd been crying most of the day. Chances were good she had been.

She opened her mouth to say something, but when his phone rang, her full lips pressed together. John 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.

Jesus Christ. Now's not the time to be thinking about Kate's mouth on your cock.

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

He ignored the call. He paid his vice president of public relations a small fortune to handle crises such as these. Not that they'd ever *had* a crisis such as this. Still, he'd make a formal statement once he had all the facts, the full details he suspected he was about to get from Kate.

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

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

John had been fielding calls all day. He'd already met with his board twice via Skype conference calls and he'd composed a brief, yet eloquent email to his employees that would be waiting for them in their inboxes when they arrived at work.

He was certain this latest call was from a reporter and he had no desire to talk until he had a better handle on the situation.

His earlier thought stuck with him. Maybe he was wrong about Kate and Ken. He couldn't for the life of him figure out why she'd been in Ken's hotel room, though, other than for the obvious reason. Which made it difficult for him to believe there might be an alternate explanation.

He sure as hell hoped there was and that Kate would provide it now.

He told her, "I have a press conference scheduled for tomorrow morning, so now's a good time for us to get the facts straight."

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 Vandell 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.

As usual, he forced his gaze away from her breasts. Not only was he careful not to give away his desire for her, but thinking of her in sexual terms seemed particularly hypocritical and inappropriate given current circumstances. Too bad his cock had a mind of its own. It throbbed behind the zipper of his black dress pants, despite his best efforts to control himself.

Wanting Kate was the bane of his existence. It tormented him day and night, year after year.

Again, he motioned to the martini he'd poured for her. When she reached his desk, she said, "I think I've caused enough trouble 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."

John 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." She shook her head and took another sip, as though eternally optimistic 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, John. I'm...pissed. I'm furious about how this is being played out on TV. I'm aggravated

because your PR people told me not to speak to the press, not to say a word in my defense. I'm upset that Ken's dead. But," she said after taking a full breath, "I'm not nervous. I have nothing to be nervous about. I didn't do anything wrong."

Her words and vehemence 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 said, "You don't really think..." Her voice trailed off. She let out a harsh breath and nearly doubled over as she placed a hand over her stomach, as though he'd just delivered a physical blow to her midsection. Straightening, she said, "I'd hoped you'd be on my side. That you'd 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 John cringe. His feelings for her were getting in the way of rational thought on so many levels.

"You jumped on the bandwagon so easily," she muttered as she turned away.

He let out a long sigh. Clearly his torment was destined to be never-ending.

He rounded the desk and sank into his black leather chair. "The facts are rather glaring, Kate. Concrete, even. Do you dispute them?"

"No." She turned back to him and 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 the gala. You know that because I was the one who called 9-1-1. And you, afterward." 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."

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. John had not become the success he was by allowing those he trusted to snub him. He was shrewd and diligent in his professional matters. And he was good at reading other people.

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

"Okay," he said, holding his hands up in a placating manner. Hope churned in his gut that she could exonerate herself. He realized he had a tremendous amount of faith in her, despite his initial assumption that she and Ken had been having an affair. His anger and own feelings of betrayal had gotten the best of him, he was loath to admit. He'd kick himself in the ass later. For now, he needed Kate to provide a full account of the evening. "Tell me what happened."

She looked disgruntled, likely because she had to plead her case. She also looked exhausted. Ken's death and the scandal were obviously taking their toll on her. John had the urge to go to her. To pull her into his arms. She looked as though she could use the support and it tugged at his heart.

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

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

Sitting in a chair in front of his desk, she said with conviction, "You know Ken was more than just a boss. He 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 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 accounting figures together."

“In his office. That’s where you’d meet.” John understood his 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. We’ve been 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.”

John frowned. He’d never expect Ken to invite an employee to his hotel suite, even if it was for work. They’d come back to the office. Except that they’d been at the Fairmont last night, so what sense would it make to waste time crossing town?

“Go on,” he said.

She shrugged. “That’s it, really. We’d planned the after-hours work in advance. I brought over the laptops, he brought along the files. The hotel supplied the printer. We set up shop in his dining room and then went to the party. We stayed longer than we should have, but everyone was having such a great time and it was nice to have a few hours away from the grind to relax.”

John recalled how electrifying the energy had been at last night’s gala. With another profitable quarter during a bad economy, he’d been excited to announce to the crowd of nearly two thousand that Archer Enterprises still had no intention of downsizing or outsourcing jobs to other countries. In fact, he’d delivered the good news last night that the freeze on merit increases had been lifted. Along with raises, employees would receive a lump-sum bonus check to make up for last year’s lack of increases when the economy had been less stable.

He also thought of how easily Kate had stolen his breath when she’d joined his reserved table up front by the stage. At his request. He hadn’t been able to resist squeezing her in with some of his senior executives and their spouses. There’d been two empty seats, after all, since Jenny had missed the event due to one of the kids being ill. And John hadn’t even considered bringing a date. A dangerous decision, he’d thought

when he'd made it. A self-conscious decision? he wondered now. Because without a plus-one date, that had left a space at the table for Kate.

Christ. He'd never realized until today how so many of his actions were centered around her. A woman he could never have!

And damn had he wanted her last night! She'd walked into the ballroom wearing a gorgeous red dress and all eyes had turned in her direction. He'd barely been able to keep his own gaze off her as he'd made the rounds, greeting employees and their significant others. His mind had wandered on more than one occasion, slipping into a fantasy of having her on his arm. He'd done what he'd typically never allowed himself to do. He'd imagined what it would be like to be with Kate. Really *be* with her. Having her by his side at the party. Dining with her when she sat *next* to him, not across the table from him as she had last night. Holding her in his arms as they waltzed across the dance floor. Taking her home with him.

He could so easily envision slowly peeling off every article of clothing until she stood before him naked. He longed to touch her soft skin. Let his hands roam her body, caressing and teasing. He'd kiss her slowly and sensually as his hands cupped her breasts, squeezing gently before he toyed with her nipples. Rolling and pinching them until they were hard and she was breathless. In desperate need of him, begging him to make love to her.

His fingers burned to pleasure her. To massage her clit and then push deep into her cunt, stroking her inner walls until she came.

"Anyway," she continued, her soft voice breaking into his errant thoughts, drawing him back to the issue at hand.

A good thing, because a few moments more and his fantasy would have made him rock hard. As it was, his cock pulsed and his gut clenched, making him terribly uncomfortable.

Serves you right. Keep your mind on business, not on fucking Kate.

“Ken hadn’t been feeling well all day,” she said. “He thought he was coming down with whatever his son had picked up at school. I suggested we wait until morning to work, offering to meet him in the office first thing. But he said he had his daughter’s Christmas recital to attend and wanted to be back in Sausalito by noon. Which wouldn’t leave us enough time. We planned to work through the night.”

She gave him a solemn look as she said, “You’ve seen his suite at the Fairmont, John. It’s enormous. There’s a living room and a formal dining room. We were working at the dining room table last night. We needed the space for our computers and files. We weren’t in his bedroom, for Christ’s sake. When the paramedics arrived, they found Ken *in the dining room.*”

He considered this tidbit for a moment, but didn’t interrupt her.

“The man outweighed me by a hundred pounds. I couldn’t have dragged him in there from the bedroom once he collapsed.”

“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 stood and came around his desk, propping a hip against the beveled edge. The determination in her green eyes mingled with something dark and mysterious to which John could not put a name.

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.”

John 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. I’ve kept pace with Ken for eight years. I’m where I’m at in your company because I’m committed to my job.”

She seemed to work up a bit of steam. Fire lit her eyes as though all of the anger she’d felt over the course of the day had finally boiled over. She said, “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?”

John’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 stance 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 he had to convince of his innocence.

Despite the fury in her eyes and the angst in her voice, John 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. He believed she 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 need to be convinced of her innocence would hurt her. But he’d 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. The PR department will help you with your statement.”

Her mouth gaped 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?”

Rage flashed in her vibrant eyes again.

Good. Stay pissed, Kate. Use that anger to convince everyone of the truth, the way you just convinced me!

She appeared to be at a loss for words. John broke one of his cardinal rules by reaching out to her and latching on to her toned biceps. The jolt he got when he touched her was the only thing that registered in his mind for a few moments. Being this close to Kate 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. His cock sprang to life, to hell with his attempts to make it stand down!

For God's sake, it was all he could do to keep from hauling her up against him and kissing her with all the passion he felt for her, which he'd suppressed for eight very long years. He wanted to feel her arms wrapped around his neck and her body pressed to his. But one taste of Kate wouldn't be enough. It'd never be enough.

Pushing that thought from his head, he said, “I want you to speak up. I want everyone to hear what really happened. I want the truth to come directly from *you*.”

She gave him a wary look. “I hate public speaking. What if I say the wrong thing?”

“You won't.”

The urge to hold her and reassure her still overwhelmed him. He wanted to close the few inches between them. But again, that would lead to wanting to slide his hands under her tank top. Palm her breasts as he kissed her.

He'd never been this ensnared by a woman before. It was positively maddening.

Biting back a groan of desire, he forced himself to concentrate on the reason for her being here. The scandal that had the potential to damage his company's image was not to be taken lightly. Nor could it take a backseat to his lust for Kate.

Yet 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. The lips he longed to feel on his skin and his cock.

"I'm not good in front of crowds," she told him in a quiet voice. "But if you think it'll help, I'll do it."

"You'll be fine," he told her. Attempting to break the spell he was under, he said, "I suggest you get some rest. You look worn out, Kate."

With a nod, she said, "It's been a very difficult day." She let out a sharp laugh. As though that were the understatement of the year. "I'm emotionally drained and exhausted. I'm sorry I acted out of line. I just...I couldn't let you think I'd done something to hurt your company."

John's chest tightened. He hated that he'd doubted her. He hated that she was even in this mess.

"Kate, I—" He broke off his sentence. Perhaps he should keep his mouth shut. There were words on the tip of his tongue that absolutely could not be said. And yet, as she continued to gaze up at him, looking vulnerable and, yes, exhausted, he simply couldn't help himself. "I'll be right by your side tomorrow. Always," he said, meaning it.

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

But it was too late. He released her biceps and instead wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her tightly, comforting her. She didn't quite return the hug. Her hands rested tentatively on his shoulders and her cheek pressed to his chest. But she trembled in his embrace, a telling sign.

"It'll be all right," he whispered in her ear.

Though he wasn't sure that was true, at least not as it pertained to their friendship. He'd just crossed a line he'd never imagined crossing and it had instant repercussions. His body responded immediately. His heart soared at having her in his arms. His pulse raced from the smell of her hair and the warmth of her breath on his skin at the opening of his polo shirt. His cock stiffened as her body melded to his, a perfect fit.

The longing he'd somehow managed to live with over the years intensified to an unbearable degree. He wanted to strip her clothes off and touch and taste every inch of her. He wanted to feel her soft skin against his. Wanted to thrust deep into her wet pussy, giving her pleasure, making her happy. Erasing the pain of the day.

He wanted Kate now more than ever before. It was pure torture. Hell on earth.

His cock throbbed as she let out a long breath and her fingertips pressed into his muscles, as though wanting to hold him in place. He wasn't going anywhere. Being able to console her was worth the torment it brought on.

The fact that she didn't pull away or step back taunted him with the possibility of her being equally attracted to him. She had to feel the evidence of his desire pressed against her belly. Unless she was too fatigued, emotionally and physically, for his arousal to register in her mind. Or believe it to be true, considering how well he'd kept his distance up to this point.

Having her in his arms must have sparked temporary insanity, because he said, "I want to protect you, Kate."

Her head snapped up, her eyes locking with his. Confusion swirled in the green irises for the briefest of moments. Then she seemed to come to her senses, return to reality.

Detangling herself from him, she finally took that step backward. Shaking her head, she said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cry on your shoulder."

"That's not what you were doing." He gave her a pointed look, willing her to say something different. To admit that she needed his support. Wanted it. Wanted *him*.

“I don’t know what’s come over me.” She looked lost. As though she’d been entranced by the intimate moment they’d shared and had no idea what to make of it.

He tried to pull himself together before he caused more damage. He turned away and reached for his martini. Something to cool him off because his temperature was through the roof. His cock pulsed almost painfully and there was a strange pull in his gut, like a warning signal that he was missing a prime opportunity with Kate.

But he couldn’t take advantage of her vulnerable state. Nor could he do anything about his desire for her. Why the fuck did he have to keep reminding himself of that today? After all the years of denying himself the freedom to express his interest in her, why was it so pressing right now?

He shoved a hand through his hair, collected his thoughts and willed his cock to take a holiday. Thinking about Ken’s death and the scandal helped tremendously. When he was back in control, he returned his attention to Kate.

“Why don’t you go home? Get some sleep. Tomorrow’s going to be a big day.”

She stared at him, as though she had something to say but didn’t know the right words. Finally, with a sigh, she said, “You’re right.”

He felt compelled to assure her one last time. “I believe you, Kate.”

He was relieved by that sentiment. For reasons that went far beyond being able to address the public with the truth about Kate’s involvement in Ken’s death. He seriously could have driven himself mad as he’d obsessed over another man touching the one woman he wanted most.

His tried-and-true Kate.

Chapter Two

She continued to stare at him. Something had just happened between them. Or had she imagined it? Had she wanted so desperately to feel his muscles tighten beneath her fingertips, hear his heart hammer in his chest and make him hard that she'd conjured a fantasy while he'd held her in his arms?

Her cunt clenched at the thought of John's erection pressing against her belly. Had that really happened or was exhaustion making her delusional?

Not that she'd be surprised if her imagination were playing tricks on her. The moment John's hands had gripped her arms, some of her conviction to keep things on a professional level with him had fallen by the wayside. How could her reasons for keeping her distance possibly stay intact when she so close to him—in his embrace, no less?

He was nearly impossible to resist. Tall and athletic, he had a body she longed to touch. He was breathtakingly handsome, with dark-blue eyes that almost looked black when his temper flared. A dangerous, yet sexy transformation she'd witnessed only a few times, but found fascinating. He was also brilliant and powerful, which made him all the more attractive to her.

She'd never allowed herself to indulge in romantic notions about him, beyond the occasional fantasy before she'd fallen asleep at night. Likely the reason she worked such ridiculously long hours was to keep her mind off him. And to make her so exhausted that she fell into bed at night too tired to give him more than a passing thought.

Yet something had just transpired between them. Acceptance of a mutual attraction?

Yes. She was almost certain of it.

Oh, but this was risky territory to enter!

“Are you okay?” he asked her, because she hadn’t moved or said a word.

His deep, sensual tone was mesmerizing, making her want to be back in his arms. In his bed. John had the kind of voice meant for erotic whispers behind closed doors. She could easily imagine him murmuring sexy words in her ear as his cock filled and stretched her pussy while he moved inside her.

Oh God, what bliss that would be!

Pulling in a long breath, she tried to steady herself. She was incapable of dragging her gaze from his, though. The nearly black irises told her he felt myriad emotions. She wished she could dissect them all. Dig deep enough to find out what he really felt. What he really meant to say, because the look he gave her indicated he had a lot on his mind. And his thoughts seemed to be centered on her.

Interesting.

In response to his question, she said, “Yes, I’m all right. I appreciate that you’ll stand by my side tomorrow.”

What did you mean by “always”? She desperately wanted to know.

“Well,” he said as he moved away from her and returned to his desk. He sank into his big leather chair. “I want you to meet with the PR department first thing in the morning. I’ll give them a heads-up so they can begin drafting your statement, then work with you to refine it.”

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

His 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 stomach 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, but she also wanted to quell any doubts about Ken, since he couldn't speak for himself. In addition, she wanted to help keep the company's reputation intact.

When John's smile skewed to a frown, her heart sank. "What's wrong?" she asked.

He 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 who you are – and yet...I doubted your innocence."

Coming out of his chair once more, he crossed the room to where she stood and clasped both her hands in his. A strong, warm grip that lit her up like a bonfire. John never touched her, yet he'd done it twice in one evening! Feeling his skin against hers was nothing short of electric.

Her breath lodged in her throat. She'd waited eight long years for this kind of contact, this sort of physical connection with him. And even though it was just his hands holding hers, it was enough to heat her insides and spark a prickle of desire deep in her pussy. Her clit tingled, making her uncomfortable in a curiously delightful way.

His words barely registered in her hazy mind as 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..." 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."

She stared at him, dumbfounded. Blinked once. Twice.

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

No, of course not. What you think he means isn't what he really means at all. It just sounds that way because you want it to.

Shaking her head and letting out a soft laugh for being so ridiculous, 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, personally selecting me as an executive-in-training 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. She felt the void immediately and it took a toll on her heart. “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, startling Kate.

She eyed him curiously. Was it her imagination toying with her again 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 with her married boss? Or... The thought that she’d been promiscuous with someone other than him?

Whoa!

Where the hell had *that* thought come from?

Shocked she’d even considered such a possibility, Kate did the only thing she could. She changed the subject. The way John always did when they traveled a best-to-avoid path of a personal nature.

“Well,” she said as she backed away. “I’d better start thinking about tomorrow’s press conference. And I’m sure you’ve got plenty of work to do tonight.” She turned and made it halfway across the vast office before drawing up short and glancing over her shoulder. “I’m really sorry about all of this.”

He gave her a tight smile as he returned to his chair. “I don’t blame you, 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 MacDougal. Archer Enterprises will support her and her family in every way possible. Next, I need to find someone to fill the enormous void Ken is going to leave.”

For a moment, she 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.

Her heart hurt for him.

“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 and...frantic...I haven’t even stopped to let the reality of the situation sink in.”

Ken is dead.

Suddenly, Kate needed a moment to catch her breath. Her knees threatened to buckle beneath her. Her gaze landed on the sofa in the corner.

“Shit,” she mumbled as grief and exhaustion got the best of her. Her stomach coiled tight. Her heart ached. Her body trembled.

“Are you okay?” John asked, instantly alarmed as he sprang out of his chair.

She shook her head. “If you don’t mind, I need to sit for a minute.”

Chapter Three

John stalked across his office in several long strides. He gripped her by the elbow and directed her to the sofa. Seeing Kate in such distress, as fat teardrops crested her eyes and her cheeks flushed pink, did a number on him. He couldn't help but console her, help her, hold her.

Fuck. He was digging a huge hole for himself tonight, but seemed incapable of stopping.

He sat beside her on the couch, his fingers brushing back strands of hair that had escaped her ponytail. His gut pulled tight, his cock stirred. Being this close to her, touching her, made his body yearn for her.

But he couldn't have her. A reality that should be engraved on his brain by now.

Myriad emotions warred inside him as he stared at her pale face.

"I'll be okay," she said in a soft voice that cracked. "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, hoping like hell it was a casual one. He doubted it. He felt pretty grim right now.

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

"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 and with the public."

A serious expression crossed her lovely features as she stared up him with watery eyes. "I have to set the record straight with Jenny MacDougal too. She's a friend. I don't want her to think... Oh hell. Of course she thinks I was sleeping with her husband.

Even if he told her we'd be working late. No one else believed that's what we were doing in his hotel room."

"Including me," he said, his jaw clenching.

"But you believe me now. That's all that matters."

John'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."

"You're a good woman, Kate," he said. "Everything is going to be okay. I promise."

He put an arm around her shoulder and swallowed down a lump of desire at being this close to her again. His response to her drew her attention to his face. Her gaze landed on his mouth again as her brow furrowed. Her breathing quickened.

"John...?"

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

Jesus Christ, her lips were so soft! Excitement shot through him, sparking his passion. To hell with the consequences. An unfamiliar sense of urgency gripped him. His mouth pressed more firmly to hers and she let out a soft whimper that spurred him on. When her lips parted, he 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. But John forced himself to retain control. Even as Kate's arms snaked around his neck and their upper bodies pressed together, he 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 wretched day she'd had...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, he 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 low tone, 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. It's what I've wanted too. For such a long, long time."

His lips grazed her temple. "It is right, Kate."

His mouth covered hers again and he drew her into another deep, soul-stirring 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 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 chest melded to his. Her breasts pressed against him, making him painfully aware of the clothing that created a barrier between them. John wanted to feel her gorgeous body, her silky skin, touching his.

The hand that swept through her hair moved downward. Over her shoulder and down her chest to the full mound of her breast. He gave it a gentle squeeze.

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, he thought he'd gone too far. This was a dangerous line to cross. He took sexual harassment seriously. But Kate didn't look the least bit harassed.

"Kiss me again, John," she said in a breathy voice. *Definitely not harassed.* "Please."

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

His hands slid under the material of her oxford and he pushed the shirt off her shoulders and down her arms.

Breaking the kiss, she said, "I want to feel your hands on my body. Even if it's just this one time."

She understood the complications as clearly as he did. Her admission—her consent—was important to him, but it didn't alter the fact that he was the CEO of the company she worked for. Even if he wasn't her direct boss, it was still a very complex and sticky situation.

Yet it was truly impossible to push her away now that he had her in his arms. He'd waited so long for this moment. Had dreamed about it endlessly. Kate was not a passing fancy. He'd neither use her nor treat her poorly. Whatever she wanted, he would give her. She had but to ask. There was nothing he'd deny her, nothing he wouldn't do for her. Or do *to* her. If she wanted his hands on her body, he was more than happy to fulfill the request.

But he had to make his intentions absolutely clear and ensure she knew what she was getting herself into.

"This is a very delicate situation," he said.

She nodded. "I understand. It could be misconstrued, like my close association with Ken. But neither of us is married and... I've wanted you for so long, John. It's not like I just decided tonight that I wanted you to kiss me and touch me. I've wanted it since the first time we met."

His brow furrowed. "I need you to recognize that this could be complicated. Especially in light of today's scandal."

"Which I'll be cleared of tomorrow, following the press conference."

He stared deep into her eyes and said, "I won't hide this. If we're together tonight, I refuse to pretend it didn't happen. We'll have to go public with it from the very beginning. It's the honorable thing to do."

She smiled and it lit her vibrant green eyes. "You mean, this isn't just a one-time thing?"

"Oh hell, no," he said. "I've wanted you for so long, Kate. I can't just have you once."

Her fingers grazed his temple, his cheek. "Words I thought I'd never hear."

"Words I never dared to say," he admitted. "But I can't deny it any longer."

"You don't know how happy I am to hear that. Deliriously happy." She smiled at him.

"You take my breath away," he told her. Then he kissed her again, loving the feeling her lips pressed to his, their tongues twisting and tangling.

Unable to control his desire, he lifted the hem of her tank top and pulled it over her head, breaking their kiss for that brief moment.

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 dragged her mouth from his and let out a soft moan. He peeled back the thin material. John's head dipped and he licked one perfect, pink bud.

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

He 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. He seized the opportunity. He licked and sucked her nipple before 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. He toyed with the tight peak until she was panting in his ear and writhing in his arms.

He eased her down to the cushion and his 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'd parted for him. He stroked her pussy lips through the denim.

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

Applying a bit more pressure and targeting her clit, 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.

John 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 she was as enraptured as he was.

"John." She said his name in a soft voice.

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.

“Make love to me, John.”

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

To save *her*.

Love swelled in her heart. She’d always loved him, but she’d had to suppress the emotion. Not tonight.

“I want to feel you inside me. 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. He 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 loafers and socks, he pulled her jeans the rest of the way off and tossed them onto the nearby chair.

His gaze swept over her, hot and bright. His dark-blue eyes deepened in color, exciting her even more. His breathing picked up, as though just looking at her nearly naked body turned him on.

The thought made Kate’s heart flutter.

One large hand eased up her calf and over her knee to the middle of her thigh. Her 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. Mostly, though, the moon offered the only slivers of light, filtering in through the vertical blinds covering 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 deep in her pussy intensified as his fingers swept upward, closer and closer to her clit. When his fingers skimmed over the lace of her thong panties, Kate felt the initial stirrings of what would surely turn into the most powerful orgasm of her life.

He bent his head to her and his lips and tongue teased her inner thigh, making her flesh quiver. Then his thumb slid under the scalloped edge of her pale pink panties. A deep moan fell from her lips as John rubbed her clit in a slow, circular motion that sent electric jolts through her body.

Her fingers twined in his thick, soft hair. His head moved slightly and she felt his hot breath on her pussy lips. 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 naked flesh. 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 wet cunt.

“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.

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 biceps as he worked her pussy with determined strokes. His tongue continued to flick over her sensitive, swollen clit. Kate's heart slammed against her chest at John's skill. How quickly he pushed her right to the edge again!

"Oh, that's so good," she whispered.

Clearly spurred on by her soft moans and writhing body, he 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. Her body craved his and it was all Kate could do not to beg him to fuck her.

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 and suckle it, while his fingers pumped in and out of her, and she'd come.

And that's precisely what happened. As though he'd known exactly when and how to send her into that spiraling tailspin that made her scream his name as she came. Kate saw flashes of light behind her closed lids. She cried out again as her fingers tightened around John's solid biceps.

"Oh God!" The sensations overwhelmed her, but they were erotically delicious. She held fast to the moment, savoring it, deriving every ounce of pleasure she could.

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.”

All those years of wanting him, of secretly loving him and fantasizing about him, made it impossible to take this new turn of events slowly. She feared if she didn't act now, the opportunity might slip away. Somehow vanish. She couldn't bear that thought. To have broken through this first barrier with him tonight...she couldn't imagine ever going back to pining for him in private, locking away all her feelings and desires.

Luckily, John seemed to feel the same way. He quickly stripped off his clothes and boots. The view was positively breathtaking. He was gorgeous from head to toe. His bronze skin, dark hair and sculpted face were enough to make her jaw fall slack. 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 stared at the long, thick cock that stood ready to seek the haven she offered.

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, Ms. Vandell?”

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

John pulled his wallet from the front pocket of his pants and extracted a condom. Inspecting the packet, he said, “Just need to confirm the expiration date. I tucked it away based solely on wishful thinking.”

She stared at him, her heart soaring. "That's for me?"

He nodded. Then he chuckled. "I'd hoped that one day I'd break down and make my move."

"You didn't really plan to, though. Did you?"

His expression turned serious. "There are some landmines to navigate."

Kate sighed. Her soaring heart took a nosedive. "Maybe we shouldn't do this. Maybe we should just pretend none of this hap—"

"No," he was quick to say. "We can't pretend none of this happened. *I* can't pretend, Kate." He pinned her with an intense look. "I'm not saying this isn't a difficult situation for us to be in. I don't, for a second, doubt there will be some backlash. Repercussions. But once you admitted you felt the same way and we both acknowledged this was more than a scratch to be itched..." He shook his head as his jaw clenched. "Christ, Kate. I can't go back to pretending I don't want you every minute of the day."

Her heart took to flight once more. "Oh, John," she said. "You can't even begin to imagine how that makes me feel."

He returned to the sofa, settling between her parted legs. 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 as 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 come to him tonight.

And she was damn glad she had.

His head dipped and his lips trailed down her neck to her collarbone. "I've waited so long for you, Kate. I'd like nothing better than to make love to you all night."

"Sounds heavenly."

John had never been so captivated by a woman. He'd never felt so hot. So turned inside out. 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. Lower still to her flat belly and slim hips. Then his gaze slid over her nearly bare mound. 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.

He 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. 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.

His hands hooked the back of her knees and he spread her legs wide. "Sweetheart, *you* are perfection personified." He admired the view sprawled before him as 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 and down the length of him, wreaking havoc on his 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 pussy 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."

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

His jaw clenched. Fighting every impulse he had to thrust hard and fast into her wet pussy, he somehow managed to retain some control. But beads of sweat broke out on his forehead.

It didn't help matters when she cupped her breasts with her hands and squeezed them.

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 left her breasts and clutched his biceps. She pulled him toward her, forcing him 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 he 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 mouth left hers and trailed over her jaw and down 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.

John 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 hold back. The feelings she evoked in him were all-consuming. And he'd waited so damn long to have her!

As he pumped in and out of her tight cunt, he felt the tremble in her body that told him how close she was to coming.

"That feels so good," she murmured. "Better than I'd imagined. Perfect."

He was thrilled to hear she'd fantasized about this moment. It made his hips thrust a little harder, a little faster.

"Yes," she whispered. "Oh God, yes." Her hips jerked, meeting his. "Fuck me hard. I want to feel you deep in my pussy, John."

"Jesus," he said in a strained voice. "You're making me crazy, sweetheart."

"So you know how I feel."

"Yeah." He grunted. "You feel amazing."

She smiled. He fucked her harder, his thrusts long and forceful.

"That's it," she told him. "More. God, I want so much more!"

He gave it to her. Within seconds, she cried out as another climax ripped through her, making her body shake.

John groaned. "Squeeze me tight, sweetheart." Her warm pussy held him captive as she milked him. "Just like that."

He could no longer hold back his emotions and the sensations that gripped him.

"Yes, Kate!" His orgasm hit him hard, stealing his breath and making his body convulse as her inner walls continued to clutch him. "Oh yes. Hold me tight."

This was the stuff dreams were made of. This woman was a fantasy come to life.

And she was all his.

Chapter Four

Kate's arms were wrapped around John's neck, her leg slung 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 on to 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.”

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. “My senior year of high school.”

“Why so long?”

“Fear,” she said without hesitation.

John eyed her curiously. “I didn’t think you were afraid of anything, Kate.”

She smiled at him. “Just one thing. Ruining my future. I’ve always been terrified of doing something stupid to mess it up. Because I almost did once.”

“What happened?”

Laughing softly, she said, “It’ll seem inconsequential and juvenile to you, but it’s always been a reminder of how one slip could cost a fortune.”

“So responsible,” he mused. “Valedictorian, honor student. Overachiever.”

“Pot...kettle...” she teased as she lifted a brow. “Anyway, I dated a boy my senior year of high school who claimed his parents owned 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. I was 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 damn lucky to get a job at Dairy Queen.”

John let out a little snort. “She’s a bit melodramatic, isn’t she?”

“You have no idea. Anyway, the owners of the house didn’t press charges, thank God. They knew Chris and 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. I concentrated all my efforts on school and my career after that.”

“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.”

“Glad to hear it.” He held her awhile longer, then said, “I should drive you home. You need some rest.”

They both dressed, then headed down to the parking garage where she’d left her car. As they exited the building, they spotted 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 coiled tight as reality returned to her. She wasn't out of the woods yet. Not by a long shot. And she'd muddied the waters further by making love with John. Not that she regretted it. No way! But she knew there would be complications as a result.

"I wonder how long they'll stake us out," she said of the reporters.

"Until the juicy scandal is no longer juicy."

Kate willed some optimism into her heart. "Tomorrow. You think this will all be over then?"

John flashed her a quick grin. "I do. I told you not to worry about it, Kate. Everything's going to be fine."

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. We'll address the issue about you and Ken tomorrow and then we'll move on." 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. "I promise it'll all work out."

She sent up a silent prayer that he was right.

* * * * *

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 over all the sensationalized journalism.

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 MacDougal. 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. I promise.”

Kate didn’t want to face Jenny MacDougal, but knew she had no choice.

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’d hurt Jenny. That she had to convince Jenny of her innocence and assure her friend 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.

With a sigh of resignation, 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.”

He 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 MacDougals’ 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.

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 presence reassured her. But it was the look in his beautiful 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."

"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 a compelling one.

Because she trusted John, she said, "All right. I'll go see her."

“Good.” He pulled her from the chair and slid his arms around her waist. “Now try to relax.”

“Difficult to do when you’re this close to me.”

He grinned. “Nice to hear.” He scooped her up in his arms and said, “Point me in the direction of your bedroom.”

“Down the hall, first door on the right.”

Her arms circled his neck as he carried into her the room. He set her on the bed and immediately began stripping off his clothes. She followed suit, though her eyes were on his magnificent body as he bared inch after glorious inch of tanned skin and rigid muscles. He was already hard and the sight of his erect cock made her cunt ache for him.

She reached for his hands, pulling him onto the bed. He joined her, settling between her parted legs. He’d extracted another condom from his wallet before divesting himself of his pants.

Tossing the packet onto the bed beside them, he said, “I had a backup. Just in case I got *really* lucky with you.”

She smiled. He so easily relieved her of the tension she’d felt when Jenny had called. He had a way of making her feel that everything was going to work out just fine. That he wouldn’t accept anything less than specific outcome.

Her fingers threaded through his hair as his body pressed to hers and he kissed her. She’d wanted the freedom to kiss him and touch him and make love with him for so long, it still shocked her that she was now at liberty to do all those things. Her other hand roamed his body, gliding over his shoulder and down his back. When she reached his ass, she gave a cheek a firm squeeze.

He pulled his mouth from hers and groaned. “You know how to push all the right buttons, sweetheart.”

“And yet you’re not inside me.”

“So greedy,” he murmured as he reached for the condom.

“Starving, actually,” she told him. “Ravenous for everything you have to offer.”

He sheathed himself as he said, “Well, we can’t have that.”

Gently gripping her hips, he flipped her onto her stomach. Kate let out a small squeal as excitement shot through her. John’s fingers slid along her pussy lips, massaging them as she spread her legs wide, bending one at the knee and lifting her ass in the air, making it easy for him to push a finger into her cunt from behind.

She watched him over her shoulder as he pleased her, his gaze smoldering, his jaw set in concentration. He pushed a second finger into her pussy and stroked her quickly, until she was writhing and moaning.

“That feels so good,” she whispered.

Her cunt clenched around his fingers as her insides ignited and all the wonderful sensations he evoked intensified. He continued to finger-fuck her until she was on the verge of coming. As her body tensed and trembled, he withdrew his fingers and thrust his cock into her pussy, making her cry out.

A sharp groan fell from his lips as she squeezed him tight while she came. His hips jerked forward and back as he made love to her. One of his hands slid around to the front of her and he rubbed her clit, keeping her aroused.

Everything he did to her drove her absolutely wild. But it was the way he concentrated so diligently on her pleasure that made her heart pound a little harder in her chest. He liked making her come, she had no doubt about that, and it made her love him even more.

“John,” she murmured his name. “Oh God, that’s wonderful. So incredible.”

His dark eyes flashed with lust, along with a hint of something more poignant. Something intense and passionate. A soul-deep emotion that mirrored her own feelings.

He placed his free hand on the mattress at her hip and his hunky body nearly curled around hers, his hard chest melding to her back. His lips grazed her neck as he continued to thrust into her with long, full strokes.

She felt her climax swell within her again, the sensations building quickly, stealing her breath.

"Come with me," he whispered in her ear. "Now, Kate. I want to feel your pussy squeezing me tight."

"Yes," she muttered. "Oh God, yes." There was no holding back. He fucked her a little harder and those sensations inside her reached a crescendo. "John!" she cried out as another orgasm rocked her body, making her quake and tingle from head to toe. Her inner walls contracted around his cock and let out a low grunt.

"That's it," he said. "So good..." He thrust into her one last time. She felt his body convulse and his cock throb as he climaxed. "Jesus, Kate. I can't quite get enough of you."

She collapsed onto the mattress. He withdrew from her and rolled onto his side, breathing heavy. Kate smiled, knowing it was likely a dreamy, sappy one.

"This keeps better and better," she said.

He chuckled. "I have a long list developing in my head of the things I want to do to you. I think we'll be occupied for a long time to come."

She rolled toward him and rested her head on his chest. "Believe me, I'm game."

"Such a vixen."

"Apparently so." They were both silent while they caught their breath. Then Kate lifted her head and stared at him. "You'll stay the night, right?"

He swept a lock of hair from her forehead and said, "Wild horses couldn't drag me away."

Sighing contentedly, she returned to her curled-up position alongside him. "This day had some merit to it, after all."

He hugged her to him. "Indeed it did."

* * * * *

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 MacDougal. "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 any guilt, but it still lingered. "Thanks for your help, John. I don't know how I would have gotten through any of this without you."

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.

Kate's anxiety mounted as the car headed up a winding drive and stopped at the front of the MacDougal 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, she 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-blond 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 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. She 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.

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 dining room table and—”

“Kate,” Jenny’s tone was incredulous.

She 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 her 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. “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 at the moment. 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.”

"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 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 MacDougals. 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 placed it back on the mantel where she admired it. "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 that path.

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

"Oh." She took a moment to process 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, Sr. was a 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 was quick to say. "I hope to keep it that way."

Kate shook her head. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Jenny."

"Thank you. 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 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. Ken—God rest his soul—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. *Especially* not to John. 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 him. Please don’t ask me to.”

“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 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 still one problem, though."

"What?"

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

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 would have 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."

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

Chapter Five

She was avoiding him.

John knew something was up when Kate called to say she would be another hour at the MacDougals, 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 his PR people, refining her statement, she'd respond.

He picked up the phone again and dialed the extension for his vice president of public relations, thinking maybe Kate was in with him. When Nolan advised John that Kate had left his office twenty minutes ago and Kate had yet to reply to his email, John knew it to be true...she truly was avoiding him.

But why?

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 and done things 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?

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 because they'd made love?

Shaking his head because he had no answers, he stalked down the corridor, heading toward the executive conference center. Entering the largest of the rooms, he found it was already abuzz with activity. Reporters were staking their claim around a table that seated fifty-six. At the head were several chairs, microphones and teleprompters. Although the PR people had fed John's statement into one of the teleprompters, John 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.

"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 whose arms Kenneth MacDougal 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 early 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, but hadn't found Kate there. She hadn't traveled with Ken in the ambulance. 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 who would be sorely missed by his family, friends and coworkers.

* * * * *

Kate was speechless. Five minutes into John's statement and she was completely swept off her feet. At first, 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 MacDougal 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 as he told ambitious reporters 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 John 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 hated keeping this news from John. She hated keeping *anything* from John. Especially after last night, when they'd both opened themselves up. 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.

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 Vandell 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 Vandell 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 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 didn't look lovesick in front of a roomful of photographers and reporters.

"Let me assure you," John said to the journalists gathered about. "The rumors being spread about Kate's association with Kenneth MacDougal are not only false, they are highly offensive."

Kate could have hugged him. Thank God she had some control!

John continued. "During this time of grief, I would expect such responsible journalists as yourself to be diligent about your research. It is completely substantiated—documented by Kate herself—that she 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 around 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 MacDougal III, be in vain."

Kate stared at him, shocked. John had just shifted all of the guilt to himself. As he wrapped up his remarks and literally presented Kate to the media, she felt a peculiar sense of calm settle over her.

The suspicious, skeptical gazes that had greeted her previously had turned to curious interest. 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.

The statement the PR gurus 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 MacDougal 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 still had Ken's secret tucked under her hat.

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

Shit.

She owed him so much. *Loved* him so much. Wanted to be with him every day from this one forward.

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

* * * * *

John stalked to his office and slammed the door. Kate had left the building with Jenny. She'd actually had the audacity to have her assistant 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 had reconnected. The way her eyes had shone so brightly when she'd stood beside him before the press had convinced him they were on the road to a happy ending to this entire weekend.

Not so.

He slumped into his chair and faced his computer monitor. He had a hell of a lot of work to do. In addition to running his company, he had an absurd amount 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.

* * * * *

At eight o'clock that evening, John stood on Kate's doorstep and pounded on the door to her loft. He'd lent her his driver this morning and taken her car to the office as a divisionary tactic, but it'd also left him with access to her building. 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 gaze 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.

His heart plummeted. She'd purposely distanced herself from him. He knew it was true. 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 John.

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 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.

John's gut clenched. 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."

John couldn't help but grin as relief washed over him. So *that's* what had her hiding out! A secret she was asked to keep from someone she didn't want to keep secrets from.

"No, Kate," he said as the tension eased from his body. "What you have is a penchant for telling the truth. Which is just one of the many things I respect and admire about you."

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 it at the chair he passed. Joining Kate at the kitchen island, he said, "So you've been avoiding me all day because Jenny asked you to keep something from me?"

"Yeah," she said. She poured two glasses and handed one to him. "I told her I didn't want there to be secrets between us, but she insisted. Begged, really. How could I deny her? Especially with all she's going through right now."

"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."

She 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 me work it out."

"Really?" she asked, surprise making her brow furrow. "You won't press me?"

"No. She asked you to hold something in confidence and that's what you're going to do. I'm not going to demand you tell me. If and when the time is right, I'm sure Jenny will share her secret with me. If not...maybe it's something I'm not supposed to know."

She let out a soft laugh as she shook her head. "My God. You are so...amazing."

He eyed her curiously. "So that's it? I mean, that's really the reason you were avoiding me today? The *only* reason?"

With a nod of her head, she said, "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. I've been in hell all day because I've wanted to be with you, but I didn't trust myself."

"I've been in hell too. Because I thought you regretted what happened between us last night."

She set her glass on the counter and gave him a solemn look. "Not possible," she said. "Not in a million years. Not only could I never regret it, I also figured out a way to make it work without compromising our reputations or our integrity."

His eyes narrowed on her. "I told you I believe if we're honest from the start, there won't be too much flak."

She smiled. "There will be and you know it. But..." She held a finger up to keep him in place as she disappeared down the hall, only to return a few minutes later with a black leather portfolio in her hand. She set it in front of him on the counter and said,

"I've been toying with this idea for some time, never quite having the courage to see it through. Nor did I want to leave Archer Enterprises, but—"

"Whoa, *what?*" He was suddenly on his feet. "What do you mean *leave?*"

"Just hear me out," she said as excitement lit her face. "I have a business plan. A new venture. I want to start a financial services company and I have a couple of potential backers. It was sort of a down-the-road idea, but now might be the right time to move forward."

"Kate, no." He gave her a pointed look. "I can't lose Ken *and* you in the same week."

Her expression softened. "John, I'm not trying to make things difficult for you at work. But I want to be with you. I mean really and truly *be* with you. I'm afraid of how people will react to our relationship while I still work for you. It could wear on us both, no matter how resilient we profess to be. This is a sign," she said as she came around the counter and grasped his hands. "Yes, I'd be starting my business much sooner than I'd anticipated, but if I did it now, we could be together without all the added pressure of naysayers and critics. Accusations of nepotism can get very ugly, John. I don't want us caught up in that."

"Goddamn it, Kate," he said as he shook his head. "You know I'll support whatever you want to do. I just don't know how we'll get by without you."

She grinned. "Oh please. Archer Enterprises is solid as a rock because of you. You got by before I came along and you'll continue to do so long after I'm gone. In fact, you know that Ken had a successor in mind and it wasn't me. I don't have half of Max Stratton's experience and you know it. He's the one who'll take over Ken's division and he's got his own protégé to support him. Now's the time for me to move on, John. For me. For Archer Enterprises. For *us*."

His hands cupped her face and he said, "I can't imagine not seeing your beautiful face during the day."

"You can see it at night," she told him. "Along with the rest of me."

He groaned. "Naked instead of in a business suit. Can't say I'm opposed to that."

With a laugh, she threw her arms around him. "You never fail to take my breath away."

He kissed her long and deep. When they came up for air, he asked, "How do you feel about weddings, Kate?"

She smiled. "I like them very much."

"Good. Because I'm too much in love with you to not go all the way."

She kissed him, then said, "Consider that a mutual sentiment." With a mischievous look on her face, she said, "Speaking of going all the way..."

He winked at her. "Lead me to the bedroom, sweetheart."

"Gladly."

They'd barely crossed the threshold when he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Hard and demanding. No doubt conveying his desire. His need. For her and her alone.

He grabbed fistfuls of the hem of her nightgown and lifted it up to her waist. Then his hands skimmed over her bare ass cheeks, kneading them as he crushed her to him, his hard cock pressed against her stomach. His heart beat an erratic cadence that matched the urgency coursing through every inch of him. Perhaps someday he'd build up a tolerance to Kate, enough that he could take things slowly with her. But not tonight.

Dragging his mouth from hers, he pulled the nightgown over her head and tossed it onto a nearby chair.

"God, you are so beautiful," he said as he took in her nearly naked body from head to toe. He knelt in front of her and hooked his fingers in the sides of her lacy thong and slid the material down her parted legs. She stepped out of the panties and they went the way of her nightie.

Glancing up at her, he said, "It might be a while before you get a full night's sleep again."

She sighed. "I suppose I'll just have to endure the pleasure."

With a chuckle, he told her, "I've waited eight years for you, remember? That's eight years of fantasies to fulfill."

"Trust me, I can live with that."

He stood and scooped her up in his arms. Carrying her over to the bed, he deposited her in the middle of it and stripped off his clothes. But then a thought occurred to him that made him scowl.

"What's wrong?" Kate asked.

"I was so worked up over confronting you about avoiding me that I forgot to stop at the drugstore before I came over."

"Oh," she said with a smile. Then she scooted over to the nightstand and opened the top drawer. She extracted an unopened box of condoms and set it on the table. Turning back to him, she said, "I supposed you could say I was also hoping you'd cave. I have fantasies of my own, you know. All starring you."

"Such a naughty woman." He climbed onto the bed and kissed her. When he eventually pulled away, he said, "I literally don't know where to start with you."

"Then allow me..."

She flattened her palms against his bare chest and gave a slight shove, sending him backward. When he was sprawled out on the mattress, she settled between his legs.

John groaned. "Careful, now. I promised to keep you up half the night, remember?"

"I have every confidence you'll keep that promise."

Her fingers wrapped around his shaft, her touch causing his hips to buck. Her head dipped and her tongue slid along the full length of him, from base to tip. She took his cock in her mouth and John let out a low grunt.

“Jesus, Kate.” He gathered up her long hair in his hands and watched her go down on him. “Oh Christ, that feels so good.”

Her head bobbed as she took him deeper and sucked him hard. His hips gyrated and his fingers tightened around her strands of hair. Every nerve ending he possessed seemed to snap and sizzle. His pulse raced.

When she gently cupped his balls and rolled them carefully, he knew he was too close to losing it to let her continue. This was one of his favorite fantasies. Kate sucking his cock before he buried it deep in her cunt, bringing her the kind of pleasure she’d given him.

“Kate, sweetheart,” he said in a tight voice. “You’re going to make me come.” She didn’t stop. He released her hair and gently nudged her shoulders. “I want to come inside your pussy, Kate. Not your mouth.”

She finally let him go, but there was a satisfied look on her face.

“Enjoyed pushing me right to the edge, did you?” he asked.

She grinned. “So much time to make up for.”

“Yeah, I know.” With that, he gripped her biceps and pulled her to him.

She straddled his lap as one hand left her arm and he reached for the box of condoms that he handed to her. Tearing open the package like she couldn’t wait another second to have him inside her, she ripped the packet and rolled the latex down his thick shaft.

Her fingers on his cock and grazing his balls did not help him to stay in control. He clasped her hips in his hands and guided her down on his dick as he thrust up into her, making her gasp.

“God, you feel so good,” she said. “So full and thick inside me.”

“Perfect fit,” he told her. “Nice and snug. Warm and tight.”

Her palms pressed to his chest as he moved inside her. “I’m not exactly familiar with all the things I think you want to do to me, but I’m definitely game.”

His heart constricted. "Sweetheart, we only have to do what you're comfortable with."

Smiling down at him, she said, "I'm comfortable with you. I'm crazy in love with you. I trust you. And I want you to do really naughty things to me. Every night. Mornings too, if we can swing it."

He chuckled. "No problem there."

"Great. Now fuck me hard and fast. Apparently, that's how I like it."

How could he deny her?

"Hold on, sweetheart. It's going to be a rough ride."

His hips jerked as his cock plunged deep into her, making her cry out. She squeezed him tight as she rode him, moving in time with him. Her long hair fell over her shoulders and down her back. He pushed away the strands around her face so he could watch her as he made love to her. The pleasure that made her beautiful features even lovelier made him fuck her harder.

"Oh God, yes," she said.

Soft moans escaped her parted lips. Her breasts bounced from his intense lovemaking. One hand slid from her hair, his fingers capturing a nipple and pinching it. He squeezed her breast, then continued to toy with the nipple. As her breathing turned into short pants, his other hand moved to her clit. He rubbed the swollen bud with his thumb, pressing hard and massaging quickly.

"John," she whispered his name. "Oh God, I'm going to come."

He worked her a little faster, feeling her body tense and then quiver.

"That's it," he said in a low tone. "Come for me, Kate. Come all over my cock. Squeeze me tight."

She did, crying out his name as her orgasm hit. Mere seconds passed before he rolled her onto her back, still inside her. He wrapped her long legs around his waist and

pumped his cock in and out of her tight pussy. Her arms circled his neck and she held him to her, her breasts pressed to his chest.

“I’m going to love everything you do to me,” she told him. “I’m so glad I waited for this, John. I’m so glad that these past eight years I’ve waited to be with you. Only you.”

“God, I love you,” he said as emotion welled inside him. “From the first day we met, I think. So smart and beautiful and ambitious. How could I not?”

She smiled at him, though tears filled her eyes. “I am so very, very lucky.”

“So am I, sweetheart.”

He thrust into her once more and they both came, calling out each other’s names in unison.

As he held her to him, his cock pulsing and throbbing inside her wet cunt, their breathing coming in heavy pulls, he knew they really were meant to go all the way. To last a lifetime.

All the torment he’d suffered had been well worth the outcome.

Wanting Kate had never felt so right.

About the Author

Multi-published and award-winning author Ava McKnight's love of romantic fiction began as a teenager. She holds degrees in General Studies and Communications and has worked on newspapers as an editor and reporter. Most recently, she worked in PR, writing speeches and Congressional testimonies.

Ava is a member of Romance Writers of America and one of its Phoenix chapters, Desert Rose. She has served as a Board member, Newsletter Director, National Contest Chairperson and Arbitration Co-Chair. She is also published in romantic fiction as Calista Fox.

Ava welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by **Ava McKnight**

All for Shayla

Island Fantasy

Jordan Tamed

Satisfying Sophie

Vaughn's Bidding



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer ebooks or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com