

INTERVIEW
WITH THE
BILLIONAIRE



J. KENNER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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INTERVIEW WITH THE BILLIONAIRE

Mr. Stark still has some secrets...

When Damien Stark agrees to be interviewed for a series of articles about his life, business, and family, he never expects that the interviewer will be an old flame. Or that she's coming to the table with an agenda of her own...

In celebration of the ten year anniversary of *Release Me*, comes this unique and entirely original compilation of journal entries, letters, and exclusive interviews with and about the reclusive billionaire.

Framed by the formal interview sessions between Damien and his ex, this book includes never-before-told perspective on many of the events from the original trilogy and continuing series, interviews with his friends, family, and co-workers, and all-new content featuring Nikki, Damien, their family, and their friends.

A must-read for all Stark fans.

A NOTE FROM JK



DAMIEN ... THIS BOOK ... AND A HEARTFELT
THANK YOU!

I never expected such an incredible ten year ride when Damien Stark walked into my life ... and I hope for many more years of readers discovering the world of Damien Stark, Jackson Steele, Ryan Hunter, Ashton Stone, Matthew Holt, the men at Stark Security, and all the gang across all the Stark World books, series spin-offs, and [Patreon](#) content!

What? You didn't know there was a Stark-centric Patreon? Launching contemporaneously with this book's release, it's the place for both exclusive and early Stark World content, focusing primarily on Nikki & Damien stories that will remain exclusive to either Patreon or JK's website, plus first (and in-progress) reads of developing stories set across the whole of Stark World.

And it's not just Nikki & Damien. You'll get early or exclusive access to stories featuring other characters in Stark World—ones you've already met as well as new ones to come. I can't wait for you to meet them first!

In addition, I'll soon be rolling out swag and art, plus status updates about what I'm working on, and regularly scheduled video chats with me! That's not all, of course, and you can learn more by visiting my actual [Patreon](#).

But back to INTERVIEW WITH THE BILLIONAIRE:

This book isn't your typical book. It's not a novel. It's not even really a novella.

To be one hundred percent honest, it's a love letter to you, the fans. Originally, this book was conceived as a collection of moments and insight told through letters, interviews, and

journal entries that focus on events that were in the series, but that we didn't see from Damien's point of view.

But I wanted to make it more than that. So instead of a simple collection of moments, I decided to include an entirely new story that focuses on the interview itself. And, because it's the Starks, how could someone come into their home to do an in-depth and intimate interview without at least a little drama percolating?

So that was the impetus.

Of course, this book doesn't touch on all the characters and key scenes. That would, frankly, require writing an encyclopedia. This is more of a taste. A gift of Damien to you!

And you may see a reference to something you don't remember happening. OMG, you might have missed a book! If you think that's the case, the best thing to do is to ask about a scene in my Reader Group, the [J. Kenner Krew!](#) If they don't know the answer, feel free to ping me through the website or social media!

So is this really the end of the Stark Saga?

Yes and no.

As I said in 2021 with the release of *[Enchant Me](#)*, it was time to wrap up the series; Nikki & Damien deserve a real HEA!

So the current plan is that there will be no more Nikki & Damien at the major book vendors. But that sucks because I love writing these characters, and you love reading them! And that's why I'll still be writing novellas for them, and Patreon subscribers can read those stories in the rough as they progress, and then download an edited copy of the full book, novella, or short story as part of their Patreon subscription

once the story is finished. (And, of course, subscribers will be able to vote on covers, some story choices, names, and other fun stuff!).

For those who aren't interested in joining Patreon, I'll also sell those completed and edited digital stories through my web store. More details on that to come!

In addition, Stark World is NOT going away. In fact 2023 is going to bring new books in that world featuring Ashton Stone and Matthew Holt. Plus, I'm going to be spinning off an entirely new Stark World Series in late 2023 or early 2024 that I'm soooooo excited about! Join the [Patreon](#) to get the early details or subscribe to my [newsletter](#) so you won't miss out when those pre-orders go up!

Finally, I've been working on a **Complete Stark Booklist** that has all the books with Nikki & Damien (or just Damien in some cases), including Easter egg books where one or both of them is just a walk-on. It would have been easier had I done that as I went along, but I have to admit I've enjoyed re-reading about ten years worth of my books! (I confess there were some tears! Nikki & Damien have had some major challenges!)

As I've done so, I've been creating a spreadsheet. You can [find it here](#) and also on my website. Right now, that is the easiest way to find the reading order and also check to make sure you haven't missed a book that is either set in or touches on Stark World. Please note: This is a living document, so it will be updated regularly.

If you see any mistakes or think I missed a book, please let me know! You can email me at jkennerinfo@gmail.com

P.S.: Damien wanted to add a note:

FROM THE DESK OF DAMIEN STARK:

Dear friends,

I wanted to take a moment to thank you for being a part of my life with Nikki, our friends, and our children. As you know, we've had some rough times, but those only made us stronger. Your support has been one of our strongest lifelines.

Wishing you love and happiness,

Damien

BEWARE ... THERE BE SPOILERS AHEAD!

“ *Damienized, v. To be needful of Damien, especially in the sense of fucking and dirty talk. See, e.g., Nikki Fairchild.*]

— *Claim Me*

DAMIEN'S JOURNAL



DALLAS

I met her tonight.

Who would have thought that anything good would come from agreeing to be a celebrity judge in a Texas beauty pageant?

And yet everything good has come from it.

Everything except that I'm in a hotel room with Carmela instead of Nikki Fairchild.

One day, though.

If there is anything right and good in this universe, then one day, she will be the one sharing my bed.

“ ***He was twenty-four years old, already a sports legend with his name on goddamn cereal boxes, and fast on his way to becoming one of the wealthiest entrepreneurs in the country. Country? Fuck that, he was shooting for the world.***

Ambitious, maybe. But he'd never thought of ambition as a dirty word. On the contrary, it was what kept him alive. Like the air he breathed, the food he ate. Competition, too. The salty, almost bitter taste of it. The euphoria of success. The dark pit of failure.

- Damien

CHAPTER 1: A CHANGE OF PLANS



Damien stood on the bedroom balcony, the late afternoon sunlight dancing like fire on the waves of the Pacific. A stunning sight, but not the one he was focusing on.

No, his attention was on the woman and the three children on the pool deck below him. *His wife. His kids.*

He drew in a breath, his chest tightening merely from the sight of them. From the stunning reality that they were his. That somehow, despite all the trauma and bullshit and wrong-turns in his life, he'd found Nikki, the one person in all the world who matched him. Challenged him. Loved him.

He'd wanted her from the first moment he'd seen her. And the real miracle was that she'd wanted him just as much.

He remembered that day at the pageant in Texas. The way she'd looked. The sound of her voice. And the absolute certainty that in that moment he'd wanted nothing more than to take her hand and run as far and as fast as they could from a world that would conspire to keep them apart.

The world had beaten them that day. The world and reality. It wasn't time. Not then.

But one day...

He'd left Dallas knowing for certain that one day Nikki Fairchild would be his.

It wasn't hubris. It wasn't magic. He'd simply looked into his future, and he'd known.

He grinned. Maybe it really had been magic all along.

Below him, Nikki dropped to one knee, the Leica he'd given her so many years before aimed at the kids who were splashing in the shallow end of the pool.

"Mommy! Take me! Take me!" On the steps, three-year-old Bradley waved like a maniac.

"Bradleeeeeey!" That from Lara, who stood in the shallow water, her hands on her hips, her nine-year-old face full of exasperation. "You're not supposed to look. Mommy's taking *candids*." It was a word she'd become fascinated with the previous week, and Damien had to give her credit; so far, she'd managed to work it into seventy-five percent of every conversation she'd had since then.

"It's okay, Lara," Nikki said as she stood up again. "We photographers have to learn how to work with all our subjects, right?"

"Right." Lara's birthday present had been a camera of her own, and she'd spent much of the last few weeks taking those candids of everyone in the household, including Gregory the house manager, Sunshine the cat, and even the staff at the gatehouse. "Okay, Bradley. You can bounce."

"I wanna bounce, too! Can I? Please?" That from Anne, now seven. And the question was directed not at Nikki, but at Lara, the big sister she adored.

"I suppose so," Lara said, her voice so like Nikki's when she was reluctantly giving in to a child's demands that Damien

couldn't help but chuckle.

As he did, Nikki turned, her smile widening when she saw him. She said nothing. Instead, she lifted the camera and snapped a picture of him.

“Don't you have enough of me?”

“Never,” she said, her voice full of both heat and laughter.

“Daddy!” Anne called. “Daddy, come swim!”

“In a minute, baby girl. I need to talk to Mommy.” He shifted his gaze back to Nikki. “Can you come up?”

He saw her brow furrow, presumably wondering why he wasn't coming down. But she didn't ask, and he didn't offer. This wasn't a conversation he wanted to have in front of the kids, and he saw the realization in her eyes—no surprise considering how well they understood each other.

“Bree's getting more sunscreen,” she said, referring to their part-time nanny. “I'll be up as soon as she's back.”

He nodded, then blew her a kiss, which succeeded in erasing the worry he'd put in her eyes. Then he turned and headed out of their bedroom and into the third-floor living area that was the heart of their Malibu home.

He poured two glasses of bourbon, neat, then stood at the top of the stairs simply for the pleasure of watching his wife walk toward him, her blond hair brushing her shoulders, her nose slightly pink from the sun.

She wore a two-piece bathing suit with a gauzy wrap tied around her waist. It was sheer, and her leg emerged from the slit as she climbed the stairs. As it did, he could see one of the scars that marred the inside of her thigh. A battle scar. A mark of honor, not shame. Because those scars were how she'd

coped with growing up in a household that rivaled the fucked-up-ness of his own. A mother who could give even Jeremiah Stark a run for his money.

Unlike Jeremiah, Elizabeth Fairchild was still alive. Thankfully, though, they hadn't heard from her in well over a year.

A small miracle, as far as Damien was concerned.

"You look happy," Nikki said, reaching the landing and sliding into his arms. "And here I thought you'd be traumatized."

He heard the tease in her voice. "About turning forty next week? Why? Are you planning on leaving me for a younger man?"

"Of course." She tilted her head back, her expression serious. "I'm debating between Sven or Terence. But it's so hard to choose. Maybe I'll just go with both of them."

He tugged her even closer, then silenced her gasp with a long, lingering kiss that had her moaning, the sound and the feel of her body curved against his making him hard. "I think somebody's looking to be punished."

Heat and amusement danced in her eyes. "By you, Mr. Stark? Always."

He chuckled, then slid back to release her even while twining his fingers with hers. "I'd like to say that was part of our agenda this weekend, but I'm afraid plans have changed."

"Oh. What happened." They'd been planning to leave the kids with their aunt and uncle while he and Nikki escaped to a desert spa retreat. The grown-up part of his upcoming birthday celebration.

“Evelyn called,” he said, referring to his lifelong friend and agent. “Apparently the fact that I’ve survived four decades on this planet is newsworthy. There’s a magazine that wants to do an in-depth profile on me.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

He understood the question. Despite being one of the most recognizable men in the world, he was also one of the most private. Or he tried to be. Somehow, life kept tossing him back into the public eye.

“I am. Or, rather, I’m resigned to it. Evelyn insists it will be a boon for the company image and excellent publicity for the sports center.”

The S&S Sports Center was a Stark and Steele joint project that was being dedicated in less than a week. Though it was already a high profile project, publicity for a public venue was never a bad thing.

“Plus, according to Evelyn, the article will be a reminder of how young I still am compared to how much I’ve accomplished.”

“Oh, good,” Nikki said. “I’m so relieved.”

He frowned. “Relieved?”

“Well, while I think the tiny bit of gray at your temple is sexy as hell, I was starting to worry that you were over the hill.”

He laughed. “Careful, wife.”

“Now that I know better,” she continued airily, “I can don’t have to worry about choosing between Sven or Tarlton for at least another decade.”

“I thought it was Terence.”

She waved a hand dismissively. “Who can keep them all straight?”

“Definitely looking for a spanking...”

Her smile was pure sin. “Only a spanking, Mr. Stark?”

“God, I love you.”

Once again, she wrapped her arms around his waist, then rose on her toes to brush a kiss over his lips. “I promise you, the feeling is entirely mutual.”

“I really am sorry. But obviously this is time-sensitive. According to Evelyn, they’re saving space in the layout. The next issue of the magazine is scheduled to release on my birthday.”

“Guess I know what I’ll be getting you,” she said, as they headed toward the sofa.

“You really don’t mind?” He sat, then tugged her onto his lap.

“I’m disappointed, but the resort’s not going anywhere. Other than that, you’re the one on the hot seat.”

He cleared his throat. “Actually, about that...”

Her brows rose as he trailed off. “Mmm-hmm?”

“Apparently this reporter is hoping to spend the weekend with us. I thought we could put her up in the bungalow. She’s a photographer, too, so just her. But she does want to interview family and friends as well. And get photos of us and the house.”

“Family?”

He heard the tightness in her voice. “I already told her no interviews or pictures of the kids. One family photo if you’re

okay with that, then we send them off to Jackson and Sylvia's just like we planned."

They'd had a no-publicity policy about their kids from the time they'd adopted Lara, but after Anne's kidnapping, they'd become even more diligent. Now, Nikki nodded slowly. "One family photo should be fine so long as we choose the location and can veto the image." She drew a breath. "All right. I guess you can tell Evelyn we're in."

"Next weekend for the resort?"

"That, Mr. Stark, is a date." She slid off his lap, then held out her hand to him. He took it and stood. "We should go rescue Bree. You're still getting in the pool with us?"

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

"So who's the reporter?"

"Maggie Bridge. Apparently she does a lot of celebrity interviews. I'm not familiar with her, but Evelyn says she's the real deal."

"She'd have to be. Evelyn wouldn't let anyone else get close to you."

"No. She wouldn't." He hesitated at the top of the stairs. He'd been living in a publicity spotlight since the day he won his first tennis match. That combined with the star-power that came with the success of Stark International had made him comfortable giving interviews, and he knew how to position himself for the press.

None of that meant that he liked it, and that was especially true when the publicity machine ventured into his personal life.

"Second thoughts, Mr. Stark?"

“And third and fourth.”

“We’ll be fine. You’ll wrap that reporter around your little finger, and my chops with the press aren’t too shabby, either.”

She was right about that. Not only did she have press experience from years on the pageant circuit, but her public revelations about her history with cutting, the press and publicity for Fairchild Development, and the simple fact that she was his wife and the press wouldn’t stay away had all come together to make Nikki comfortable in front of a camera. That’s not to say she sought it out, but she could definitely handle herself.

“Of course, we’ll be fine,” he said, taking her hand as they descended the stairs. “What can touch us, so long as we’re together?”

DAMIEN'S JOURNAL



10TH BIRTHDAY

Dear Mom:

It's my birthday. I'm ten today, and I miss you. I wish I could call you or send you a letter. I know I can't. So I'm talking to you in my journal instead. I don't know if you can read this. I hope you can. I miss you so much.

You told me to be strong. I'm trying to. Really. But it's super hard.

It was easier at first because I did what you said about playing tennis when I was sad or scared or angry or just missing you. I loved it so much. The game. Hitting the ball, and making it go where I wanted.

And winning.

Guess what? You were right. It helped. With the missing you, I mean. And the more I played, the more I loved it.

After you left, I started playing in tournaments. And Mr. Lang—do you remember my gym coach when I was 8? Anyway, he started practicing with me after school. But then he couldn't anymore, but he got me into a summer tennis camp even though Dad said we couldn't afford it because there wasn't money left. But Mr. Lang talked to Coach Sanders. He's a pro who works at the tennis center, and he said that he'd coach me. And he did for almost an entire year.

It was so awesome.

I'd play all day, and then wait in the building with my books until Dad picked me up.

Oh—I forgot to tell you. I just finished *I, Robot*. You were right. It was really good. I want to read *Stranger In a Strange Land*, but the lady at the library said I'm not old enough. I'm gonna bike to the bookstore and buy it anyway. I have enough allowance saved up, so Dad doesn't have to know.

And one of the people who volunteers at the sport center teaches high school physics. I asked him if I could mow his lawn, and he'd teach me instead of pay me.

He said I wasn't old enough, but I told him I was. You said so one time, and I told him that. So he said he'd give me a test, and he asked me a bunch of questions about Newton and quantum stuff and electromagnetic forces and all sorts of stuff that wasn't hard at all.

I told him so, too. I don't think he believed me, but then he read all my answers, and he said that he'd spend an hour with me three times a week and on Saturdays, too, if we had time.

We did that for three months, and it was so awesome.

But then about six months ago, everything changed.

Dad changed it.

The thing is, Mom, I hate him.

I hate my father.

I hate Jeremiah Stark.

And I hate Merle Richter, too. I know I shouldn't say so, but I do.

I. Hate. My. Father. And. Merle Richter.

It feels really good to say that.

Do you already know what happened? Do you even know who Coach Richter is?

This is what happened:

Dad heard Coach Sanders telling someone I had potential. And then right after I turned nine, I won a tournament for kids in SoCal— isn't that cool? I beat all the others and got a trophy and a check, too, for a hundred dollars.

Dad let me keep the trophy, but he took the money.

I didn't care. Not much. But I wanted to celebrate with Coach.

But do you know what Dad did? He fired Coach Sanders the very next day.

Does that even make sense?

I mean, Coach was good, right? But Dad fired him. And then he hired Coach Richter.

I hate him.

I hate him so much I want to quit. He says I can't. He says it's good for me, but I think it's because I won money. Dad likes money. And I've won more, too. He keeps it all.

The game isn't fun anymore. Mom, he pretty much ruined last year. I wish you were here instead of him.

The only good thing is that Coach has a daughter. Her name's Sofia, and she's nice. She's terrible at tennis, but we have fun. So I guess that's something.

And I've been in a bunch of newspapers. I guess that tournament was a big deal. Winning's fun. So is seeing my picture in magazines and the paper and stuff. But it's

weird, too. Like I'm a circus animal, you know?
Doing tricks.

Coach Richter says we're going to go big. I don't know what that means, but I overheard him talking to Dad. I think they're going to pull me out of school. I don't want them to. If you were here, he wouldn't. You wouldn't let him.

I wish you were here.

I wish he'd died and not you, and I don't even care if I'm not supposed to say stuff like that.

Anyway, that's me. I guess I mostly wanted to say that Dad's a jerk. But I think you already knew that.

P.S. Dad found out about the physics stuff and now I can't do that anymore. I know I'm not supposed to hate my dad, but I do. I wish I didn't. I wish I had a different dad.

“ *I close my eyes, just soaking up the feel of him. It's more potent than coffee, and if I could bottle this sensation, I'd be richer than my husband.*

- **Seduce Me**

CHAPTER 2: COUNTDOWN



Damien's phone vibrated, and he checked the text, then frowned. "She's here," he said to Nikki, who was still in her robe at the table in the third floor kitchen.

"Here?" She glanced at the clock on the microwave. "She's a full fifteen minutes early."

"I could leave her in the drive, but I don't think that Evelyn would approve of that first impression to someone who's writing about us."

"You're the one who was a master of the universe in his twenties. I could take the kids away for the weekend. Leave you to the barrage of personal questions. She might have said family, but we both know this article is really about you."

He heard the tease in her voice, but there was nothing teasing when he took her hands, then met her eyes.

"How could she possibly write about me, but not about you? You're as much a part of me as my blood. As the air I breathe."

He watched as her eyes went soft, then turned sharp with humor. "In other words, you don't want to deal with this by yourself."

"Not even in the slightest."

“I guess I’ll stay, then.” She moved closer, her hands going around his waist as she tilted her head back for a kiss. “I’ll go finish getting dressed. Will you make sure Bree has the kids looking presentable? When’s Jackson’s crew coming?”

“In about an hour,” Damien said.

“Perfect. That’s about when Jamie said she and Ryan and Ollie would get here. We need to get Evelyn and Frank to come, too,” she added, referring to her once-estranged father, who just happened to be Evelyn’s new husband.

“Family day,” he said, and she grinned.

“Even if it’s for a reporter, it’s nice to have family under the roof.”

“It is,” he said. As far as he was concerned, Jamie and Ryan were definitely family. Ryan was as close to him as a brother, and Jamie and Nikki had been like sisters since childhood.

As for Ollie...

Damien had come a long way with the third in the Nikki-Jamie-Ollie musketeer troupe, and while he genuinely liked the guy now, he didn’t rank Ollie in their first circle of friends and family.

His wife did, though. And that meant Damien would, too. Even if Ollie was a sometimes-prick who used to be in love with Nikki, and might still be.

Then again, Damien could hardly blame him.

“Did I lose you?” Nikki’s forehead creased as she peered up at him.

“Just thinking about logistics,” he lied. “I thought we could let this reporter—Maggie—get her photos early, and then

Jackson and Syl can whisk the kids away. I imagine Ryan's crew will join them."

She laughed. "Am I a bad person for being very, very jealous of them and the kids?"

"If you are, then so am I," he admitted.

She released a dramatic sigh. "The price you pay for being so damn important. And I pay it just from loving you."

He kissed her again, this time his hands sliding inside her robe. "Too steep?"

"Never, Mr. Stark," she said, then moaned softly as his hands cupped her bare ass under the robe. "But if you want this interview to stay businesslike, you might want to stop that. Unless you want them to hold her at the gate for an hour."

"I'm sure we could manage faster than that," he said, making her laugh even as she backed away from him.

"I'll take you up on that later, Mr. Stark. In the meantime," she continued as the doorbell chimed, "you should probably go greet our guest. It's almost time for the Damien Stark Show."

DAMIEN'S JOURNAL



OLLIE

The bottom line is that I'm the asshole.

Then again, so is Ollie McKee.

But tonight was mostly on me. Still, she's mine, dammit.

Nikki.

The woman I've yearned for since the first moment I saw her. A woman with whom I'd connected instantly, as if we'd known each other forever. I couldn't have her then in Texas—we'd had to wait six years to find each other again—but now that we have, she is mine. I've claimed her.

Hell, I love her.

But so does fucking Ollie McKee.

And even though I know that Nikki only thinks of him as a friend, I made an ass of myself. Hell, I put myself—and my temper—on display at The Rooftop, a club for fuck's sake. And won't that be all over the tabloids tomorrow?

Frankly, I'm surprised I didn't punch him. God knows he deserves it, abusing his position at the firm. Digging into my business. Yes, he deserved it. And the only reason I've cut him any slack is that I know he's only looking out for her. That wins him a pass. One pass.

But I did embarrass Nikki. More than that, she thinks I came because I didn't trust her. I do. I don't trust Ollie, but I trust Nikki without reservation. But trust wasn't even the heart of it.

Dammit. The idea of hurting her—of causing her any pain—is enough to destroy me. And yet it was my own damn temper—no, jealousy—leading the show. Sending me hurtling across town simply so I could see her. Could pull her into my arms.

Could assure myself that she was still mine.

Millions at my fingertips and an entire empire at my command, and when it comes to Nikki, I lose myself completely. It makes sense, I suppose. Because I would be lost without her.

I think I was before.

No, I'm sure of it.

And the miracle is that she feels the same.

I know that none of this is Ollie's fault, but I hate knowing he's held her. Comforted her. And yet at the same time, I'm so grateful that he was there when she was in pain. I may have been the one who kicked that asshole Kurt to the curb, but it was Ollie who held her after Kurt hurt her. I am so grateful to him for that. And yet I will resent him until eternity.

I'm not jealous of Jamie. I shouldn't be jealous of him. He's just a friend. From Nikki's side, anyway.

*But I see the truth. He's in love with her.
I think he has been for years. And for that
alone, I feel sorry for him. Because I know
what it's like to love her and not have her.*

But she is mine now.

*And Ollie, my man, it is time for you to
move on.*

“ *I would have sought you out. Count on it, Mrs. Stark. We’re part of each other, Nikki. We’re inevitable, you and I.*

- *Lost With Me*

CHAPTER 3: BLAST FROM THE PAST



As Damien started down the stairs, he heard the sound of Gregory, his long-time house manager, opening the door.

“Good morning, ma’am. Mr. Stark is on his way. If you could just wait here,” he added, and Damien saw his arm indicate the sofa in the first floor great room. “Can I get you some coffee?”

“I’d love some. Thank you.”

Damien frowned. The open door was blocking his view of the woman, but there was something familiar about the woman’s voice. Something he couldn’t quite place.

Perhaps she’d interviewed him before or they’d met at a function. Except that didn’t seem right either. He’d paused midway down the staircase instead of continuing down to greet her immediately, and something told him to trust that instinct.

A moment later he was glad that he had, because the moment she passed the door, he recognized her.

Well, fuck.

He turned, hoping she wouldn’t notice him, then hurried back up the stairs and into the kitchen, well out of view of the

first floor. Without thinking, he grabbed a cup of coffee off the small table, then took a long swallow, barely even noticing that it had gone cold.

“Damien?”

He looked up to see Nikki at the opposite entryway, still in her robe. “I came back for another cup of coffee. Why are you here? I thought you were going down to greet that reporter.”

“Gregory let her in.”

She stared at him as if he was speaking Latin. Of course, Gregory had let him in. That’s what Gregory did if he was on-site. And then it was Damien or Nikki’s role to actually greet the guest as the homeowner.

“I need to call Evelyn,” he said.

She moved closer, then put her hand on his arm, her forehead furrowed. “What’s going on?”

He only shook his head, then held up a finger. He pulled his phone out of the pocket of the suit he’d worn in anticipation of the photo shoot, then indicated that Nikki should follow him. The odds of anyone on the first floor overhearing a third-floor conversation were slim to none, but he still felt better in the bedroom with the door closed.

He put the phone on speaker and dialed Evelyn’s mobile.

“How’s my favorite son-in-law?” Not Evelyn. *Frank*.

“Could be better,” he admitted. “Is Evelyn around? We’ve hit a speed bump on this interview she set up.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound good. Hang on. She just stepped outside.”

As Frank put the phone down to go get Evelyn, Damien met Nikki's eyes, and her smile just about melted him. When Frank Dunlop—originally Leonard Frank Fairchild—had come to Los Angeles with the hope of getting to know the daughter he'd abandoned as a child, Damien had been terrified that the man was going to hurt Nikki again. And considering her mother's utter inability to be either a decent human or a good parent, the thought that Frank would break her heart, Damien still believed he'd had good reason to be worried and suspicious.

Thankfully, Frank had been sincere, and over time he'd become a true father and a solid addition to the family. His recent marriage to Evelyn was an even bigger plus, bringing the woman who already stood as Nikki's surrogate mother truly into the family.

"Damien?" He heard the concern in Evelyn's throaty voice as she came onto the line. "What happened?"

"Maggie Bridge."

"I'm not following, kiddo."

"She's here. She's Lena. Maggie Bridge is Magdalena Spicer."

"Good God."

"Yeah," Damien said, his eyes on Nikki's confused expression. "That pretty much sums it up. I want her out of my house. Normally, she already would be, but I know you've been working your ass off to pull together all the marketing and publicity for the Center. So I figured I owed you the courtesy of the call."

"And I appreciate it. Can you give me five minutes?"

He checked the security feed on his phone, saw that Lena was settled on the sofa reviewing what looked like notes as she sipped a cup of coffee that Gregory must of served her.

“Five is fine.” Let her stew a little bit longer.

“I’ll call you right back,” she said, then ended the call.

“Okay,” Nikki said. “What’s going on? Who is that woman?”

“An ex,” Damien said, the word feeling chalky on his tongue.

Her brows rose. “I’m guessing it didn’t end well.”

“It most definitely did not.”

“When was this? And what happened?”

“About two years before we met at Evelyn’s party.”

“Met again, you mean.”

He thought of the way she’d looked the first time he’d seen her. A reluctant pageant princess with something more interesting to offer than an empty hope for world peace. “Yes,” he said. “Met again.”

“So this was back in your *fucking, not dating* period.”

“Nice to know my wife pays attention.”

“And has an excellent memory. Especially when the topic intrigues me.”

“Are you saying I intrigue you?”

“You always have,” she said, then raised a brow. “And quit flirting and tell me. Evelyn’s going to call back soon.”

He chuckled. He wasn’t happy about the woman sitting downstairs, but the banter with his wife had definitely

improved his mood. “Fair enough.” He moved to sit on the foot of the bed, and Nikki sat beside him. “We went out. We enjoyed each other.”

“You romped between the sheets.”

“Such a way with words. But yes.”

“And how exactly is she’s different from all the other women who’ve shared your bed?”

“I didn’t think she was. She certainly wasn’t the woman who had been on my mind since I’d been one of the judges in a certain Texas beauty pageant.”

A slow grin danced on her mouth. “Buttering me up?”

“Just being honest. The truth is that she wasn’t different. We had sex. Not vanilla, but nothing particularly over-the-top. We went to restaurants. Bars. A few clubs. I took her to a few functions where a date was expected. It was fine. Not exceptional, but fine. And neither of had expectations.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“I was. Later I came to the realization that her expectations had nothing to do with me and everything to do with my bank account. And once it became clear that I didn’t intend open the purse-strings for more than the cost of a few gifts and meals, she devised her own path.”

“Ahhh.” She stretched out on the bed, propping herself up so that she could look at him as he shifted to face her.”
Elaborate, please.”

“She started to publish and sell articles about me. About our sex life. As graphic as she could get away with, and not even entirely accurate.

As soon as I realized—and Evelyn drew my attention immediately—I cut all ties with her. She continued to publish, with even more exaggeration, and suggested that our break-up was the kind of clusterfuck that entailed flying dishes and keyed cars.”

Nikki had propped herself up, and now she was looking at him with wide, disgusted eyes. “Did you bury the bitch?”

He smiled; god, but he loved her. “I didn’t. I denied her allegations when directly asked and otherwise ignored them. I think that pissed her off more.”

“I bet it did.” She frowned. “But Evelyn said she’s legit. She wouldn’t have hooked you up with some sort *National Enquirer* type rag. And a legit magazine wouldn’t have hired her if she’s writing trashy tabloid stuff.”

“True enough.” He glanced at the phone. If Evelyn was really calling back in five, they should be hearing soon.

As if the thought had conjured her, the phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID and pushed the button to connect the call simultaneously. “Tell me.”

“The magazine doesn’t have an alternate reporter. Not one who can file the story in time. We can pull it, Damien. It’s your call. But I’m going to advise against it. Maggie Bridge has a solid reputation, and her editor is fine with giving you final approval of the article after I suggested that you’d had some issues with her coverage under her previous pen name.”

“I see,” he said as Nikki reached for his hand. “So they were aware of the Lena Spicer by-line?”

“She owned up to it when she applied for the job. Said she didn’t want to do the tabloid trash. She also said that she knew she crossed the line with her articles about the two of you.

That's one of the reasons for the new name. She wanted a *bridge* between the old Lena and the new Maggie."

"Is that so?"

"I was surprised, too," Evelyn admitted. "So what do you think? It's your call, obviously, but I think you should move forward. You have full veto power on the actual article, so other than spending time with a woman you'd rather be far away from, there's really no downside."

He glanced at Nikki, who nodded.

"We'll move forward. You've done a hell of a lot to get the publicity for the center set up. I'm not going to sabotage that because of ancient history."

"That's the mogul I know and love. Call me if you need me."

His smile widened. "Consider this the call. You said yourself she wants family here for interviews and photos. A year ago, you might have had an excuse. But as long as you're wearing Frank's ring, you're tagged. He's coming, you're coming. Mom."

"I knew I'd stumble across a reason I shouldn't have signed that license."

He grinned, hearing the humor in her voice.

"Everyone's coming at eleven," Nikki put in.

"I know, Texas. I was already planning on it. You don't think I'd send your dad into the lion's den alone? Now go do that interview. Assuming you're okay with it, too, Texas."

"As long as she's not making a play for my husband, I think I'll survive. I mean, if I eschewed every woman in

Damien's past, I'd have essentially no women to talk to in this town."

"My wife is a comedian."

"And yet remarkably accurate. Ciao, you two. We'll see you soon."

She ended the call, and Damien reached for Nikki, pulling her across the bed until she was spooning against him. "All those women, but it was only ever you I wanted. From the first moment I saw you on that stage rattling on about world peace."

She squirmed around to face him. "I never."

"I know. Why do you think I fell for you so hard and so fast?"

"Me, too."

"There's only you, baby. There's only ever been you."

"Liar."

He cupped her chin as he looked deep into those blue-green eyes, as vibrant as the sea. "I'm not. And you know it."

"Yeah," she said with the kind of smile that set his heart on fire. "I do."

DAMIEN'S JOURNAL



LENA/NIKKI

So many years of keeping a journal, and now I've fallen out of the habit.

No, I've been shoved out of it.

This life I've fought so hard for for is a harsh mistress, and my time is no longer my own. That's not a complaint, but the truth is that there are too many things I want to accomplish. Too many mountains to climb. Too many opportunities.

Perhaps there is value in recording my thoughts—certainly these musings helped me keep my sanity during the long years with my father. With Richter. When Sofia and I were being sucked into the seventh circle of hell.

But that is not where I am anymore.

And so I will retire this journal. My calendar will be a new record. Not an emptying of my thoughts, but a recordation of key moments. It is a compromise, and isn't that what all the pundits who comment on my success are always saying? That my greatest skill is my ability to juggle. To choose the path. To face my choices and make the hard decisions?

It's true, so why not embrace it?

And yet...

One more entry, because I have to get it out. And better on paper than fulminating in my blood – Lena. The woman I've been fucking. I thought we had an understanding. That we were both burning off steam. Simply enjoying each other until we were tired of each other. And now she's taken to the press to vilify me.

I have no intention of sinking to her level. As far as I'm concerned, she can say whatever the hell she wants, but if she's looking for a reaction, she'll get no satisfaction from me.

For that matter, perhaps she's done me a favor. The truth is, I've found no no satisfaction—well, none more than physical—with any of the women I've gone out with, and certainly not within the last four years.

That was when I saw her. When I heard her speak to those stone-faced pageant judges. Not about bullshit causes that she knew nothing about. But about education and science. About learning and progress. About achievement and hard work.

The woman is stunning. Poised and beautiful. And yet that is not that attraction. At least not all of it. No, I find her fascinating. The way she thinks. Who she is.

She has become the standard against which I measure all other women, and none have lived up to the example she's set.

I wonder what she would think if she knew that I was watching her academic career even as I have financed part of it. I haven't cut corners for her—in fact I specifically recused myself from the committees that selected her. She did not need my help.

But now that my money is financing much of her education, it seems only fair that I should watch from afar.

She is the one.

Nikki Fairchild.

And since the day I first saw her, all other women have paled in comparison.

I want her. I can say it here, on these pages that I will soon abandon.

I want this woman. I want her submission, her trust, her love. I want to know that a woman such as her wants me as well. That she sees me and not the bank account.

I believe she would. No, I am certain of it.

And yet I don't know if that day will every arrive.

If it doesn't, will I spend the rest of my life lost in a sea of what might have been? Because I'd had the chance. For one shining

moment in Texas, I could have taken her hand
and run away.

She would have come with me; I'm certain
of it.

But we both stayed.

And now I can't help but wonder if we will
be together again.

But, no. That is pessimism talking.

We will be together.

She is mine, after all.

And no other path is possible.

“ *Every one of your scars reflects strength. But yes, he adds, brushing his lips over the C-section scar. “This one is definitely my favorite.*

- *Hold Me*

CHAPTER 4: FAMILY TIME



THE STORY

“She’s waiting downstairs, and the others will be here soon. We should go.” She started to turn toward the door.

He took her elbow, tugging her toward him. “No. I don’t think so.”

She turned back to him, and he could see the question in her eyes. It faded, though, and in the same moment her eyebrows rose in both amusement and interest.

“You have another suggestion, Mr. Stark?”

“I think you know exactly what I’m suggesting,” he said, moving closer, then tugging on the sash on her robe to release the bow. It fell open, and he slid his hands inside, his palms grazing her hips as she drew in a breath. “And I think you know exactly what I need.”

“She’s waiting.” The protest was soft. And not the least bit convincing.

“So you said. But I need this, baby. I know why I’m letting her into our home, but that doesn’t mean I like it.”

“Do you think I don’t understand? You’re pissed off that she’s here and you can’t toss her out. Or you could, but it

wouldn't be satisfying because it would tank part of the work Evelyn's done."

"You do know me well."

She put her hands on his, then gently pushed them off her hips. For a moment his heart hitched, fearing that she could deny him this. Then she moved to the intercom. "Gregory, something's come up. Can you make sure our guest is comfortable? We should be free by ten-thirty."

"Of course."

She turned back to him, her smile as mischievous as his own. But it wasn't humor that pulsed in his veins, especially not when she shrugged out of the robe, letting it fall to a heap on the floor as she walked toward him. "Whatever you need, Damien. Whenever you need it."

"Do you have any idea how much I love you?"

"I think I have a clue," she said, sliding into his arms. "I'm pretty sure we're breaking every social rule in the book. My mother would be having a fit."

"Makes it all the more exciting doesn't it?"

"Hell, yes," she said, then gasped as he cupped her naked ass and pulled her closer so that her body pressed against his cock, already blissfully, painfully hard.

"Tell me what you want from me, Mr. Stark."

"You've already given me everything I could ever want. Right now, I just want to enjoy what's mine."

She grinned. "That would be pretty much everything across many acres. Not to mention huge chunks of Los Angeles. And the world for that matter."

“You’re thinking far too big. The only possession I intend to enjoy right now is the one in this room with me.”

Her eyes widened as she looked around the room. “The bed? The furniture? Or perhaps the light fixtures?”

“You.”

She eased to the bed and sat at the foot. “Mr. Stark, are you suggesting that I’m your possession? That you *own* me?”

“I’m not suggesting at all. I’m stating it outright.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. Do you have a bill of sale? Some sort of contract? After all, transfer of title is a highly regulated transaction. You should be able to provide proof of ownership.”

He patted himself down, then aimed a frown at her as he took a step closer. “I seem to have misplaced the documents. I wonder if I could provide you some other proof?”

He moved closer still so that she had to lean back and tilt her head up to look at him. “And what kind of proof would that be?” she asked.

“Familiarity with my property, for starters. An intimate knowledge. How this lovely trinket I own feels.”

“Trinket?” The laughter in her voice faded into a needy moan as he slid his fingertip deep inside her cunt, then traced it up to her cleavage. “How it tastes,” he continued, then slipped his finger into his mouth as her eyes locked on his. “How to best enjoy it,” he added, once again taking her hips and pulling her toward him so that her hot skin was pressed against his slacks, and his hands were sliding down her backside, on a mission to tease her ass.

“Well, it’s not ideal, Mr. Stark.” Her voice was reedy, as if passion was making her desperate for air. “But I suppose if you don’t have the paperwork, you can continue trying to prove ownership. I warn you, though. I’ll take a lot of convincing.”

“I’m nothing if not diligent. And very, very thorough.” On the last, he picked her up at the waist and tossed her onto the bed. She cried out, the sound muffled when he slid on top of her, his mouth closing over her breast as his fingers slipped inside her.

“Nikki.”

He spoke her name like a prayer. And why not? She was a goddess as far as he was concerned. She’d given him life. She’d given him everything. And he intended to give everything back in return.

“You’re mine,” he murmured. “Tell me.”

“Yours,” she said. “Oh, god, yes.”

He rolled to the side, then got off the bed, tossing his suit jacket aside. Then he held out his hand for her.

She took it without question, and he led her to the glass door and onto the side of the balcony that faced away from their pool deck, giving them complete privacy from anyone down there.

“Here,” he said, putting her hands on the railing. It was glass and iron, and though their property extended down to the distant beach and there was no one else in sight, just the thought that someone might see them excited him. Because she was his, and damned if he didn’t want everyone to know it.

He eased closer behind her, one hand teasing her nipple, the other sliding between her legs to play with her clit.

“You’re so wet. Is it me or the possibility of being seen?”

“You. Always you.”

“But?”

“Maybe it’s a little of both.”

He chuckled. “Close your eyes. Keep them closed.” He brushed his lips over the edge of her ear. “Do you see them? The people coming to the beach? The boats on the water with their binoculars and telescopes. What if they turned this way. What if they looked up? What would you do?”

“Whatever you told me to.”

“Good answer,” he said as he thrust his fingers inside her, then teased the spot that always made her squirm.

“Do you want me to fuck you like this? Claiming your ass with my cock, and your cunt with my fingers? Pressing you up against the edge so that you’re trapped between me and the glass with no where to go and the whole world watching? Do you want that? Does it excite you?”

“Yes. Oh, please, yes.” Her voice trembled, but she didn’t need to speak to answer. Her body shouted what she wanted. Hell, what she needed.

What he needed, too.

“Don’t move,” he said, then hurried inside, only to return minutes later with lube. “I’m going to make you explode,” he promised as he teased her ass with slick fingers, while his other hand played with her clit.

“You’re so wet, baby,” he said. “And I’m so hard.” He unzipped the pants that cost more than some cars, then pressed the tip of his rock-hard cock to her ass. She whimpered in protest when he pulled his hand away from her clit to tease her ass cheeks, and he felt her back go rigid as he eased inside her, then relax as she whispered, “Yes. Damien, please, yes,” as he moved slowly inside her, letting her adjust to the feel of him.

“More,” she said, but when he moved his hand back around to tease her clit, he found her own fingers there. “Naughty,” he said. “I like it.” He gave her ass one quick smack for disobeying and felt the sigh of pleasure run through her entire body. Then he put his hand on hers and brushed his lips against her ear. “We’re going to do this together, baby.”

“Yes. And Damien?”

“What is it baby.”

“Harder. Your cock. Please. Ride me harder.”

He was happy to oblige. He held her steady with one hand on her hip as he fucked her ass, his fingers fucking her as she teased her clit. She was so close. So was he. And with every one of her gasps and moans, he edged closer to release.

“Don’t stop..” she begged. “Don’t stop.”

“Never. I want to stay like this forever. Lost inside you. Touching you. Hearing the sounds you make when you’re aroused. Knowing it’s me you want.”

“Only you. Only ever you—*Damien.*”

He felt the explosion come on, and he took his hand away long enough to cover her mouth just in case the kids were outside when she screamed, her body going wild around him, tightening, thrumming, bringing him all the way over.

Until finally, his body left hers, and he stumbled back.

“Don’t move. Keep your eyes closed.”

She nodded, and he went into the bathroom, then returned with a damp towel to clean them both up.

Are your eyes still closed?

“Yes.”

“There’s someone down there.”

She tensed.

“They watched us baby. They watched us the whole time.”

“Damien...”

He kissed her earlobe. “We’re alone. But the thought excited you.”

“Yes.”

“Me, too. I’ll take you back to Masque soon. I think my wife might like to try new things.”

“She might,” Nikki said. “But I want to be blindfolded.”

“Do you? Why?”

“Because I’d never know for sure if someone was watching. If they were getting off watching us. And I like the maybe.”

“You like the knife edge.”

“I do. And in case you couldn’t tell, she added, sliding his hand between her legs, “I also liked what we did just now very, very much.”

“Ten-twenty,” he said as he slipped back into his suit jacket. He’d settled on the Desmond Merrion bespoke suit he’d picked up in London on his last trip. It wasn’t a suit that suggested power. On the contrary, it shouted it from the rooftops. He’d worked hard to hone the skill of quiet intimidation. A handy skill in business negotiations.

Today, he was more than happy to use that particular skill with Lena.

“Ten minutes to spare,” Nikki said. “I don’t even know what to do with myself.”

“Care for a quickie?”

She’d bent down to scratch Sunshine, their cat. Now she glanced up at him, amusement dancing in her eyes. “You’re insatiable. It’s one of your finer qualities,” she added making him laugh. “Although right now I think it’s less about lusting after your doting wife, and more about avoiding the woman waiting for us downstairs.”

“You do know me well.”

“Come on, Mr. Stark,” she said, abandoning the cat as she slipped on a pair of heeled sandals that complemented her classically styled sheath dress. “I think it’s showtime.”

They took the elevator rather than the stairs to the first level, giving them a chance to swing by the playroom where Bree was keeping the kids occupied. As soon as they stepped into the room, cries of *Mama! Daddy! Mommy!* filled the room, along with the patter of three pairs of little feet barreling toward them.

“Miss Bree says lots of people are coming today,” Lara said.

“And for pictures,” Anne added.

“Daddy! Daddy! Look at me! Look at me!”

“I see you,” Damien said, scooping up their dark-haired son, Bradley, a precocious three-year-old. “And yes,” he told his girls, “we’re going to do some pictures, and then you’re going to get to spend most of the day with Aunt Sylvia and Uncle Jackson.”

“Jeffery, too?”

“And Ronnie?”

“Are they coming over, too?”

“What about Aunt Jamie?”

“What about Grandpa and Evie?”

The questions poured out of the kids like rocket-fire, and he couldn’t help but laugh. Apparently Nikki couldn’t either, because he could hear the chuckle in her voice when she dove into the fray to answer their questions. “Yes, your cousins are coming. And Grandpa and Evelyn. There’s a lady here who’s writing an article about Daddy, so she wants to meet his family and some of his friends and co-workers. It’s going to be mostly boring, so Aunt Sylvia and Jackson will talk to her first, then you’ll go home with them. Deal?”

“Deal!” Bradley said from where he squirmed at Damien’s hip.

“What do you need me to do to get them ready?”

“Not a thing,” Nikki assured her. “I’ll take care of it. Not that there’s much to do. They all have drawers at Syl and Jackson’s place.”

“What about here? Sounds like it’s going to be a crush. Would you like me to help?”

“I thought you were on deadline?” Bree had recently sold the book she’d written after moving back to LA and enrolling in a low residency MFA program.

“Don’t all writers procrastinate?”

Nikki rolled her eyes. “Well, we don’t need any help with people wrangling, but my guess is she’ll want to talk with you, too. Especially since we’re not letting her interview the kids.”

“I want to talk to the lady, Mommy. Why can’t I?”

“Because those are the rules, kiddo,” Damien said. “You know that.”

He and Nikki had implemented a strict no-press rule when they adopted Lara. Not that they avoided talking about the kids publicly, but they highly edited their comments.

As for the kids, they gave no interviews. Not now, anyway. Probably not until they turned eighteen and could decide for themselves if they wanted to step fully into those shark-infested waters.

He and Nikki had discussed backing off that policy once they reached high school. As Jamie and Evelyn had both pointed out, practice makes perfect. Better to learn how to play it close to the vest when you’re still young enough to have an adult who can shush you standing right there.

It was, Damien knew, a sound policy. The press training he’d received when he’d been playing tennis had turned out to be a boon for his current life, and had given him an easy confidence even back when he held his very first press conference upon the founding of Stark International.

He gave Lara his stern-dad look, and she wiped the pout off her face. “Okay, Daddy. I love you.”

“You, too, kiddo.” He made eye contact with the three of them. “Best behavior, okay? Everyone ready to go meet Ms. Bridge? All right, then,” he said, after seeing their enthusiastic nods.

He glanced at Nikki and Bree. “Shall we?”

They moved down the hall to where it opened onto the first floor living area, then found Lena—*Maggie*—still perusing what was presumably a list of interview notes.

She stood as they entered, then caught Damien’s eye. He wasn’t sure if her expression was smug or apologetic. Not that it mattered. She might be here, but they would play by his rules moving forward.

“Maggie Bridge,” he said, and watched the way her eyes widened slightly. Apparently she’d been expecting a blow-up. “I’d like you to meet my family.”

“It’s a pleasure,” Maggie said, moving forward to shake Nikki’s outstretched hand.

“I’m Nikki,” she said, “though I imagine you already knew that. And these three are Bradley, Lara, and Anne.” The girls nodded and smiled when Nikki spoke their names, but Bradley only snuggled closer to Damien.

“I’m so glad we were able to work this out.”

“I assure you we wouldn’t have if I’d know who you were before we set the time and date.”

Maggie swallowed. “Yes, well. I’m sorry about that.” She turned to Nikki. “I assume he’s told you that I was something of a b-i-t-c-h in the past.”

“I’d say that’s an accurate summation.”

“Then I owe you a thank you as well for letting me into your home despite being a shit to your husband. *Oh!* Sorry,” she added, with a quick look at the kids.

Damien softened a little. The reaction seemed genuine, and he appreciated that she was making the effort. He caught Nikki’s eye and realized she was thinking the same thing.

“So how is this going to work?” Nikki asked. “The interviews, I mean. Evelyn mentioned you wanted family and close friends. Are we all going to sit around a table chatting while you take notes? And however you manage it, you’ll need to cut Jackson and Sylvia loose early. They’re going to be taking these three back with them.”

“Not a problem,” Maggie said, her voice no longer holding any hint of stress. Apparently she’d come into the interview with the same trepidation he’d had. “I’m happy to make that work”

Maybe Evelyn was right; maybe she really was making a fresh start. If so, Damien applauded her. But while he hoped that was the case, he would reserve judgment until he was certain.

“So we’ll start the interviews with Jackson and Sylvia. I’ll talk to them as a couple, then invite you and Nikki to join us,” she added, looking at Damien. “The interview is about you turning forty and the work you’ve done, your relationship with Nikki, your family life. Basically, the man behind the Stark International machine. But since it’s being released in conjunction with the Sport Center dedication, I’ll be sure and include plenty of Jackson in the article.”

“All that sounds fine.”

“I’d like to interview you two after that—not a complete interview, as I expect we’ll take a few sessions today and tomorrow. We’ll cover basic territory, then anything that I want to follow up from the Steele interview. Then I’ll talk with another set of your friends, and we’ll repeat until we call it a day. Then finish up tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a solid plan.” And he was relieved that she seemed like the consummate professional. Maybe she’d just needed some years to grow up. God knew they all did.

“We’ll start with the family photo. You said everyone was arriving at eleven?” She glanced at her watch as Damien did the same.

“Just under fifteen minutes. People will begin arriving anytime.”

“I thought we could have the pool in the background. Do you mind if I go get the tripod set up and take a look at the lighting situation?”

He gestured toward the glass door that opened onto the deck. “Help yourself. We’ll bring folks out as they arrive. There’s a fridge behind the bar. Help yourself to water or soda or juice. Whatever you’d like.”

She gave him the sweet smile that he recalled from the first time they’d met at a mutual acquaintance’s dinner party. Then she picked up her camera bag and headed outside, sliding the door closed behind her.

“So she’s not the devil,” Nikki said.

“Devil!” Bradley squealed, making Nikki wince.

Damien set him down, then rolled his shoulder. Thankfully, he still played tennis and worked out; as he’d

learned from his first two kids, toddler toting was surprisingly challenging.

“Okay, you three,” Nikki said. “Run on back to Bree and tell her it’s time to get cleaned up for pictures.”

“Pictures!” Anne said, jumping up and down and clapping, which, of course, made Bradley do the same. And made Lara roll her eyes as she herded her little brother and sister out of the room.

“She’s growing up too fast,” Damien said.

Nikki laughed. “She thinks she is.”

“She’s *sure* she is,” he countered, as he took his wife’s hand. “They say it goes by too fast. They’re right.”

“Yeah. They are.”

He tugged her to a stop, then kissed her, needing the feel of her against him. The solidarity that was *them*. “I love you,” he said as they drew apart.

“I know. Isn’t it wonderful?”

He laughed, then pulled her close, noticing Maggie by the pool, looking in their direction, her expression unreadable. Melancholy, perhaps. He assumed she still hadn’t found someone to share her life with.

Maybe that was karma. But then again, he was hardly a saint. Still, he’d found Nikki. And never did a day go by that he didn’t thank the universe for that miracle.

“Where’d you go?”

“Just thinking how much I love you.” He watched as she lifted one brow. “I swear,” he said, then laughed as the doorbell chime filled the room.

“Showtime,” Nikki said, as they hurried toward the door. They opened it to find fourteen-year-old Ronnie and her ten year old brother Jeffery practically bouncing at the door.

“Go on back,” Jackson—Damien’s half-brother—said, and they burst down the hall, their cries of, “Hi, Uncle Damien! Hi, Aunt Nikki,” flying behind them.

“Stay clean,” Nikki called. “Pictures soon!”

“Apparently, Ronnie’s come up with a new game,” Sylvia said. “Also known as a new way to boss around her brother and cousins.”

She was about to say something else, but Evelyn and Frank approached from behind. Both in their early sixties, they made an attractive couple. Evelyn in her flowing, BoHo style clothes that probably would have fit right in at Woodstock, and Frank in his tweed jacket, white button-down, and pressed jeans coupled with cowboy boots.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Nikki said, hugging her father first and then Evelyn, the woman who’d been more a mother to her than Elizabeth Fairchild ever had, something that Damien would be forever grateful for. Then again, she’d been more than a mother to him as well, and there had been times that Damien wondered if his own mom had sent her to him as a guardian angel.

“Are we the last ones?” That from Jamie, as she stepped in around Jackson, followed by Ryan Hunter, her husband and Damien’s closest friend.

Well, he had been Damien’s closest friend. That was before Jackson. Now, he’d have to say they both filled that role.

Orlando McKee—Ollie—had arrived with them, and while Damien wouldn't count Ollie in his tightest circle, Nikki definitely did. And today was about family. Jamie and Ollie might not be blood, but they were more family to Nikki than her mother ever was.

“You're the last,” Nikki told Jamie, then turned to Damien. “Shall we see if Maggie is ready for us?”

DAMIEN'S JOURNAL



CHILDREN

I have a niece.

*A precocious pixie of a little girl. Veronica
Amelia Steele.*

*She's clever and sweet and looks
remarkably like me. Or, more accurately, she
looks like my brother. Her father.*

*What a long way we've come, he and I.
From essentially enemies to family-in-name to
true friends. To real brothers.*

*And his little girl is now officially my niece.
Nikki and I joined him and Sylvia in court for
the final paternity ruling. After which there
was much celebration and spoiling of the child.*

*I confess to a tug at my heart. To
watching Nikki and hoping that someday we'd*

have a little girl or boy who looked at us with the kind of love with which Ronnie looks at her father, and at Sylvia, too, who from what Jackson tells me is not only incredible with Ronnie, but has fallen into the unexpected roll of Mommy with both enthusiasm and skill.

I want that. I do.

But I also know that Nikki may not share that desire. We both had miserable childhoods, but at least I had a mother who loved me. Who left me only because she died. Even now, with so much I can do with the resources I command, I could not have saved her anymore than I can save Nikki from the past that she spent with Elizabeth Fairchild. Or from the pain and damage that vile woman caused.

I know Nikki fears that she would walk in her mother's footsteps as a parent, but I also know that would never happen. I know her heart, and that's not who she is.

But as much as I want to take the fear from her—as many times as I've promised to

protect her—I can't protect her from the demons of fear and self-doubt.

I can only try to reflect back to her the strong, capable woman I see.

I can only hope that she will continue to find her own strength.

Because, dammit, I'm jealous of my brother. I want a child. Nikki's child. Our child.

And I have to believe that one day, some precious little imp will call us Mommy and Daddy.

“ Charles got a lab to rush the test. It’s positive. I’m Ashton Stone’s father, and he fucking hates me.”

- **Enchant Me**

CHAPTER 5: SOMEONE'S MISSING



They all moved to the pool deck, then followed Maggie's directions as to where to stand, finally ending up in front of the pool, the infinity-style edge behind them so that Damien assumed the final photo would show them standing on a vast spread of calm water that appeared to seamlessly join with the sea.

"Okay," Maggie said. "I think we're ready. If you can all just—*oh*."

"Is something wrong?" Nikki asked.

"No, no. I just realized we're not all here." She turned her attention to Damien. "Where's your oldest son? Where's Ashton?"

"I'm afraid he can't make it. He's out of the country, actually." Damien had been disappointed when he'd called Ash after Evelyn told him about this last minute interview. Though it would be an understatement to say that it had been rough learning he had an unknown son last year, he couldn't deny that things had turned a full one-eighty.

Now he considered Ashton Stone to be both his son and a friend. One day, hopefully, a business associate, too. The man definitely had the talent, something that made Damien incredibly proud.

“Oh.” Maggie frowned. “I was under the impression we’d have the entire family. Plus I really wanted to get a photo of the two of you. For the article. And I wanted to get his thoughts on you, your business, your relationship. I know that readers will be interested. After all, I doubt there’s anyone in the country who didn’t hear at least something about the fallout when he announced himself as your son.”

“No,” Damien said coolly as Nikki squeezed his hand in solidarity. “I imagine that’s true. But it’s also behind us. I have a good relationship with my son.”

Maggie smiled warmly. “I know. That’s the point. Readers saw the drama. Now they should see where it settled. How well it settled.”

“I don’t disagree on principle, but as I said, he’s unavailable. But I’m happy to give him a call and find out when he’ll be back.”

“I appreciate that. We can move ahead today, and if he gets back in time, we can do another shoot for the two of you, as well as at least one portrait with all the Starks—you two, the little ones, and Ashton.”

“If you’ll excuse me a moment, I’ll try to get in touch right now.”

Maggie smiled—a rare, genuine smile that he’d seen all too infrequently when they were going out. More frequently, he’d seen a manipulative smile.

Another sign, he hoped, that she’d truly changed.

He excused himself, then dialed Ash’s number while stepping back inside.

“Hey, Daddy-o,” Ash said, answering on the first ring. “What’s up?”

Damien chuckled. “You sound upbeat.”

“Just had a great meeting for the power system. Pretty sure I’ve landed my final investor.”

“Congratulations,” Damien said, meaning it. In truth, he’d wanted to invest himself. But Ashton—his son—had wanted to go it alone. To prove he could. And damned if Damien hadn’t understood that. “That’s an incredible feeling.”

“It really is. But unless you’re clairvoyant, you didn’t call to congratulate me.”

“No, that’s just a pleasant bonus. I was wondering when you’d be back in the country. The reporter is here, and really wants us to get some photos together. Plus she wants to interview you.”

“This whole dog and pony show is supposed to help promote the Sports Center, right? So a big deal for you and Uncle Jax?”

“That’s about the whole of it.”

“Well, I guess I’m your favorite son, then. Too bad for Bradley. I can be in LA by lunch tomorrow.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“Not a problem. To be honest I was already thinking about it. To see you and Nik and the kids. But I’m happy to have you feel indebted to me. Maybe you’ll raise my allowance?”

“We’ll negotiate,” Damien said with a laugh, once again amazed and thrilled this man had found his way back into his life.

“So what’s this reporter’s name?”

“Maggie Bridge.”

“Magdalena Bridge? Magdalena Spicer?”

Dread crawled up Damien’s spine. “You know her?”

“Know her? We went out once after she interviewed me for an article about the system. Now she’s showing up at events I’m at. Basically stalking me. And she’s—it doesn’t matter. But no way am I getting close to her.”

“I don’t blame you,” Damien said, working to control his temper. “I’ll cancel the article.”

“No, no. Don’t do that. Truth is, she’s a solid reporter. I’ve read her stuff. But she’s a nutcase on the personal side. But that doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“No, but I’m keeping the topic of you out of the overall interview. If she has a vendetta, how unbiased do you think this article will be?”

“Good point. Your call. I do want to come see you and Nikki. And my brother and sisters,” he added. “Maybe next weekend? After she’s out of your hair?”

“I’ll tell the kids. They’ll be thrilled. In the meantime, can I help get her off your back?”

“I’ve got it under control,” he said, in a way that made Damien think there was no control whatsoever.

“Ash ... you know you don’t have to handle things alone now.”

“Still getting used to that. Thanks. But seriously, I think she’ll run down soon. Bottom line, I shut the door. She’s just trying to push it open. But it’s locked tight.”

“Well, I’m here if you need me.”

“I know. And Dad? That feels pretty good.”

A LETTER TO ASHTON



Dear Ashton,

I hope I don't regret sending this. I hope you don't feel awkward receiving it. But I ran across this journal entry from last year, and am enclosing a photocopy.

I wrote it the day after I learned the truth. And long before you trusted me.

Come visit soon. We miss you.

Love,

Parhien

Journal Entry:

How many years ago was it that I said I would no longer keep a journal. Rather, I would simply record key events as an aid to memory.

There wasn't enough time in the day to take the time to examine what was happening around me. To me. Or so I thought.

Perhaps I was a fool then, thinking that the events in my life were worthy only of a mention. A one-line notion with the sole purpose of helping to recall some event, but not enough to rouse the emotions those events stirred.

Perhaps with some things, that is that is a blessing.

With Ashton, though, I think I want the full memories. The full emotions. Bittersweet and wonderful. Challenging and exhilarating.

Ashton Stone. My son.

But even this entry may be useless when I read it at some future time. It's been over a

day now, and I'm still not sure all of what I'm feeling. Joy? I can't deny it. Fear? Absolutely. Confusion? Most definitely.

There is anger, too, because Ashton exists only because of what Merle Richter did. What he forced me and Sofia to do. The way he bound us together, more than friends and not really lovers. Too young to fight back, but not too young to want to. Old enough to know that what he had us doing was wrong, but too reliant on him to do anything about it. And old enough to know that despite the wretchedness, there was some comfort there for the both of us.

And Sofia ... did she even know Ash existed? That he'd grown inside her?

I don't know. She carried him, of course, but she was so young. So broken. And there are women who go full-term in a pregnancy and never understand what is happening. Women who block the memory of giving birth and the child altogether.

As sad as it may be, I can see that path for Sofia. And, of course, the other tragedy is

that I cannot even ask her if she knew. Or if she hated me for it.

I regret so much what she went through. What we both went through.

But the horror of that time gave me another son, and while I know this must be hard for him, I can't help but feel joy. And hope that one day he understands that I didn't abandon him. On the contrary, I had no idea he existed. Now that I do, all I want is to get to know him. To make up for lost time.

And yet the joy I feel is tinged with guilt and with fear. The guilt has no basis. I know what Richter did. I know the maze that bastard had thrown Sofia and I in. I know that it is not my fault that Ashton believes I turned my back on him.

So I'll let myself feel it and then move on.

But what I can't move on from is Nikki. The feeling that somehow I've betrayed her.

Intellectually, I know it's not true. And yet despite this intellect of mine that has so

often been praised, I can't back myself away emotionally. The fear that I've inadvertently hurt her is like a knife through my soul, and even though it is Nikki that I fear I've hurt, I also know that it is Nikki I need to push past my own guilt. And Nikki with whom I want to revel in this miracle.

Perhaps the real miracle will be if I can read these pages years from now. Already, the pages are stained with tears, the ink running.

I so rarely cry. Beat the shit out of a punching bag, sure. Lose myself in Nikki, hell yes. But cry?

I suppose that is one more way Ashton has changed my life. And right now my most fervent wish is that he won't hate me forever. And I will do anything in my power to make my own wish come true.

“ *I lean against the tiled wall and watch him, this man who is so much more than physical beauty. He’s strength and intelligence, commanding and tender. He’s honorable and strong, fierce and loyal.*

And he loves me.

- *Hold Me*

CHAPTER 5: GROUND RULES



When Damien returned to the pool deck, he headed straight for Maggie. He wanted to shake her. To ask her what the hell she'd done to Ash. What game she was playing. But he didn't. There were ways to play games, and right now he was playing to get through these interviews, to get this woman out of his home, and to go on about his life.

"I'm sorry, but Ash can't get back into the country in time to do the interview."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. He would have been an asset for the article."

"I'm sure he would have been," Damien said.

"So are we ready to start with the photos?"

"I think so. But before we continue, I wanted to set some ground rules. And I want you to know that any deviation from these rules will cause me to reject the article. I have veto power. You remember that, right?"

She looked at him quizzically. "Has something happened?"

"What could have happened? I just want to speak to you without my wife and kids around. I don't want there to be any misunderstandings, Lena."

“Of course not.” Her expression was all innocence. But he knew her well enough to see the hardness in her eyes.

“I want it clear that if you try to use anything from these interviews elsewhere—verbatim or exaggerated—I will use every resource at my disposal to see that your life becomes very, very miserable.”

“Damien, I—”

“Mr. Stark. For today, I’m Mr. Stark. Nikki is Mrs. Stark.”

“I—well, of course. I thought we’d gotten the past out of the way and—”

“Let me be clear. I’m agreeing to this interview despite our history because I was assured you would comply with certain terms. I intend to make sure my conditions are maintained.”

“Well, of course they will be. I agreed, didn’t I?”

“Good. Then let me stress that I will not be talking about what happened to me and Sofia. Nothing about Merle Richter. You won’t be getting a deep, emotional interview about those days. If you want to write about it, there was plenty of coverage during the trial. You can plow through old articles from here and in Germany. But I won’t speak of it. Are we clear?”

“Of course.”

“The same holds true of Anne’s kidnapping. You can talk to Bree—that’s her choice—but Nikki and I won’t talk about that time. It was extensively covered, and we both spoke to the press at the time. Cover it in the article if you want, but you get your information from pre-existing materials.”

“Again, that’s not a problem. Anything else?”

“You won’t be interviewing the children. I believe Evelyn made that clear when she set up the interview, but if you’re expecting us to loosen that rule over these two days, you should know right now that you were mistaken.”

“I understand. Of course, Mr. Stone is different situation.”

“Ash is an adult. If he wants to talk to you, that’s up to him. So,” he continued, “are we clear?”

“Absolutely. That all sounds very reasonable.” She flashed him a charming smile.

Damien had to wonder at her easy acquiescence. If she didn’t want to talk about the abuse or the kidnapping, he couldn’t help but wonder what other aspects of his life she intended to dredge up. But, he supposed, he would see soon enough. “All right, then. That’s all I needed to hear.”

He headed back towards Nikki, noting her baffled expression. He slid in beside her, his arm going around her waist. She leaned closer, whispering, “What was that about?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

In front of them, Maggie faced the group . “Okay, everybody, let’s make some pretty pictures. Then I’ll start the interviews with the Steeles right after we get the photographs out of the way.”

“ *You’re my proof that I must be a good man.
How else could I deserve you?*

- **Entice Me**

TRANSCRIPT: STEELE



DAY 1, SESSION 1, 11:15 AM

- *Audio Transcription by All Access Enterprises*
- *Annotations added by client: Spicer, Magdalena*
- *Location: Stark Home, Malibu, CA, Pool Deck*
- *Subject(s): Jackson Steele, Sylvia Brooks Steele*
- *Interview conducted by Maggie Bridge*

Begin Interview

[They sit close, his arm around her shoulder. Her hand is on his thigh. This is an affectionate couple. Both have been photographed in the press, so no description is necessary. But there is no doubt that Jackson is related to Damien Stark.]

Bridge: Thank you both for doing this. It's a great opportunity having you here Mr. Steele. I would love to do an extended interview about you and your career, too, if you have the time.

J. Steele: I'm flattered, but I'm afraid we don't. Besides, it's Damien who's turning forty. I've already passed that milestone. And please, call me Jackson.

S. Steele: And I'm Sylvia.

Bridge: You're a Project Manager for Stark Real Estate Development, is that right?

S. Steele: It is. My focus is bringing new projects to fruition. Finding the right location, acquiring the real estate, retaining the right architect for the job, putting together the right team.

Bridge: But before that, you were Damien Stark's executive assistant?

S. Steele: I was.

Bridge: And what's he like as a boss?

S. Steele: Couldn't ask for better. He's firm, but fair. He's brilliant, so I learned a lot. He's demanding, but he doesn't ask anyone to work harder than he does. And he looks for talent in house. In some companies, I would have worked an exec's desk for my entire career. At Stark International, I moved up and over.

Bridge: And how well did you know Nikki Stark—well, Nikki Fairchild—when you were working Mr. Stark's desk?

S. Steele: Not well at all. I was passingly familiar with many of the women he went out with, but it wasn't my habit to to get to know them.

Bridge: But you got to know Nikki.

S. Steele: Well, she is my sister-in-law.

Bridge: So you two only became close when you married Jackson?

S. Steele: No. I was being flip. We were good friends long before that.

Bridge: And how did that friendship develop?

[Sylvia looks to Jackson as if for guidance. As far as I can tell, he gives none, but she reacts as if she got a response.]

S. Steele: The truth is, the more I saw of her, the more I liked her. Damien is a brilliant man and extremely talented. Nikki is as well. They match each other. Even just seeing their relationship from my desk, I could tell that that they complement each other. A mutually beneficial relationship.

[Jackson takes Sylvia's hand at this point and squeezes it.]

S. Steele: To be perfectly honest, I made a point of getting to know her better after the business with the painting went public. She wasn't used to being the Celebrity of the Month, but she handled it well. And honestly, I think Damien got off cheap.

Bridge: You have no problems with the fact that he paid her a million dollars as a sitting fee for a nude portrait.

S. Steele: None at all. And I hope you don't either. It's a fabulous painting.

Bridge: It is. And for what it's worth, I intend to tell her so.

S. Steele: Oh. Well, I'm glad to hear it.

Bridge: You were caught up in a similarly visible scandal when Jackson was arrested for—

J. Steele: No.

Bridge: I'm sorry.

J. Steele: You've crossed the border. Move back into Damienland. The press has covered that murder more than enough, and neither Syl nor I have a comment for you.

[I glance to Sylvia at this point and she nods.]

Bridge: I apologize. I tend to do very conversational interviews. You never know where they'll lead.

J. Steele: Not a problem. Just back up and take a different road.

Bridge: The first project you two worked on together was The Resort at Cortez, correct?

J. Steele: Yes. Sylvia brought me on.

S. Steele: It was my first job as a project manager. I was still on Damien's desk, but he knew that I wanted to move into real estate. We lost the original architect and the project was in danger. I—well, I recruited Jackson.

Bridge: I can see why. Jackson was certainly on the rise. A bona fide starchitect.

S. Steele: That's right. His career was exploding. Which made him a huge asset if we could land him.

Bridge: I assume you were eager to sign on. That must have been a plum project—working with your brother. Two men at the top of their game.

[For a moment, I think he's going to laugh. Instead, he shifts in the chair, kicking his feet out and looking completely relaxed.]

J. Steele: Back then I wanted nothing to do with the project. Not with Sylvia. Not with Damien. And that's another road we don't need to go down. Suffice it to say I got over it. My brother's a talented man. That's why I have a permanent West Coast office in Stark Tower now.

Bridge: You said "not with Sylvia." Had you two met before?

J. Steele: We're not shifting to an interview about us. Suffice it to say we met in Atlanta a few years before work on The Resort at Cortez.

Bridge: How did—

[Jackson holds up a finger, then waves it.]

Bridge: From what I understand, The Resort at Cortez was a huge success.

J. Steele: It was. And we have Syl to thank for that. She was tireless.

S. Steele: I think we have the entire team to thank. We're expanding, too. I think that might be a scoop for you, actually. If so, you're welcome.

Bridge: Expanding?

S. Steele: Several acres of the island were left undeveloped. We're putting in a section of private residences — single family homes and one high-end condo tower. Plus, we're expanding the resort. I'm very excited about the potential.

Bridge: And how involved is Damien?

S. Steele: As much as he needs to be. And if Jackson and I do our jobs right, that isn't much.

Bridge: Do you find it difficult working for your brother-in-law?

S. Steele. Not at all. In some ways it's easier than before. Damien's a very private person. I caught peeks behind the mask as his Exec Assistant—it's inevitable—but now I know him so much better. It's given me more insight into him, and I respect him even more. Which is saying a lot, because I already respected the hell out of him.

Bridge: What about you, Jackson? You made your own name, but until recently, I think it's fair to say that your brother is more well known. His tennis career and then all the ventures that make up Stark International.

J. Steele: You'll get no argument from me. I have a niche. Damien has the world.

Bridge: And is that a problem?

J. Steele: Not anymore.

Bridge: But...?

J. Steele: For years, I thought Damien was an ass.

Bridge: You didn't know he was your brother until you were an adult.

J. Steele: No. He didn't know about me. I knew about him. I'd just never met him until I was an adult. But Damien didn't have a clue. I saw him as my spoiled baby brother. I don't feel that way anymore for a lot of reasons, none of which I'll get into here. I will say that I blamed him for keeping my father from me. Since I imagine that Jeremiah Stark will come up in your interview with Damien, let me just say that had I seen my father with clearer eyes back then, I would have been thanking my brother for saving me from that son-of-a-bitch.

[He checks his watch]

J. Steele: We need to wrap this up and get the kids back to our place. Any more burning questions?

Bridge: Well, the S&S Sports Center. What was it like working with your brother?

J. Steele: This is hardly the first time, and we work well together. The center was a passion project for both of us, and I'm proud of my design. But the place itself was Damien's idea, and it was a good one.

Bridge: Thank you. I appreciate your time. Both of you. Anything you'd like to add?

J. Steele: Just that Damien's faced a lot of shit in his life. I have, too, but I think it's safe to say that his truckload is bigger than mine. But despite all of that, he's one of the best people I know. And considering I used to think he was Satan incarnate, that's saying one hell of a lot.

INTERVIEW END

DAMIEN'S JOURNAL



A BROTHER

I have a brother, and as far as I can tell he hates me.

I have said over and over that I am only recording events now. There is no time for long journal entries.

And yet I feel this deserves one.

Even so, this is the most I can do right now. I don't know how to process this information. I don't know how to flip my world into this new reality.

I will come through it fine—of that much I am certain.

But the truth is that I'm only certain because of Nikki.

She has changed everything for me.

*Whatever I accomplish from now forward
—whatever I overcome—it is because I have
found her.*

*She is nothing short of a gift from the
universe, and the miracle is that to her I am
the same.*

*So I will move forward in this new reality
where I have an older brother. A man who, as
far as I can tell, hates me.*

*Considering the the landscape of so much
of my life, I suppose that state of affairs was
inevitable.*

*But just in case the universe is listening,
here's my request: Stop fucking with me.*

That is all.

CHAPTER 6: THE SPOTLIGHT



“Would it be possible to conduct this interview upstairs?” Maggie asked. He was doing his damndest to think of her as Maggie, the vetted reporter. Not Lena, the woman who’d harassed him. And not Magdalena, who was apparently trying some of the same tricks on Ash.

It wasn’t easy.

“Upstairs is fine,” Nikki said, filling the gap left by his silence. She eyed him curiously, obviously wondering if the response was okay, particularly after their earlier conversation with Evelyn when Jackson and Syl were being interviewed.

“Yes,” he said now. Of course that’s fine.”

Maggie flashed a winning smile. “To be honest, I’m anxious to see the painting.”

“Admire it all you like, but that’s also an off-limits topic. I think we’ve seen enough press about how that painting came to be to last a lifetime.”

“I’m sure you have. But if it’s okay with you,” she said to Nikki, “I’d like to talk about the experience of being the model. I’m not interested in the million dollars. I’m interested in what it was like to stand for a Blaine original.”

Nikki glanced up at him, clearly undisturbed by the topic. He'd rather leave it off the table, but as far as he was concerned, it was Nikki, not him, who had the final say about what she did or did not discuss about those sessions.

“Sure,” Nikki said, obviously understanding the nature of his silence. “But just know that I’ll cut you off if it starts to feel dicey.”

“Of course,” Maggie said, with another bright smile. “And I hope you both know that holds true for anything said in this interview.”

“That’s my practice in *any* interview,” Damien said, and his time Maggie’s smile wasn’t quite as chirpy.

As they talked, they’d begun climbing the stairs from the first floor living area to the third floor, which was the true heart of the house. The painting was mounted there. A stunning portrait that had been well worth the investment, especially considering he’d ended up with the woman herself and not just the likeness. He’d been hesitant to hang it so prominently at first, not wanting Nikki to feel exposed. But she’d insisted, pointing out that her face was hidden.

At the time, they’d believed no one would know the truth. Now most of the world did, but Nikki had never once intimated that she wanted it taken down. On the contrary, he knew that she was proud of it

Now, it hung on the wall above the stone fireplace, not visible until about halfway up the floating staircase. When they reached that spot, Maggie stopped, her attention focused on the portrait of his wife.

“Oh, it’s stunning.”

“It is,” Damien said. “Though not as stunning as the woman herself.” He took Nikki’s hand, forcing himself not to laugh as she rolled her eyes.

“Of course I heard all the gossip. About the payment. But I never heard about how it came to be Blaine that painted it. Do you mind if I ask now?”

“Not at all,” Nikki said. “But let’s get some coffee and get settled first.”

They left Maggie in front of the portrait, then went into the third floor kitchen. Originally intended as a convenient location for catering staff, it had completely overshadowed the fully-loaded commercial kitchen on the first floor, now only used on the rare occasion that the Starks hosted a large party at the house.

He slipped his arms around his wife. “You’re sure?”

“Of course. I’m not ashamed of the painting. And I made one hell of a good business decision. What I hated was the spotlight. And the suggestion in the media that I was prostituting myself.”

“You’re still in the spotlight.”

“Yes, but instead of a harsh and uncomfortable light, it’s more like the low glow that theaters use to line auditorium stairs. It’s there, but it’s almost under the surface. I can live with it.” She brushed a kiss over his lips. “Besides, that painting brought us together.”

“All right, Ms. Fairchild,” he said, sliding into the endearment. “The painting is on the table.”

“I’ll take it off if she gets weird about it. But considering the ground rules you laid down and the fact that you did that

after talking to Ash, I have a feeling she's going to play by the rules."

"With us, anyway. Who knows what she'll try to pry out of the others."

"She's going to want to bend the rules, you know," Nikki said. "No abuse? No kidnapping? She'll want to edge around those."

He nodded. "There's leeway. But I'm not going to talk graphically. And I'm going to make her work for it."

"All's fair in love and the press?"

"Something like that." He poured three coffees and put them on a service tray. Gregory had offered to attend to tasks like that, but Damien had feared that Maggie would want to interview him as well, and that wasn't something he wanted to put Gregory through.

He picked up the tray. "Shall we?"

"Once more unto the breach," Nikki quipped.

"It's not like we haven't been there before.

“ *There is no one else who has the power to tear me apart the way you do, Nikki. No one else who can reach in and squeeze my heart. You are my world, Ms. Fairchild, and I love you desperately.*

- **Take Me**

TRANSCRIPT: STARK-1



DAY 1, SESSION 2, 1:17 PM

- *Audio Transcription by All Access Enterprises*
- *Annotations added by client: Spicer, Magdalena*
- *Location: Stark Home, Malibu, CA, 3rd floor living area*
- *Subject(s): Damien Stark, Nichole Fairchild Stark (Nikki)*
- *Interview conducted by Maggie Bridge*

Begin Interview

[They are seated on a sofa holding hands, entirely at ease with each other. I am facing them in a plush chair. I need only turn slightly to see the painting.]

Bridge: Again, I appreciate you both doing this. What I'd like to do today and tomorrow is break our conversation down into a few sessions. That will keep us all fresh and also give me the opportunity to follow up with you two about anything that might be addressed by one of the other interview subjects. Would that be okay?

N. Stark: That's fine by me. Damien?

D. Stark: I think that's perfectly reasonable.

Bridge: Terrific. You've been interviewed so many times on the subject of your meteoric climb in the business world, so I'd like to dig into the man more than the business, at least initially. Specifically, I'd like to spend most of our time together talking about your relationship.

D. Stark: One of my favorite topics.

[Nikki laughs, and Damien leans over to casually kiss her on the cheek. Some early press suggested that their relationship was staged. In just the short time I've been in this house, I am sure that it is not.]

Bridge: Damien, most of our readers will be aware of the fact that you paid one-million dollars for a nude portrait of Nikki painted by Blaine. I'm assuming you two were already seeing each other?

D. Stark: : Actually, no. We were both attending a showing of Blaine's work at my agent's home. Evelyn Dodge.

Bridge: I'm guessing that answers my next question. Blaine's an exceptionally sought after artist. Was the personal connection how you were able to obtain his services?

D. Stark: That and the fact that I paid him.

Bridge: Touché. Nikki, you've already spoken publicly about why you agreed to that painting, so I won't go over that again. But can you tell me a bit about the experience of modeling for the portrait. I have to assume you were eager to do it. A million dollars is a huge incentive.

N. Stark: It is, but I said no at first. Repeatedly, if I'm remembering correctly.

Bridge: Because of your scars?

N. Stark: Yes.

Bridge: Your history of cutting is something else we don't need to go into since you've now given a number of interviews about the topic, and I know you work with kids with similar issues as a Stark Youth Advocate.

N. Stark: That's right.

Bridge: If you don't mind, I'll pull some background from pre-existing material for the article. Only if necessary for context.

N. Stark: That's fine. As Damien pointed out, we'll have a chance to review and veto any sections we find troublesome.

[Her smile is pure Southern charm, but even so, it has a bite.]

Bridge: So you ultimately agreed because of the money.

N. Stark: I did. And that money financed my own business.

Bridge: What was it like? Modeling for a piece that is both beautiful and erotic? And for a man like Blaine who has made his living off of eroticism?

N. Stark: It was scary. It was intimate. And it was freeing.

Bridge: How so?

N. Stark: Well, at first I was scared that Damien would call it off—and I wanted that million.

Bridge: That he'd call it off because of your scars?

N. Stark: He didn't know. And they were my shame. My mother had drilled into me how ugly they were. My mother and, well, other people who had seen them.

[She barely shudders, but I see Damien take her hand. It's easy to see that his touch comforts and relaxes her.]

Bridge: That all does sound scary. Were you scared of what Damien would think?

N. Stark: Only about the scars. I know I'm attractive. My mother made a career out of my looks. Or tried to, anyway. As much as I hated her for that, it also got into my pores. That was how I judged myself. I was pretty. Without clothes, I had

hideous scars that destroyed everything good. I believed it.
Why wouldn't Damien?

Bridge: But he didn't.

N. Stark: No. That's when my mask really fell away.

Bridge: Mask?

[She looks irritated, and I think she is wishing she could call back the words.]

N. Stark: It's something I do. I didn't want to be a pageant princess. So I created Pageant Nikki. I didn't want to be the dutiful and dainty child my mother wanted, and so I had the Dutiful Nikki mask, too. I used to hate parties, especially when I didn't know anyone, but my mother insisted I go to any associated with a pageant or a pageant director or anyone with money or clout. And Social Nikki was born.

Bridge: And what mask were you wearing when you met Damien?

[For a moment, she looks confused.]

N. Stark: Honestly, I don't remember. I was Social Nikki at the party. Or I was trying to be. All polite and refined, but that mask fell pretty quickly. Damien's the only one I've ever been with where I've had to fight myself to keep the mask on.

Usually, I have to fight to take it off. No, wait. Evelyn. I met Evelyn right off, and was pretty much mask-free.

Bridge: Do you believe in soulmates?

N. Stark: I never did before. But Damien is everything a soulmate should be.

Bridge: And was Damien present while Blaine was working?

N. Stark: Now you're starting to sound prurient.

Bridge: I didn't intend it that way, but during the time you were being painted, you and Damien began to date.

N. Stark: I'm not sure I'd call it dating, but we can go with yes.

[It's clear from their expressions that my question amuses them.]

Bridge: Why is that funny?

N. Stark: No reason.

[I don't believe them, but I know when to move on.]

Bridge: Would you say the painting was the catalyst for your relationship?

N. Stark: I think that's fair, yes.

D. Stark: I disagree.

N. Stark: Do you? So what was it? My shoe debacle on the stairs?

[They laugh, but since he shakes his head, I don't ask. I'm too curious to see what he does consider the beginning.]

N. Stark: The limo?

D. Stark: Dallas, of course.

[Her smile blooms like a flower, and it is easy to see why she did so well on the pageant circuit.]

Bridge: What happened in Dallas?

D. Stark: Absolutely nothing. But we saw each other. It was during a break in a pageant she was in and I was judging. We spoke to each other.

N. Stark: You could say there was a vibe.

Bridge: So you stayed in touch?

D. Stark: No. We never spoke after that night until the party for Blaine.

Bridge: I'm sorry, I don't think I'm following. If nothing happened, how was that the beginning?

D. Stark: It just was. I just knew.

Bridge: Knew what?

D. Stark: That she was mine.

Bridge: And what if the party for Blaine hadn't happened?

D. Stark: But it did.

Bridge: Yes, but—

D. Stark: The point is I knew immediately that she was my future. If there was no party, there would have been another moment in the future.

Bridge: That seems rather woo-woo for a man so scientifically inclined.

D. Stark: Maybe that's why I'm so damn successful. I see things beyond the realms of expectation.

Bridge: There's a quote for the article.

[We all laugh. Considering the awkwardness a few hours ago, I'm relieved.]

Bridge: So the baseline reason you two are now happily married with a family is because of a beauty pageant?

N. Stark: Yes.

D. Stark: Actually, if we're walking this line, then as much as I hate to admit it, I think we need to point to Jeremiah and Elizabeth.

Bridge: Your father and Nikki's mother?

N. Stark: Seriously?

D. Stark: Would you have been at that pageant if your mother hadn't pushed you? And I wouldn't have been judging if my father hadn't pushed me into tennis.

N. Stark: But we would have found each other anyway.

[She takes his hand.]

N. Stark: So I say that we were the catalyst. Not them. Never them.

D. Stark: You're right. It all goes back to us.

INTERVIEW END

DAMIEN'S JOURNAL



SCARS

I saw her secret today. What she thinks is her shame. What she believes she has to keep hidden.

She couldn't be more wrong.

Those are battle scars. Proof of what she has endured.

She is exceptional.

And even if I have to move heaven and earth—even if I have to give up every dollar I've earned and everything I've built—I will make her see the strength inside her.

More than that, I will make her mine.

“ *He looks at me and sees strength. He believes in me even when I don't believe in myself. “I have the strength because of you,” I say.*

He shakes his head. “That's not true. But even if it is, so what? I'm right beside you, and I promise you, sweetheart, I'm not going anywhere.

- *Anchor Me*

TRANSCRIPT: DODGE/DUNLOP



DAY 1, SESSION 3, 3:30 PM

- *Audio Transcription by All Access Enterprises*
- *Annotations added by client: Spicer, Magdalena*
- *Location: Stark Home, Malibu, CA, 1st floor living area*
- *Subject(s): Evelyn Dodge, Frank Dunlop*
- *Interview conducted by Maggie Bridge*

Begin Interview

[Subjects are sitting on the sofa holding hands. These two are recently married—about a year—and their newlywed status is apparent.]

Bridge: Thank you both for agreeing to these interviews. Obviously, I want to get a solid picture of Nikki and Damien for the article, and your input is invaluable.

E. Dodge: Honey, you don't have to thank me. I'm the one who arranged for the article, remember?

Frank Dunlop: Evelyn...

E. Dodge: He's my rudeness checker. Keeps me in line. How I lived without him, I'll never know.

[Were I only reading this interview, I might think she was being sarcastic. But I can hear the affection in her voice, and the tender way their hands touch tells the truth as well.]

Bridge: Evelyn, you've been representing Damien all his life. Been there for the good times and the bad.

E. Dodge: I have indeed.

Bridge: What would you say is the biggest challenge he's overcome?

E. Dodge: Oh, come on, Maggie. We're not going there.

Bridge: You mean the abuse? The trial?

E. Dodge: I'd say those two are intertwined. And I believe Damien took that topic off the table.

Bridge: It's difficult to talk about Damien's past without at least touching on those events.

E. Dodge: Fair enough. But you know what? I don't think that was the hardest. Well, only tangentially. I think his biggest

challenge was walking away from Nikki. Thinking that the reveal of those horrible photos and videos would destroy her. Turns out what destroyed them both was him walking. Idiot boy.

[I manage to hold back my laugh.]

Bridge: I spoke with them about that in our first interview.

E. Dodge: Then you already have a sense.

Bridge: Can you give me your broad impression of Damien?

E. Dodge: One of the best people I know. And one of the hardest to get to know. That boy protects his privacy. It's hard to get to know him. But it's worth it. And he will go to hell and back to protect the people he loves.

Bridge: You're smiling.

E. Dodge: Just remembering something I told Nikki that day she met him at my house.

Bridge: What's that?

E. Dodge: Think of Damien as an iceberg. Most of that boy is well under the surface. Honestly, I think Nikki's the only one who's truly seen the full essence of that man.

Frank Dunlop: Can't blame him, though.

Bridge: What do you mean?

Frank Dunlop: He's had a lot of shit thrown at him. I'd be protective, too. Hell, when I think of Nikki, I know I'm part of the shit. And she hid some part of herself away because of what I did.

E. Dodge: Frank, no. She loves you.

Frank Dunlop: Now she does. But that's because she's an amazing woman. She owed me nothing. Especially since my leaving left her at the mercy of her mother.

Bridge: Why did you leave?

Frank Dunlop: I couldn't take it anymore. Elizabeth, I mean. And I was a fool for walking out on my girls. I'll never forgive myself for that. But I'm damn sure glad that Nikki found it in her heart to forgive me. You, too, Ev. Taking a chance on a man who did that to his children.

E. Dodge: Frank, no. You're a good man. And you're a man who learns from his past. That's more rare than you know.

[The moment between them is so intense that I have to look away.]

Frank Dunlop: Well, I'm trying to learn. And I'm proud that Nikki trusts me now. I blindsided her when I came back, but she took a chance on me. That girl of mine is pretty special.

E. Dodge: She damn sure is.

Bridge: It's wonderful to see that you two have repaired your relationship, but I wonder what impact you leaving when she was a child had on Nikki.

Frank Dunlop: There's a question. I'd have to say every problem she has. Fair bet they stem from her mother, and I'm the one who left her at Elizabeth's mercy.

[Evelyn squeezes his hand.]

Bridge: Can you be specific?

Frank Dunlop: The cutting, for one thing.

Bridge: You blame yourself for that?

Frank Dunlop: She wouldn't have been forced to enter all those pageants if I hadn't left. But I think the one that truly guts me is how much being a parent terrified her. She didn't think she could handle it. That she'd start cutting again. Didn't think she'd be a good role model since she didn't have one. Thought she wouldn't know how to do it right. All of that.

E. Dodge: But she got past that, and she's a great mom.

Frank Dunlop: She did. Hell, she held it together during the kidnapping. She coped. She was a mom, and a good one. Can't say the same for me. I was out of the country and didn't rush home. Didn't even call until later. I didn't know what to say or how to say it. I hurt her when I left. I didn't fight for my family. For my kids. But Damien will. Hell, he already has. She's standing with a damn good man.

[She squeezes his hand. For the first time in my career, I don't know what to say.]

E. Dodge: She's a remarkable woman. I remember the first day I met her, standing alone, not giving a flying fuck about all the Hollywood types mingling in my living room. One exchange and I knew that girl was smart. Not just decoration. Fifteen minutes later, and I knew she'd become one of my favorite people. I remember telling her I wanted to see how her story would turn out. Would it be a romcom? A comedy? A drama? God forbid, a tragedy? Would it have an Happily Ever After?

Frank Dunlop: Turns out it was all those things.

E. Dodge: It was. She and Damien are in a saga. And from my perspective, I'd say it's epic.

INTERVIEW END

“ *You’re my blood and my breath, Nikki.
You’re my life. I will always fight for you. I
will always come to you. And I will happily
destroy anyone who tries to hurt you.*

- Play My Game

A LETTER TO EVELYN



Dear Evelyn,

This is far too late, but I was inspired this morning to send you a thank you letter for sending me to that damn pageant in Texas all those years ago.

Who would have believed that a pageant I anticipated being a painful slog would ultimately change my life.

As I write this, my wife of less than a day is sleeping, the sound of the surf on this secluded beach filling our charming, beachfront room.

I hope you know that you are the mother she should have had. That asking you to participate in the wedding wasn't Nikki simply being polite.

And I hope you know how much you mean to me, now and over the years.

I loved my mother, so I don't want to claim you in that way but I hope you know that I have always thought of you as family.

I think perhaps you bit off more drama than you expected when you agreed to represent me after Jeremiah banged at your door.

For that, I apologize. And I thank you for never wavering. For always being there for me.

There are things about my past that I would change. You are not one of them.

Much love,

Darrien

“ *I cannot believe that anything about Damien is a danger to me. On the contrary, he is a gift. A rescuer. A knight upon a white steed, though he would scoff at the image and insist that the horse must be a black one.*

- **[Claim Me](#)**

TRANSCRIPT: HUNTER/ARCHER



DAY 1, SESSION 4, 4:15 PM

- *Audio Transcription by All Access Enterprises*
- *Annotations add by client: Spicer, Magdalena*
- *Location: Stark Home, Malibu, CA, 1st floor living area*
- *Subject(s): Ryan Hunter, Jamie Archer Hunter, Orlando McKee*
- *Interview conduct by Maggie Bridge*

Begin Interview

[Subjects Ryan and Jamie are sitting on the sofa. Ryan is sitting while Jamie is lounging, her bare feet in his lap. Orlando (Ollie) is on the floor, his back to the couch near Jamie.)

Bridge: Thank you for agreeing to this interview. As three of the Stark's closest friends, your perspective is invaluable.

Jamie: Three *of*? I think you meant to say that since we three *are* their closest friends.

Bridge: Did I?

[It's clear she is fighting a smirk.]

Jamie: Totally. Because it's true. I'd even say that as for me and Nikki, I'm slightly above Ollie.

[She bats at his head.]

Jamie: So you can totally hit the road.

Ollie: Jamie, chill. You put a camera in front of her and you get The Personality. You want to see the real Jamie, you'll have to turn the video off.

Bridge: I guess I'll just suffer through the hyped-up version of Jamie. I prefer having a video. I like to look back at facial expressions.

Jamie: I do that. Study faces. Only I do it as an acting exercise.

Bridge: I do it to see who's bullshitting me in an interview.

[I'm speaking only to Jamie and she knows it. She bursts out laughing.]

Jamie: All right. Let's get this party started.

Bridge: Jamie and Ollie, you two have been friends with Nikki since college?

Jamie: High school. And Nik and Ollie were next door neighbors.

Ollie: I got an up close and personal view of the insanity that is her mother.

[Jamie shudders]

Bridge: What?

Jamie: Elizabeth Fairchild is like a creature from a horror movie. I always shudder in horror movies. Seriously, Nicholas drew the short straw in the mom department.

Bridge: Nicholas. And you're...?

Jamie: James.

Bridge: And you?

Ollie: Oh, no. They tried out Olivia, but I didn't bite.

Jamie: Which I think is evidence that it's not a trifecta but a duet. Sorry, Ol. I'm the real bestie. Girl power and all that.

Ollie: You know I love you, Jamie, but dial it back. Let the woman do her job.

Bridge: So how did the nicknames come about?

Jamie: Ah-ah. You can't expect me to reveal all our secrets. Seriously, what are you looking for?

Bridge: Just information. You and Nikki went to school together?

Jamie: That's right. But I was the ballsy one first. I moved here. She stayed in Texas. Then she wised up.

Bridge: And you were already out here?

Ollie: I graduated college early and went to law school. I worked in LA for a while and then transferred to the firm's New York office. I came back right before Nikki moved here.

Bridge: That was Bender, Twain & McGuire? The firm that represents Damien and Stark International.

Ollie: Yeah.

Bridge: Are you still with them?

Ollie: Considering it's your job to know things, I think you already know the answer.

Bridge: You're an attorney with the FBI.

Ollie: I am. I thought a change would be good.

Bridge: And what do you do?

Ollie: I don't share my life with reporters for no reason. This is about Nikki and Damien.

Bridge: Fair enough. Are the three of you just friends? Or has there every been any romantic or sexual involvement?

[Ollie blushes. Jamie snorts. Ryan looks amused.]

Bridge: You and Nikki dated?

Ollie: No. Never. /**Jamie:** He wishes

Jamie: Ollie's had a crush on Nikki since forever.

Ollie: We're friends. That's all.

Jamie: Um, Ol? We're friends, too, and we fucked. [Her attention shifts to me.] Wasn't our finest hour, but we were both in a fucked up kind of place, what with him crushing on Nikki and all the drama with his fiancée.

[Ollie bangs his head against his knee. Ryan is practically shaking from holding in laughter. Jamie just shrugs.]

Jamie: What? It's true. And what's the deal, anyway, Ollie. Now that you're single, is there anyone new in your life?

Ollie: No. Of course not. You know I'm focusing on work.

Jamie: If you say so. But we're going to talk.

[Ollie blushes.]

Bridge: Well, I think I'm going to shift this back to Nikki and Damien. Though I could definitely make a case for running with this story instead. I think we'd get a significant readership. Especially with your fanbase, Jamie.

Jamie: Yeah, Evelyn is always telling me I need to stop oversharing now that my career is on the rise. I'm trying, but that's really not in my nature.

Bridge: Evelyn represents you as an actor?

Jamie: All things, really. Actor, on-air personality, whatever comes along next. She's great. I adore her. I'm sure she gets lots of the credit for keeping Damien sane over the years.

Bridge: You recently made a splash in *Intercontinental*. Congratulations. I enjoyed the film.

Jamie: Thanks. Zelda Clayton wrote an amazing book—and thank goodness that nutcase didn't kill her. That was insanity, but I gotta say it was good press.

Ollie: Tragedy and drama always are.

Jamie: True that. Anyway, Zelda's great, her book was great, and that movie put me on the map. I owe a lot to Matthew Holt and the people at Hardline Entertainment. I'm working on another project now with him. I'm starring and producing. It's exciting.

Bridge: Congratulations. Nikki must be proud of you, too.

Jamie: She doesn't care a thing about Hollywood past, oh, the Jimmy Stewart era. But, yeah, she's thrilled for me. And fair is fair. I don't give a flip about the code that makes my phone and computer work. But she loves that stuff, and her business is growing so fast. She's going to give Damien a run for his money one day.

Bridge: Would that bother him?

Jamie: Hell, no. He'd throw a goddamn party. He's so proud of what she's done it's almost sickening.

[Clearly it's not, as Jamie's smile is so wide it looks painful.]

Ollie: Nikki deserves every good thing that's happened to her.

Bridge: Including Damien?

Ollie: I'll be honest. I wasn't on the Damien train at first.

Jamie: Because of the being in love with Nikki.

Ollie: Because I didn't trust him. But he's earned it. And he's good for her. And I'm over the crush.

Jamie: Told you he had a crush. And, yeah. Damien's good for her. He's also a genuinely good guy. He helped get me my first acting gig. And he introduced me to Matthew.

Bridge: Has Nikki helped with your career?

Jamie: Did you miss the part about Nikki not giving a fuck about Hollywood? So no to the career. Yes to the life. She and Ollie have been my lifeline. Especially Nik because, well, you know, for part of the time, Ollie was part of my problem. I used to have a fucking-around problem.

[She has to be the most un-filtered interviewee I have ever spoken with. I understand she's excellent at being on the reporter side of the microphone and that she has a knack for getting celebrities to reveal more than they normally would. I think I now understand how she manages that.]

Bridge: A fucking around problem?

Jamie: As in too much and with the wrong people. Sorry Ollie.

Ollie: Hey, gotta second the thought. Not that it wasn't fun. It was. Sorry, Ryan.

Ryan: No worries. I'm well aware of the fun factor.

[They're all completely comfortable. I feel my cheeks burn.]

Bridge: So, um, how did you get over that fucking around problem.

[She lifts her leg and lightly nudges Ryan.]

Ryan: I put a collar on her. Not to mention a wedding band. You could say I tamed me a wildcat.

Ollie: Ryan. Come on, man.

Ryan: Hey, it's true.

Bridge: I get the feeling neither you nor your wife have many boundaries.

Jamie: I don't have many filters, either.

Bridge: So I'm noticing. As entertaining as this is, I'd like to shift back to Nikki and Damien.

Ollie: Oh, yes, please.

Bridge: Ryan, what's your perspective? I understand you and Damien have been friends for years. You met not long after Stark International was formed.

Ryan: That's right.

Bridge: And do Nikki and Damien, um, have a similar relationship as you and Jamie. Or was that collar of the metaphorical variety.

Ryan: You'd have to ask them. As for the collar...

[He smiles. Jamie—unbelievably—blushes.]

Bridge: Jamie, you'd mentioned Matthew Holt. There are rumors he owns a secret high-end sex club. Masque.

Jamie: Guess it's not so secret, huh?

Bridge: I've heard rumors that Nikki and Damien have been there.

Jamie: Well, gee. I've never seen him there. But I'm pretty sure the idea of a club like Masque would be to wear a mask. Not that I'd know. That just seems to make sense.

Ryan: Is this really a line you want to pull?

Bridge: Damien Stark's private life sells magazines.

Ryan: Pretty sure that *sex club* isn't the theme he'd want for an article meant to be celebrating his accomplishments, including the S&S Sports Center.

Bridge: Of course. I just wondered if Damien—never mind.

[I clear my throat, gathering my thoughts and pushing down memories.]

Bridge: Let's go back to the attempt on Zelda Clayton's life. That was investigated—and resolved—by agents working at Stark Security.

Ryan: It was.

Bridge: I'd love to know how Stark Security was formed, but can we start with how you met Damien?

Ryan: I had a small security company. It was doing well, and it caught Damien's eye. He made me an offer I'd be stupid to refuse, and I sold it to him. He brought me on to run it, then promoted me to head of security for all of Stark International. I still have that title, but the day to day is handled but other people on my team.

Bridge: Because your focus is Stark Security.

Ryan: That's right. After Anne and Bree were kidnapped, Damien wanted to do something to make a difference, so we created the agency. We specialize in cases that for whatever reason are best handled outside the normal law enforcement channels.

Bridge: And the success rate?

Ryan: I'm proud to say our success rate is off the charts.

Bridge: Getting back to Damien, would you say that Nikki is good for him?

Ryan: Nikki is the best thing that ever happened to that man.

Bridge: What stands out to you about Nikki and Damien's relationship?

Ryan: It's like ours. The fit.

Jamie: Of course, Nik doesn't have my rough edges, but, then again, Ryan likes it rough.

[Ryan rubs his temples as if exasperated, but it's clear he's amused.]

Ollie: Jamie, give it a rest.

Ryan: She's right, though. I remember looking at those two and thinking that was what I wanted. To feel the way I knew they felt. Because you could see it. I'll admit I was jealous. I wanted that, too.

Jamie: And he always goes after what he wants.

Ryan: It's true. And once I got to know Jamie, I knew I wanted her. She was a challenge, though.

[Ollie laughs.]

Ryan: Fortunately, I'm very good at getting what I want.

Jamie: Challenge? That's just his polite way of saying that marriage scared the shit out of me. I got over it, obviously. Anyway, we've gone so off-topic. The bottom line is they are gone for each other. It sounds corny, but it's not. It's fucking awesome.

INTERVIEW END

“ *When he looks at me, his face has the dark intensity of a hunter, and I feel as vulnerable as his prey.*

- *Claim Me*

DAMIEN'S JOURNAL - KIDNAPPING



ANNE'S ABDUCTION

Anne.

And Bree.

My baby. Our nanny.

I can't process this. I can't organize my thoughts to write. Every moment I'm writing is a moment I'm not thinking of what to do. Of how to do it.

Of how to save them.

Please.

These are the only words in my heart today:

Please.

And Nikki. Always Nikki.

“ *I will slay your dragons. I will keep you safe.*

- **Have Me**

TRANSCRIPT: STARK-2



DAY 1, SESSION 4, 5:45 PM

- *Audio Transcription by All Access Enterprises*
- *Annotations added by client: Spicer, Magdalena*
- *Location: Stark Home, Malibu, CA, 3rd floor living area*
- *Subject(s): Damien Stark, Nichole Fairchild Stark (Nikki)*
- *Interview conducted by Maggie Bridge*

Begin Interview

[They are seated as before on the sofa. This time, Nikki's feet are curled up under her, and Damien's arm is around her shoulder. They look relaxed and comfortable.]

Bridge: Sorry we're getting a late start. We'll wrap earlier tomorrow.

Damien: Not a problem.

Bridge: Earlier we talked about your relationship. I'd like to continue that, but expand it more to encompass family. Can you tell me how you'd describe your relationship?

Nikki: Perfect.

[Damien smiles, then brushes a kiss over her cheek.]

Bridge: So no fights? Everything is smooth sailing?

Damien: Oh, there are fights. There's also the making up.

[As he speaks, he trails a fingertip along her thigh. She's changed into shorts, and his finger strokes bare skin, the touch entirely casual. I'm not even sure he's aware that he's stroking her.]

Nikki: He's right, though. We don't fight much. The truth is we fit.

Damien: We both have missing pieces. But together, we complete each other.

Bridge: Could you imagine not being together?

Nikki: Now? No. I'd survive—Damien's helped me realize that I'm strong enough to survive—but losing him would come close to destroying me. But that's not something I'm afraid of. I know he'll never leave me. He'd move heaven and earth before doing that.

Bridge: Damien?

Damien: I feel the same way. And if she did leave, I'd get her back.

[Nikki laughs.]

Nikki: He would too. My husband is very resourceful.

Damien: And formidable. Don't forget that.

Nikki: How could I?

Bridge: Actually, I want to talk about those resources in our next interview, particularly Stark Security. But for now, was there ever a time you feared that your relationship wouldn't survive.

[They share a look, dark and meaningful. For a moment, I fear I won't get an answer, or if I do, it will be an obfuscation.]

Nikki: Yes, actually. After Germany. I was terrified.

Bridge: By Germany, you're referring to the trial? When Damien was charged with murdering his tennis coach?

Nikki: Yes. The court received some horrible images. They were sealed, but apparently someone else had them, too. They threatened to release them. Damien ... well, he left me.

[I have heard this from the other interviews, and of course I remember the outcome from the coverage at the time. But I try to react as if this is the first I've heard of it.]

Damien: I was a fool. That's the bottom line.

Nikki: You were. But you left for me. He was trying to protect me. He thought I wouldn't be able to handle the media when the images went wide. Honestly, I wasn't entirely sure, but I was determined to prove to him I would be fine.

Damien: She was brilliant. She proved to me just how strong we both are.

Bridge: I remember the press conference. You were brilliant.

Nikki: Thank you. That means a lot.

Bridge: And you did release those photos? You and Sofia. You were—

Damien: As I said, that topic is off-limits. Go back to old articles and fill in the details if you feel compelled to write about it. But for now, drop it.

Bridge: Of course. But I do have one question that I don't believe has been covered, and it's not directly about the abuse.

Damien: I'm listening.

Bridge: Sofia. Were you ever involved with her. Was she ever your girlfriend?

Damien: No. We were just friends. Friends in a bad situation. And that's all I'll say, except that I'm done being ashamed of that time in my life—of running because of that shame. I did that—ran far and fast—and I almost lost the person I cherish most in this world. It was a mistake.

[He pauses, clearly fighting strong emotions.]

Damien: The irony is that my leaving brought us even closer. But never again.

[He takes her hand.]

Damien: The sun won't ever set for us.

[Nikki's smile sparkles. So do the tears in her eyes.]

Bridge: Nikki, you went to Germany, too. You were clearly in a deeply committed relationship. But not only did he not tell you about what happened in the past, but he left you when it was at risk of being disclosed.

Damien: Careful, Maggie.

Bridge: I just want to know if it bothered you. The fact that he didn't tell you any of that despite your intimacy.

Nikki: Of course, it did.

Bridge: Oh.

[Damien is fighting a smile. I assume he is amused by my reaction. I wasn't expecting an admission.]

Bridge: And have you put that behind you?

Damien: We have.

Bridge: Nikki? Do you agree?

Nikki: I do. But that's not to say we've brushed it under the rug or shoved it in a closet. Like Damien said earlier, that whole thing strengthened us both. We realized how much we wanted to be together. We both knew it, but we were fighting it. And in the end, we came out stronger.

Bridge: Fighting it. But why?

[Damien drags his fingers through his hair, then frowns.]

Damien: I've been in love with this woman since the first time I saw her.

Bridge: In Dallas?

Damien: [nods] It was love at first sight, just like in a fairy tale. But everyone tells you fairy tales aren't real, or at least that Happily Ever After isn't realistic. So maybe we both let ourselves believe that a little.

Nikki: Except, we were wrong.

Damien: Happily Ever After should be the norm. I walked away from Nikki once because I was a fool. I'll never do it again. I would give up everything I have for her. For our children.

Bridge: You came close to losing Anne.

Nikki: I won't talk about that. We said it was off-limits.

Bridge: All right. Let's talk about Ash. Nikki, how was Damien after Ash made his announcement at your wedding? And then after he confirmed paternity?

Nikki: How do you think? He was shocked. Devastated.

Damien: I'd just learned that I missed out on an entire lifetime of one of my children.

Bridge: Who you'd fathered when you were a child yourself.

Damien: Doesn't make him any less mine. And we don't need to keep walking this path.

Nikki: No, we don't, because the bottom line is that Damien did the right thing. Ash is his son. He's part of our family. And we're all trying to make up for lost time.

Bridge: And you're okay with that. How Ash was conceived? Who his mother was?

Nikki: Okay with it? What happened to Sofia and Damien was vile. But that's hardly Ash's fault. It's Richter's. And Jeremiah's. And you have no right to suggest—

[Damien puts a hand on her arm. She settles.]

Bridge: There've been other paternity claims.

Nikki: And there may be more. Shockingly, my husband was never a monk.

Bridge: Does that frighten you?

Damien: I think it's time to back off this line, Lena.

Bridge: I'm not trying to harass you. I want to understand the way you think. The extent to which you two are a unit.

Damien: The full extent.

Nikki: It's okay, Damien. As for the possibility, I'm not blind to that. And if someone else turns up—verifiable—then we'll

deal with it. In case it isn't clear to you yet, We're a strong family.

Bridge: You are. And yet you came close to losing one of your children.

Nikki: That's out of bounds./**Damien:** Enough.

Damien: Shut it down, Lena. I set terms. You agreed to them. And unless my memory is failing me, these interviews are supposed to be for a profile about me in conjunction with the Sports Center and my birthday. Not a tribute to the *National Enquirer*. Perhaps we should shift topics to business?

Bridge: The focus is on the man behind the business. But we'll get there. Right now, tell me more about Ashton. The man stood up at your vow renewal and basically shut it down.

Nikki: That's true, but he had reason to. Maybe he could have approached it less dramatically, but we don't fault him. We love him.

[Damien has been watching her as she speaks. Now he cups her head, then pulls her into a kiss as I sit there, waiting to get back to the interview. I clear my throat, then smile.]

Bridge: Moving on. Nikki, has Damien's money ever been a problem for you?

Nikki: Um, no. Not at all. I've noticed that his money spends exactly like all the other money. It took some getting used to. The vast oceans of wealth, I mean. But I wouldn't call it a problem.

Bridge: I only ask because you're still working. I presume you're earning your own money on principal.

Nikki: Oh, I see. And no. I'm working because I like to. As I said, it took some getting used to, but now if I feel like going shopping in Paris, I just take one of the jets and our Amex Black Card and go for it. It's ridiculously convenient. And honestly, it's no problem at all.

[I'm certain her smile is the one she pulled out at pageants.]

Damien: It's getting late. Why don't we continue this in the morning.

Bridge: Of course. Could I speak to you for a moment?

[From his expression, I expect him to say no.]

Damien: Nikki, go on. I'll walk Maggie out.

Nikki: No problem.

[Nikki leaves. And I am left to walk with Damien.]

INTERVIEW END

“ *As I walk toward my husband, this man I love with all my heart, I glimpse the lingering shadows in his eyes, and I can't shake the cold blanket of fear that settles over my shoulders when I slide my hand into Damien's.*

- **Please Me**

CHAPTER 7: ALONE AGAIN



THE STORY

As soon as Nikki entered the foyer to the master bedroom, Damien ushered Maggie down the stairs. “Would you care to explain yourself?”

“About what?”

“About the shift from pleasant to confrontational. You’ve been goading Nikki, and I want to know why.”

“You’re being paranoid. I’m a reporter. The job requires a bit of pushing. That’s how you get the meat.”

“You’re not writing about Chernobyl, Maggie. It’s a puff piece and we both know it.”

They reached the front door, and she turned to face him. “I know. I’m sorry. The truth is—well, never mind.”

“What?”

“Just that you made the right choice.”

He shook his head, not following.

“Nikki, I mean.”

“Believe me, I know.”

“You and I would never have worked out.”

He frowned. “Lena, you know that wasn’t even on the table.”

“I know. What I don’t understand is *why*. Why did you catch a glimpse of Nikki from across a room and now she’s the princess in the palace. Why wasn’t that me?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. This really wasn’t supposed to be on the night’s agenda. “Lena, we’re not doing this.”

“I know. I’m sorry. That’s not even what I mean. I’m just trying to understand.”

“Understand what?”

“It’s just ... there’s a guy. He’s a lot like you. And I thought we were fine, but then he just ended it. Is it me? Am I the Wicked Witch in the fairy tale and not the princess?”

“I don’t know, Lena. And I’m sorry. But I can’t be the one to help you figure it out.”

“I can’t tell if Lena just came on to me or if I completely misread the situation.” He’d just stepped into the room to see Nikki sitting on the bed wearing nothing but a thin tank top and plain white panties. She was rubbing lotion on her legs and looked sexy as hell.

“Coming on to you,” she said. “Honestly, a man with your reputation should be faster on the uptake.”

He laughed, then moved to join her on the bed, claiming the tube of lotion and taking over the task. “Is that right?”

“Besides, you already knew the answer. That’s why you called her Lena and not Maggie.”

“It’s scary how well you know me.”

“Plus, she was bordering on bitchy during that last interview. I’m not sure what triggered her. Other than me.”

“I’ll call Evelyn and cancel tomorrow.”

“No, don’t do that. It’s just us again and Bree. I’m sure she wants to ask Bree what it’s like working for us—she’s probably hoping we’re monsters. And she’ll probably ask about the kidnapping.”

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t.”

Nikki shook her head. “No. We’ll tell Bree it’s her decision if she wants to answer, but she might want to. It might be cathartic for her. Talking to a stranger, I mean.”

“All right.”

He shifted on the bed so that he was propped on his side, his hand moving over her bare legs, now soft from the lotion. “The questions today had me thinking. And it’s you we have to thank for our life today. For our children. For everything that makes up our wonderful world.”

“I appreciate the compliment, but what the hell are you talking about?”

“Germany. You followed me there. You broke through that morass of self-pity and memories and fear. You brought me back to life. You brought me back to you.”

Her grin held a hint of mischief. “I guess I did. You owe me big-time.”

He laughed. “Yeah. I suppose I do.”

“You should probably thank me properly.” He heard the heat in her voice.

“I probably should.”

“Lena will probably be a nightmare tomorrow,” she said as he tugged down her panties. “Either that or contrite.”

“Shockingly, I’m not in the mood to talk about Lena.”

“I’m just saying you should ignore her.”

“I intend to. She’s just trying to get a rise out of me.”

Nikki grinned, then shifted on the bed so she could cup his already hard cock. “What a coincidence. So am I.”

“ *I hold him close, still astounded that we have such power over each other. That we are the balm to each other’s soul. It humbles me. And, yes, it terrifies me. Because how could we ever survive if we lose each other?*

- **Complete Me**

TRANSCRIPT: BERNSTEIN



DAY 2, SESSION 1, 10:45 AM

- *Audio Transcription by All Access Enterprises*
- *Annotations added by client: Spicer, Magdalena*
- *Location: Stark Home, Malibu, CA, 3rd floor kitchen*
- *Subject(s): Bree Bernstein*
- *Interview conducted by Maggie Bridge*

Begin Interview

[We are upstairs with Nikki & Damien's permission as Bree said that she would be more comfortable in the kitchen or the playroom. Since she gave me the choice, I chose the kitchen. There is coffee. And the chairs are adult sized.]

Bree: So, before we start, I want to say that I'm not going to talk about personal stuff. About Nikki and Damien or the kids. You said you wanted to talk about what it's like to work for the Starks. And the kidnapping. They said it was my choice to talk to you about either.

Bridge: So what will we be talking about?

Bree: I guess we'll see when you ask.

Bridge: Alright. Are you ready?

Bree: Um, sure.

Bridge: So tell me what you do for the Starks.

Bree: I'm a part-time nanny. I'm living in the guest house and writing.

Bridge: And how long have you been doing that?

Bree: I worked for them before the kidnapping, then I moved to New York for school. When I decided to switch to a low-residency MFA program and come back to LA, they took me back.

Bree: And you wanted to return?

Bree: I did. They're great to work for. Easy going but not lax. They don't make unreasonable demands, and they're flexible. Honestly, it's the perfect situation for me.

Bridge: I heard that they fired you after the kidnapping.

[Her eyes go wide.]

Bree: No. No way. But I did want to leave. I'd been accepted to a Masters program. I was moving to New York.

Bridge: Did they want you gone? I was under the impression that Stark essentially paid to make you go away.

Bree: I don't know what you're talking about.

Bridge: Well, he bought you an apartment in Manhattan. That's a little extravagant for severance. Seems more like a bribe.

Bree: No. No way.

Bridge: Well, you're young. Maybe you'll see it differently in a few years.

Bree: Think what you want, but if you print your suggestion without my denial—if you print it at all—I will totally call Evelyn and get her to snag an appointment for me with Damien's attorney. It wasn't like that.

Bridge: You're saying Damien's not the kind of man who would pay someone off?

Bree: I don't know. He didn't pay me off.

Bridge: He's a powerful man with a checkbook full of clout. People like him don't have to do what they don't want to do.

Bree: No. You're—

Bridge: They thought you participated in the kidnapping. And you're sitting here defending them?

Bree: You have this all backwards.

Bridge: Oh, so they weren't suspicious. My source must be wrong.

Bree: Source? Who?

Bridge: Sorry. Confidential.

Bree: Well, you should know your source is a liar. They were suspicious for a while, sure. Who could blame them? It was their little girl. And it was my boyfriend behind it all. But they realized they were wrong. I even helped take him down in the end.

Bridge: Hmm.

Bree: What's that supposed to mean?

Bridge: I was just wondering if you blame them. For thinking that you'd help kidnap that sweet child and pump her full of a drug to make her loopy and tired.

Bree: They ... they would have been idiots if they didn't suspect me. I mean, I disappeared at the same time Anne did. And trust me, neither one of them is an idiot.

Bridge: So you weren't upset? Pissed? Feelings hurt?

Bree: Well, sure. I think that really ripped them up, too. That they had a moment of doubt, I mean. They're good people. Some of the best I know. And I love their kids. The cousins, too. Jeffery and Ronnie. I secretly love when Stella's unavailable to watch the Steele kids, and I get all of them. It's exhausting, but I love it. And Ronnie's old enough to help now.

Bridge: That's all nice, but the fact that you love the job only makes their suspicions worse. And then to buy you off with an apartment ... smells like a bribe to me. They gave you a nice gift. Now you're supposed to be silent. Is that why you're not answering my questions.

[Bree pushes back from the table. I've clearly pissed her off]

Bree: I am answering your questions, and you're not listening. I meant what I said. I will sic Charles on you. And now, I think we really are done.

Bridge: I understand. You're young. You'll get clarity when you're older.

[She doesn't answer. She just leaves.]

INTERVIEW END

“ *I lean against the tiled wall and watch him, this man who is so much more than physical beauty. He’s strength and intelligence, commanding and tender. He’s honorable and strong, fierce and loyal.*

- Hold Me

TRANSCRIPT: STARK-3



DAY 2, SESSION 2, 1:00 PM

- *Audio Transcription by All Access Enterprises*
- *Annotations added by client: Spicer, Magdalena*
- *Location: Stark Home, Malibu, CA, 1st floor living area*
- *Subject(s): Damien Stark, Nichole Fairchild Stark (Nikki)*
- *Interview conducted by Maggie Bridge*

Begin Interview

[They sit together on the sofa on the first floor, their fingers twined, their eyes on me. They have spoken with Bree. I am certain of it. And it is her they believe.]

Bridge: As I said, today will be mostly about your business ventures.

Damien: We'll see how it goes. This may be a much faster interview than any of us anticipated.

[I glance at Nikki. She says nothing.]

Bridge: Alright. Let's get started. As I was saying, I wanted to focus more on business relations. We've done family, friends, now professional.

[They do not return my smile.]

Bridge: I'd like to start with a basic question. What are you working for, Damien? What goal? What's your endgame?

Damien: Endgame?

[He looks at me as if I was nuts.]

Damien: The endgame is creation and exploration. Scientific. Geographic. Mental. Philosophical. Any way that a human mind can examine and explore a place or an idea or a theory. Stark International isn't about the money, though one of the main goals is certainly profit. On the contrary, that goal of creating—new tech, new art, new buildings—*that's* the force. The money is a byproduct, and, thankfully a useful one.

Bridge: How so?

Damien: Reinvestment, for one. Comfort, for another. I'm not ashamed of the property I own, the toys I have. Also, a significant portion of the income I earn from Stark International goes directly into the Stark Education Foundation and the Stark Children's Foundation. Not to mention a number

of other charities. There is no end game, Maggie. No trophy at the end. There's just the game.

Bridge: A game. exactly.

[He pinches the bridge of his nose as if I'm merely the lead-in to a headache.]

Damien: Tell you what. Let's move on to more tangible concepts.

Bridge: Actually, let's start with the foundations. What was the impetus for creating them?

Damien: I think you know. I assume you're aware that the mission of the SCF is to help abused, neglected, and other kids in need?

Bridge: And that was a personal cause for you.

Damien: You're not back-dooring me into this conversation.

Bridge: You're the one who—

Damien: *Lena.*

[I take a step back. He's clearly in a pissy mood.]

Bridge: Moving on.

[I clear my throat.]

Bridge: In that case, I'm curious about your business relationship with your wife.

Damien: It's an excellent relationship. She created a fabulous product. We licensed it.

Bridge: You mean you financed it.

Nikki: The hell he did. He offered. I said no.

Bridge: And so he came in through the back door. Paid you for a nude portrait. But you both knew what it was for. And that's fine. But my question is if you've worked together in any other capacity.

[The look at each other. I've clearly hit a nerve, as he's obviously been pulling strings so that his wife's software gets a massive contract with Stark International.]

Nikki: No. But I don't think either one of us would rule it out.

Bridge: I don't imagine you would. But you do work with Jackson.

Damien: I do. Yes.

Bridge: That must have been an unusual situation. He'd grown up knowing about you, but you didn't know about him.

Damien: It wasn't ideal, no.

[He crosses his arms. Looks at me.]

Damien: Lena, what's going on?

Bridge: Just trying to put together an article.

Damien: My relationship with Jackson has been thoroughly explored in pretty much every form of media out there. What aren't you telling me?

Bridge: Not a thing. You don't know me as well as you think you do. You never gave us the chance.

[Beside him, I see Nikki raise a brow.]

Damien: What would you like to know about Jackson and me?

Bridge: What's in the works next?

Damien: We're expanding the Resort at Cortez, actually. Building a second residential section. Adding on to the resort. Increasing transportation to and from the mainland. We're very excited about the project.

Bridge: So you started out brothers, became coworkers, and now you're friends?

Damien: That's accurate. Does that bother you?

Bridge: You don't think it smells of nepotism?

Damien: I think it wreaks of talent.

Bridge: And you, Nikki?

Nikki: I definitely smell talent.

Bridge: Are you intimidated by the scope of your husband's business ventures. He's everywhere. I imagine there's not a person in the world he couldn't connect with in well-under six degrees of separation.

Damien: Lena, what's this about? Even if that were true, what does it matter?

Bridge: It matters if you use those connections to overpower others. To push them out and put your own people in.

[He cocks his head. He has that dangerous look I've seen before.]

Damien: I don't know what you've heard, but that's not me.

Bridge: No? Didn't you create Stark Security to solve your problem?

Damien: By the time Stark Security was created, we had Anne back. That organization was formed to hopefully prevent others from going through what Nikki and I did.

[His knuckles are white; he must be close to crushing the bones in Nikkis' hand. Gently, she releases his fingers. He grimaces. She stands.]

Nikki: Magdalena, it's time for you to leave. No need to file your article. Evelyn's going to pursue different avenues for publicity.

Bridge: So that's it.

Nikki: Yes. That's it.

Bridge: Fine.

[I walk away, but I turn back at the door. Damien is standing now, and he's pulling Nikki into his arms.]

INTERVIEW END

DAMIEN'S JOURNAL



TRUTH DOES NOTHING

*Jeremiah was gone for two entire days,
and it was heaven.*

*I'm not supposed to call him that. Makes
me call him dad. But he's not my dad.
Biologically, sure. No escaping that. But if he's
my dad then I'm a – I don't know. Anything
other than me. Because I can't be me and
have come from that man.*

*I told him what Coach does. With me.
With Sofia. What he makes us do.*

*I told him, and he pretended not to
understand. He said we need Coach, and that
means we do what he says.*

That I do what he says.

I hate it, but I'd do whatever that Coach Asshole says if he'd just keep Sofia out of it. I don't know how to describe it, but she's breakable. And Coach doesn't care. Her own damn father, and he doesn't care.

I want to tell Alaine—but how do you tell your friend something like that. Especially since it's a secret. It must be because I'm ashamed, and so is Sofia. And if the truth comes out, I might not be able to play tennis anymore. And if I can't play, they'll just send me back to California with him.

Honestly, I'm not sure which is worse. What Coach does or the thought of living with my dad.

I can't believe I even wrote that, but I'm not going to scratch it out because it's true.

I know what my dad and Richter are.

But what does thinking like that make me?

Mom, if you're there, I miss you.

*I wonder what my life would be like if
you'd lived.*

*And most of all I wonder what it would be
like if I just had the balls to say no.*

“ *I need to make this happen. Stark Security. I need it to be more than just another entity under the Stark umbrella. I need it to be formidable. Hell, I need it to be dangerous. I need it to be the line in the sand between the kind of world that should exist, and a world filled with monsters disguised as humans.*

- *Indulge Me*

A LETTER TO ANNE



My Precious Anne,

Someone has taken you.

It's surreal to write those words. I read them over and over, but they don't seem to make sense. The letters form words, but the words have no meaning.

Someone has taken you. They've taken you and Bree, and your mother and I are terrified.

But you shouldn't be. Because I am telling you right now, that I will get you back.

One day, when you're older, I'll give you this letter and tell you the story. You deserve to know, but not until you can understand what happened—and how much you are loved.

All my love,

Your Daddy

“ *Everything I have. Everything I am, pales in comparison to the way I feel about you.*

- Entice Me

CHAPTER 8: THE END



Damien closed the door behind Lena.
“Will she cause trouble?”

“I think she’s trouble by nature.” He shook his head.
“When she first got here, I thought maybe I’d misjudged her.
But as the hours passed—”

“I know. She came with an agenda.”

“But what?” Nikki asked. “And is it directed at you? Ash?
Me?”

For her sake it better be me. I won’t go easy on her if she
starts a vendetta against my son or my wife.

“Maybe she’ll erase the interviews and just walk away.
She said herself you were formidable.”

“We can hope.”

Nikki moved closer and he drew her to him. “She’d be a
fool to burn bridges in journalism. She’ll never get hired again
if anyone hears how these interviews went down.”

“I agree,” he said. “She’d also be a fool to get more firmly
on my bad side. And an even bigger one to harm Ash. Or, God
forbid, you.”

He sighed. All he knew for certain was that she was up to something.

Soon enough, they'd all know what.

BONUS SCENE!



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As a thank you for your pre-order or release day purchase, please visit this link and enter the password to either read this steamy bonus scene online or to download the scene to read on your device. (This scene is also included in the print edition of the book).

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MORE DAMIEN? YES, PLEASE!



I hope you enjoyed *Interview With The Billionaire*, but I also hope that you're still hungry for more of Damien and the Stark World gang. Why? Because in addition to spin-off books and new series set in Stark World, you'll also find more of Damien and Nikki over at my [Patreon](#), launching concurrently with the release of *Interview With The Billionaire*.

Why?

Because we all need more Stark World stories!

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Monthly Zoom chats with JK (At a minimum);

Character info - deep dives into how characters came about, inspiration, and more;

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First look at a sexy new series set on the Resort at Cortez;

Art.

Swag.

So much more!

PLUS ...

A chance to vote on future stories and plot points:

What's Ash's heroine's name?

Shall we vote on killing off Elizabeth Fairchild? Just a thought... Maybe Nikki then finds a Dark Secret when she goes through her mother's things...

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THE STARK SAGA (NIKKI & DAMIEN)



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The Stark Saga

J. Kenner

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[claim me](#)

[complete me](#)

[take me](#) (novella)

[have me](#) (novella)

[play my game](#) (novella)

[seduce me](#) (novella)

[unwrap me](#) (novella)

[deepest kiss](#) (novella)

[entice me](#) (novella)

[anchor me](#)

[hold me](#) (novella)

[please me](#) (novella)

lost with me

damien

indulge me (novella)

delight me (novella & bonus content)

cherish me (novella)

embrace me (novella)

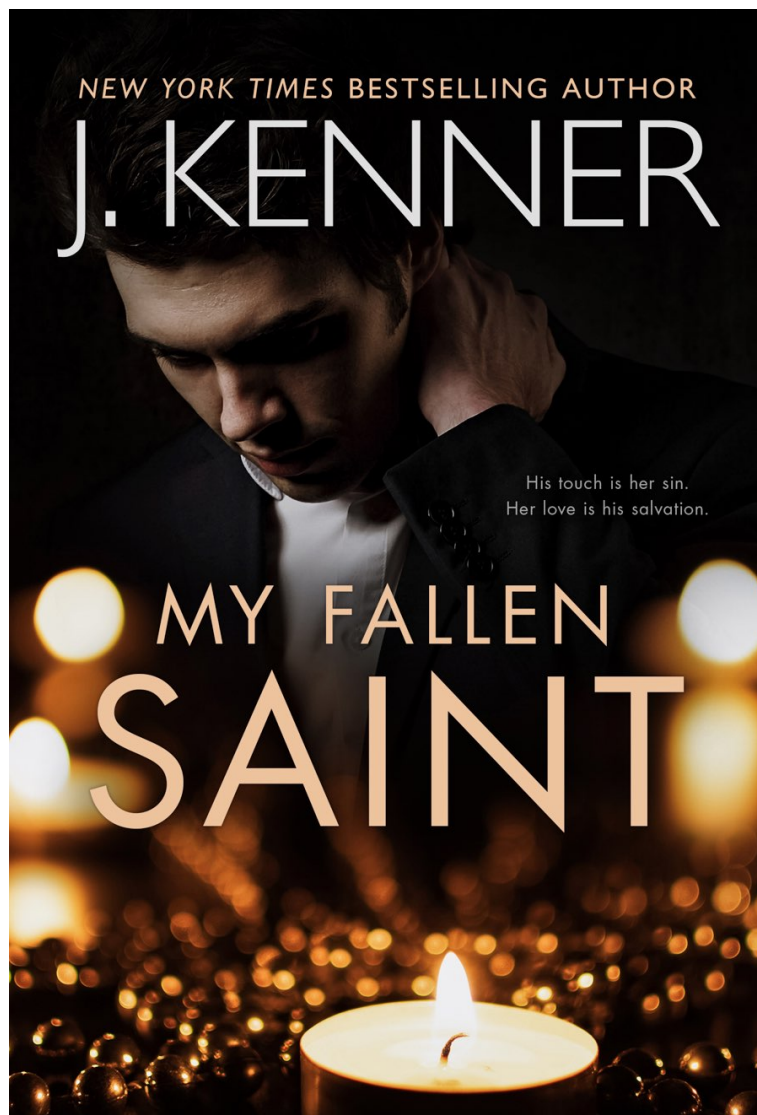
enchant me

interview with the billionaire (novella & bonus content)

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CHAPTER 1



The wind stings my face and the glare from the afternoon sun obscures my vision as I fly down the long stretch of Sunset Canyon Road at well over a hundred miles per hour.

My heart pounds and my palms are sweaty, but not because of my speed. On the contrary, this is what I need. The rush. The thrill. I crave it like a junkie, and it affects me like a toddler on a sugar high.

Honestly, it's taking every ounce of my willpower not to put my 1965 Shelby Cobra through her paces and kick her powerful engine up even more.

I can't, though. Not today. Not here.

Not when I'm back, and certainly not when my homecoming has roused a swarm of butterflies in my stomach. When every curve in this road brings back memories that have tears clogging my throat and my bowels rumbling with nerves.

Dammit.

I pound down the clutch, then slam my foot onto the brake, shifting into neutral as I simultaneously yank the wheel sharply to the left. The tires squeal in protest as I make a U-turn across the oncoming lane, the car's ass fishtailing before

skidding to a stop in the turnout. I'm breathing hard, and honestly, I think Shelby is, too. She's more than a car to me; she's a lifelong best friend, and I don't usually fuck with her like this.

Now, though...

Well, now she's dangerously close to the cliff's edge, her entire passenger side resting parallel to a void that boasts a view of the distant coastline. Not to mention a seriously stunning glimpse of the small downtown below.

I ratchet up the emergency brake as my heartbeat pounds in my throat. And only when I'm certain we won't go skidding down the side of the cliff do I kill Shelby's engine, wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans, and let my body relax.

Well, hello to you, too, Laguna Cortez.

With a sigh, I take off my ball cap, allowing my dark curls to bounce free around my face and graze my shoulders.

"Get a grip, Ellie," I murmur, then suck in a deep breath. Not so much for courage—I'm not afraid of this town—but for fortitude. Because Laguna Cortez beat me down before, and it's going to take all of my strength to walk those streets again.

One more breath, and then I step out of the car. I walk to the edge of the turnout. There's no barrier, and loose dirt and small stones clatter down the hill as I balance on the very edge.

Below me, jagged rocks protrude from the canyon walls. Further down, the harsh angles smooth to gentle slopes with homes of all shapes and sizes nestled among the rocks and scrubby plants. The tiled roofs follow the tightly winding road that leads down to the Arts District. Tucked neatly in the valley formed by a U of hills and canyons, the area opens onto

the town's largest beach and draws a steady stream of tourists and locals.

As far as the public is concerned, Laguna Cortez is one of the gems of the Pacific Coast. A laid-back town with just under sixty-thousand people and miles of sandy and rocky beaches.

Most people would give their right arm to live here.

As far as I'm concerned, it's hell.

It's the place where I lost my heart and my virginity. Not to mention everybody close to me. My parents. My uncle.

And Alex.

The boy I'd loved. The man who broke me.

Not a single one of them is here anymore. My family, all dead. And Alex, long gone.

I ran, too, desperate to escape the weight of my losses and the sting of betrayal. I swore to myself that I'd never return.

As far as I was concerned, nothing would get me back.

But now it's ten years later, and here am I again, drawn back down to hell by the ghosts of my past.

CHAPTER 2



I met Alex Leto on my sixteenth birthday, and the first time I saw him, something inside me turned on. Something like happiness, yet so much more complicated. Optimism, maybe, but mixed with rainbows and unicorns.

The day started gray and dismal, with storms rolling in at dawn. They parked themselves over my house, spread their dark gray arms, and stirred up wind and rain from daybreak all the way into the evening. Six of my ten invited guests called to cancel, but even before the party started, I'd known that it was ruined.

I should have seen it coming. Maybe not a gale, but something. After all, I was not the most blessed of kids. For starters, I was an orphan.

I'd turned four the day after my mother died, and though I used to tell my dad that I remembered her, by the time I was ten, that was a lie.

Her brother, my Uncle Peter, moved his commercial real estate business to Laguna Cortez after she died. My dad couldn't afford to hire help, and as Chief of Police he had an erratic schedule. Daddy and I lived in the hills, but I'd go to Uncle Peter's huge, light-filled beach house most days after school.

It was a stunning home, but I hated every moment away from my dad. Maybe some part of me knew what was coming. I don't know. All I know is that I wanted him beside me and safe.

But wanting doesn't matter. It never does. Wants are just so much fluff, and Fate is a goddamn bitch. The summer I turned thirteen, I learned that lesson well.

That's when a gunman murdered my father, then killed himself. People tried to comfort me by pointing out that my father died on duty in the job he loved. But it didn't help. He was still horribly, painfully dead.

After that, my life spiraled even more. I moved in with Uncle Peter, and all my friends thought that I was so lucky, because there aren't that many beachfront homes in Laguna Cortez.

But I wasn't. I wasn't lucky at all.

Eventually, I grew accustomed to my new normal. I'd find myself going entire days feeling happy, only to hate myself at night, because how could I experience joy when my parents had both died so horribly?

Which was why I wasn't surprised when the storms rolled in on my birthday, because life will always sneak up and bite you.

Still, even with only a few kids showing up, we'd had fun. Instead of the beach, we settled into the media room to watch movies. And when Brandy and I went downstairs to ask Uncle Peter if my favorite pizza place was delivering in the storm, there *he* was.

A few years older than me, Alex was tall and lean, with close-cropped blond hair, a clean-shaven face that still had a

boyish roundness, but an expression that was fully adult. His sandy brown eyes held me in place when he turned to look at me. And when his wide mouth curved into a friendly smile, a low, thrum teased between my thighs.

I'd had a crush or two by then, but I'd never reacted that viscerally to a guy. But Alex ... well, a mere glimpse gave me more understanding of what all the fuss was about than any of the late-night gossip sessions at Brandy's frequent slumber parties.

When he came over to shake my hand and wish me a happy birthday, I almost passed out. I was so flustered that I could only stand there, my hand in his, as I tried to play back the conversation of the last few seconds.

Alex Leto. That's how he'd introduced himself. And he was working for Uncle Peter during his gap year while he decided on a college.

"Hi," I'd squeaked, then kicked myself for being utterly uninteresting.

"Trouble with the movie?" Uncle Peter had asked, and I'd squinted at him, not understanding a word. "The projector," he clarified. "Did you come down because I need to fix something?"

"Oh! Right. Pizza. We want to order pizza. Will they deliver in this weather?"

"If not, I can go get it for you," Alex said, and if I hadn't already fallen hard, that would have sealed the deal. A real live Prince Charming right in my kitchen.

Once Uncle Peter agreed, there'd been no more reason to hang out in the kitchen, and Brandy and I reluctantly went back to the media room. "Oh. My. God," she whisper-squealed

as we climbed the stairs. “Did you see the way he was looking at you?”

“He was being polite,” I countered, though her words revived that down low tingle, now complemented by a swarm of butterflies in my belly.

“Was he?” She winked at me, and I grabbed her wrist before she could burst into the media room.

“Don’t say anything.”

“What? Why not?”

“I just ... I ... please? Can we tell them about the pizza and leave it at that?”

“Yeah.” She shrugged. “Yeah, sure. If that’s what you want.”

“Thanks.”

She gave me a quick conspiratorial smile. “But he really is super cute.”

“I know, right?” And we both burst into giggles, only to fall into total hysterics when our friend Carrie pushed open the door with a scowl.

“Hello? Waiting the movie on you two. I mean, rude.”

We clapped our hands over our mouths to bite back another flood of laughter, took our seats, and settled in until the pizza came. And even though Alex was the one who delivered it—and even though he stayed to watch the second half of *Aliens* and sat right next to me—Brandy never said a word. Not then. Not ever.

Which is a big part of why she’s my best friend to this day.

After that, Alex was around a lot. Peter had a home office, but he did most of his work at construction sites or in the offices of the apartments and hotels he owned. He'd hired Alex to do administrative stuff, which meant that Alex was at the house most every day.

I turned down beach and movie offers from my friends, choosing to stay in and fetch Alex water and snacks and coffee. Each time I'd linger a bit, asking what he was doing, and he'd never blow me off. He'd even invite me to stay. Then one day he asked if I wanted to help.

"Not as interesting as spending the summer with your friends," he'd said, "but I'd love the company." He smiled then, and that tiny little motion—nothing more than muscles around lips—had melted me.

"Good. Because I'd rather be here."

"Would you?"

I nodded, my heart pounding with such ferocity I was sure he must be able to hear it.

"That works out great, because I like having you here."

I met his eyes, and something deep inside me roared. For the first time in my life, I felt the hard punch of true, sexual desire.

"Right." I swallowed, trying to overcome my desert-dry mouth.

So that's what I did, helping him when I could, taking up space the rest of the time. And we talked. About anything and everything. I'd never been as comfortable with anyone in all my life, and that was despite the humming, buzzing, crackling in the air whenever we were near each other.

“Have you done anything?” Brandy asked when we were back in school months later.

“No! He works for my uncle, remember? Besides, he’s eighteen. Me, sixteen. And he knows it.”

She waved away my words. “Yeah, but so what? You act older. Ever since ... well, my mom says you raised yourself.”

Honestly, Mrs. Bradshaw wasn’t wrong. My uncle may have sheltered and fed and clothed me these last few years, but that was about it. Nurturing, I got at Brandy’s house. And the rest? Well, I guess maybe I did raise myself.

“Eighteen,” I repeated firmly. “Nineteen next week.”

“That’s perfect.” Her blue eyes twinkled. “Wrap yourself in a bow, and you can be his present.”

I didn’t give myself to him, of course, but when he turned nineteen, I gave him a leather friendship bracelet with a Celtic knot. “That’s called a love knot,” he said, and I felt my cheeks burn hot.

“I—I didn’t know.”

“Didn’t you? Well, it makes it all the more special to me.”

“Oh.”

He held out his arm to me. “Fasten it?”

I did, lightly stroking my thumb over his wrist as I manipulated the clasp.

“This is fucked up,” he said, so soft I could barely hear him.

“What?”

“Us,” he said, the words like ice.

“I’m sorry. I should—” I turned to go, but he grabbed my arm and pulled me back. We were alone in Uncle Peter’s study, and he held me in place.

“You’re sixteen.” He practically growled the words. “Why the hell are you only sixteen?”

I shook my head, blinking as I tried to prevent the flood of tears.

“We can’t,” he said, and I didn’t have to ask what he meant.

“I know,” I whispered. I’d been talking to the ground, but I told myself that wasn’t fair. He deserved the words. He deserved to see my heart. I looked up and met his eyes. “But I want to.”

His head tilted in the slightest of nods. “I know,” he said. “I want it, too.”

CHAPTER 3



For months, being with Alex was both torture and bliss. It was like living in a pressure cooker, and I think we both knew that the day would come when we couldn't fight it anymore.

Then, right after Christmas break, Brandy's dad pulled up stakes and moved the whole family to San Diego with barely any notice at all. We'd been devastated, and the day before she left, I helped her pack her room and stayed until her mom said I had to go because the movers were coming at five in the morning. I'd left reluctantly, fighting back tears so that Brandy wouldn't lose it all over again.

I got home to find Alex waiting up for me, ostensibly catching up on Uncle Peter's paperwork. I'd hurried up to my room, unable to even talk to him without risking more tears.

I'd been about to doze off when I heard the light tap at my door. I propped myself up, assuming it was Uncle Peter coming to say goodnight. Instead, it was Alex.

He shut the door behind him, then stood on the far side of the room. "I wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I'm sad," I admitted, and it was as if the words were permission for the tears to flow. "I don't think I've been this sad since Daddy died."

“Oh, Ellie...” I barely registered the fact that he’d crossed the room to me. That he was sitting on the edge of the bed, and I was upright and clutching him, sobbing against his shoulder.

I don’t know when he slid into bed next to me, but he did. We were both fully clothed, him in jeans and me in PJs, and he held me tight as I snuggled against him. He stroked my hair, and I cried myself to sleep. Not only because Brandy was gone, but because I knew that one day soon, Alex would leave for college, and I’d lose him as well.

Nothing happened that night. Nothing sexual, anyway. But emotionally? Well, whatever bit of my heart I’d held back was fully his by morning. He snuck out before Uncle Peter arrived, and we shared a secret smile in the kitchen as I made toast to eat on the way to school. Just a normal day. Except it would never be normal again.

After that, every day held smiles and shared glances, and I floated on a cloud knowing this wonderful guy had become my rock. Someone solid and real in a world where everyone I loved kept getting ripped away.

I didn’t have a party on my seventeenth birthday. With Brandy gone and Alex out of town for some work thing, I couldn’t muster the enthusiasm. Instead, Uncle Peter took me out to dinner, and when he went out later that night, I took a twilight stroll down the beach to the tidal pools.

I sat on the rocks, careful not to slip into the pool and disturb the tiny ecosystem. The moon was full, so there was enough light to see the silver fish, brown anemones, and all the rest of the sea life that lived in that fragile little world.

I was bent forward, watching a hermit crab navigate its way across the pool, when I heard the soft pad of footsteps behind me. A spike of fear shot through me, and I jumped to

my feet, not even thinking, and lost my footing. I started to go down, certain I'd either squash all the critters in the pool or scrape every bit of exposed skin on the rocks.

But then suddenly I wasn't falling. I was flying, being pulled off the rocks and into Alex's arms.

"I've got you," he said as my blood pounded in my ears. Not from my near miss, but from his proximity. From the sensation of his body pressed against mine as he held my upper arms tight in his clenched hands.

Our eyes met, and though I've never considered myself particularly bold, I moved first, tugging my arms free so I could wrap them around his neck as I rose on my toes and closed my mouth over his.

There was no fear, no worry that he'd push me away. I'd known in the instant before our lips met that this was the way it had to be. This perfect, intense moment that ignited a firestorm inside me as he cupped the back of my neck, pulling me closer until I felt like I could crawl inside of him.

"Ellie," he murmured when we broke apart, and hearing my name on his lips was like throwing gasoline on a fire. I wanted him. All of him. And once again, I lifted myself onto my toes and lost myself in the taste of him.

He hesitated only a moment, but in those few seconds, I feared he'd push me away. But then he made a low noise in his throat and thoroughly claimed my mouth, his tongue tasting and teasing, dancing with mine as his hands slid down to cup my ass.

He pulled me close to him, and I moaned when I felt his erection against my belly. I'd never been this close to a guy,

and the proof that he wanted me that way burned inside me, making my inner thighs ache and my core throb.

Then suddenly he wasn't cupping my rear anymore. He had one hand down the back of my shorts and I was spreading my legs, offering him all of me.

"Please," I begged, gasping for air. I wasn't even sure what I was asking for. His finger? His cock? Did I want him to lay me down in the sand and make love to me? Did I want him to take me home?

All I knew was that the answer was *yes*. All I wanted in that moment was to be his, however and wherever he wanted.

When he looked down at me—when I saw the wild, raw heat in his eyes, I knew that's what he craved, too.

This was happening. Oh, God, this was really happening.

But then something in his face shifted, and he pulled his hand out of my shorts. I heard myself whimper as he took a step back, breaking the contact between us.

"Alex?" I heard fear in my voice. Fear that he didn't want me. Fear that I'd done something wrong.

"We can't," he said, taking my hand and holding it close to his chest. "I've never wanted anyone as much as I want you, Ellie. But we can't do this."

I tried to swallow, but the knot of tears stuck in my throat. And when I asked *why* my voice was little more than a croak.

He cupped my cheek. "You're barely seventeen, El. And I'm almost twenty. Plus, I work for your uncle." Something in his face hardened. "Your uncle's not the kind of man who would overlook it. We've already been playing with fire. Push this, and we'll both get burned."

I wanted to shout back that I didn't care. I wanted to burn. I wanted to get lost in the flames with him until we were both reduced to ashes.

But I didn't say any of that because I knew he was right.

He shook his head slowly, his expression profoundly sad. "I never wanted—"

"What?"

"Here. I never wanted to come here."

"To Laguna Cortez?" My voice rose in surprise. "I thought everybody wanted to come here."

"My dad made me. Now, though..." He trailed off, running his fingers over his short hair. "God, Ellie, now this is exactly where I want to be."

"Please," I said, blurting out the word before I lost my nerve. "I want to."

The corner of his mouth curved up. "Me, too. Obviously. But we can't."

"Yes, we can. Uncle Peter's barely noticed that we're friends, much less that there's more."

"Fine. We can."

For a moment, my heart stopped, but then he continued.

"But, El," he said. "I won't."

He stuck to that, too.

Every night, I'd go to bed and slide my hand between my legs while I imagined him doing all the things I read in romance novels. Every night, I'd silently pray for him to sneak into my room and into my bed.

But he never did. He kept his word, even though each time we were alone the air was so charged, I was sure that one of us would crack.

We didn't, though.

Not then. Not yet.

For the next two months, our friendship grew even stronger. Especially with Brandy gone, he became my closest friend. We talked for hours that summer after he was done with work, mostly at the tidal pools. Sometimes he'd stay late at the house, because Uncle Peter was hardly ever home.

We'd talk or cook dinner or watch movies. Horror mostly, because it was an excuse to sit close and hold hands at the first scary scene.

And always, *always*, there was that greedy, guilty need that had me squeezing my thighs to relieve the pressure. I imagined crawling into his lap and doing exactly what the girls in those movies were doing.

And I didn't even care that if I did them, then surely the monster would get me, too.

Maybe I should have cared more. Maybe in the end, I really did bring the monsters down on me.

I don't know. But I vividly remember that September day when Chief Randall came to school and delivered the news that Uncle Peter was dead. Killed by a single bullet to the back of the head, shot from the gun of a monster.

In grief and fear, I'd run home, expecting to find Alex working in the office. But he wasn't there. Later, I learned that he'd been checking the books at one of Uncle Peter's properties when a detective had come to give him the news. They'd questioned Alex for over an hour, digging deep into

Uncle Peter's business, searching for clues as to who might have held a grudge.

I didn't know any of that at the time. All I knew was that I was dying inside. That I needed to hear his voice in order to know that he was truly okay. Because everybody I loved—*everybody*—was taken from me. Over and over and over again.

All afternoon and evening I sat with my phone beside me, curled up under a blanket in the living room with Amy Randall, the Chief's wife, bringing me hot tea and cookies. I loved her for taking care of me, but even with Amy in the room, I felt alone.

Alex never called, and at ten o'clock Amy kissed my cheek and got herself settled in the guest room. I went upstairs to my room—and there he was, sitting on the edge of my bed.

I don't know how, but I managed to shut and lock the door behind me before I fell, sobbing, into his arms. "You're going to be okay," Alex whispered. "I hate that you're hurting, but you're strong, El. Never forget how strong you are."

There was an unfamiliar edge to his voice, and he spoke straight to my soul when he said, "I've seen your heart, and you will survive this. And I'll tell you something else, too. I love you, Elsa Holmes." His voice burned with emotion. "That's why I call you El," he added, his thumb and forefinger making the sign for the letter L. "Because it's the first letter in *love*."

Pure joy battled the loss and pain inside me as he cupped my cheek, his eyes locked on mine. "Promise me you won't ever forget that."

"Alex..." I could barely say his name though my tears.

“Promise me.” The words were harsh. Demanding.

“I promise.”

He closed his eyes, then took a deep breath. And when he opened them again, I gasped at the wild intensity I saw. The blatant hunger. “Tonight, Ellie. Damn me all to hell, but I’ve got to have you tonight.”

“Yes,” I said, though I wanted to cry with relief. “Yes,” I repeated, only to have the word lost in the soft brush of his lips, that innocent, tender touch exploding into something much more passionate. Something raw.

Something wonderful.

He flipped me onto my back and straddled me, his mouth hard on mine as I clenched at his hips and pulled him down, craving a deeper connection. Needing skin on skin. I wanted everything I’d been fantasizing about, and I wanted it right then. But at the same time, I wanted this to go slow. To last forever. I wanted no one but Alex, and nothing except being in his arms.

“Ellie,” he whispered, then trailed kisses down my neck and lower still. I wasn’t wearing a bra, and his mouth closed over my breast through my T-shirt. I arched up, so startled by the intensity of the sensation that I had to bite the soft spot at the base of my thumb in order to keep from crying out. Amy was all the way on the other side of the house and a floor below us, but considering the magnitude of what I was feeling, if I let go, I was certain that my cries of pleasure would shake every wall in the place.

He moved lower then, his tongue teasing the thin strip of bare skin between my shirt and my PJ bottoms, making me writhe beneath him. I felt the brush of his fingers as he

unfastened the string, then watched as he lifted his head to meet my eyes while he gently eased my pants down, along with my panties. A shiver ran through me—not fear, but anticipation and wild nerves.

“Okay?”

I nodded, then closed my eyes as he kissed my belly button, then moved slowly lower. His hands were cupped at my sides, his thumbs barely touching the swell of my breasts. The only truly intimate contact was his mouth. Such a small bit of skin to generate such incredible sensations.

He moved with wicked slowness. He probably wanted to make sure I was ready, but I was flying from the heat of him, from the wildness and need he was setting loose inside me. Even with all the times I’d made my own body explode, I’d never experienced this growing anticipation or the pure erotic pleasure of being tended and led down a sensual path toward an avalanche of pleasure.

It almost became too much. I whimpered, then shifted my hips as his lips pressed against my mound. He slid his hands lower, then gripped my waist, holding me firmly in place. Only once did he take his mouth from my skin, and that was when he spoke to me. My eyes were closed, my back arched as my body strained for more. “You should touch yourself,” he said. “Your breasts. Your nipples.”

“Why?”

“You’ll like it,” he said. “I will, too.”

I swallowed, the thought that he’d watch as I did something so intimate making me more than a little nervous. Ironic, considering how intimately *he* was touching me. But I did as he asked, barely grazing my fingertip over my very tight

nipple. And oh my God, the sparks that set off. I closed my eyes again, forgetting to be nervous, letting my hands tease my breasts as his mouth explored below, his tongue flicking over me in ways that had me biting my lower lip to prevent me moaning so much that he'd worry about me and stop.

And then—oh God, and then—my whole body tightened and exploded with way, way, way more intensity than I'd ever managed on my own, because on my own, I'd always stopped. But Alex was relentless, teasing and sucking until I didn't care about embarrassing myself, and I writhed and moaned and screamed until he finally slid up my body, put his hand on my mouth, and reminded me that the walls were thin.

He'd held me then, taking over the job of playing with my breasts, then helping me out of my bunched-up T-shirt so that I was naked and he was still fully dressed.

I bit my lower lip and asked, "Do you want...?" I held my breath, waiting for him to answer. I was warm and sated, but I still wanted more. I wanted *him*.

"Desperately," he said. "I want everything with you, El. I want a night that neither of us will ever forget. I want to bury myself inside you and feel it as you shatter around me." He kissed me gently. "Is that okay?"

I nodded, mute, and he kissed me again before sitting up and reaching for his back pocket. He pulled out his wallet and took out a condom, and I felt like an idiot, then, because I was so worked up it hadn't even occurred to me.

"You've done this before," I said, a bit accusatorially, but that was only to hide my embarrassment.

"No," he said as he peeled off his jeans and shirt.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not naive, you know."

His smile was both teasing and sweet. “Sex, yes. But never with someone I love.”

“Oh.”

“I do love you, El, and it’s destroying my reason.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“We shouldn’t do this. Not tonight. Not when I—Not after—But dammit, I want you too much. I can’t stand the thought that I might—”

“What?”

“Lose you?”

He made the words a question, and I nodded in understanding. Peter was the first person he’d lost. And I understood grief better than anyone. “You won’t lose me, Alex,” I promised. “How can you if we love each other?”

I thought I saw tears in his eyes, but then he kissed me, and once again I was lost as he swept me away, out to sea on a tide of passion. He moved slowly, every touch bringing me that much closer to begging until, finally, I did exactly that and showered him with pleas.

He didn’t ask if I was sure—he knew that I was—but he met my eyes, and when he grinned, he was more than my new lover, he was my best friend. And I knew right then that no matter what, the night was going to be perfect.

He buried himself inside me, moving slowly, taking care to hurt me as little as possible, until I was actually whimpering with need. And when he exploded, I opened my eyes and watched the release play out over his face and body, amazed that I had the power to take him there—and then amazed again a few minutes later when he once more sent me off on the

same journey until we were both utterly spent and limp as rags.

He slid up the bed, pulling me against him, and we clung to each other, whispering softly until sleep claimed us. I drifted off in his arms, knowing that I would survive this. Because with Alex by my side, I could survive anything.

That's what I believed, anyway, but I learned soon enough that it was a crock of steaming bullshit.

Because by the time I got up the next morning, Alex was gone, vanished with no word other than one crappy slip of paper telling me he was sorry and that I was strong. I'd loved him. I'd trusted him. And he'd walked away.

Everyone else in my life had been stolen from me. But Alex? He'd left of his own accord.

And that made him the worst devil of all.

CHAPTER 4



It's Uncle Peter's murder that's dragged me back to Laguna Cortez. At the time, the police believed the perp was a guy named Ricky Mercado, who'd lost his shit after Peter called him out for dealing drugs at one of the apartment complexes Peter owned.

They believed it because Ricky Mercado turned himself in the day after the murder, and the evidence backed him up. He ended up with a sentence of twenty-five to life, lasted about a decade in prison, then was killed in a prison fight last month.

Just shy of a week ago, I learned from Chief Randall that new evidence shows that Mercado couldn't have committed the crime. Turns out he was in Long Beach at the time of the murder—caught on camera beating the shit out of a clerk at a local convenience store.

So who did kill my uncle? And why the hell did Mercado confess to a crime he didn't commit?

I don't know. But I came back to find out.

My cell phone rings, and I return from the cliff's edge to Shelby. I see that the call's from my editor, so I bend over and grab the phone off the passenger seat. "Hey, Roger. Checking up on me?"

“Checking in on you. How’re you doing, kid?”

With anyone else, the nickname would grate on me, but Roger’s been my mentor since the first day I arrived at *The Spall Monthly* as an intern after quitting my job with the Irvine Police Department to start a new life in New York as an investigative reporter.

Now I’ve got a Masters in Journalism and a job as a staff writer, but he’s still my mentor and friend. And a little bit of a father, too.

“It’s weird being back,” I confess, because I know he’s worried about me. He doesn’t know my entire story, but he knows how my family’s ghosts haunt this town. And he knows I’d left Laguna Cortez in my rearview mirror about five minutes after I got my GED during the first semester of what would have been my senior year.

I’d packed five boxes into Shelby, gotten an apartment in Irvine, then worked as a barista until I could start college at UCI in January. I was still seventeen, but Chief Randall and Amy signed off as my court-appointed guardians.

I haven’t been back to Laguna Cortez since. I’m not sure I’d be back now if Roger hadn’t pushed me.

“Deep breaths,” he says. “I’ve watched you for three years and there’s nothing you can’t handle.”

I cringe. I hate seeming weak, and I’m convinced that’s how he saw my reluctance to return. “I’ve got this,” I say firmly. “But I may not turn it into a story.”

I pace in front of Shelby, as if moving will ward off the creeping anxiety that’s nipping at my heels. “I want to know what really happened to my uncle. But that doesn’t mean I

want *Spall* publishing it. It's still my life. My family. You get that, right?"

I know he does. But I can't seem to pass up any opportunity to remind him.

"I want you to have closure, Ellie. If that means writing a story, then write it. If it means finding the truth and locking it away, then that's your choice. I won't push you. Not for this story. But you damn well better turn the profile piece in on time."

Now I laugh, because Roger truly is a clever bastard. "I'm on my way to the interview right now," I assure him.

My last argument against coming back was that I had work to do in New York. So my devious editor assigned me to write a profile of the Devlin Saint Foundation, focusing on the success it's had in rescuing and rehabilitating women and children caught up in a Nevada-based human trafficking ring. To that end, he lined up an interview with Devlin Saint—the Devlin Saint—for this afternoon.

It's not an investigative piece, but it's still important. Despite being relatively new, the Devlin Saint Foundation has become one of the world's foremost philanthropic organizations, with fingers in educational projects, criminal rehabilitation efforts, global development, anti-hunger, the arts, and so much more.

Its success, of course, is attributed to Saint himself, the mysterious, young, and extremely private founder of the organization. A man who started the DSF only five years ago and grew it into a world-renowned philanthropic enterprise. Whose reputation as a brilliant and generous global philanthropist is counterbalanced by his notoriety for being an arrogant and enigmatic loner whose business acumen and

exceptional looks have paved the way to his foundation's success where his chilly personality could not.

I hesitated when Roger assigned the story, but ultimately agreed. After all, Saint is so enigmatic and well-known that the whole country will read the story, and that can only be good for my career.

Now, I wrap up the call with Roger, ostensibly because I need to get moving, but really because as soon as my mind turned to the foundation, it also turned to Alex. With a sigh, I take one more look at the town below.

From up here, it looks small and fragile. Like an architectural model. But I know the truth. Beneath its bright sunshine and sparkling waters, Laguna Cortez is nothing but death and loss, sharp edges and pain.

Despite having only two lanes and soft shoulders, Sunset Canyon Road is the main east-west thoroughfare for this Orange County town. With its gentle curves, it's also the easiest route down the hill.

But I don't need easy. Not now. Not even remotely.

So instead of meandering like someone's grandma down the main road, I hook the first left onto a tiny canyon road with no shoulders, serious drop-offs, and hairpin curves from hell.

I fly down the road, losing my cap in the process so that my hair whips around, stinging my cheeks. I ignore the discomfort. My attention is entirely on the road, on navigating this path. Right now, all I need is the wind in my face, the roar

of Shelby's engine, and the euphoria of knowing that for this moment at least, I'm in total and complete control.

That's an illusion, of course, and no one knows it better than me. No one is ever in control of their destiny. Lives are lost. Dreams are shattered. Hearts are broken. Right now, I could hit a pothole and flip the car. I could die before I ever make it into Saint's office.

But that's the thrill, right? And when I finally pull into the foundation's parking lot, I'm back in control. Because once again, I've shown that bitch Fate my middle finger.

I've won.

For a moment, I simply sit in the driver's seat, relishing my victory. Then I adjust the rearview mirror, grab the brush I keep in the glove compartment and go to work on my loose, dark brown curls. I always drive with a cap, which tends to prevent the worst tangles, but since the thing went flying, right now, I'm a mess.

I end up opening the trunk and getting my toiletry bag out of my suitcase. It has a small bottle of Argan oil, and I use a few drops to ease the tangles free. After years of driving Shelby, I've learned what necessities to have on hand.

I take the opportunity to fix my makeup as well, using the rearview as a cosmetic mirror. Even having driven from LA with the top down, I'm still pretty put together, which is probably because I don't use that much makeup to start with. Some golden eyeshadow to highlight my brown eyes. A smidge of gloss. Mascara of course, and just a hint of blush.

Normally I'm not particular about my face and hair. Or my clothes for that matter. Sure, I enjoy dressing up for a night out, but my favorite part of being a reporter is living in jeans

and a T-shirt. Because most days I'm sitting at my desk writing or working the phone.

Today, though, I want to look as professional as possible. I've never seen a photo of Saint where he doesn't look sharp. Hell, dead-to-rights perfect. And I'll be damned if I'll walk in there without looking like his equal. If nothing else, Roger expects that.

I stayed with friends in Los Angeles yesterday after taking five days to drive from New York so I'd have Shelby with me in California. This morning, I'd done lunch with my friends, then meandered my way down to Laguna Cortez. My plan is to bunk with Brandy while I write the article about the foundation and research the facts surrounding Uncle Peter. She moved back after college, and I called last night to tell her I'd meet up with her after my interview.

I dressed for the interview before leaving LA. A simple black pantsuit with a white silk tank and a loose-fitting blazer. I'm wearing flats at the moment, but I reach into the back and grab the killer Christian Louboutin pumps I'd stashed there earlier.

Designer shoes are my weakness, and since I can't actually afford them, I've made them a game, searching them out in consignment stores, thrift stores, and online sites like eBay. I found these a few months ago at an estate sale. A total score. They also have the advantage of adding much-needed inches to my usual five-foot-five frame, which is always nice in an interview. I can hold my own, but extra height gives extra confidence.

Once I'm all set, I grab my dad's battered leather satchel that I use as a briefcase, then slide out of the car. I pause for a moment to look at the impressive building rising from what

was once the slab of a long-demolished grocery store, the concrete baked and cracked. It had been an eyesore of disputed ownership, and Alex and I would walk across it some nights when we'd head out together for ice cream.

We'd walk from Uncle Peter's house to Pacific Avenue, the east-west street that serves as the access point for the Arts District. We'd get our ice cream from the corner store, then walk south along the Pacific Coast Highway for about a mile before crossing the highway to this lot. Then we'd keep walking toward the ocean and our tidal pools.

"What a wreck," Alex said once, looking around at the cracked concrete and sunbaked weeds that marred the empty lot.

I'd looked around, then shrugged. "It's just concrete."

"It's an eyesore. Right here between the Coast Highway and the ocean. It deserves better."

"Well..." I cast about for a piece of discarded chalk. Kids used the lot to draw, so it wasn't hard to find. I bent down and wrote *El and Alex's place*, careful to use the nickname he'd started calling me a few weeks after our first kiss. Everyone else called me Ellie.

Then I'd grinned up at him. "It's ours now. We can imagine it's anything. Does that make it better?"

"Oh, El," he'd said, with that sweet, sexy smile. "It does. It really does."

Now, I stand frozen, lost in the memory. Then I swallow the lump in my throat and pull myself from the past. The building that now rises in front of me is all cement and steel and glass, with sleek lines and sharp angles. Five stories that sparkle in the sunlight, complemented by a wide swath of eco-

friendly landscaping that peters out as it reaches the sandy beach.

It's absolutely stunning, but I don't like it at all.

Because this building isn't supposed to be here. And I don't care about the environmentally responsible xeriscaping or the locally sourced materials. I don't give a shit about the beauty of the angles or the way such a massive structure rises from the ground as if it is as native to the coastline as the craggy cliffs and rocky coves.

And I could care less about how the amazing Devlin Saint took a stretch of undeveloped land with disputed title, got it sorted out, and built something as remarkable as the DSF's offices.

Because this was our space. Our lot. And I hate Saint for stealing the memory from me.

A fresh burst of anger cuts through me. Not at Saint this time, or even Alex. No, this time, I'm angry at myself. Because Alex Leto was a prick. A manipulative son-of-a-bitch, and I don't owe him a thing, much less warm and fuzzy memories.

If I could banish him from my mind, I would, but at the very least, I need to exorcise the power he has over me. And, dammit, I'm going to start right now.

I draw in a series of deep breaths, purposefully gathering myself. Then I cup my hand over my forehead to shield my eyes from the sun as I reconsider the building. And this time I have to admit that it's not so bad. At least Saint got out there and built something. Took an eyesore and turned it into something stunning. All Alex Leto did was run.

I'd trusted him, and he'd ripped me to shreds.

But I'm smarter now. Stronger, too. Just like he said.

And you know what?

Fuck Alex Leto. Fuck him for leaving me during those already dark days. For slinking away without a word and never getting in touch again. For casting the final blow when I was already cracked and broken.

Mostly, fuck him for breaking my heart.

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Cover design by Michele Catalano, Catalano Creative

Cover images by suslik83 (glass of whiskey) and yakiniku (CEO desk)

Digital ISBN: 978-1-953572-56-1

Print ISBN: 978-1-953572-57-8

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Published by Martini & Olive Books

V-2023-D

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. Kenner (aka Julie Kenner) is the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Wall Street Journal* and #1 International bestselling author of over one hundred novels, novellas and short stories in a variety of genres.

JK has reached the #2 slot of the *New York Times* twice. She's been praised by *Publishers Weekly* as an author with a "flair for dialogue and eccentric characterizations" and by *RT Bookclub* for having "cornered the market on sinfully attractive, dominant antiheroes and the women who swoon for them." A six-time finalist for Romance Writers of America's prestigious RITA award, JK took home the first RITA trophy awarded in the category of erotic romance in 2014 for her novel, *Claim Me* (book 2 of her Stark Saga) and another RITA trophy for *Wicked Dirty* in the same category in 2017.

In her previous career as an attorney, JK worked as a lawyer in Southern California and Texas. She currently lives in Central Texas, with her husband, two daughters, and two rather spastic cats.

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