

# J. KENNER

# Take Me

YOU LOVED  
**DAMIEN STARK.**  
NOW MEET  
**EVAN BLACK.**

She *claimed* his heart. He *released* her passion.  
Even though their story is *complete*...  
there's always more.

Take Me  
J. KENNER



headline  
ETERNAL

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First published in this Ebook edition in 2013  
by HEADLINE ETERNAL  
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

Published by arrangement with Bantam Books,  
an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group,  
a division of Random House LLC.  
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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library.

eISBN: 978 1 4722 1767 7

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP  
An Hachette UK Company  
338 Euston Road  
London NW1 3BH

[www.headlineeternal.com](http://www.headlineeternal.com)  
[www.headline.co.uk](http://www.headline.co.uk)

[www.hachette.co.uk](http://www.hachette.co.uk)

Cover photo ©Johnny Ring

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*Excerpt from WANTED*

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## About the Author



J. Kenner loves wine, dark chocolate, and books. She lives in Texas with her husband and daughters. Visit her online at [www.jkenner.com](http://www.jkenner.com) to learn more about her and her other pen names, to get a peek at what she's working on, and to connect through social media.

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By J. Kenner

*The Stark Trilogy*

Release Me

Claim Me

Complete Me

*Most Wanted Series*

Wanted

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## Praise for J. Kenner

### **Just some of the rave reviews for J. Kenner's powerfully sensual and erotic Stark Trilogy:**

'J. Kenner's evocative writing thrillingly captures the power of physical attraction, the pull of longing, the universe-altering effect one person can have on another. She masterfully draws out the eroticism between Nikki and Damien . . . *Claim Me* has the emotional depth to back up the sex . . . Every scene is infused with both erotic tension, and the tension of wondering what lies beneath Damien's veneer – and how and when it will be revealed' *Heroes and Heartbreakers*

'*Claim Me* by J. Kenner is an erotic, sexy and exciting ride. The story between Damien and Nikki is amazing and written beautifully. The intimate and detailed sex scenes will leave you fanning yourself to cool down. With the writing style of Ms Kenner you almost feel like you are there in the story riding along the emotional rollercoaster with Damien and Nikki' *Fresh Fiction*

'PERFECT for fans of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Bared to You*. *Release Me* is a powerful and erotic romance novel that is sure to make adult romance readers sweat, sigh and swoon' *Reading, Eating & Dreaming Blog*

'*Release Me* sucked me in from the very beginning. I started cheering for the heroine, Nikki Fairchild, on the first page . . . An emotional roller coaster, full of tenderness, love, mystery and . . . hot sex – *Release Me* is definitely one you'll want to add to your TBR list' *Scandalicious Book Reviews Blog*

'*Release Me* . . . just made the top of my list with Damien and Nikki . . . the way in which J. Kenner tells the story, how vulnerable and real Damien and Nikki feel, makes this story so good, and re-readable many times over' *In Love With Romance Blog*

'This is deeply sensual and the story packs an emotional punch that I really hadn't expected . . . If you enjoyed *Fifty Shades* [and] the Crossfire books,



you're definitely going to enjoy this one. It's compelling, engaging and I was thoroughly engrossed' *Sinfully Sexy Blog*

'I will admit, I am in the "I loved *Fifty Shades*" camp, but after reading *Release Me*, Mr Grey only scratches the surface compared to Damien Stark' *Cocktails and Books Blog*

'I couldn't put this book down. I HAD to know what happened next . . . If you liked *Fifty* and the *Crossfire* series, you will love *Release Me*' *Bungalow Books Blog*

'Damien Stark . . . belongs with some of the greatest fictional characters . . . what makes *Release Me* stand out from the crowd is the fact it has such memorable characters . . . it was good, very good' *Book Passion For Life Blog*

'It is not often when a book is so amazingly well-written that I find it hard to even begin to accurately describe it . . . I recommend this book to everyone who is interested in a passionate love story' *Romancebookworm's Reviews*

'I really wasn't expecting it to be as mind-blowing as this was. *Release Me* was SO MUCH MORE EMOTIONAL and DEEP and COMPLEX than I was expecting, I loved it . . . simply amazing' *Romance Books Forum*

'The story is one that will rank up with the *Fifty Shades* and *Crossfire* series. I am impatiently awaiting book two! A definite read for those who enjoyed *Fifty Shades* and *Bared to You*' *Incubus Publishing Blog*

'*Release Me* by J. Kenner will undress you and leave you breathless! Kenner's erotic story brings two souls together, where a love that has been elusive is suddenly craved. The attraction between Damien and Nikki is palpable, they are two strong personalities with past demons to contend with. *Release Me* gives readers tantalizing pages of sensual delight, leaving us reeling as we journey with this couple and their passions are released. *Release Me* is a must read . . . !' *Readaholics Anonymous*

‘J. Kenner has written a sensually seductive storyline that catches your imagination and pulls you in’ *The Reading Café*

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# Take Me

I've long dreamed of my fairy tale wedding, but it wasn't until I met Damien Stark – who captured me with his kisses and undid me with his touch – that I began to believe it was my destiny. Though we both carry secrets and scars, our shared passion heals us, binding us together. We have surrendered to each other completely, and our mutual ecstasy is the brightest light in my life.

But darkness still snakes through the cracks in our armour. Ghosts from our past have moved in, bringing fresh pain that cuts deep and threatens to destroy everything we hold dear.

Damien is my anchor to this world, and I am his. But if we are going to keep each other, we have to fight the shadows of our pasts to move forward into our future.

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# Chapter One

*White.*

It is all around me. Soft and billowing. Gentle and soothing.

I am standing in a room, though I can see neither walls nor windows. There is only the endless flow of material. The sensual caress of silk against my body as I move through the drapes that fill the space before me. Hundreds, maybe thousands. They are beautiful. They are perfect. And I am not afraid.

On the contrary, I am perfectly calm. And as I move forward, my bare feet padding softly on the cool floor, I realize that I am heading toward a light. It shines through the diaphanous panels that flutter as I pass, as if struck by an ocean breeze.

I know that I am traveling toward something—*someone*—and I can feel the wellspring of joy rising up inside me. *He* is there. Somewhere beyond this forest of sensuality. Somewhere in the light.

*Damien.*

I quicken my step, my pulse increasing as I move faster and faster.

I am desperate to see him. To feel his fingertips upon my skin, as gentle as the brush of these curtains against my body. But though I hurry forward, I don't seem to be getting anywhere, and now the soft flutter of the drapes has taken on a menacing quality. As if they are reaching out, clutching me, holding me back.

Panic bubbles inside me; I have to get to him. I have to see him, touch him, and yet no matter how hard I try, I do not seem to be moving forward at all. I'm stuck, and what had only a moment ago seemed like the welcoming beauty of a curtain into heaven now seems like a trap, a trick, a horrible nightmare.

*A nightmare.*

My pulse quickens as the truth settles over me. I am not in a room; I am in a bed.

I'm not running; I'm sleeping.

This is a dream, a dream, and only a dream. But it is one from which I cannot seem to wake, even though I am moving faster now, clawing my way through these damnable drapes because I am certain—with the kind of certainty that comes only in the world of dreams—that if I can just get through them then I will be free. I will be awake. And I will once again be safe in Damien's arms.

But I cannot get through.

Though I push and shove and beat my way through the gauzy silk—though I run and run until I am certain that my lungs will burst with the exertion—I can get nowhere other than where I already am, and I collapse, defeated, onto the cool ground, my skirt billowing out around me like the petals of a flower.

I tentatively stroke the material. I had not realized when I was running that I was wearing a dress, but this is a dream and I know better than to think too deeply about the odd parameters of this version of reality. Instead, I focus on gathering myself. On staying calm. On breathing deep. I am no longer moving forward, and that is good, because now that I have come to a stop, the curtains are falling away, drifting gently to the ground only to disappear like cotton candy touching water until there is nothing left but me and this room with white walls that seem to press in around me, moving closer and closer with each breath that I take.

My chest is tight, and when I look down, I realize that my hand is fisted in the silk skirt. There are small yellow and gold flowers embroidered against the white silk at the hem, and the flowers are inset with shimmering white pearls that now feel hard beneath my palm. I glance down at the fitted bodice, the perfection of the silk, the gentle pressure of the stays.

I am in my wedding gown, and for a moment, that reality soothes me. *Damien*, I think again. He is not beside me, but I know that he is with me. This man—this incredible man who will soon be my husband.

Just the thought of him calms me, and I am able to breathe more easily. I can continue, I can move. I can stand and go forward and leave this room.

I can go into Damien's arms.

I start to do exactly that, shifting my weight so that I can rise to my feet.

That's when I see the stain.

A blur of pink rising up from the pure white silk of the skirt. It is so faint that at first I think it must be a trick of the light. But then the hue deepens, shifting from pink to red as it spreads out, tainting the purity of my beautiful dress.

*Blood.*

Frantic now, I scramble backward, as if I can somehow escape the stain despite the fact that I am wearing it. But of course there is no escape, and I claw at the skirt, trying to yank it up, trying to see beneath it. Trying desperately to find the source of the blood.

I can't. My hands are too slippery. Red and wet and stained. I rub them on the skirt, trying to clean them. My breath is coming in gasps, my pulse pounding so loudly in my ears I can hear nothing but my own blood flowing through my veins. That same blood that is coating me, escaping me.

*No, no, oh, God, no.*

But it is true—I am certain of it. The blood on the skirt is mine, and with one final, desperate jerk, I draw the material up, tugging at the silk and satin and lace until it is gathered around my waist and I can see my legs, bare and slick with blood.

I hear a noise—a gasp. It came from me, and I'm rubbing at the blood, searching for the source. I'm on my knees, my thighs pressed together, but now I separate them, and I see the scars that have for so many years marred the soft flesh of my inner thighs. Self-inflicted wounds made by the pressure of a blade held tight in my hands.

I remember the sweet intensity of that first slice. The glorious heat when steel penetrates flesh. The relief that comes with the pain, like the screech of a boiling kettle when it finally releases steam.

I remember the pain, but I no longer need it. That is what I tell myself. I don't need the wounds; I don't want the pain.

I don't need to cut anymore.

I'm better now. I have Damien to hold me tight. To keep me centered and safe and whole.

But there is no denying the blood. And as I look down at the open wound—at the raw and mangled flesh, and at the blood that pools around me, so sticky and pungent—I feel the tightness building in my chest and the rawness in my throat.

Then, finally, I hear myself scream.

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## Chapter Two

I come awake in Damien's arms, my throat raw from the violent sound that had been wrenched from it. My face is pressed to his bare chest, and I sob, my breath coming now in gasps and gulps.

His hands stroke my shoulders, the movement both strong and soothing, possessive and protective. He is saying my name, "Nikki, Nikki, shhh, it's okay, baby, it's okay," but what I hear is that I am safe. That I am loved.

That I am his.

My tears slow and I breathe deep. I concentrate on his touch. On his voice. On his scent, sexy and familiar and desperately male.

I focus on all the little things that make up the bits and pieces of this man I love. All the things that make him who he is, that give him the power to calm me. To look my demons in the face and send them scurrying. He is a miracle, and the biggest miracle of all is that he is mine.

I open my eyes, then lean back as I tilt my head up. Even thrust out of sleep as he was, he is exceptional, and I drink in the vision of him, letting the beauty of this man soothe my parched soul. My breath hitches as I look into his eyes, those magical dual-colored eyes that show so much—passion, concern, determination. And most of all, love.

"Damien," I whisper, and am rewarded with the ghost of a smile upon his lips.

"There she is." Gently he strokes my cheek, brushing my hair back from my face. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

I shake my head in the negative, but even as I do, I hear myself say a single word, "Blood."

Immediately, I see the worry prick in his eyes.

"It was just a dream," I say, but I don't completely believe it.

"Not a dream," he corrects. "A nightmare. And this isn't the first."



“No,” I admit. When the nightmares started, they weren’t even truly nightmares. Just a vague sense of unease upon waking. More recently, I’ve jerked awake during the night with my heart pounding in my chest and my hair damp with sweat. This, however, was the first dream with blood.

I pull back more and sit up straighter, clutching the sheet around me, as if it offers protection from the nightmares, too. I twine my fingers with his and our legs are still touching. I do not want to think about the dreams, but if I must, then I need Damien’s touch to anchor me.

“Did you cut?”

I shake my head. “No. Except—except I must have. Because it wasn’t scars on my legs, but wounds. And they were open. And there was blood everywhere and—”

He silences me with a kiss, so deep and firm and demanding that I cannot hold on to my fear. Instead, he fills my mind with a raging heat so intense that it destroys everything except Nikki and Damien and the passion that is constantly smoldering between us, ready to ignite at the slightest provocation. Ready to burn away anything that threatens this life that we are building together, be it the ghosts of our pasts or my fears of the future.

*My fears of the future?*

I turn the words over in my head, and realize with a violent shock that they hold the weight of truth. The realization baffles me, because I am not afraid of being Mrs. Damien Stark. On the contrary, I think that being Damien’s wife is the thing in this world that scares me the least. It is what and who I am meant to be, and I am never more certain of that than when I am in his arms.

Is that it, then? Am I afraid of the span between now and “Do you take this man”?

His thumb gently brushes my lower lip, and I see the knowing glint in his eyes. “Tell me,” he says, in the kind of voice that allows no refusal.

“Maybe they’re portents,” I whisper. “The dreams, I mean.” The words feel foolish on my lips, but I must say them. I can’t hold the fear inside. Not when I’m certain that Damien can turn it around.

“Portents?” he repeats. “Like a bad omen?”

I nod.

“Of what?” His brow rises. “That we shouldn’t get married?”

I hear the tease in his voice, but even so, my response is both violent and firm. “God no!”

“That I will hurt you?”

“You could never hurt me,” I say. “Not the way you mean.” We both know that there have been times when I have needed the pain—when I would have once again taken a blade to my flesh if Damien had not been there. But he is here, and he is all that I need now.

“Then what?” he asks as he gently lifts our joined hands to his lips. Softly, he dots kisses along my knuckles, and the sweet sensation distracts me.

“I don’t know.”

“I do,” he says, and there is such certainty in his voice that I feel calmer. “You’re a bride, Nikki. You’re nervous.” He presses a playful kiss to the end of my nose. “I think you’re supposed to be.”

“No.” I shake my head. “No, that’s not—” But I go no further. Because the truth is that he may be right. Bridal jitters? Could it really be as simple as that?

“But there’s nothing to be nervous about,” he says, even as his hands go to my shoulders, even as he gently slides his palms down my arms, making the thin sheet drop away.

I am naked, and I shiver. Not from the slight chill in the air, but from the longing in Damien’s eyes. A longing to which I so willingly surrender.

“What is it they say about marriage? That the bride and the groom are becoming one?” He trails a fingertip lightly over my collarbone, then down slowly, the touch butterfly soft, until he reaches my breast. “That isn’t true for us, baby. It’s not true because we already are one, you and I, and this wedding is just a formality.”

“Yes,” I say, my voice little more than breath.

His hand cups my breast as his thumb rubs idly over my hard, tight nipple. The touch is so soft, and yet I feel its echo throughout the whole of my body. Just one simple brush of flesh against flesh, but it is not simple at all, because it holds the power to destroy me. To rip me apart and put me back together.

I close my eyes in surrender and in welcome, then lie back as Damien guides me down onto the bed. He pulls the sheet away, leaving me exposed, and then I feel the bed shift as he moves to straddle me. He is naked and the hard steel of his erection presses against my thighs, hot and needy. I reach for him and cup my hands on his tight, firm ass. He is not inside me—he is not even stroking my sex—and yet I am awash in awareness, my muscles clenching with desire for him, my hips writhing in wanton, unashamed need.

“Damien,” I murmur, then open my eyes to see him above me, his eyes soft as he gazes upon my face.

“No,” he says. “Close your eyes. Let me give this to you. Let me show you just how well I know you. How intimately I know your body. Because it’s not just yours—it’s mine, too. And I intend to show you how very well—and how very thoroughly—I take care of what is mine.”

“Do you think I don’t already know that?”

He doesn’t answer with words, but the soft brush of his lips over mine is all the response I need. Slowly, he trails gentle kisses down the arch of my neck, then lower still until his mouth closes roughly over my breast. My nipple is already tight and hard and so very sensitive, and he drags his teeth over it.

I arch up as little shock waves shoot through me to pool like warm liquid in my womb. The muscles of my sex clench with longing. I want him inside me—I want it desperately. But he is not even touching me there. He’s not touching me anywhere except on my breast, where he is suckling and biting, tasting and teasing. He is erasing everything—thought, worries, fears—until I am reduced to that one point of pleasure that seems to fill me, dazzling me from the inside, sparking and singing until I am certain that I am going to come simply from the sensation of his mouth upon my breast.

Slowly—so painfully slowly—he moves his mouth away from my breast and then kisses his way down my midline. He pauses at my navel, his tongue teasing me, the touch almost a tickle, but far more sensual. He slides a hand under my lower back, and I arch up as he nips at me, tiny bites and the scrape of teeth against the soft skin of my belly.

He has moved down the bed, and my legs are spread wide. He is between them, but he is not touching my sex. He’s not even stroking my thighs. He has one hand beneath my back and the other on the mattress beside my hip for balance. But there is heat coming off of him, and the triangle made up of my thighs and sex seems on fire. I am alive with need, with desire, with want.

And yet Damien makes no move to satisfy me. He is content to tease and torment, and as he slowly traces the shape of my navel with the tip of his tongue, I moan in both pleasure and frustration.

“You like that?” he asks.

“Yes,” I murmur.

“So do I.” His voice is low and reverent. “You taste like candy.”

“Candy is bad for you,” I tease.

“In that case,” he says with a low growl, “I like being bad.”

“Me, too,” I whisper, even as my hips rise in unspoken demand. “But, Damien—”

“You want more,” he says, finishing my thought. He kisses the top of my pubic bone, then trails his lips over the bone of my hip, following it down to the juncture of my thigh.

“Yes, oh, God, yes.”

“And if I’m not done tasting you? If I want to kiss and suck and tease every inch of your body? If I want to have my fill of you before I thrust myself deep inside of you? Before we get lost together? Before I let you come?”

He lifts himself up, then bends over me, so close that I am certain he will kiss me, so near that we are breathing the same air.

Then he shifts away, moving his mouth to my temple. His lips brush lightly over my skin before he whispers, “I will always give you more, baby, but first I want you ready, I want you hot, I want you desperate.”

“I am.” The words are wrenched from me, and as Damien pulls away, I see the smug smile pull at his mouth.

“You are,” he says. “But you also asked for more. And that, my darling Nikki, is a demand I’m always happy to satisfy. The question is, more what?” His mouth closes over my breast, and I cry out as he bites my nipple. “More pain?”

I cannot answer, my body is reeling from the erotic storm he is conjuring inside me.

“More pleasure?” he asks. He slides farther down my body, and this time skin does touch skin, the contact making the embers within me burst into raging flames. His lips move down between my breasts, then lower and lower until he reaches my clit. He blows gently on my sex even as he places his palms firmly on my inner thighs, spreading me wide. He takes one hand away, then strokes his finger gently over my slick, hot sex. I tremble, so close I think that if he breathes on my clit, I will come.

“More anticipation?” And then his mouth is moving again, tracing down my leg, over the scars on my inner thigh, to that sensitive spot behind my knee. I am lost, melting. I am his to control, to command, and I can do nothing but absorb the pleasure with which he is bombarding me.

He continues on, lower still, until he reaches my ankle, then the sole of my foot. He drags the tip of his finger from heel to toe, and my foot arches in response, along with my back. My sex clenches greedily, and I am astounded at the reaction from a simple touch upon my foot. Then again, how can I be astounded by my reaction to any touch rendered by Damien? I can't. I can only surrender, which was of course Damien's plan all along. To take me away from myself and bring me to this place that we share, a place where there is only Nikki and Damien and the pleasure we find in each other.

He is not done with me, and he slowly trails kisses up my leg until I am squirming, my hips gyrating in both pleasure and need. I want more. I want it all. And, miracle of miracles, Damien finally gives it to me. His tongue flicks gently over my clit, just the tiniest of touches, but he has primed me so thoroughly that I explode, shock waves shooting out to my fingers and toes, pleasure spiraling through me.

A tiny touch, yes, but also just the beginning. He closes his mouth over my sex, sucking and teasing. He holds my legs wide so that I cannot shift or move. He doesn't relent, making my orgasm grow and grow until there is torment behind the pleasure, until I am ripped open and needy, desperate for him to come to this place with me, to find me in the stars.

"Now, Damien. I need you inside me now."

This time, thank God, he doesn't hesitate, but neither is he gentle. He is on his knees, and he turns me onto my side. He straddles one of my legs, but hooks my other over his opposite hip, then holds me steady with his palm on my outer thigh. His other hand is cupped on my ass, but he slips down so that he teases the rim of my anus even as he thrusts deep inside my cunt.

This is not a position he's taken me in before, and the sensation of my legs being scissored, of his hand and cock so intimately on me, of the way he is kneeling against me, his body as erect as his cock while I lie prone like a vestal offering, is astoundingly exciting, and as he moves inside me, I feel the orgasm rise within me again.

I close my eyes, letting the sensations flow through and around me. It is magical, this feeling. Being so open to Damien. Being so joined with Damien. *Joined*. In sex, in life, in marriage.

A shiver runs through me, and I hear Damien moan as the muscles of my vagina tighten around him, drawing him deeper and deeper into me.

"That's it, baby. Open your eyes."

I do, and see him looking not at me, but at the juncture of our bodies. I am watching his face—watching the passion build—and when he moves his gaze and meets my eyes, the storm I see building there nearly does me in. I am breathing hard in time with the waves of pleasure that crash through me. The same pleasure I see on his face, driven by the same heat I see burning in his eyes.

A heat that is melting me.

That is ripping me apart.

That is going to shatter us both, I think, as the climax breaks over me and I arch back, held in place by Damien's body and hand as my sex clenches tighter and tighter around him, milking him to his own fantastical release.

Reality returns slowly, like stars appearing in a newly dark sky.

For a moment I have to wonder if I have melted, but it is only the limbless feeling that comes with a release born of pure pleasure.

Damien pulls out, and I mourn the loss of our connection, at least until he lies beside me, our arms and legs a tangle, our faces close. "Thank you," I murmur.

"For what?"

"For distracting me. From my nightmare."

He laughs. "I didn't realize I was that transparent."

"Only to me. Like you said, we know each other."

He kisses the tip of my nose. "You have nothing to be nervous about."

I nod, but the truth is that he is wrong. I realize it now. I want this wedding to be a reflection to the world. An outward manifestation of what he and I are together. Beauty and grace and something special and unique. I want it for him. For us. And for the whole damn world.

And so yes, I am nervous.

"I want the wedding to be perfect," I confess.

"It will be," he assures me. "How can it be anything else? Because no matter what happens, the wedding will end with you being my wife. And that, my darling Nikki, is the only thing that matters."

I brush a kiss over his lips, because he's right. I mean, I know that he's right.

But I also know that he's forgetting about the cake and the dress and the band and the photographer and the tents and the tables and the champagne and on and on and on.

*Men*, I think, and then snuggle close, reluctantly acknowledging that for tonight, at least, he's distracted me.

For tonight, I care only about this man who will soon be my husband—and who already is my life.

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## Chapter Three

I awake to an empty bed and the smell of frying bacon. I roll over to find my phone on the bedside table, then glance at the time. Not yet six.

I groan and fall back among the pillows, but I don't really want to go back to sleep. What I want is Damien.

I slide out of bed, then grab the tank top and yoga pants I'd left draped across a nearby armchair. I head barefoot out of the bedroom and move the short distance down the hall to the third-floor kitchen.

We're in Damien's Malibu house, and the wall of windows that faces the ocean is wide open, the glass panels having been thrust aside to let in the breeze. The smell of the ocean mingles with the scent of breakfast and I breathe deep, realizing that I am content. Whatever demons had poked at me during the night, Damien effectively banished them.

I glance toward the windows and out at the darkened Pacific. Waves glow white in the fading moonlight as they break upon the shore. There is beauty there, and part of me wants to walk to the balcony and stare out at the roiling, frothing water. But the siren call of the ocean is nothing compared to my desire to see Damien, and so I turn away from the windows and head straight to the kitchen. It is larger than the one in the condo I used to share with my best friend, Jamie, and it is not even the primary kitchen for this house. That is on the first floor, and could easily service a one-hundred-table restaurant. But this—the “small” kitchen—was installed as an adjunct to the open area that serves as a venue for entertaining, and since it is just down the hall from our bedroom, Damien and I have gotten into the habit of cooking our meals and eating in this cozier, more informal area. Usually we're joined by Lady Meow-Meow, the fluffy white cat I took custody of when Jamie moved out. I know Lady M misses Jamie, but she's also enjoying having the run of this



huge house, and Gregory—the valet, butler, and all around house-running guy—spoils her rotten.

Now I lean against the half wall that marks the break from hallway to kitchen. Damien is standing at the stove cooking an omelette as if he were nothing more than an ordinary guy. Except there is nothing ordinary about Damien Stark. He is grace and power, beauty and heat. He is exceptional, and he has captured me completely.

At the moment, he is shirtless, and I cannot help the way my breath stutters as my eyes skim over the defined muscles of his back and his taut, strong arms. Damien's first fortune came not from business, but from his original career as a champion tennis player. Even now, years later, he has both the look and the power of an elite athlete.

I let my gaze drift down appreciatively. He is wearing simple gray sweatpants that sit low on his narrow hips and cling to the curves of his perfectly toned ass. Like me, he is barefoot. He looks young and sexy and completely delicious. Yet despite his casual appearance, I can still see the executive. The powerful businessman who harnessed the world, who shifted it to his own liking and made a fortune in the process. He is strength and control. And I am humbled by the knowledge that I am what he values most of all, and that I will spend the rest of my life at his side.

“You're staring,” he says, his eyes still on the stove.

I grin happily, like a child. “I enjoy looking at pretty things.”

He turns now, and his eyes rake over me, starting at my toes. “So do I,” he says when his gaze reaches my face, and there is so much heat in his voice that my legs go weak and my body quivers with want. His mouth curves into a slow, sexy smile, and I am absolutely certain in that moment that I am going to melt. “You spoiled my surprise,” he says, then nods toward the breakfast table where a tray sits with a glass bud vase displaying a single, red rose. “Breakfast in bed.”

“How about we share breakfast at the table?” I move to him, then stand behind him with my arms around his waist. I gently kiss his shoulder and breathe in the clean, soapy scent. “Early meeting?” Damien is hardly a slacker, but he usually doesn't go into his office until after nine. Instead, he works from home, then showers after a brief workout before heading downtown. Today, apparently, we're operating on a compressed timeline.

“Not early,” he says. “But also not here. I've got a meeting in Palm

Springs. The helicopter's coming in twenty."

"I've got an appointment in Switzerland," I counter airily as I step back so he can finish putting our breakfast together. "The jet's coming in an hour."

His mouth twitches with amusement. The omelette is already on a plate, and now he adds the bacon. I follow him to the table, pour us both orange juice and coffee, then sit across from him. Putting a napkin in my lap, I realize I'm smiling like an idiot. And the best part? Damien's smile matches mine.

"I love this," I say. "Breakfast together. Domesticity. It feels nice."

He sips his coffee, his eyes never leaving my face, and for a moment there is nothing between us but contentment. Then he tilts his head, and I see the question rising in his eyes. I should have expected it. Damien wouldn't leave for a meeting without being absolutely certain that I am okay. "No more shadows this morning?" he asks.

"No," I say truthfully. "I feel good." I take a bite of the omelette we're sharing, and sag a bit in my chair in ecstasy. I'm a lucky girl in so many ways, not the least of which being that my fiancé can cook. "How could I not with you taking such good care of me?"

As I hoped, my words bring a smile to his lips. But worry still lingers in his eyes, and I reach across the table to squeeze his hand. "Really," I say firmly. "I'm fine. It's like I told you—I want this wedding to be perfect, which is ironic considering that I've spent my whole life trying to escape from my mother's plan to mold me into Perfectly Plastic Nikki." I immediately regret mentioning my mother. After years of playing the good and dutiful daughter, I've finally come to terms with the fact that my mother is a raging bitch—one who also happens to despise my boyfriend. She made my childhood miserable, and while I am fully prepared to accept the responsibility for my cutting, there's not a shrink in the world who wouldn't agree that the causative threads of that particular vice lead back to Elizabeth Fairchild and her various quirks and neuroses.

"You're not your mother," Damien says firmly. "And there isn't a bride in the world who doesn't want her wedding to be everything she's dreamed of."

"And the groom?" I ask.

"The groom will be happy if the bride is. And so long as she says 'I do.' And when he can call her Mrs. Damien Stark. And once we get to the honeymoon."

I'm laughing by the time he finishes. "Thank you."

"For putting up with your wedding jitters?"

"For everything."

He stands and refills my coffee before clearing the table. "Is there anything you need my help with today?"

"Nope."

"We're getting married on Saturday," he says, as if this was news to me, but the words make my supposedly nonexistent jitters start jittering again. "If you need Sylvia's help, just ask," he adds, referring to his supremely efficient assistant.

I shake my head and flash him my picture-perfect smile. "Thanks, but I'm good. Everything is on track."

"You've taken on a lot," he says. "More than you had to."

I tilt my head, but stay silent. This is a conversation we've had before, and I don't intend to have it again.

We'd traveled across Europe for a month after he proposed, and while we were there, he'd suggested we simply do it. Get married on a mountaintop or on the sands of the Côte d'Azur. Return to the States as Mr. and Mrs. Damien Stark.

I'd said no.

I want nothing more than to be Damien's wife, but the truth is that I also want the fairy-tale wedding. I want to be the princess in white walking down the aisle in my beautiful gown on my special day. I may not agree with my mother about much, but I remember the care that she and my sister put into Ashley's wedding. I'd envied my sister a lot of things, not really understanding that she'd had her own demons to battle, and when she walked down the aisle on a pathway of rose petals, my eyes filled with tears and my one thought had been, *Someday. Someday I will find the man who will be waiting for me at the end of that aisle with love in his eyes.*

And it wasn't just my own desire for the fantasy wedding that made me insist we wait. Like it or not, Damien is a public figure, and I knew that the press would be covering our wedding. It didn't need to be the fanciest affair—in fact, I wanted it outside on the beach—but I did want it to be a beautiful celebration. And since I knew the paparazzi would be pulling out all the stops to get tacky pictures, I wanted a collection of portraits and candid shots that

we controlled. Fabulous pictures that we could give to the legitimate press, outshining—I hoped—whatever ended up in the tabloids.

More than anything, though, I wanted the story and photographs to overshadow the horrible things printed just a few months ago, when Damien had been on trial for murder. I wanted to see the best day of our lives on those pages in sharp counterpoint to, and in triumph over, the worst days.

I have said all of this to Damien, and while I know he doesn't fully agree with my reasons for needing this wedding, I also know he understands them.

As for me, I understand his fear that I've taken on too much. But this is my wedding we're talking about. The nightmares are only my fears; they are not my reality. I can handle it; I can handle anything if the end result is walking down that aisle toward Damien.

"Everything is going great," I say to reassure us both. "I've got it all under control. Really."

"You found a photographer?"

"Are you kidding? Of course." It is a lie. And that's a risk, because Damien can read me better than anyone. I force myself not to hold my breath as I wait for him to ask me details—name, studio, credentials. Those are questions I can't answer because the truth is, I *haven't* found a photographer to replace the one Damien fired last week after we learned the man had made an under-the-table agreement to sell unapproved candid photos of the wedding and reception to TMZ.

And that's not even our only problem. I found out yesterday that the lead singer for the band I'd lined up had decided to drop everything and move back home to Canada, which means we are now entirely without entertainment.

I need to get off my ass and find someone—and I need to do it fast. As Damien had so kindly reminded me, the wedding is just a few days away.

But, hey, it's not like I'm feeling stressed or anything.

I frown, realizing that maybe there is a solid explanation for my nightmares, after all.

"What is it?" Damien asks, and I fear that despite all my efforts to keep these minor ripples in the wedding planning out of his hair, it's about to get gnarly.

"Nothing," I say. "Just thinking about my massive to-do list."

I can tell by his expression that he doesn't buy it. But I am a bride, and like

most grooms, he knows innately that “handle with care” is standard operating procedure. “In case it escaped your notice, we have the cash to pay someone to help you. Use it if you need it.”

“What? Like a wedding planner?” I shake my head. “For one thing, the wedding’s too close for that. For another, as I keep telling you, I want to do this myself. I want it to reflect us, not the latest fad in weddings.”

“I get that,” he says, “but you’ve taken on a hell of a lot.”

“You’ve helped,” I respond.

He chuckles. “As much as you’ve let me.”

I lift a shoulder. “You have a universe to run.”

It’s a simple fact that I have more time than Damien. I’m juggling only one small business, which has exactly one employee—me. He’s running Stark International, which has about as many people as an emerging country. Maybe more. And, yes, I have been busy, but that’s partly because Damien didn’t want a long engagement. And since I didn’t think I could stand waiting, either, I was happy to agree.

It’s been three months since he proposed, two months and twenty-nine days since I started diving into planning and prep, balancing my software development business against the business of my wedding. I’m proud of what’s come together, and I’m even more proud that I’ve done so much of it on my own. Hell, I’ve actually been getting some use out of all those etiquette classes my mother forced me to sit through. Imagine that.

I aim an impish smile at him. “Maybe you’re right. I mean, it is a bit stressful doing everything so fast, but I’m actually having a lot of fun working out the details of decorating the beach and organizing the caterer and pulling all the pieces together. I suppose we could push the wedding back a few months to make things even easier on me.”

His eyes narrow dangerously. “Don’t even joke about that. Not unless you want me to scoop you up, toss you on the helicopter, and elope to Mexico. Which, for the record, I still think is a fantastic idea.”

“Vegas would be easier,” I tease.

“There’s no beach in Vegas,” he says, his expression going soft. “Even if I’m kidnapping you, I won’t deny you the surf or the sunset.”

I sigh and fold myself into his arms. “Do you have any idea how much I love you?”

“Enough to marry me,” he says.

“And then some.”

He hooks his arm around my waist and tugs me close, then brushes his lips over mine. The kiss starts softly, a feather-touch, a tease. But there’s no denying the heat between us, and soon I am moaning, my mouth open to him, his lips hard against mine, taking and tasting. He pulls me closer to him, my name like a whisper on his lips, and the embers that are always burning between us burst into white-hot flames.

His hand slides along my back, then under my tank top at its base. The sensation of skin upon skin is delicious, and I sigh with pleasure, then gasp with longing as those clever fingers slip beneath the waistband of my yoga pants and curve over my rear. He tugs me closer, his erection hot and hard between us, as his fingers slip inside me. I’m liquid heat, and I want nothing more than to strip us both bare and let him take me right here, on the hardwood floor.

Passion thrums through me, and I swear I can feel the house vibrating around us.

It takes me a moment to realize that the thrum isn’t entirely the result of my lust for my fiancé—it’s the arrival of his ride, the helicopter approaching from the north to settle on the helipad that Damien installed on the property.

I pull away, breathless. “You’re going to be late, Mr. Stark.”

“Sadly, you have a point.” He kisses the corner of my mouth, and the pressure of his tongue at that sensitive juncture is almost as enticing as the feel of his erection hard against me. “Are you sure you don’t want to come with me today?” he asks. “I don’t think I’ve ever fucked you in the helicopter.”

I laugh. “It’s on my bucket list,” I assure him. “But today’s not the day. I’m meeting with the cake lady.” Rather than a regular wedding cake, I’d decided to go with tiers of cupcakes, with only the top layer being the traditional cake with fondant icing. The baker, a celebrity chef named Sally Love, came up with an exceptional design for the icing on each individual cake, and she’s going to incorporate real flowers on the tiers, making the overall design both elegant and fun. Not to mention tasty. Damien and I went together to pick out the flavor for the top layer, and also selected ten possible flavors for the cupcakes. Today, I’m going back to narrow the ten finalists to the final five.

“Do you need me?” he asks.

“Always,” I say. “But not at the bakery. You did your part, I’m just finalizing the cupcake choices.”

“Don’t ditch my tiny cheesecakes,” he says.

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“Is Jamie going with you?”

“Not today,” I say. My best friend and former roommate recently moved back home to Texas for the express purpose of getting her shit together. She’d come back three days ago determined to be the best maid of honor ever—which meant that I’d had to field a full hour of apology when she explained to me why she might not make it to the bakery today. “She drove up to Oxnard last night, and she’s not sure when she’ll get back today. She did a play there a few years ago, and the director’s a friend who now does commercials, and . . .” I trail off with a shrug, but I’m sure Damien understands. Jamie’s still trying to land a gig.

“And if she gets a job?” he asks.

I shrug again. I’m torn between wanting her to be cast and wanting her to take as much time as she needs to get her head back on straight. I miss Jamie, but Hollywood pretty much ate her up and spat her out, and although my best friend likes to pretend like she’s tough enough to take it, underneath the careless sex kitten veneer is the heart of a fragile woman. And it’s a heart I don’t want to see broken.

Damien kisses my forehead. “Whatever happens, she has you. That makes her one step ahead of the game already.”

I smile up at him. “Will you be back tonight?”

“Late,” he says, then trails a fingertip over my bare shoulder. “If you’re sleeping, I’ll wake you.”

“I look forward to it,” I say, then tilt my head up for a quick kiss on my lips. “You better go get dressed, Mr. Stark,” I say, then push him off toward the bedroom. He’s back remarkably fast, securing his cuffs as he walks toward me, then taking my hand as he tugs me onto the balcony with him. I follow him down the staircase and along the path toward the helipad.

We pause at the edge, and he kisses me gently one last time. “Soon, Ms. Fairchild,” he says, but what I hear is *I love you*.

I watch as he bends over and hurries under the spinning blades to board the helicopter, which has *SI* emblazoned on the side. Stark International. I grin,

thinking that *SU* would be more appropriate—Stark Universe. Or Stark World. Damien is, after all, my whole world.

I shield my face from the wind, then watch as the bird rises, taking Damien away from me. I know he'll be back tonight, but already I feel hollow.

I consider going inside to get dressed, but instead I follow the flagstone path that cuts through the property until it reaches the beach. I walk along the sandy shore, imagining my wedding. We've planned it for sunset, with a party to follow. Considering who Damien is, the guest list is relatively small. We've invited our mutual friends as well as a number of key employees of Stark International, Stark Applied Technology, and the rest of Damien's subsidiaries. Also, some of the recipients of grants from Damien's various charitable organizations.

The ceremony itself is going to be short and simple, with Damien and I having only a best man and a maid of honor, respectively. Since my father ran off ages ago, I don't have a man to walk me down the aisle. I considered asking one of my best friends, Ollie, but even though he and Damien have negotiated a truce, I didn't want to risk marring my wedding day with drama.

And there's no way I'm having my mother do it. How could I stand to have her give me away when I've spent the last few years running from her? I have not, in fact, even invited her to the wedding. Which means I have no parent to give me away. So I'm going to walk myself down the aisle, a journey on a pathway of rose petals, with Damien Stark standing tall and elegant at the end of it.

We've written vows—short and sweet—and we both agree that what is important is getting to the meat of the ceremony: *Do you take this man? Do you take this woman? I do, I do, dear God, I do.*

The reception is a different story—that we expect to go on all night. Maybe even into the next day. After Damien and I head out on our honeymoon after the appropriate socializing and cake-eating interval, Jamie is taking charge of the Malibu house and she, with the help of Ryan Hunter and the rest of the Stark International security team, will make sure that anyone who needs a place to crash has one, and anyone who needs a lift home gets one.

Even though we'll be off on our honeymoon for most of it, it is the details of the reception that have been occupying most of my time. I've arranged for tents, dance floors, lanterns, and heaters. There will be a buffet, three bars,



and a chocolate fondue station provided by Damien's best man, his childhood friend Alaine Beauchene. I'm a little flummoxed by my music conundrum, but I'm revved up and eager to solve it, and I tell myself that by the end of the day I will have arranged both the music and the photographer. I am nothing if not optimistic.

Other than that, the only major things still needing to be wrapped up are finalizing the cake—which I'll do in a few hours—and then the final dress fitting. The dress is a Phillippe Favreau original that we purchased in Paris after hours of conversation with Phillippe himself. It is insanely expensive, but as Damien reminded me, there's very little point in having gazillions of dollars if you don't enjoy them. And I really did fall in love with the design.

Phillippe is custom-making it for me, and it is being shipped from his Paris studio. There were some nerve-wracking delays, but I've been assured that all is on schedule now, and it is set to arrive at his Rodeo Drive boutique tomorrow morning. His most trusted associate will make any final alterations tomorrow afternoon and deliver it the next morning—Friday—so that it will be locked up safe in the Malibu house, all ready to transform me into a bride on Saturday.

All in all, things are going reasonably smoothly, and I can't help but smile. So what if I've had a few nightmares? For the most part, I'm kicking serious wedding butt, and I don't intend to stop.

I breathe deep, content, then fling my feet through the surf, sending the water sparkling. *Mrs. Damien Stark.*

Honestly, I can't wait.

"Ms. Fairchild!"

I look up to see Tony, one of Damien's security guys, hurrying down the beach toward me.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Ms. Fairchild, I tried your phone but there was no answer."

My phone, I remember, is by the bed. "What is it?" I ask, alarmed. "Is it Damien?"

"No, no, nothing like that. But there is a woman at the gate," he says, referring to the gate that Damien had installed at the property entrance after the paparazzi got all crazy during his murder trial. "Ordinarily, I would simply send her away and insist that she make an appointment, but under the circumstances . . ."

“What circumstances?”

“Ms. Fairchild,” he says, “the lady says that she’s your mother.”

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## Chapter Four

*My mother.*

My mother.

Holy shit, my mother?

My knees go watery and I have to force my arms to stay at my sides so I don't reach out automatically for Tony. There's nothing on the beach that I can use to steady myself, and right now I really need steadying, so I stand perfectly still and smile and hope Tony doesn't yet know me well enough to pick up on the fact that I'm totally and completely freaking out.

"I wasn't expecting my mother," I manage to say. "She lives in Texas."

"I knew she was from out of state, Ms. Fairchild. I checked the lady's ID. Elizabeth Regina Fairchild, address in Dallas. I assume she's here for the wedding."

"Right. I just—she's not supposed to be here until Friday," I lie. I conjure what I hope is a bright smile, but I fear it looks like something out of a low-budget Halloween thriller. "So, right. I guess tell her to drive on up to the house. If you could buzz Gregory and ask him to settle her in the first-floor parlor, I'll run in and get dressed," I add.

"Of course, Ms. Fairchild." If he has picked up on my nerves, he is either kind enough or well trained enough not to say anything.

I hurry back up the path and take the stairs to the third floor. I want to ensure that I don't see my mother until I'm dressed and made-up and looking polished and pretty enough that maybe—*maybe*—she'll wait an hour or two before she starts in on me.

Once I'm in the bedroom, the first thing I do is grab my phone off the table and dial Damien. The second thing I do is end the call before it has the chance to connect.

I sit on the edge of the bed and suck in air. My heart is pounding so hard, my chest hurts, and I am holding my phone so tightly in my right hand that it is making indentations into my palm. My left hand is curled in on itself, and I concentrate on the sensation of my fingernails digging into my palm. I imagine my nails cutting through skin, drawing blood. I focus on the pain—and then, disgusted with myself, I hurl my other arm back and toss my phone across the room. It shatters from the impact, an explosion of plastic and glass, a smorgasbord of sharp edges now glittering on the floor, tempting and teasing me.

I rise, but I am not heading toward those shards. I will not touch them, not even to sweep them away. They are too tempting, and despite the fact that I've grown stronger in my months with Damien, I do not trust myself. Not now. Not with Elizabeth Fairchild just two floors below, waiting like a spider to draw me in, wrap me up, and suck the life right out of me.

*Shit.*

My mother.

The woman who locked me in a dark, windowless room as a child so that I had no choice but to get my beauty sleep. Who controlled what I ate so meticulously that I didn't make the acquaintance of a carb until college.

The woman whose image of feminine perfection was so expertly pounded into her daughters' heads that my sister committed suicide when her husband left her, because she'd clearly failed at being a wife.

The woman who said that I was a fool to stay with Damien. That once you passed the ten-million-dollar mark one man is pretty much like another, and I should move on to one who came with less baggage.

The woman who said that I'd ruined the family name by posing for a nude portrait.

The woman who'd called me a whore.

I didn't want to see her. More than that, I wasn't sure I *could* see her and manage to stay centered.

I needed Damien—I *wanted* Damien. He was my strength, my anchor.

But he wasn't in town and my mother was downstairs. And while I knew that one phone call would have him returning within the hour, I couldn't bring myself to go to the kitchen, pick up the house phone, and make that call.

I could do this on my own—I had to.

And with Damien's voice in my head, I knew that I'd survive.  
At least, I hoped I would.

"Well, look at you!" My mother rises from the white sofa, then smooths her linen skirt before coming toward me, her arms out to enfold me in a hug that is capped off by her trademark air kiss. "I was beginning to think you were going to leave me down here all alone." She speaks lightly, but I can hear the indictment in her words—I left her unattended, and broke one of the cardinal rules from the Elizabeth Fairchild Guide to Playing Hostess.

I say nothing, just stand stiffly in her embrace. A moment passes, and I decide to make an effort. I awkwardly put my arms around her and give her a small squeeze. "Mother," I say, and then stop. Honestly, what more is there to say?

"Married," she says, and there is actually a wistful tone in her voice. For a moment, I wonder about her motive for coming. Is she here because she honestly wants to celebrate my marriage? I'm not quite able to wrap my head around the possibility, and yet I can't help the tiny flame of hope that flickers inside me.

She steps back and looks me up and down. I've taken the time to shower and change and put on my makeup, and I know exactly what she sees as she looks at me. My blond hair is still short, though it has grown out since I took scissors to it and violently whacked off large chunks after the last time I saw her. I like this new shoulder-length style. Not only is it nice not to have the weight of all that hair, but the curls are bouncier and frame my face in a way that I like.

I'm wearing a simple linen skirt that hits just above my knees and a peach sweater over a white button-down. My feet are in my favorite pair of strappy sandals. The three-inch heels are wildly impractical for an afternoon of running wedding errands, but these are the shoes I was wearing the night I met Damien at Evelyn's party so many months ago, and as I stood in my closet a few moments before, I was certain I'd need the extra bit of magical shoe confidence they impart if I was going to survive my mother.

The truth is, I know that I look good. It's not possible to have entered and won as many pageants as I have and still hem and haw and pretend not to know how you look. Objectively, I'm pretty. Not movie star gorgeous—that's Jamie—but I'm pretty, maybe even beautiful, and I know how to hold

myself well. Under other circumstances, I'd be standing tall, knowing that I passed the inspection of anyone who took the time to look me over. But these are not ordinary circumstances, and I am suddenly feeling like an awkward teen, desperate for my mother's approval. And the thing I hate the most? That soft look in her eyes only moments before. She'd knocked me off kilter, and now I don't know what to expect. My defenses are down, and I'm left hoping for affection, like some lost puppy that followed her home looking for a handout.

It's not a feeling I like.

"Well," she finally says, "I suppose if you're going to wear your hair short, that style is as good as it's going to get."

My rigid posture slumps ever so slightly, and I look down so that she can't see the tears pricking my eyes. I really am that puppy, and she's just kicked the shit out of me. I can either cower, or I can bare my teeth and fight back. And damn me all to hell, but the cowering almost wins out.

Then I remember that I'm not Elizabeth Fairchild's pretty little dress-up doll anymore. I'm Nikki Fairchild, the owner of her own software company, and I'm more than capable of defending my own damn haircut. I suck in a breath, lift my head, and almost look my mother in the eyes. "It's shoulder-length, Mother. It's not like I've been shaved for the Marines. I think it's flattering." I flash my perfect pageant smile. "Damien likes it, too."

She sniffs. "Darling, I wasn't criticizing. I'm your mother. I'm on your side. I just want you to look your best."

What I want is to tell her to turn around and go home. But the words don't come. "I wasn't expecting you," I say instead.

"Why would you be?" she asks airily. "After all, it's not as if you invited me to your wedding."

*Um, hello? Did you really think I would after the things you said? After you made it clear that you don't like Damien? That you don't respect me? That you think I'm a slut who's only interested in his money?*

That's what I want to say, but the words don't come. Instead, I shrug, feeling all of ten, and say simply, "I didn't think you'd want to be here."

I watch, astonished, as my mother's ramrod straight posture sags a bit. She reaches a hand back, then takes hold of the armrest and lowers herself onto the couch. I peer at her and am astonished at an emotion on her face, one I'm not sure I've ever seen there before—my mother actually looks sad.

I move to the chair opposite her and sit, watching and waiting.

“Oh, Nichole, sugar, I just—” She cuts herself off, then digs into her purse for a monogrammed handkerchief, which she uses to dab her eyes. Her Texas twang is more pronounced than usual, and I recognize that as a sign of high drama to follow. But there are no tears, no histrionics. Instead, she says very softly and very simply, “I just wanted to spend some time with you. My baby girl’s getting married. It’s bittersweet.”

She reaches out, as if she intends to take my hand, but draws hers back into her lap. She clasps her hands together and straightens her posture, then takes a deep breath as if steeling herself. “I think about your wedding, and I can’t help but remember your sister’s. I want . . .”

But she doesn’t finish the sentence, and so I do not know what she wants. As for me, I don’t know when, but I’ve risen to my feet, and have turned away so that she can’t see the heavy tears now streaming down my cheeks.

I squeeze my eyes shut, determined not to think of Ashley, and even more determined not to think of the hand that my mother had in her suicide. But these thoughts are hard ones to banish, because they have lived inside me for so long. And now—well, now I can’t help but wonder if this is my mother’s way of showing remorse.

Or am I simply being a fool and wishing, perhaps futilely, that there is a détente to be had between my mother and me.

## Chapter Five

“Cupcakes.” My mother’s voice is flat, but her smile is perky and falsely polite. She’s speaking to Sally Love, the owner of Love Bites. It’s one of the most popular bakeries in Beverly Hills. Sally has catered dozens of celebrity functions, has been featured in every food and dessert magazine known to man, and is a longtime friend of Damien’s. She’s also an artist with icing and a pleasure to work with.

I am terrified my mother is going to offend her.

Mother’s smile stretches wider. “What a perfectly charming idea. And was that your suggestion?” she asks Sally.

“I believe in working with my clients to figure out exactly what they want, to make their event not only special but uniquely theirs.”

“In other words, you don’t feel bound by tradition or societal expectations?” Her words are venomous, but her tone and manner are so polite that it’s hard to tell if she’s being deliberately offensive or making genuine conversation. I know the answer because I know my mother, and I step in and flash my own perky smile.

“I’m completely in love with the cupcake idea. I saw it in a magazine and it seemed like the perfect way to combine tradition and whimsy.” I turn to Sally, purposefully excluding my mother. “So we’re good to go on the top tier, right?”

Sally grins, displaying rosy cheeks that make me think of Mrs. Claus and Christmas cookies. She’s probably only ten years older than me, but there’s something maternal and soothing about her. I can understand why she does so many wedding cakes. She can calm a nervous bride with nothing more than a look.

“We’re all set,” she assures me. “But we do need to narrow down the choices for the cupcakes.” The plan is to have five different flavors of



cupcakes—one for each of the tiers—so the guests can pick their favorite. Additional cupcakes—in case anyone wants seconds—will be scattered artfully on the table, mixed with the fresh wildflowers I have on order from the florist. Daisies and sunflowers and Indian paintbrushes that remind me of the incredible arrangement Damien sent me after the night we first met.

Sally nods to the table set up at the back of the storefront, elegantly draped in white linen. It's topped with a row of ten tiny cakes. "I thought you might want to refresh your memory."

I laugh. "Even if I'd already decided, you know I'd have to sit down and taste those." I glance at my mother as I head toward the table. "Do you want to try, too? They're all amazing."

Mother's brows lift sky high, and I wonder when my mother last had a carb that didn't come from a lettuce leaf or a glass of wine. "I don't think so."

I shrug. "Suit yourself," I say, and see my mother's lips purse as I settle behind the table. "More for me."

The first cake is a tiny cheesecake. It's Damien's favorite, and I restrain myself from taking a bite because I'm going to ask Sally if I can take it home for him. I can think of all sorts of interesting negotiations we could have if he's bargaining for cheesecake.

I smile as I taste the next cake, not because I'm a fan of red velvet, but because I'm imagining all those possibilities. The next is a deep, delicious chocolate that I savor with a moan that is almost sexual. Sally laughs. "That cake gets that a lot."

"It totally stays," I say, then grin wickedly at her. "In fact, let's have a dozen packed up to take with us on the honeymoon."

We're laughing, and Sally's asking me about the honeymoon, and I'm telling her that it's a secret even from me—a Damien Stark surprise—when my mother clicks her way over on her nail-point heels. She stops in front of me, effectively ending my moment of bridal bonding with Sally.

"Chocolate, yellow, white," she says. "A pound cake. A cheesecake. If you insist on doing cupcakes at least stick with traditional flavors."

"I don't know," I say, taking a second bite of the cupcake I'm working on. "This one—butternut?—is to die for."

"It's very popular," Sally says. "But try the strawberry."

My mother reaches over and snatches the fork out of my hand. For a moment, I'm fool enough to think that she's going to get in the spirit and try

the cake. But all she does is point the tines at me. “Honestly, Nichole,” she says, in a tone that leaves no doubt that I have committed some heinous sin. “Are you trying to ruin your wedding? Have you thought about your waist? Your hips? Not to mention your skin!”

She turns to Sally, who is clearly struggling to wipe the expression of appalled shock off her face. “Bless her little heart,” my mother says, in a tone that practically drips sugar, “but my Nichole isn’t a girl who can eat cake and then get into something as form-fitting as a wedding gown.”

“Nikki is a lovely young woman,” Sally says firmly. “And I’m sure she’s going to look stunning at her wedding.”

“Of course she will,” my mother says, her voice sounding farther and farther from me. It’s as if I’m sliding back, moving down some tunnel, away from her, away from Sally, away from everything.

“That’s why I’m here,” Mother adds, her tone entirely reasonable. “My daughter knows she has no self-control about things that are bad for her—*cakes, candy, men*,” she adds in a stage whisper. “I’ve always been there to help her keep her eye on the prize.”

“I see,” Sally says, and I have a feeling she sees more than my mother wants.

As for me, even from the depths of this well into which I’ve fallen, I am seething. I want to leap out of my chair and tell my mother that she’s never helped me, she’s only manipulated me. That she’s not interested in what I want, but only what I look like and how I act and if I’m presenting an image that stands up to the Fairchild name—a name that’s not worth what it used to be since she took over—and decimated—the oil business that she inherited when my grandfather passed away.

I want to say all of that, but I don’t. I just sit there, my plastic smile on my face, hating myself for not moving. For not telling her to get the hell back to Texas.

But what I hate even more is the fact that I’m now clutching the second fork in my hand, and it’s under the table, and the tines are pressing hard into my leg through the thin material of my skirt. I don’t want to—I know I need to stop, to stand up, to simply get the hell out of there if that’s what it takes—but whatever strength has been building in me over the last few months has scattered like dandelion fluff under the assault of a ferocious wind.

“Nikki,” Sally begins, and I can’t tell if the concern in her voice is because

of my mother's speech or if she sees some hint of my struggle on my face. It doesn't matter, though, because her words are cut off by the electronic door chime.

I look up, then draw in a breath. The tunnel disappears and my vision returns. The fork tumbles from my hand to the floor, and I realize I've stood up.

It's Damien—and he is moving like a bullet toward me.

I head around the table, unconcerned about anything else. He stops in front of me, his face hard, his eyes warm but worried. "Turns out I could work the cake thing into my schedule, after all."

I try not to smile, but the corners of my mouth twitch, and I feel tears of relief prick my eyes. "I'm glad."

He reaches out and strokes my cheek. "You okay?"

"I'm perfect," I say. "At least, I am now."

The worry fades from his eyes, and I know that he believes me. He takes my hand, then turns to face my mother. "Mrs. Fairchild. What a pleasant surprise," he says, in the kind of overly polite voice that suggests there's nothing remotely pleasant about this particular surprise.

"Mr. Stark—Damien—I—" She stops abruptly, and I am amused. My mother is very rarely rendered speechless, but the last time she and Damien met he sent her away, effectively getting rid of her by flying her back to Texas on one of his jets. And that was before she'd said the variety of nasty things she's since uttered about the two of us. I have to wonder if she doesn't now fear that her ride out of California this go-round will be significantly less pleasant.

Damien, however, is the picture of cultured politeness. "It was so kind of you to come with Nikki today. I think we both know how valuable your opinion is to her." My mother's eyes widen almost imperceptibly. I can tell that she wants to reply, to lash out with the sweet sting of words that she'd want to cut him as deeply as a blade has cut me, but they clearly don't come. I'm not surprised. My mother is formidable, but Damien is more so.

Her expression shifts from consternation to surprise when Jamie bursts into the bakery like a tornado. "I'm here! I'm here! Big ticky mark for the maid of honor!"

For a moment I think that she really is here simply because she promised me she'd try to make it to Love Bites on time. But when I see that it is not me

she looks to first, but Damien, I realize that he called her—and that she is part of the cavalry, too.

A moment later, Ryan Hunter, Damien's head of security, hurries inside as well, only to stop short when he sees Damien, then fall back toward the door, his eyes on my mother, as if she is a bomb about to go off. Laughter bubbles in my throat. I never felt loved by my mother. Damien not only makes me feel loved, but also cherished and protected and safe.

I understand what has happened, of course. Tony called Damien. Since Damien was in Palm Springs, he called both Jamie and Ryan in order to ensure there was someone with me to run interference. I squeeze his hand, then mouth, *Thank you*. The words are simple; the emotion is not.

He squeezes back, but his attention is focused on my mother. I look toward her, too, and as I do I realize that Sally has gracefully exited, leaving the drama of the showroom for the relative calm of the kitchen.

Damien's voice is firm as he addresses my mother. "Between Jamie and me, I think we have it covered. I'm sure you have unpacking to do. Why don't you let my security chief drive you to the hotel?"

"Don't be silly," my mother says. "I'm happy to stay." She smiles at me, and my stomach curls. "I want to spend time with my daughter."

"Awesome," Jamie says. "Today's her bachelorette party." She glances at her watch. "In fact we're supposed to meet the others girls at Raven in about half an hour. It's a strip club," she adds in a stage whisper. "It's going to be awesome. Wanna come?"

My mother goggles at her, and it takes all my power not to laugh. I know Jamie is joking—I specifically told her I didn't want to do the bachelorette thing—but in this moment it would almost be worth going through with it.

"Um, no. Thank you. I—" Her eyes cut to Damien. "I suppose I should get settled."

"I keep a suite at the Century Plaza hotel," Damien says. "I insist you stay there."

"Oh, no. I wouldn't want to be any trouble."

He doesn't say what I know he is thinking—*You've already been that*. Instead, he graces her with his most formal corporate smile. "No trouble at all. In fact, your car is already there. You're all checked in."

I see the confusion on Jamie's face—*she's been staying at the Century Plaza suite*.

“Oh. I see. Well, then.” My mother turns her attention to me. “I’ll go with you tomorrow to the dress fitting,” she says, and I remember with regret that I’d nervously prattled off my schedule for the week as I drove us from Malibu to Beverly Hills.

“Sure,” I say, though what I really want is to scream that there is no way in hell I want her in my head as I try on my wedding dress. “That would be great.”

Damien is looking at me questioningly, and I shrug in reply. Part of me wants him to step in and send her packing. But she *is* my mother, and another part of me—the secret, buried part that I don’t like to take out and examine too closely—wants to have her at my wedding. Wants to have her hold me and tell me she’s sorry for all the years of horror and drama.

I want it, but I do not expect it. Yet still that flame of hope is alive, and I feel it flickering inside me.

“Ryan will take you,” Damien says to my mother. I glance at Ryan and watch as he turns his attention away from Jamie to this new assignment. I turn to look at my best friend. Her expression suggests that she’s oblivious to Ryan’s attention, but there’s an unfamiliar color to her cheeks, and as she watches him lead my mother out the door, I can’t help but wonder.

Jamie crosses the room to join me at the table, then picks up the red velvet cake with her fingers and takes a huge bite. “You realize that there’s no way I’m sharing a suite with your mother.”

I laugh. “Neither of you would survive.”

“I had Tony pack your things when he delivered Mrs. Fairchild’s car,” Damien says. “You’re staying in Malibu with us.”

Jamie does a fist pump. “Score!”

My smile is so wide it almost hurts. “Thanks for having my back,” I say to Damien.

“Always.” The softness in his eyes hardens a bit. “Do you want me to send her back to Texas?”

I almost say yes, but then shake my head. “No. I’m getting married, and she is my mother. I’m strong enough to handle it,” I say, in response to his reproachful look.

“You are,” he agrees.

“And there was a moment—” I shake my head, thinking about the way she’d talked about Ashley’s wedding, and the vulnerability that I’d seen in

her eyes.

“What?” Damien is looking at me intently.

“I just think that, despite all the Elizabeth Fairchild nonsense, part of her really does want to be here for me on my wedding day.”

For a moment, Damien only looks at me, his hands on my shoulders. Then he leans forward and captures my mouth with the sweetest of kisses. When he pulls away, I expect an argument. I expect him to recite an itemized list of every horrible thing my mother has done to me, to us. I expect him to point to his own father, whom neither of us want at this wedding. Hell, I expect him to talk some sense into me.

Instead, he says simply, “Be careful.”

I swallow and nod, because I know that he’s right to be concerned.

Once again, the door chimes, but this time I do not know the man who enters. He is drop-dead gorgeous, with dark hair highlighted by gold and red. He carries himself with a Damien Stark kind of confidence, and when his gaze sweeps the room, I see both calculation and intelligence in his sharp, gray eyes.

“We should finish up with Sally and get going,” I say to Damien. “She’s got other customers to deal with.”

“I’m sure she does,” he replies, “but Evan isn’t one of them. He’s with me.”

“Holy crap,” Jamie says, “do you travel in packs?”

Damien frowns, and I almost laugh. There aren’t many people who can knock him off kilter. “What are you talking about?” he asks.

“Never mind,” Jamie says, waving her hand as if wiping the words away. But she turns her attention to me, and I nod slightly. I have understood her perfectly, because this guy is hot. Maybe not Damien Stark hot, I think loyally, but he’s got some serious sizzle going on.

“Evan Black, let me introduce you to my fiancée, Nikki Fairchild, and her best friend, Jamie Archer.”

Evan strides across the room to join us. He shakes my hand, then Jamie’s. I can’t help but notice that she holds on a moment longer than is necessary.

“Congratulations,” Evan says to me. “I knew the first time he talked about you that one day you two would be married. I wish you all the best.”

“Thank you,” I say, looking curiously at Damien. He’s never mentioned this man before.

“I’ve known Evan for years,” Damien says. “He lives in Chicago—we had a drink when I flew out there a few months ago,” he adds.

“We met when we were both looking to acquire a failing business,” Evan adds.

“Who got it?” I ask.

“Damien,” Evan says, without regret. “But today it’s my turn.”

That I don’t know what he means must be obvious by my expression. “Evan’s acquiring the galleries,” Damien says, referring to the art galleries that Giselle Reynard recently transferred over to him. “We were in Palm Springs examining the items in storage, and Evan’s going to come to Malibu tomorrow to take a look at the main property.”

“I have a few other things to take care of while I’m here,” Evan says, “but I’m honored to have been invited to the wedding. I’m very happy for both of you.”

“Thank you,” I say, noticing that Jamie is still peering at him with interest. This is something that needs to be nipped in the bud. Not only is Jamie supposed to be backing away from men, but considering Evan is Chicago-bound, he could be nothing more than a fast fuck. And that is so not what my best friend needs.

Jamie pulls out her phone and makes a face, then looks at me. “We need to hurry,” she says. “We’re going to be late.”

“Late? For what?”

She rolls her eyes. “I told you. We’re meeting the girls at Raven,” she says, referring to a male strip club in Hollywood.

“Raven,” Damien says, his brows lifting.

“Um, hello?” Jamie says. “Bachelorette party. Alcohol. Mostly naked gorgeous men.” She looks him up and down. “Not that she doesn’t already have that in her life, but still. This is the night to be naughty.”

“It’s only barely past lunchtime,” I say stupidly.

“I know,” Jamie says. “That’s when there’s less of a crowd. More attention for us.”

*Oh my.*

I glance toward Damien, but this is one of the few times when I cannot read his expression. My gaze shifts toward Evan. He is easier to read, as he’s not even trying to hide his amusement.

“I told you I didn’t want a bachelorette party,” I say. “And I have stuff to

do today. The music. The photographer,” I remind her, then grimace when I see Damien’s brows rise again. *Damn*. My little lie earlier has been soundly caught out.

“And I need to make sure the flowers are confirmed,” I add, rushing on. “I need—”

“To chill with your friends,” Jamie says. “Come on, Nick. Music or not, pictures or not, come Saturday night you’re going to be married. You’ll never, ever, ever get to go out as a hot single girl again. So we’re doing this. I’m your maid of honor and I’m insisting.” She glances at Damien. “Sorry, dude. It’s in the best friends rule book.”

“I’m certain it is.” He turns to me, his expression implacable. “I need to speak with you alone.”

I shoot Jamie the kind of look that could bring down an army, then follow Damien to the far corner of the showroom. We’re standing beside a case filled with gorgeous, decorative wedding cakes. I glance at them, then wish that I hadn’t, because all they do is remind me of how quickly Saturday night is barreling down on us. And while Damien’s entry only moments ago might have felt like the cavalry, now those prickles of stress and nerves are starting up again. Because Jamie is right—this is my last chance to cut loose with my girlfriends.

But I don’t want to irritate Damien, and though it has never actually come up between us, I feel confident he is not going to graciously accept the idea of another guy getting up close and personal. And we both know that even if we insist on ground rules, Jamie will make sure that they are soundly ignored.

“It’s not my idea,” I say.

“But you want to go.” His voice is low, sensual—and it’s making me nervous, because I can’t figure out his angle.

“I didn’t even know about it,” I say.

He twines a strand of my hair through his fingers, then releases it as he brushes his thumb over the curve of my jaw, then over my lower lip.

My mouth parts, and I feel my body go soft and needy. There is no one in the world who has ever had the effect on me that Damien does, and right then I want nothing more than to fold myself into his embrace and lose myself in his kisses.

That, however, isn’t where the moment is going.

“Go,” he says. “Have fun with your friends.”



I blink. “Really?”

He chuckles. “Would I deny you the full wedding experience?”

“I—well, no, but Raven . . .” I trail off, because really, what is there to say about buff men dancing in thongs?

“Mmm, yes, about that.” He moves closer, his heat so palpable I feel the sizzle. “You go. You have fun. And you come back and tell me all about it.”

I lick my lips. “All about it?”

He leans forward so that his lips brush my ear. “Every last thing, baby. Have as good a time as you want. And when you get home,” he adds, his hand sliding down to cup my ass, “I’ll decide whether I need to simply spank this beautiful ass, or whether you need a more thorough punishment so that you remember just how much—how thoroughly, completely, and irrevocably—you belong to me.” He pulls back so that he is looking straight into my eyes, and the desire I see there almost makes me come on the spot.

“Do we understand each other?”

I nod.

“What’s that?”

“Yes,” I say, and then meet his eyes defiantly. “Yes, sir.”

The corner of his mouth twitches. He takes my hand and pulls me close, then brushes a gentle kiss over my lips. “Just so you know, Ms. Fairchild,” he whispers, “I’m secretly hoping you spend this afternoon with your friends being very, very naughty.”

## Chapter Six

Jamie lets out a laugh as a guy in nothing but a thong and a cowboy hat gets up close and personal in her face. I'm sitting right beside her and am listing toward the left—away from him—but Jamie is eating it up, gleefully tucking ones and fives into the elastic band of his thong. Elastic that, from the stretched out look of it, is going to snap at any moment.

Which probably wouldn't bother Jamie at all.

But even though the guy's not bad-looking, the only naked man I'm interested in anymore is Damien. And this guy is no Damien.

Jamie pulls out a fifty, and I roll my eyes, thinking that I'm about to witness a new level of hip-gyrating entertainment. That's when Jamie hooks her thumb toward me, nods, and very deliberately sticks the fifty right over the guy's package.

"*Jamie!*" I squeal, but I'm laughing now, because she's laughing and so are Lisa and Evelyn and Sylvia. I try to squirm away, but Jamie holds me in place, grinning wickedly.

Beside me, Evelyn takes a shot of straight Scotch. "Honey, you know I love your boy—and I am quite fond of my own man's attributes, too—but you need to relax and appreciate this from an artistic perspective." As if in illustration, she leans back, takes another drink, attaches her eyes firmly on the cowboy, and sighs.

Evelyn Dodge is brassy, opinionated, and often inappropriate. She says what she thinks, takes no shit off anyone, and has conquered Hollywood and then some. A former-actress-turned-agent-turned-patron-of-the-arts, Evelyn has been friends with Damien since his early days on the tennis circuit. She's known his secrets for longer than I have, and she loves him as much as I do. Damien lost his mom when he was just a kid, and I've always been grateful that Evelyn was in his life. Now I'm grateful that she's in mine.

But this isn't the time to be sappy, and I flash her the kind of smile that would make my mother proud. "Evelyn," I say sweetly, "you are so full of shit."

"It's the years in Hollywood, Texas." She cocks her head at Jamie. "At least this one already has the mouth for it."

"Fuck, yeah," Jamie says. Then she waves another bill and points at me. "Come on, John Wayne," she says. "Don't stop now."

The dancer obviously knows which of us is shoving bills down his pants, because he does as she says, gyrating closer and closer, and I'm squirming out of reach and laughing so hard that I almost pee my pants.

And all the while I'm wearing a fake diamond tiara that says *Virgin Bride* in equally fake red gemstones.

"It's no use," Jamie finally announces, then waves the dancer away, but not before giving him one more fifty. "She only has eyes for Damien."

"Can you blame her?" Sylvia says. I turn to her, eyebrows raised. Sylvia is Damien's assistant, and we've spent so much time together as I've planned the wedding that we've become pretty good friends. "What?" she says, holding her hands up in a sign of innocence. "Just because I work for him doesn't mean I'm blind to him."

"What happens in Raven stays in Raven," Jamie says wisely, then points a finger at me. "And don't even pretend to be jealous of her. You'd have to be jealous of the whole world, because every straight female out there thinks he's the most fuckalicious thing on two legs. Besides, you know Damien's only got eyes for you."

"I do," I say happily. At the moment, I'm very happy. It may not even be five yet, but I've had a Happy Hour buzz going for the last couple of hours, and have imbibed more than my fair share of Manhattans, because Jamie says that the little cherry garnish is appropriate for a bachelorette party, even though my cherry was popped long ago.

My best friend has a way with words.

The waiter comes with another round of drinks, but before I can snag a fresh Manhattan, Lisa snatches it off the tray. "I think it's about time we get you home to Damien," she says. "You're getting glassy-eyed."

I squint at her. "No way."

She laughs. "He will be so mad at all of us if we send you back tonight only to pass out. Especially since you're going home with a goodie bag."

“I am?” I’m beginning to think that Lisa’s right and I’m a little wasted, because even if she’s talking in euphemisms, I have no idea what she means by a goodie bag.

“Instead of each of us buying you a present, we went in together and got you a Bag O’ Fun from Come Again,” Jamie explains, referencing a local sex toy shop.

“You didn’t,” I say, not sure if I should be amused or mortified. “What’s in it?”

“You’re just going to have to wait and see,” Jamie says, while the rest of them grin.

“I promise it’s good,” Lisa says. “I may have to recreate a bag for Preston and me.” Lisa is a business consultant who has done some work with me, and her fiancé, Preston, is one of the top executives at Stark Applied Technology.

“You’re supposed to save it for your wedding night,” Sylvia adds.

“But we won’t think less of you if you dig in tonight,” Jamie says. She shares a mischievous grin with Evelyn. “She’s going home to Damien, after all, so how could we blame her?”

The limo parked outside of Raven is one of Damien’s insane stretch numbers that the company keeps primarily for impressing competitors and rewarding employees. Since this isn’t the greatest neighborhood in the world, a crowd of gawkers have gathered. I think some of them are drooling. A few must recognize me, because about ten feet from the car I start to hear my name called out. I see phones being thrust into the air, and a flurry of shouts and camera flashes surround me.

I walk faster, flanked by my friends.

I’m surprised that Edward isn’t on the sidewalk holding the door open for me, but it doesn’t matter, because Jamie and Evelyn have taken the lead, and they bundle me into the limo, tell me that they hope I had a great time with them and that I have an even greater one with Damien—wink, wink—and then slam the door, effectively blocking the paparazzi and tourists who are determined to get in my face.

I lean back against the soft leather and take deep breaths. Dealing with the paparazzi is part and parcel of dating and marrying a multi-billionaire who owns half the world, and I know that. But once the press got hold of the fact that Damien had paid me a million dollars to pose for a nude portrait—and

once Damien was indicted for murder—the press went a little nuts. Now it's a good day if we go out in public with only a small swarm.

I've learned to live with it, but I don't like it. It makes me tense and uncomfortable, and if there was a way to avoid it, I would.

What I hate the most is that I know they will be out in full force for the wedding. Although all of the Stark International security force will be at the house to make sure we don't have party crashers on the perimeter, the beach itself is public—and I'm certain that it will be crowded with paparazzi with long lenses and lots of determination.

Since I can't do anything about that except move the wedding inside or to another location altogether, neither of which are options that appeal to me, I have come to terms with the fact that I'm going to have to simply deal with the paparazzi and all the pictures that will surface afterward.

Yay.

That realization was one of the reasons we fired the photographer that we'd hired to do our wedding day portraits. I really didn't need one more underhanded person trying to snap a picture of someone who is having just a little bit too good a time at the champagne fountain after the wedding.

I frown, remembering that I still have to find a photographer, and it's already Thursday and the wedding is Saturday. *Shit*. If it weren't my own wedding, I could take the pictures myself. For that matter, I suppose I could take my Leica to the ceremony . . .

I shake off the ridiculous thought. Honestly, the black camera strap would totally clash with my dress.

Still, I should use this time in the limo to be productive. Maybe call some of the folks on my initial list of maybes and see if they're booked for the day. But my head is too light from my Manhattan indulgence, and all I want to do is sit back, enjoy the ride, and think about seeing Damien again in just a few minutes.

The fact that I tossed my phone across the bedroom and broke it also puts a crimp in my plan to manage a little work.

Frustrated at being without Damien, and irritated about my own foolish temper, I glance out the window and frown, because this isn't the way that we usually go home. I am about to hit the button for the intercom when a phone rings, which is odd because there is no permanent phone in the back of the limo, and, as I have just reminded myself, my iPhone is toast.

The ring comes again.

I lean forward, cock my head, and decide the sound is coming from the bar. I get off the leather bench and move carefully in that direction. Another ring, and I narrow the source down to the ice bucket. I pull off the lid, glance down, and find a phone in the otherwise empty container.

With a grin, I answer the call. “Hello?”

“Ms. Fairchild,” he says—his voice is low and enticing and flows over me like warm chocolate.

“Mr. Stark,” I say, unable to hide my amusement. “Funny you were able to call me, since I have no phone.”

“I told you—I will always take care of your needs.”

I smile, feeling warm and satisfied. “Where are you?”

“I’m not with you,” he says. “Other than that, does it matter?”

My mouth curves into a smile. “No, but you’re wrong. You are with me. You’re always with me.”

There is a pause before he answers. “Yes,” he finally says, and I don’t think I have ever heard that simple word spoken with so much meaning and complexity before.

I sigh with satisfaction, then close my eyes. He may not be beside me, but for the moment, I am content.

“We’ve done this before,” he says. “You, alone in the back of my limo. Me, somewhere else, thinking of you. Imagining you. Wanting you.”

I swallow, my body already tightening in anticipation of where these words are going. Because we *have* done this before—and the caress of his voice upon me that night is one of my most treasured memories.

“Tell me what you did,” he says.

“That night in the limo?” I ask, though I know that is not what he means.

“Tonight. At Raven.”

“I watched the dancers.”

“What did they do?” His voice has a hard edge, and I shiver a little, remembering his promise to punish me.

“They danced,” I say. And then, because I’m feeling reckless, I add, “They stripped down to thongs. They were slick with oil. They got close.”

“How close?”

I think of the way the cowboy was gyrating right in front of my face. I remember the way that Jamie laughed and Lisa and Evelyn egged him on.

“Pretty close,” I whisper.

“I see.”

There is a pause, and I squirm on the seat. My legs feel prickly, my sex clenches greedily. I’m thinking of Damien’s promise to punish me, and I yearn to be home. To feel his hands upon me.

“Did it turn you on?” he asks, with that low, dangerous tone.

I almost lie, but I can’t do that. “Yes,” I whisper. “But only because it made me think of you. Your body hard and naked in front of me. Your chest close to me. That thin strip of hair that leads down to your cock, so near I could lick it. And those amazing muscles that form a V as if arrowing down to heaven.”

“Christ, Nikki.”

I smile, pleased I can bring that ragged tone to his voice.

“Mostly, though, it turned me on because I was watching other men. Because they were nearly naked, and I knew that when I got home to you—” I cut myself off, my bravado suddenly evaporating.

“What?” he asks. “What will happen when you get home?”

“You said you’d punish me,” I say, so softly I’m not sure that he can hear me.

“Did I?” There is a note of triumph in his voice, and it makes me weak. “How should I punish you?”

I lick my lips. “You should probably spank me.”

“I probably should,” he agrees. “Would you like that?”

“Yes.” My voice is nothing more than a whisper of air.

“Why?”

I close my eyes. It’s a question that I expect whenever I ask for the pain, and I know that after my dreams he will be even more careful with me. I love that he understands me so well, but it means that I have to say aloud what I want from him, and that voicing of my desires is both awkward and undeniably exciting.

“Why, Nikki? I want to hear why you want the sting of my palm.”

I lick my lips, forcing them to wrap around my words. “Because of the way it feels.”

“Tell me.”

“Tiny pinpricks of pleasure,” I say, my soft words becoming bolder even as they sizzle through my body, sparking like currents of electricity that fire

my senses. “They melt into heat, into liquid desire. It makes me wet, Damien, you make me wet.” I pause, knowing that my words have captured him. “Pleasure and pain, Damien, and you’re the only one I trust to give me both.”

For a long moment he is silent. Almost too long. And then I hear his intake of breath, followed by his slow, clear words. “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.”

“I know,” I whisper.

“But, baby,” he adds, with a lightness now coloring his words, “that doesn’t change the fact that you were naughty.”

“Was I?” I am breathing hard now, anticipating what is to come.

“Have you seen the Internet?”

I frown. That wasn’t a question I was expecting. “Um, no.”

“Your party is all over Twitter,” he says, and I cringe. *That* I should have expected. “I imagine it’ll be on TMZ by morning. The gentleman who was, shall we say, in your face looked quite energetic.”

“I think he probably works out,” I say dryly.

“You realize this puts me in a bit of a predicament.”

I’m trying very hard not to smile. “Does it?”

“I’m just not sure how to punish you now. Considering your . . . eagerness . . . I’m beginning to think that spanking isn’t quite the punishment it ought to be.”

“Damien!” I’m laughing—but I’m also a little worried. Damien is nothing if not creative.

He chuckles, and it’s obvious the bastard is enjoying himself.

“Maybe I should just hang up?” he says.

“No.”

“No, what?” he asks, and I hear the tightening in his voice. Whatever playfulness has been between us, it’s fading under the slow burn of something else. Something hot. Something dangerous.

“No, sir,” I say. My breath stutters in my chest, and I know that I am already wet. I’ve been wet since the moment I heard his voice. “Please, sir. Please don’t hang up.”

“I’ll stay on the line, but only if you obey. Bend my rules, and I hang up.”

“Yes, sir.”



“Take your skirt off. And your panties.”

I unbutton the skirt and shimmy out of it. I toss it onto the floor of the limo and drop my panties on top.

“Okay.”

“Are you sitting back down?”

“Yes.”

“Are you wet?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to punish you, Nikki, just like you want. I’m going to make you come. I’m going to make you explode.”

I close my eyes and lean my head back, lost in the power of his words.

“But it won’t be fast.” He pauses, then, “Tell me how wet you are.”

“Very.”

“No, not like that. I want you to touch yourself. Just one finger. Imagine it’s mine.”

“I am.”

“Now slide it down the juncture of your thigh,” he orders. “Let me feel how silky your skin is. How soft. How tempting.”

I do what he says, trembling as much from the gentle touch as from the fantasy that it’s Damien’s.

“Don’t touch your clit,” he says, and though I desperately want to, I obey. “Now tell me.”

“Like I said, I’m very wet.”

He chuckles. “I’m very glad to hear it. Tell me, what’s in the goodie bag?”

“I don’t know. Hang on.”

I tug the bag over and peek inside. “A mask, a vibrator, some sort of oil, handcuffs, a video.”

“Oil?”

“Yeah.” I pull out the small bottle and read the label. “Arousal oil.”

“Interesting. Open it.”

“I—okay.” I break the seal and unscrew the cap. Immediately, I can smell the spices. “It’s a bit minty. There aren’t instructions.”

“Dab a little on your finger,” he says. “Then stroke it onto your clit.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Should I hang up?”

“Right. Okay. No problem.” I’m not at all sure what this stuff is, but I

figure if it's in a bag from Jamie, it must be fun. I put a drop on my finger and ease my finger over my clit. I'm so sensitive that even that tiny sensation makes me shiver.

"Well?" Damien asks.

I cock my head, expecting some sort of new sensation. "Nothing."

"Hmm. All right, then, we'll move on. Does the vibrator have batteries?"

I test it out, and find that it purrs nicely in my hand. "It does," I say, and immediately cringe. I sound far too eager, and I know from Damien's chuckle that he both heard and understood.

"And the mask," he says. "Go ahead and put that on."

"All right." I slip it over my eyes, and the world goes dark. "Okay, I—holy fuck." The oil that I thought did nothing is now doing considerably more than nothing. "That oil, it's . . . well, it's very wow."

"Tell me."

"It's like mint, I guess. Like if you sucked on one of those really strong mints and then went down on me. Oh, wow. It feels amazing, sensitive—oh, God, Damien, please."

"Please, what?"

"Everything. Anything." I squirm, wanting simply to relieve this growing pressure, this demanding sensation. "Please, sir, can I touch myself?"

"Oh, yeah. We're going to use the vibrator. Your fingers. I'm going to tell you how to touch yourself, baby. And you're going to let me hear you come."

I am awash with gratitude. I've been holding the phone, but now I put it on speaker and set it beside me, peeking out from under the blindfold just long enough to make sure I push the right buttons.

"Slide your hand up your thigh," he says, "then gently stroke your clit. Are you doing it?"

"Yes." I can barely speak.

"Can you turn on the vibrator?"

"I—I think so."

"Fuck yourself with it, baby. I want it inside you. I want you imagining it's me. Holding you, fucking you, burying myself deep in you."

*Oh my God.* I fumble, turned on, frantic, weak with longing. I switch to my right hand, and stroke my clit with my left. The oil is amazing, and . . . "I'm close," I say. "God, Damien, I'm so close."

"I know, baby. Come the rest of the way for me. Let me hear it."

“I—” But I can’t talk anymore. I’ve done as he asked with the vibrator, and it fills me, the dual sensation of the vibration and my finger stroking my clit coupled with my fantasy of Damien, and his voice on the phone telling me to “Come for me, baby, come for me,” is too overwhelming. I let my head fall back, and grind my hips, lost to everything now but the need for release that is close, so close, so very close, and then—

I explode, and as I do, I cry out Damien’s name.

“That’s it, baby,” he says. “That’s it. Keep touching yourself. Don’t stop. Don’t stop, baby, you can come again.”

I’ve turned off the vibrator and tossed it onto the seat, but I do as he says and stroke myself. I’m so desperately wet. Wet and wide open and wishing that Damien were right here.

I still have the mask on, but I can hear the mechanical sound of the privacy screen starting to descend.

*What the fuck?*

“Damien!”

“I hear it, too. It’s just the privacy screen. Don’t stop. Don’t put your legs together. Stay like that, baby. Open and wide.”

“Are you crazy? *Edward.*”

“I believe we agreed that you needed to be punished.”

“No.” I pull my legs tight together and rip off the mask even as I slide sideways, out of the line of sight of the driver.

And when I do, I realize that it isn’t Edward behind the wheel, it’s Damien.

He turns to glance, and I take deep, gasping breaths as I try to reconcile fear and relief and anger.

“Bastard,” I finally say, though that hardly covers it.

“Slide back to the middle.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Suit yourself.” He starts to raise the privacy screen.

“Fine.” I’m pissed, but I’m not stupid. And, yeah, I’m still turned on.

As he drops the screen, I slide back to center.

“Spread your legs,” he says, and as I do, he adjusts his mirror. “Now, that really is a beautiful view.” There is awe in his voice, and it makes me feel beautiful. Despite being exposed, despite the scars on my thighs. Damien makes me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world, and that is just one of the things that makes me love him.

“Wider,” he says. I comply, and I hear Damien’s sharp intake of breath. He may be playing with me, but there’s no denying that he’s turned on, too.

“Are you excited, Ms. Fairchild?”

“Yes,” I admit. “Except for that one moment of terror, yes.”

“You should know me better. And you should listen better.”

“Listen?” And then it hits me. “The bag. How would you know about the goodie bag if you weren’t in the car?”

“Exactly. I gave you that clue. It’s not my fault if you were too distracted to pay attention.”

I manage a smirk. “Actually, I think it was your fault.”

He chuckles again. “Maybe so.”

I start to bring my legs together.

“Oh, no, Ms. Fairchild. That’s how you sit for the rest of the ride. It’s your punishment—and my reward,” he adds, tapping the rearview mirror.

“In that case,” I say, and strip off my sweater, shirt, and bra.

“Jesus, Nikki,” Damien says, as I sit naked on the backseat, feeling suddenly very smug.

“I thought you needed to be well rewarded. After all, you earned it. I mean, you’ve been sitting in an empty limo all afternoon while I was inside drinking and watching hot guys.”

“Best not to remind me of your infractions,” he warns. “And the truth is, I wasn’t just sitting in the limo.”

“Oh?” I lick the tip of my finger and slowly circle my nipple. I’m pretty sure I hear a low growl come from the driver’s seat. “What were you doing?”

“You were with the girls,” he says, his voice unnaturally tight. “I was with the guys.”

“Were you?” I let my finger trace down, down, down. Slowly, I stroke my sex, thrusting my finger deep inside, then withdrawing it to tease my clit.

I started this little show to torment Damien, but I’m also tormenting myself. “So, um, who were you with?” Honestly, it’s getting hard to think.

“Alaine, Charles, Preston. Jesus, Nikki, do you have any idea how hard I am?”

I allow myself the pleasure of a satisfied smile. “Anyone else?”

“Ryan, Evan, Blaine. A few others.”

“Mmm.” I force myself not to drift, not to let myself come. I want him hard and hot. I want to turn the punishment around on him.

I want to keep control.

“So, um, tell me about Evan. Jamie was certainly checking him out.”

“Tell her to stay away,” Damien says sharply, and my hand pauses.

“Why?”

“Actually, I take it back. Don’t tell her anything. Knowing Jamie, telling her to stay away would just make her more determined.”

“All right,” I agree. “But why? What’s wrong with him?”

“Not a damn thing. I like him, a lot. But he has an edge.”

“An edge? What kind of edge?”

“The dangerous kind.”

“Oh.” I want to ask more; however, I know better than to try to get information out of Damien that he doesn’t want to give. “To be honest, I think Jamie’s appreciation is more aesthetic than active. I’m pretty sure she’s got her eye on another guy.”

“Who?” Damien asks.

I shrug. I don’t answer, but I’m thinking of Ryan.

For a moment I think Damien will press the point, but all he says is, “We’re here.”

I glance out the window and see that we’ve entered a drive-in movie lot. I laugh out loud. “Where are we?” I ask, tugging my skirt and shirt back on. I don’t bother with the bra or underwear. At the moment, they seem superfluous.

“The Vineland Drive-In. City of Industry.”

“Don’t you have to pay?”

“I called ahead and made arrangements.”

“You planned this all along,” I say, which is pretty much stating the obvious. “Why?”

He opens his door, gets out, then joins me in the back.

“Why?” I repeat.

“So we could make out in a car at the drive-in,” he says simply.

I laugh, because as corny as it sounds, the idea is also exciting. “Interesting. I think I’d like that.”

“Would you?” He reaches over and begins to unbutton the shirt that I just put back on. I lean toward the console so that I can raise the privacy screen.

“No,” he says as he peels the shirt off.

“Damien!”

His fingers unbutton my skirt, then tug down the zipper. “Do you really think that someone is going to lean on the hood, press their face to the glass, and peer all the way back here?”

“They might,” I say, though I agree it’s doubtful.

“They won’t. But doesn’t the possibility make you wet?” He slides his hand up my skirt. “Yeah,” he says. “I think it does.”

I lick my lips, refusing to admit the excitement that’s building inside me. “I was already wet,” I say.

“Mmm-hmm.”

I feel my cheeks heat. “I thought you didn’t do public sex.”

“I don’t. And I’m not going to. We’re in a limo. No one’s looking in. But I like the fantasy,” he admits. He leans forward and kisses me, even as he slides two fingers deep inside me. “And so do you.”

“I do,” I admit, both because it’s true and because I don’t want to have secrets from Damien. “You are my fantasy, Damien. You know that, right?”

“And you are mine,” he says, after kissing me softly. “We’re lucky, you and I. There were so many places where our lives made wrong turns. And yet all those turns, all those horrors, all those days that we want to forget—they all add up to this moment. To you in my arms.” He strokes my hair, his expression tender. “I have no regrets for the past, Nikki. And when I’m with you, the only thing I can see is the future.”

“Damien,” I say, the word soft like a prayer.

“Yes?”

“Kiss me.”

“Whatever you want, sweetheart,” he says before his mouth closes over mine and I slide down into the bliss of his arms.

## Chapter Seven

I sit in the silence of the Malibu house, sipping a sparkling water as I work at a small desk in the library. The library is my favorite room in this house, and it's not really a room at all. Instead, it's a level—a mezzanine—broken into a variety of sections. The comfy chairs and coffee tables are by the wall of windows overlooking the ocean. The bookshelves line the area that is visible from the massive staircase leading up from the entrance hall. The work areas are farther back, hidden from view, and it is in one of those quiet corners that I now sit.

It is late—barely three in the morning—and Damien is asleep in our bed.

I couldn't sleep, and though I stayed in bed for hours, warm in Damien's arms as I drifted in and out of a hazy dream state, I never managed to fall into slumber. I'm not sure if it was nerves or too much bourbon or the persistent thoughts of my mother, but in the end I gave up and came down here. Now I am sitting in the light of my laptop monitor putting the finishing touches on the gift I intend to give Damien on our wedding day—a scrapbook of our time together.

I've been working on it for months, even before we were engaged, and have managed to gather and edit photos ranging all the way from our very first meeting at a Dallas pageant to the present. I had originally intended it to be entirely electronic, but once he proposed and I realized that this was the perfect wedding-night gift for the man who owns everything, I decided that it needed to be tangible. I bought a leather-bound scrapbook with thick, archival paper, and have been carefully pasting in the images and writing captions and notes to him with my very best effort at penmanship.

Right now I am searching the computer for a picture of the Vineland Drive-In, because that is a memory I want him to keep, though I don't think either one of us had any idea what movie was playing. Instead, we made out

like teenagers in the backseat, kissing and exploring, touching and groping. And when Damien finally thrust hard inside me—when I came in sudden release and exultation—I am certain that my cry was at least as loud as the movie soundtrack.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickle, and I know without turning around that Damien is here. His walk, his scent, his presence—I don't know what it is, but there is something in him that calls so profoundly to me that I am never unaware of him. If he is in the same room, my body knows—and wants.

I gently close the scrapbook, then tuck it into a drawer before turning to him.

“I don't like waking up without you,” he says.

I smile. “Now you know how I feel.” Usually it is me who wakes up to find the other side of the bed cold and empty.

“What are you doing?”

“Just working on something.” I lift a shoulder. “I couldn't sleep.”

“Oh, really?” He lifts a brow and eyes the desk.

“Don't even think about it, mister. You'll see it on Saturday.”

“Saturday,” he murmurs, the hint of a smile playing around his mouth. “Seems like there's something I'm supposed to be doing on Saturday.”

I laugh, and fly out of the chair to smack him playfully on the chest. He pulls me into his arms and kisses me, gently at first and then with increasing fervency. “I reached for you,” he says. “You weren't there.”

The words are matter-of-fact, but to me they seem thick with meaning. I lean back so that I can see his face more clearly. “What's wrong?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” he says, deflecting my words but not my worry. There is something on Damien's mind. He tucks my hair behind my ear. “Tell me what's keeping you awake.”

“Bourbon,” I say. “Bridal jitters.”

“Not your mother?”

“That, too,” I admit.

“Whatever you want to do, you know that I support it. All I ask is that you remember this is your wedding, and it's the only wedding you're going to have.” He strokes my cheek, the touch melting me as much as the words. “Consider that when you decide how to handle your mother.”

I nod. “You're right.” I take his hand. “And you? Is it wedding jitters that



are bothering you? Is something going on at work?"

He turns, looking out toward the rows of polished bookshelves now standing like sentries in the dark. He doesn't answer right away, and I'm starting to suspect he isn't going to answer me at all. Then he says, "It's Sofia."

I try not to react, but I have no control over the quickening pace of my heart, and I'm certain that my eyes have gone unnaturally wide. "What about her?" I ask carefully. Sofia is so far off my list of favorite people, it isn't even funny. Still, she was important to Damien when he was growing up, and despite a lot of recent shit, I know that she's still important to him.

"I got an email from her. I saw it right after we got home. She wants to come to the wedding. She thinks that it could be arranged."

The words hang in the air, like one of those cartoon anvils that is defying the laws of gravity and simply hovering, waiting for the moment when it will drop and crush the hapless coyote.

I open my mouth, close it, then try again. "Oh," is all I can manage.

"That pretty much sums it up," he says. He's wearing pajama bottoms tied loosely around his waist, and he slides one hand into a pocket. With the other he massages his forehead with his thumb and finger.

"Do you want her to come?" I finally ask.

He lifts his head, looking at me as if I've gone insane. "No."

A moment passes, and then he lets out a soft curse. "No," he repeats, "and the not wanting makes me sad." He meets my eyes. "But I meant what I said in the limo, about our choices and the people in our lives leading us to this point. To each other." He steps closer to me. "It saddens me—hell, it angers me—but I have no regrets."

"I don't, either," I say, thinking of my mother. Of who she is, what she's done, and what I want. It's all a turmoil inside me. A storm. I know what I should do, what I want to do. But I'm not certain it's what I can do.

And though he hides it better than I do, I know that a similar storm is raging within Damien. How can it not be? He thrives on control. It is his lifeblood, his sustenance, and yet just the mention of Sofia's name conjures the specter of everything that spun out of control, cutting a path of destruction through his life as effectively as a spinning propeller breaking loose from its axle.

"Damien," I say, and I hear both longing and helplessness in my voice.

I see the heat flare in his eyes as he moves even closer to me. I take an automatic step backward, but am foiled by the desk. I stop, breathing hard, as he cages me in. I am wearing the button-down shirt that he abandoned on the floor when we went to bed. The tail hits me mid-thigh, and he uses his finger to trace the line of the hem, slowly easing it up, higher and higher.

My pulse quickens, and I feel the effects of his touch shimmering through me, hot and electric and alive.

Without thinking, I shift my stance, widening my legs. I want his hands upon me. I want his cock inside me. I want everything he has to give, and I want him to take everything he wants.

His hand slides between my legs and cups my sex, finding me desperately wet. "Tell me you want me," he says, sliding his fingers inside me. I almost melt with pleasure.

"Always," I say truthfully, and I know with absolute certainty that there will not ever be a time when I don't respond to Damien's presence. To his proximity, his heat. When I won't open like a flower to him. When my body won't crave his touch.

He thrusts another finger inside me and I grind down, shamelessly wanting more. But he denies me, and I hear myself whimper as he pulls his hand away. And then my whimper changes to a gasp when he grabs either side of the shirt and tugs it open, baring my breasts and sending buttons flying.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, and I close my eyes in expectation of his mouth on my nipple. But the touch doesn't come. Instead, he turns me around, then pulls the shirt the rest of the way off so that I am naked in front of him. I am facing the desk, my ass pressed against his erection, now hard steel beneath the thin pajama bottoms.

"I wanted you in the limo," he says. "But I need you now. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"You know I do." I turn to look at him as I speak, but he shakes his head.

"Eyes forward. Bend over. Hold on to the far side of the desk."

I do as he says. I feel vulnerable. I feel *him*.

"I don't think we ever took care of that little issue of punishment," he says.

I lick my lips, my body already tight with anticipation and my sex clenching with desire.

"Is that what you want, Nikki? Shall I spank your ass? Shall I punish you with the sting of my palm, turning your ass pink and sweet, making you hot?"

“I’m already hot,” I say honestly. “And yes. Please, yes.” We both want this. Hell, we both need it. He needs to take back some of that control, and I so desperately need to give it to him. Because I need the storm to settle inside me as much as he needs my submission.

I do not turn around, but I can hear the soft rustle of material as he slips off the pajama bottoms. He steps closer, and the tip of his cock rubs along the crack of my ass. “Maybe I should just take you, fast and without warning.”

“Yes.” There is no hiding the need in my voice, and Damien chuckles.

“Soon,” he says, and then lands his palm sharply against my rear.

I cry out, more from surprise than pain, and then brace for the second blow. It comes fast, and then Damien’s palm is caressing the point of impact, smoothing out those brilliant red sparks, making them flow inside me, shifting from pain to a vibrant pleasure that pulses through me.

“More?” But he doesn’t wait for an answer, just spanks me again, and again. Eight more times, until my rear is red hot and sensitive and my cunt is so wet that I can feel my desire coating the inside of my thighs.

I am bent over the desk, my breasts rubbing against the wood with every impact, and now my nipples are as tight and hard and sensitive as my clit. I’m awash in sensation, my entire body sparking like a live wire, and with the right touch, I know that I will shatter.

I expect another smack, but this time his hands grab my hips instead. With his knee, he roughly shoves my legs apart. One hand comes down on my back, holding me in place over the desk. The other strokes my sex, opening me, readying me, though that is hardly necessary—as I am so ready for him to be inside me, I can hardly stand it.

“Damien, please,” I beg. “I need you in so many ways, but right now, I just need you to take me.”

He does, thank God. Gently at first, just the tip of his cock sliding into me as my muscles clench greedily around him. He withdraws, and I moan, immediately regretting the loss of him. Then, without warning, he slams into me, our bodies coming together brutally, violently, and I can feel his body tightening as his climax draws close. “Come with me, baby,” he says, his hand snaking around to stroke my clit.

It is that touch in combination with the sensation of being filled by Damien that sends me spiraling off the cliff, then grabbing on to the edge of the desk as Damien thrusts into me, faster and faster until he explodes as well, then

collapses onto the carpet, clutching me around the waist and pulling me down with him.

I land on top of him, and he grins. “Again, Ms. Fairchild?”

“I could be convinced,” I say, though I am still breathless.

He lifts himself just high enough to kiss me. “Marry me,” he says, then grins.

“Yeah,” I say happily. “I think I will.”

“All I am saying is that there is a reason that tradition exists,” my mother says as we enter Phillippe Favreau’s Rodeo Drive boutique.

I am regretting not only having her come along today, but also that I answered her questions about my flower choices for the wedding. She has been harping on it ever since I explained that the cupcake tower would be decorated with wildflowers because that was the overall floral theme.

Wildflowers, in the world of Elizabeth Fairchild, are an epic fail where weddings are concerned.

“Orchids, lilies, gardenias. Darling, those are all lovely and elegant and classic.”

“I like what I’ve picked out, Mother.” I glance around the studio. There are only three gowns on mannequins and one very thin woman working behind a tall glass table that doubles as a desk. “Now, would you drop it?” I glance at the woman. “I’m Nikki Fairchild. I have an appointment with Alyssa for an alteration on a gown that arrived this morning.”

“Nikki Fairchild?” she repeats, looking a bit more flummoxed than is usual for store clerks on Rodeo Drive. “The Damien Stark gown?”

I frown. “Um, well, I’m going to be the one wearing it, but Damien ordered it, yes. Why? Is there a problem?”

She smiles an overly perky smile, and little knots of dread form in my stomach. “I’ll just get Alyssa. One moment.”

“Even magnolias,” Mother says.

“Would you stop it?” I am practically snarling, and Mother’s eyes go wide.

“Nichole! You need to learn to control yourself.”

I suck in both a breath and my temper, and refrain from telling her that she needs to learn to shut up. “I’m a little nervous,” I say. “I think there may be something wrong with the dress.”

“Nonsense. I’m sure it’s lovely. Do you have a picture?”

I glance sideways at her, thrown off kilter by the fact that she's actually being soothing. "Um, sure." I pull out my phone and call up the photographs we'd taken in Paris, both of Phillippe's sketch and of the basted-together version that I wore for the initial fitting. Just seeing it makes me smile. It has a fitted bodice with a low neckline that reveals a hint of cleavage. The sleeves are slim and hug my arms. The skirt is not a traditional princess style, but is instead sleek in the front and over my hips, showing off my curves. The back has a modified bustle that supports a train.

The neckline and the hem and the lower line of the bodice are embroidered with tiny flowers accented with pearls, giving the pure white dress a touch of the whimsical. I think it's an exceptional dress, and I cannot wait for Damien to see me in it.

I glance over at my mother, expecting to see approval in her eyes. I should have known better.

"Well," she says with a sniff, "I suppose this is to be expected, considering your choice of flowers and cake."

"I—" I snap my mouth shut. I have no idea what to say. No idea what insult to hurl that will cut her as deeply as she is cutting me, each word like a new wound.

All I want is one tiny crumb from my mother. Approval, compassion, respect. But there is nothing there, and there never has been.

And yet I have been foolish enough to let that flame of hope keep burning. God, I'm an idiot.

I turn away so as to not let her see that my eyes are bright with tears.

"A longer train," she says. "And a fuller skirt. This is one of the few times you can completely hide those hips, Nichole. You should take advantage of it."

I cringe, wanting to scream at her that just because I'm no longer a size four does not mean that I have to start wearing caftans. I'm young, I'm healthy, I'm pretty, and if she's too goddamn stupid to see that—

My wild thoughts are interrupted by the door to the back room bursting open and a tall red-haired woman hurrying in.

"Nikki," she says, holding out her hand. "I'm Alyssa."

I start to hold my hand out as well, only to discover that I've clenched it so tight that I've left indentations from my nails in my palms. I flex it, then extend it to her. "Is there a problem?"

“I’m afraid so,” she says. “This is terribly embarrassing, but your dress is missing.”

“Missing,” I repeat stupidly.

“We hope it’s just a clerical error in customs, and we’re doing everything we can.” I halfway tune her out, still stuck on that one word: *missing*. My dress is missing, and my wedding is Saturday. Tomorrow.

“. . . have been other shops with items missing . . .”

What the hell am I going to do? This is my dress. My *wedding* dress. I mean, I can’t just run to Target.

“. . . customs or the shipper, but we’re looking into it, and . . .”

And it’s not even just a wedding dress. It’s the dress I bought during my trip to Europe with Damien. It’s the dress we bought during our days and nights in Paris. The dress made by the designer who assured Damien that he would go faint with awe when he saw me in the gown. This is not a dress I can lose, nor is it a dress I can replace, and I can feel the panic, the anger, the futility rising inside me.

One goddamn thing after another, and I can’t even lash out. Because it’s not this poor girl’s fault—hell, she’s mortified, too. But everything is just piling on: the photographer and the music and the flowers. Those goddamned flowers that my mother has been talking about for the last hour.

“Ms. Fairchild?” Alyssa says, her voice ripe with concern. Her fingers brush over my arm, and I use the touch as an anchor to draw me out of my thoughts and back to reality. “Ms. Fairchild, are you okay?”

“She’s fine,” my mother says firmly. “This can only be considered a good thing. It gives her a chance to find a dress that might actually flatter her figure.”

Alyssa’s eyes are wide, and she’s staring at my mother like she’s never met such a creature before. Hell, she probably hasn’t.

“Come on, Nichole. This is Beverly Hills. I’m sure we can find you a gown.”

“Get the hell out of here.” I did not plan the words, but I know the moment that they are out that I mean them with all my heart.

“Excuse me?”

“Texas,” I say. “Go back to Texas, Mother. Go now.”

“Texas! But, Nichole, how—”

“It’s *Nikki*,” I snap. “How many times do I have to tell you? You don’t

listen.”

Beside us, I see Alyssa lick her lips and then fade into the background. At the glass desk, the thin girl seems overly interested in the single piece of paper on the surface.

I really don’t give a shit. Right then, decorum is the last thing on my mind.

“I can’t possibly go to Texas now. I’d miss the wedding.”

“That’s the idea,” I say. “I’ll have Grayson fly you. You’ll need to leave today so that he can be back in plenty of time. He is invited,” I add, my voice syrupy sweet.

“Darling, I’m your mother. You can’t ask me not to be at your wedding.”

I hesitate for just a moment, just long enough to hear Damien’s voice in my head talking about choices and paths and where they lead. And this choice leads to my wedding day. To a day of celebration. Or to a day with my mother harping in my ear. The woman who has, in so many ways, gone out of her way to steal the joy out of so many moments in my life.

“Nichole, don’t do this. I need—” She cuts herself off, her lips clamping tightly shut.

I take a deep breath, suddenly realizing that I’ve been more of an idiot than I thought. My mother didn’t come here because my impending wedding spurred her to repair our relationship. And she didn’t come because she wanted to apologize for the horrible things she said to Damien.

She came because she spent every dime our family had a long time ago, and she sees a new cash cow in me. I don’t know what it is she needs—a new house, a new car, investment capital. I don’t know, and I don’t care. She’s not getting a dime of my money, and she’s sure as hell not getting Damien’s.

“Goodbye, Mother.”

“Nichole, no. You can’t do this.”

“You know what, Mother? I can.” I head for the door, my heart feeling lighter and my step springier. I glance back at her and smile. “And for that matter, why don’t you go ahead and find your own way home?”

## Chapter Eight

“You’re amazing,” Damien says that night when I tell him what I did. “You once told me that you didn’t have the balls to stand up to your mother.” We’re in the swimming-pool-size bathtub, facing each other, our legs touching.

“I still don’t have balls,” I say with a laugh.

“Sure you do.” He reaches for my hand and tugs me toward him, then very deliberately cups my hand over his package. “These are all yours.”

“Damn straight,” I say, then capture his mouth in a kiss.

His arms go around me and he pulls me close, until I have no choice but to straddle him if I want to sit in any sort of comfortable position.

Not that straddling Damien is a hardship, especially when his erection is rubbing against my folds in a way that is very effectively taking my mind off the day’s drama.

“I’m proud of you,” he says, trapping me in the circle of his arms.

“I’m proud of me, too,” I say. “I took control of the situation. I decided what I wanted for this wedding, and I did what had to be done.” I kiss him. “I think I’m going to make a habit of going after the things I want.”

“Haven’t you always?”

I press a finger over his lips. “That’s not the point.”

“What is?” he asks.

“This,” I say, reaching between us to cup my hand around his erection. Slowly, I stroke the length of him. “Taking control can be very rewarding,” I say.

“Oh, yes.” His voice sounds raw.

“Something wrong, Mr. Stark?” I ask innocently. “You seem distracted.”

“On the contrary,” he says. “I’m very focused. Very aware.”



“Are you?” I increase the pressure on his cock, then tease the tip with my thumb.

He sucks in air, and I see the shudder cut through him and the heat in his eyes.

He looks at me, and I smile, slow and easy and with all sorts of promise.

“Kiss me,” he says. “Ride me.”

Now it’s my turn to shudder in anticipation. I rise up, capturing his mouth in a kiss that is hot and deep and demanding. His tongue wars with mine, thrusting and teasing. I lower myself onto his cock and ride him, lifting myself up and down in a frantic rhythm that sends water sloshing around the tub.

Over and over, deeper and deeper, until I have no choice but to break the kiss, because I have to arch back simply from the weight of the pleasure that is shooting through me.

When I do, his mouth closes over my breast, and his teeth nip at me, the pain sending hot wires of pleasure down through my body to my cunt, to that deep place inside me that he’s touching, thrusting against with every stroke, building a delicious pressure that grows and grows until finally we explode together, sending water flying out of the tub and me collapsing back against Damien’s chest in utter satisfaction and release.

We stay that way until we fear that we will shrivel in the tub, then Damien lifts me out, dries me off, and carries me to the bed, tucking me gently under the cool sheets.

“You haven’t told me what you’re doing about your dress,” Damien says moments later as we twine together in the bed, half drifting off to sleep.

“I went back inside after Mother left,” I tell him. “It’s not perfect, but they had a dress that was my size in the back.”

“Do you like it?”

I shrug. The truth is that it’s a lovely dress that any bride would be thrilled with. But it’s not *my* dress, and what girl is happy with sloppy seconds?

“I’m sorry, baby,” he says, kissing my bare shoulder.

“It’s okay, really. I promise you’ll think I’m stunning.”

“I always do.”

I smile, and I’m still smiling as I start to drift off. I’m just about to slide into the sweet oblivion of sleep when I remember one other thing. “You still awake? I have a brilliant idea.”

“I’m always awake for brilliance,” he says.

“I got the idea from those tweets of us from Raven.”

“Us?”

“Us girls,” I clarify.

“Uh-huh. If this is about inviting the Raven men to the wedding, I’m going to exercise my veto power.”

“Very funny. No, I was thinking about our photographer problem. I know I told you I wanted to make sure we had wedding portraits, but we can sit for a portrait anytime. Besides, I want to remember the day, not a pose. And I was thinking that we could do the same thing all those folks did in tweets.”

“Which is?”

“Candid shots. We give each guest a camera as a wedding souvenir. And then we have them drop the memory cards in a bowl before they leave. We’ll get a ton of fabulous pictures of our friends, us, dancing, eating. They won’t be professional, but they’ll be fun. And they’ll be *us*. And not the kind of tacky pictures that the paparazzi will snap from the beach. What do you think?”

“I think you’re brilliant,” he says. “Brilliant and beautiful. And I cannot wait to be your husband.”

I smile in contentment and love. “Me, either,” I say, and then, finally, I close my eyes, snuggle closer to Damien, and let sleep tug me under.

Damien is already gone when I wake up on Friday. He’s left word with Grayson that he has some business to attend to before we leave on our honeymoon and that he will either be at the office or looking at various properties with Mr. Black.

I put a waffle in the toaster—which pretty much sums up my culinary skills—and eat it without syrup on the patio while I make some morning phone calls. The first one is to Sylvia, and I explain my plan about the cameras. She thinks it’s brilliant, and swears that she has plenty of time to handle it.

“I’ll make sure they’re delivered by morning. Seriously, Nikki, don’t worry about it. Rest a little today. You deserve it. And you’ll need it for your honeymoon.”

I roll my eyes, but since she’s right, I don’t argue. Instead, I actually do the delegation thing and email her the names of three bands I auditioned, liked,

but rejected. It's not a perfect solution, but it is a low-stress one. She promises to call them, see who's still available, and to pick the best one.

I thank her and sign off, then try to decide on the appropriate form of pre-wedding relaxation. I actually managed to finish Damien's scrapbook last night, so that's out. And while my own work has been stacking up, somehow the idea of getting onto the computer and programming just doesn't appeal.

About the only thing that does, actually, is a walk along the beach. And since I don't want to go alone, I head downstairs to the first-floor guest suite, knock, and then head into Jamie's darkened room.

Normally, I'd let her sleep. But since this is my last day as a single best friend, I figure an exception is in order. I pull the covers back and give her a little shake.

"Mmm, Ryan . . ."

I lift my brows, because that's a very interesting development, but Jamie doesn't indulge me by talking in her sleep again. Instead, she bolts upright, springing awake.

"Holy fuck, Nikki," she screeches. "What the hell are you doing?"

I shrug. "Wanna take a walk on the beach?"

Fortunately, Jamie is easygoing. She shoots me a couple of dirty looks for good measure, throws in a curse, but gets dressed. We're down at the beach within fifteen minutes.

"So, do you have anything to tell me?" I ask.

She stares at me like I'm a loon. "The moon isn't made of green cheese. Masturbation doesn't make you go blind. Jethro Tull is a band, not a guy. How do those work for you?"

"Not bad," I say. "I was thinking more along the lines of Ryan."

She slows her step. "What about him?"

"Ever since Damien had him take you home that time, you've had this thing."

I expect her to deny it. Instead, she shrugs. "So?"

"So there really is a thing?"

"Not as far as he's concerned," she says, her tone frustrated. "As far as I can tell, I'm invisible to him."

I hook my arm through hers. "I can't imagine you being invisible to anyone."

"I know, right? I mean, what's up with that?"

I laugh. “So what are you going to do?”

“About Ryan?”

“About you.”

She slows her pace. “I don’t know. I didn’t get that commercial that Caleb is directing, but it felt nice doing the audition thing again. But I don’t want to get back on the same hamster wheel, you know? And I’m—” She glances at me, then clams up.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“James . . .”

“Fine. Whatever. It’s just that everything changes with you getting married.”

“I’m still your best friend.” I stop walking, and tug her to a stop, too.

“Well, duh,” she says, in a way that sends a shock of relief running through me. “I just mean that I don’t think I’d do that great living by myself. In case you hadn’t noticed, I have a tendency to run a little wild. And you’re off the roommate market. I thought about living with Ollie, but that might be weird.”

“Ya think?”

She waves a hand. “Nah, that’s over,” she says, referring to their romps between the sheets. “But it still might be weird. Where is he, anyway? He’s coming to the wedding, right?”

“He’s supposed to be at the dinner tonight.” Since we’re not doing a big wedding, we’re not having an official rehearsal dinner. But we are getting a whole slew of our friends together. “He’s been in New York. Depositions, I think he said.”

“And Damien’s cool with him coming tonight?”

“Like you said, it might be weird, but on the whole it’s okay. They aren’t ever going to call each other up to go have a beer at the corner pub, but I think we can manage the occasional dinner and social event.”

“Good.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “Change sucks.”

I think about the changes in my life since Damien entered it, and the ones that are coming. A wedding. Hopefully a family. I smile, then start walking again, tugging Jamie along beside me. “No,” I say firmly. “You’ll see. Change doesn’t have to suck at all.”

Le Caquelon in Santa Monica is closed tonight for our private party. Alaine, Damien's childhood friend and best man, owns the fondue-style restaurant, and has graciously offered it for this evening's party.

I love the place, with its funky decor and wild colors. The last time I was here, Damien and I shared a very private booth. Tonight, everyone is gathered in the main restaurant. We are laughing, talking, and toasting. And, of course, indulging in the various fondue pots that Alaine has scattered throughout.

He has turned off the restaurant's normal New Age music in favor of piping Rat Pack tunes from the speakers. Apparently he is aware that Damien and I share a love of Sinatra, Dean Martin, and the rest.

I smile at Damien, who is talking to Ollie and Evan across the room. He leaves them, then strides to me and pulls me close, easing me around the makeshift dance floor before dipping me, much to the amusement of the other guests. "I am a genius," he says.

"So I've been told."

"I also own a stereo," he adds.

"This is also a fact that I'm aware of. I assume there's some sort of connection coming."

He points to the speakers. "We don't need a band tomorrow. We just need a DJ."

I gape at him. "You are a genius. Except I already told Sylvia to hire a band."

"She didn't have the heart to tell you, but they've all been booked." He leans closer, nips my earlobe, then whispers, "I think you may be exhibiting signs of stress. My assistant was trying to protect you. I can't say I blame her."

I laugh and push him away, then immediately pull him back into my arms. "You're in a good mood."

"Of course I am. Haven't you heard? I'm getting married tomorrow."

"Lucky man," I say.

"Very," he replies, and the intensity of his gaze acts like an underscore to the word.

"I have something for you," I say, tugging him to the far side of the restaurant where all the women have piled our purses. I had brought a huge tote, and now I pull out the present wrapped in silver paper.

He takes it, his expression so much like a boy on Christmas morning that I laugh with delight. “Go ahead,” I urge.

He peels off the paper, studies the book, then slowly opens it. I know the first image he sees—a snapshot of the two of us in Texas six years ago. It was an offhand shot by a local news reporter and it never even made the paper. I lucked into it after a call to the paper’s morgue. “Nikki,” he says, and there is awe in his voice. He flips through the pages, and the love I see in his eyes makes my knees go weak.

I watch as he examines every page, every memory. When he is finished, he closes the book with reverence, sets it gently on the table, and then pulls me close. “Thank you,” he says, those two words holding a lifetime of emotion.

He kisses me gently, then leads me back to the crowd. “I have a gift for you, as well,” he says, then looks at his watch. “I need about fifteen more minutes.”

My brow furrows as I wonder what he could be up to, but I nod. “That gives me plenty of time to make the circuit and eat more chocolate. Come with?”

“Of course,” he says, then follows me to the chocolate fondue station. Alaine is there, and we chat for a while. Then Alaine and Damien go off to talk with Blaine and Evelyn. Since I have something to ask Evelyn, I almost follow them, but Ollie approaches, and I pause to give him a hug.

“Hey, deposition guy. How goes the wild and woolly world of civil litigation?”

“Wild and woolly,” he replies with a grin. “And over. At least for a few weeks.” He waves to Charles Maynard, his boss, then leads me into a corner. “Charles asked if I wanted a transfer back to New York.”

“Really? Why?”

“Courtney, I think. I asked for the transfer to LA originally to be closer to her. Now that we’re not a couple . . .” He trails off.

“Are you going to take him up on the offer?” Ollie and I haven’t been as close lately, but I know that I will miss him if he moves.

“Thinking about it. But I’m on the fence. I love Manhattan, but LA has its perks, too.” He looks at me as if there is something else he wants to say.

“What?”

He hesitates, then barrels forward. “Do you think there’s any chance of repairing the damage with Courtney?”

I feel my shoulders sag. “You fucked up, Ollie. Big time. We all love you. Hell, she loves you. But I don’t know if that’s enough.”

“No,” he says. “I don’t, either.”

I squeeze his hand. “I’m here if you need me.”

“I know,” he says, then hugs me. “I’m glad.”

I return the hug tightly, thinking that this is another nice thing about weddings—it lets you clear out the last of the ghosts lingering in your past.

I make the circuit, chatting with Ryan and Edward, with Steve and Anderson. Charles and Blaine come up and I try to get some sense of where Charles stands on Ollie’s move, but he’s saying nothing.

Sylvia and Ms. Peters and others on Damien’s staff are here as well. And, of course, there’s Evelyn.

“I’ve been trying to corner you all night,” I say to her.

“Funny, I was just thinking that you were the popular one.” She steps back and examines me in that sentimental way folks have of looking at brides before the wedding. “You’re good for him, Texas. Hell, you’re good for each other.”

“Yes, we are,” I say. “Did Damien tell you about my mother?”

“I heard some of it from him,” she admits. “I think I heard the rest from Jamie.”

I grin. That doesn’t really surprise me.

“I sent her packing,” I say. “And I never asked her to walk me down the aisle, even though she’s the only parent I’ve got.”

“Parent?” she repeats. “You know better than that, Texas. Family’s what you make of it, and that woman may have given birth to you, but she’s not your family, not really.”

I look around this room filled with friends, and have to nod. “I know,” I say. “But you’re family, and I love you.” I take a deep breath. “Would you walk me down the aisle?”

I think I see tears in her eyes, but I don’t say anything. I just give her a moment to gather herself, even while I’m holding close to my heart the knowledge that my request moved her. “Hell yes, Texas,” she finally says. “You better believe I will.”

Moments later, Damien calls me over to where he stands chatting with Evan. He pulls a flat silver box out of his pocket, and hands it to me.

“I can open it?”

“Of course.”

I rip the paper off. I lift the top off to reveal a beautiful necklace with a silver chain and sunshine-yellow gemstones. “Damien, it’s lovely.” I glance down at the emerald ankle bracelet I always wear, feeling spoiled.

“I remembered the flowers on your wedding gown. I thought this would match them.”

My heart twists at his thoughtfulness. “But that was the first dress,” I explain.

“I know,” he says, as Evan reaches over and grabs a large box off the floor. He sets it on the table, and I look between the two men with curiosity. “Go ahead,” Damien urges. “Open it. I think you’ll find the necklace appropriate, after all.”

Wary, I pull off the lid, and find myself gazing down at my beautiful, missing wedding dress.

“How—?”

“I have a few friends who have a unique ability to track down internationally shipped items that have gone missing,” Evan says.

“Oh.” I glance at Damien, wondering if that means what I think it does. But his face reveals nothing. To be honest, I really don’t care how or where he found my dress. I’m just glad it’s arrived.

“Alyssa’s coming to the house in the morning. She’ll take care of any alterations on-site,” Damien adds, and I lean over and kiss him impulsively, this man who takes such exceptionally good care of me.

“Thank you,” I say to Damien, then turn to include Evan. “Thank you both. You saved me.”

A sense of relief sweeps over me, and for the first time since I started this wedding planning thing, I feel truly stress-free. It feels nice.

I reach out and hold tight to Damien’s hand. *This, I think, is the only thing that’s important.*

The party continues until well into the night, and it’s almost two by the time we get home. I’m about to strip and fall into bed when I realize that I’ve missed a call. I put the phone on speaker and listen as the message plays.

“Hi, Nikki, this is Lauren with the flowers for tomorrow. I just wanted to let you know that we’re all set. It was last minute, but we were happy to make the change.”

I frown and glance at Damien, who looks as confused as I feel.



“So we’ll be there in the morning to set up, this time with the lilies and gardenias. And we’re sending a selection over to Sally, too, for the cake. Thanks again, and we can’t wait to see you tomorrow. Congratulations again to you and Damien.”

The call ends, and I stare at the phone like it is a serpent.

What the fuck?

*What the bloody fuck?*

“She switched them,” I say. “My mother actually fucked with my wedding.” I meet Damien’s gaze. I know mine is angry. His is murderous. Not because of the flowers—I sincerely doubt he cares about sunflowers versus gardenias—but because of what that woman has done to me over and over and over.

“It’s like she’s reaching out from Texas and twisting the knife. Like there is no pleasure in her life unless she’s screwing with me.”

I stalk around the bedroom, trying to get my head together. I feel cold and angry and out of control. Whatever pleasure I’d felt when Damien and Evan presented me with my wedding dress has been swept away. It’s as if this wedding will never truly be my own. And now I either have to endure a wedding with my mother’s stamp upon it, or I have to spend my wedding day sorting out this mess.

“Dammit,” I howl.

“It will be okay,” Damien says, pulling me into his arms.

“I know it’ll be okay. It’s not like we’re talking about curing cancer. But that’s not the point. She just went and turned the whole thing around on me.”

“And at the end of the day, we’ll still be married,” he says reasonably.

I am in too bitchy a mood to listen to reason, but it’s still there. Inescapable and true and hanging in the air between us.

I stalk around the room a bit more, while Damien eyes me with trepidation, as if I’m a bomb about to go off.

Smart man.

Finally, the bubbling anger cools, leaving calm calculation.

I feel the prickle of an idea, and slowly it grows. After a few more laps around the room, I stop in front of Damien.

“I can fix this,” I say.

“What do you mean?”

“I can howl and complain that she fucked up my wedding. Or I can turn it

around on its ear, flip my mother the bird, and say that she didn't fuck up my wedding, she did me a favor."

"Did she?"

My smile is slow. "Yes. And I'll tell you why." I grab the collar of Damien's shirt, pull him toward me, once again feeling light and free. I kiss him hard. "I can tell you," I repeat, and then flash a smile full of wicked intentions, "but you're going to have to make me."

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## Chapter Nine

I stand on the third-floor balcony looking out at the calm Pacific. It is a beautiful evening, perfect for an outdoor wedding.

It is almost sunset. Just about time for the ceremony to begin.

Damien is beside me, his arm around my waist. The expanse of his property, lush green fading to pale sand, spreads out before us.

Usually, the beach is empty this time of day. Right now, however, it is dotted with white tents and glowing lanterns. Guests mingle, indistinguishable from this distance, and I hear the soft strains of Frank Sinatra drifting up to us. Beyond the line of tents, the paparazzi are camped out, ready to pounce.

I can't help but smile at the thought that we're pulling something over on those vultures.

Beyond them, the Pacific glows a warm purple tinged with orange from the swiftly setting sun.

*Soon, I think. Soon I will be Mrs. Damien Stark.*

"You're sure this is what you want?" Damien asks as the air fills with the thrum of his helicopter. It swoops down in front of us to settle gently on the helipad.

I take one more look at the panorama spread out before me. "I'm sure," I say, raising my voice to be heard over the rotors.

Below us, Gregory and Tony are loading suitcases into the bird.

I rise up on my toes and kiss Damien, hard and fast and deep. I pull away, breathless, and smile at the irony—it took a shove from my mother to drive home something I should have realized all along.

I press my palm to Damien's chest, wanting to feel the beat of his heart beneath my hand. "It's not the walk down the aisle that matters—it's the man waiting for me when I get there. You said it yourself, it's the only wedding

I'll ever have, and this is the way I want it." No stress, no drama, no paparazzi. No polite chitchat, no worries about music or food or flowers or unexpected relatives showing up out of the blue. Just Damien and those two little words—*I do*.

"And all the work you've put into the reception?" he asks, even though we talked about this last night—about how I'd been working so hard for perfection that I lost sight of what Damien already knew—that so long as we end up as man and wife, "perfect" is a given.

Still, I indulge him by answering again. I understand he needs to be certain that I am sure I want to do this.

"The party's important, too," I say. "And they'll have a great one." I nod toward the beach. "Trust me. Jamie has it under control. If anyone knows how to make sure a crowd has a good time at a party, it's my best friend." I smile more broadly. "I asked Ryan to help her. They'll party through the night, and anyone who has a mind to can watch us get married in the morning. And Evelyn promised to spin the crap out of it for the press."

Damien's smile is as wide as my own. "I love you, Ms. Fairchild," he says.

"You won't be able to say that much longer. Soon it'll be Mrs. Stark."

He takes my hand and tugs me toward the stairs. "Then let's go," he says. "The sooner, the better."

We hurry hand in hand down the stairs, then sprint for the helicopter, heads down, laughing. Damien helps me aboard, and once we're strapped in, he signals the pilot and the bird takes off.

So, with the guests waving goodbye from the beach and the paparazzi snapping wildly, we elope into the sunset, leaving our wedding guests to eat our food, drink our champagne, and dance into the night.

Damien and I stand on a beach beside a foaming sea that is shifting away from the gray of night into a cacophony of colors with the rising sun. That was something else I'd realized: I couldn't get married at sunset. I had to have a sunrise wedding.

I am wearing my wedding dress and the necklace that Damien gave me, and when I saw the look in Damien's eyes as I walked the short distance down the aisle to him, I knew that whatever trouble it took to rescue the dress was worth it. I feel like a princess. Hell, I feel like a bride. And in Damien's eyes, I feel beautiful.

I am not wearing shoes, and I curl my toes into the sand, feeling wild and decadent and free. There is no stress, there are no worries. There is simply this wedding and the man beside me, and that is all that I need.

In front of us, a Mexican official is performing the ceremony in broken, heavily accented English. I am pretty sure I have never heard anything more beautiful.

“Do you take this man?” he asks, and I say the words that have been in my heart from the moment I first met Damien. “I do.”

“I do,” says Damien in turn. He is facing me as he speaks, and I can see the depth of emotion in his dual-colored eyes. *Mine*, he mouths, and I nod. It is true. I am his, and always will be.

And Damien Stark is mine.

A few feet away, a small boy who has been paid some pesos is holding Damien’s phone, streaming video of our wedding back to Malibu, where Jamie is projecting the ceremony onto one of the tent walls, just in case any of the guests are still sober and awake after a long night of partying.

Here on our beach, the official pronounces us man and wife. The words crash over me, heavy with meaning, filling my soul. “That day,” I whisper, my heart full to bursting. “That day when you asked me to pose for you—I never expected it to end like this.”

“But it hasn’t ended, Mrs. Stark. This is just the beginning.” His voice sounds full to bursting, and his words are absolutely perfect.

I nod, because he is right, and because I am so overwhelmed by the moment I can manage nothing else.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” he says, then captures my mouth with his. The kiss is long and deep, and all around us the locals clap and cheer.

I cling to Damien, never wanting to let go, as the sun continues to rise around us, casting us in the glow of morning.

*Perfect, I think. Because the sun will never set between Damien and me. Not today, not ever.*

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# Chapter One

*I know exactly when my life shifted. That precise instant when his eyes met mine and I no longer saw the bland look of familiarity, but danger and fire, lust and hunger.*

*Perhaps I should have turned away. Perhaps I should have run.*

*I didn't. I wanted him. More, I needed him. The man, and the fire that he ignited inside of me.*

*And in his eyes, I saw that he needed me, too.*

*That was the moment everything changed. Me most of all.*

*But whether it changed for good or for ill . . . well, that remains to be seen.*

Even dead, my uncle Jahn knew how to throw one hell of a party.

His Chicago lakeside penthouse was bursting at the seams with an eclectic collection of mourners, most of whom had imbibed so much wine from the famous Howard Jahn cellar that whatever melancholy they'd brought with them had been sweetly erased, and now this wake or reception or whatever the hell you wanted to call it wasn't the least bit somber. Politicians mingled with financiers mingled with artists and academics, and everyone was smiling and laughing and toasting the deceased.

At his request, there'd been no formal funeral. Just this gathering of friends and family, food and drink, music and mirth. Jahn—he hated the name Howard—had lived a vibrant life, and that was never more obvious than now in his death.

I missed him so damn much, but I hadn't cried. Hadn't screamed and ranted. Hadn't done anything, really, except move through the days and nights lost in a haze of emotions, my mind numb. My body anesthetized.

I sighed and fingered the charm on my silver bracelet. He'd presented me with the tiny motorcycle just over a month ago, and the gift had made me

smile. I hadn't talked about wanting to ride a motorcycle since before I turned sixteen. And it had been years since I'd ridden behind a boy, my arms tight around his waist and my hair blowing in the wind.

But Uncle Jahn knew me better than anyone. He saw past the princess to the girl hidden inside. A girl who'd built up walls out of necessity, but still desperately wanted to break free. Who longed to slip on a pair of well-worn jeans, grab a battered leather jacket, and go a little wild.

Sometimes, she even did. And sometimes it didn't end right at all.

I tightened my grip on the charm as the memory of Jahn holding my hand—of him promising to keep my secrets—swept over me, finally bringing tears to my eyes. He should be beside me, dammit, and the swell of laughter and conversation that filled the room was making me a little sick.

Despite the fact that I knew Jahn wanted it this way, it was all I could do not to smack all the people who'd hugged me and murmured softly that he was in a better place and wasn't it wonderful that he'd lived such a full life. That was such bullshit—he hadn't even turned sixty yet. Vibrant men in their fifties shouldn't drop dead from aneurysms, and there weren't enough pithy Hallmark quotes in the universe to make me think otherwise.

Antsy, I shifted my weight from foot to foot. There was a bar set up on the other side of the room, and I'd positioned myself as far away as physically possible because right then I wanted the burn of tequila. Wanted to let go, to explode through the numbness that clung to me like a cocoon. To run. To *feel*.

But that wasn't going to happen. No alcohol was passing these lips tonight. I was Jahn's niece, after all, and that made me some kind of hostess-by-default, which meant I was stuck in the penthouse. Four thousand square feet, but I swear I could feel the art-covered walls pressing in around me.

I wanted to race up the spiral staircase to the rooftop patio, then leap over the balcony into the darkening sky. I wanted to take flight over Lake Michigan and the whole world. I wanted to break things and scream and rant and curse this damned universe that had taken away a good man.

*Shit.* I sucked in a breath and looked down at the exquisite ancient-looking notebook inside the glass-and-chrome display case I'd been leaning against. The leather-bound book was an exceptionally well-done copy of a recently discovered Da Vinci notebook. Dubbed the Creature Notebook, it had sixteen pages of animal studies and was open to the center, revealing a stunning



sketch the young master had drawn—his study for the famous, but never located, dragon shield. Jahn had attempted to acquire the notebook, and I remember just how angry he'd been when he'd lost out to Victor Neely, another Chicago businessman, with a private collection that rivaled my uncle's.

At the time, I'd just started at Northwestern with a major in poli sci and a minor in art history. I'm not particularly talented, but I've sketched my whole life, and I've been fascinated with art—and in particular with Leonardo da Vinci—since my parents took me to my first museum at the age of three.

I thought the Creature Notebook was beyond cool, and I'd been irritated on Jahn's behalf when he not only lost out on it, but when the press had poured salt in the wound by prattling on about Neely's amazing new acquisition.

About a year later, Jahn showed me the facsimile, bright and shiny in the custom-made display case. As a general rule, my uncle never owned a copy. If he couldn't have the original—be it a Rembrandt or a Rauschenberg or a Da Vinci—he simply moved on. When I'd asked why he'd made an exception for the Creature Notebook, he shrugged and told me that the images were at least as interesting as the provenance. "Besides, anyone who can successfully copy a Da Vinci has created a masterpiece himself."

Despite the fact that it wasn't authentic, the notebook was my favorite of Jahn's many manuscripts and artifacts, and now, standing with my hands pressed to the glass, I felt as if he was, in some small way, beside me.

I drew in a breath, knowing I had to get my act together, if for no other reason than the more wrecked I looked, the more the guests would try to cheer me up. Not that I looked particularly wrecked. When you grow up as Angelina Hayden Raine, with a United States senator for a father and a mother who served on the board of over a dozen international nonprofit organizations, you learn the difference between a public and a private face very early on. Especially when you have your own secrets to keep.

"This is so goddamn fucked up it makes me want to scream."

I felt a whisper of a smile touch my lips and turned around to find myself looking into Kat's bloodshot eyes.

"Oh, hell, Angie," she said. "He shouldn't be dead."

"He'd be pissed if he knew you'd been crying," I said, blinking away the last of my own tears.

"Fuck that."

I almost laughed. Katrina Laron had a talent for cutting straight through the bullshit.

I'm not sure which one of us leaned in first, but we caught each other in a bone-crushing hug. With a sniffle, I finally pulled away. Perverse, maybe, but just knowing that someone else was acknowledging the utter horror of the situation made me feel infinitesimally better.

"Every time I turn a corner, I feel like I'm going to see him," I said. "I almost wish I'd stayed in my old place."

I'd moved in four months ago when Uncle Jahn's aneurysm was discovered. I'd taken time off from work—easy when you work for your uncle. For two weeks I'd played nurse after he came home from the hospital, and when he'd been given the all-clear by the doctors—yeah, like *that* was a good call—I'd accepted his invitation to move in permanently. Why not? The tiny apartment I'd shared with my lifelong friend, Flynn, wasn't exactly the lap of luxury. And although I loved Flynn, he wasn't the easiest person to cohabitate with. He knew me too well, and it always made me uneasy when people saw what I wanted to keep hidden.

Now, though, I craved both the cocoonlike comfort of my tiny room and Flynn's steady presence. As much as I loved the condo, without my uncle it was cold and hollow, and just being in it made me feel brittle. As if at any moment I would shatter into a million pieces.

Kat's eyes were warm and understanding. "I know. But he loved having you here. God knows why," she added with a quirky grin. "You're nothing but trouble."

I rolled my eyes. At twenty-seven, Katrina Laron was only four years older than me, but that didn't stop her from pulling the older-and-wiser card whenever she got the chance. The fact that we'd become friends under decidedly dodgy circumstances probably played a role, too.

She'd been working at one of the coffee shops in Evanston where I used to mainline caffeine during my first year at Northwestern. We'd chatted a couple of times in an "extra cream, please, it's been a bitch of a day" kind of way, but we were hardly on a first-name basis.

All that changed when we bumped into each other on a day when extra cream wasn't going to cut it for me—not by a long shot. It was in the Michigan Avenue Neiman Marcus and I'd been surfing on adrenaline, using it to soothe the rough edges of a particularly crappy day. Specifically, I'd just

succumbed to my personal demons and surreptitiously dropped a pair of fifteen-dollar clearance earrings into my purse. But, apparently, not as surreptitiously as I'd thought.

"Well, aren't you the stumbling amateur?" she'd whispered as she steered me toward women's shoes. "With a shit technique like that, it's a wonder you haven't been arrested yet."

"Arrested!" I squeaked, as if that word would carry all the way to Washington and to my father's all-hearing ears. The *fear* of getting caught might be part of the excitement, but *actually* getting caught wasn't a good thing at all. "No, I didn't—I mean—"

She cut off my protests with a casual flip of her hand. "All I'm saying is, be smart. If you're going to take a risk, at least make it worth the trouble. Those earrings? Really not the bomb."

"It's not about the earrings," I'd snapped, then immediately cringed. The words had been a knee-jerk response, but they were also true. It *wasn't* about the earrings. It was about my dad, and the grad school lectures and the career-planning talks, and the never-spoken certainty that no matter what I did, my sister would have done it better.

It was about the oppressive, overwhelming weight of my life and my future that was bearing down on me, harder and harder until I was certain that if I didn't do something to break out a little I'd spontaneously combust.

Kat had glanced at my purse as if she could see through the soft Coach leather to the contraband inside. Then she slowly lifted her eyes back to my face. The silence hung between us for a full minute. She nodded. "Don't worry. I get it." She cocked her head toward the exit. "Come on."

Relief flooded through me, and my limbs, which had frozen in both fear and mortification, began to thaw. She steered me to her car, a cherry-red Mustang that she drove at more or less the speed of light. She careened down Michigan Avenue, maneuvered her way onto Lake Shore Drive, and came so close to the other cars as she zipped in and out of traffic that I'm surprised her convertible didn't lose a layer of paint. In other words, it was freaking awesome. The top was down, the wind was whipping my hair into my face and mouth, and all I could do was tilt my head back and laugh.

Kat risked our lives long enough to shoot me one sideways glance. "Yeah," she said. "We're going to get along just fine."

From that moment on, I'd adored Kat. Now, with Jahn's death sending my

universe reeling, I realized that I not only loved her—I relied on her.

“I’m really glad you’re here,” I said.

“Where else would I be?” She scanned the room. “Are your mom and dad around somewhere?”

“They couldn’t make it. They’re stuck overseas.” The familiar numbness settled over me again as I remembered my mother’s hysterical sobs and the deep well of sorrow that had filled my father’s voice when he’d learned about his half-brother. “I hated calling them,” I whispered. “It felt like Gracie all over again.”

“I’m so sorry.” Kat had never met my sister, but she’d heard the story. The public version, anyway, and I knew her sympathy was real.

I managed a wavering smile. “I know. That means a lot to me.”

“The whole thing sucks,” Kat said. “It’s so unfair. Your uncle was too damn cool to die.”

“I guess the universe doesn’t give a shit about coolness.”

“The universe can be a raving bitch sometimes,” Kat said. She exhaled loudly. “Want me to crash here tonight so you won’t be alone? We could stay up late getting so wasted that there’s no way in hell either one of us will dream.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll be okay.”

She eyed me uncertainly. She was one of the few people I’d confided in about my nightmares, and while I appreciated the sympathy, sometimes I wished I’d kept my mouth shut.

“Really,” I said earnestly. “Kevin’s here.”

“Oh, yeah? And how’s that going? Engaged yet?”

“Not quite,” I said wryly. I supposed we were dating since I’d slept with him twice, but so far I’d dodged the let’s-be-exclusive conversation. I wasn’t sure why I was so reticent. The sex wasn’t mind-blowing, but it did the job. And I genuinely liked the guy. But I’d spent the last few months holding him at arm’s length, telling him I needed to keep my attention on Jahn’s surgery, then his recovery.

Obviously, I hadn’t planned on Jahn’s sudden death.

How horrible was it of me to think that now that Jahn was gone, I had no more excuses to hand Kevin?

Beside me, Kat craned her neck and scoped out the crowd. “So where is he?”

“He had to go take a call. Technically, he’s working today.”

“What are you going to do now?” Kat asked.

“About Kevin?” Honestly, I was hoping to avoid doing anything on that front for the foreseeable future.

“About your job,” she countered. “About the roof over your head. About your life. Have you thought about what you’re going to do?”

“Oh.” My shoulders sagged. “No. Not really.” My job in the PR department of Jahn’s company might pay my bills, but it was hardly my life’s ambition, and Kat was one of the few people to whom I’d confessed that deep, dark secret. Right then, however, that wasn’t a conversation I wanted to have. Fortunately, something across the room had caught Kat’s attention, effectively erasing my lack of direction and purpose from her mind.

She stood slightly straighter and the corners of her mouth tilted a bit, almost hinting at a smile. Curious, I turned to look in that direction, but saw nothing but suits and dresses and a sea of black. “What is it? Kevin?” I asked, praying he wasn’t heading in our direction.

“Cole August,” she said. “At least I thought I saw him.”

“Oh.” I licked my lips. My mouth had gone suddenly dry. “Is Evan with him?” I forced my voice to sound casual, but my pulse was racing. If Cole was around, it was always a good bet that Evan was, too.

Then I remembered what day it was and my pulse slowed as disappointment weighed down on me. “Isn’t tonight the ribbon-cutting for the hospital wing Evan funded?”

Kat didn’t even spare me a glance, her eyes still searching the crowd. “Not sure.” She shot me a quick look. “Yeah, it is. You invited me before, you know, all of this happened.”

I blinked back the sudden prick of tears. “Evan’s going to hate missing this. Jahn was like a dad to him.”

Beside me, Kat took a quick step backward, startling me.

“What is it?”

She dragged her gaze away from the crowd, then frowned at me. “I . . . Oh, shit. I have to go make a call. I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Um, okay.” Who the hell did she need to call right now? That wasn’t a question I pondered for long, though, because I’d caught a glimpse of Cole. And right beside him—looking like he owned the world and everything in it—was Evan.

Immediately, my chest tightened and a current of electricity zinged across my skin. Technically, I saw him first, but it was my body's reaction that caught my attention. Only after I felt him did I truly see him.

And what a sight he was.

Whereas Cole might be sex on wheels, Evan Black was the slow burn of sin and seduction—and tonight he was in rare form. He must have come straight from the hospital, because he was still in a tux, and although he was clearly overdressed, he appeared perfectly at ease. Whether in a tux or jeans, where Evan was concerned, it was the man that mattered, not the garment.

He had the kind of chiseled good looks that would have gotten him plucked from obscurity in the Golden Age of Hollywood, and the kind of confidence and bearing that would have made him a box-office draw. A small scar intersected his left brow, giving the angel's face a hint of the devil.

He both came from money and had made his own fortune, and it showed in the way he held himself, the way he looked around a room, managing to take control of it with nothing more than a glance.

His eyes were as gray as a wolf's and his hair was the color of cherrywood, a deep brown that hinted at golds and reds when the light hit it just right. He wore it long in the back so that it brushed his collar, and the natural waves gave it the quality of a mane—which only enhanced the impression that there was a wildness clinging to the man.

Wild or not, I wanted to get close. I wanted to thrust my fingers into his hair and feel the locks on my skin. I imagined his hair was soft, but that's the only part of him that was. Everything else was edged with steel, the hard planes of his face and body hinting at a dangerous core beneath that beauty.

I didn't know whether the danger was real or an illusion. And right then, I didn't care.

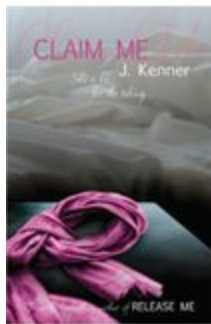
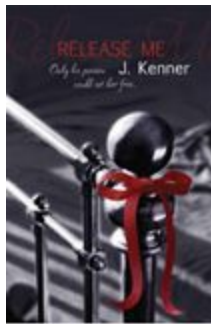
I wanted the touch, the thrill.

That desperate need to fly I'd been feeling all night? So help me, I wanted to fly right into Evan's arms.

I needed the rush. I craved the thrill.

I wanted the man.

And it was just too damn bad that he didn't want me, too.





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