



Release Me (The Stark Series #1)

By J. Kenner

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An emotionally charged romance between a powerful man who's never heard "no" and a fiery woman who says "yes" on her own terms

He was the one man I couldn't avoid. And the one man I couldn't resist.

Damien Stark could have his way with any woman. He was sexy, confident, and commanding: Anything he wanted, he got. And what he wanted was me.

Our attraction was unmistakable, almost beyond control, but as much as I ached to be his, I feared the pressures of his demands. Submitting to Damien meant I had to bare the darkest truth about my past—and risk breaking us apart.

But Damien was haunted, too. And as our passion came to obsess us both, his secrets threatened to destroy him—and us—forever.

***Release Me* is intended for mature audiences.**

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Editorial Review

About the Author

J. Kenner spent more than ten years as a litigator in Southern California and Central Texas, using her rare free time to indulge her passion for writing. California born, she now lives—and writes—in Texas, with her husband and daughters.

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1

A cool ocean breeze caresses my bare shoulders, and I shiver, wishing I'd taken my roommate's advice and brought a shawl with me tonight. I arrived in Los Angeles only four days ago, and I haven't yet adjusted to the concept of summer temperatures changing with the setting of the sun. In Dallas, June is hot, July is hotter, and August is hell.

Not so in California, at least not by the beach. LA Lesson Number One: Always carry a sweater if you'll be out after dark.

Of course, I could leave the balcony and go back inside to the party. Mingle with the millionaires. Chat up the celebrities. Gaze dutifully at the paintings. It is a gala art opening, after all, and my boss brought me here to meet and greet and charm and chat. Not to lust over the panorama that is coming alive in front of me. Bloodred clouds bursting against the pale orange sky. Blue- gray waves shimmering with dappled gold.

I press my hands against the balcony rail and lean forward, drawn to the intense, unreachable beauty of the setting sun. I regret that I didn't bring the battered Nikon I've had since high school. Not that it would have fit in my itty-bitty beaded purse. And a bulky camera bag paired with a little black dress is a big, fat fashion no-no.

But this is my very first Pacific Ocean sunset, and I'm determined to document the moment. I pull out my iPhone and snap a picture.

"Almost makes the paintings inside seem redundant, doesn't it?" I recognize the throaty, feminine voice and turn to face Evelyn Dodge, retired actress turned agent turned patron of the arts—and my hostess for the evening.

"I'm so sorry. I know I must look like a giddy tourist, but we don't have sunsets like that in Dallas."

"Don't apologize," she says. "I pay for that view every month when I write the mortgage check. It damn well better be spectacular."

I laugh, immediately more at ease.

"Hiding out?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're Carl's new assistant, right?" she asks, referring to my boss of three days.

“Nikki Fairchild.”

“I remember now. Nikki from Texas.” She looks me up and down, and I wonder if she’s disappointed that I don’t have big hair and cowboy boots. “So who does he want you to charm?”

“Charm?” I repeat, as if I don’t know exactly what she means.

She cocks a single brow. “Honey, the man would rather walk on burning coals than come to an art show. He’s fishing for investors and you’re the bait.” She makes a rough noise in the back of her throat. “Don’t worry. I won’t press you to tell me who. And I don’t blame you for hiding out. Carl’s brilliant, but he’s a bit of a prick.”

“It’s the brilliant part I signed on for,” I say, and she barks out a laugh.

The truth is that she’s right about me being the bait. “Wear a cocktail dress,” Carl had said. “Something flirty.”

Seriously? I mean, Seriously?

I should have told him to wear his own damn cocktail dress. But I didn’t. Because I want this job. I fought to get this job. Carl’s company, C-Squared Technologies, successfully launched three web-based products in the last eighteen months. That track record had caught the industry’s eye, and Carl had been hailed as a man to watch.

More important from my perspective, that meant he was a man to learn from, and I’d prepared for the job interview with an intensity bordering on obsession. Landing the position had been a huge coup for me. So what if he wanted me to wear something flirty? It was a small price to pay.

Shit.

“I need to get back to being the bait,” I say.

“Oh, hell. Now I’ve gone and made you feel either guilty or self-conscious. Don’t be. Let them get liquored up in there first. You catch more flies with alcohol anyway. Trust me. I know.”

She’s holding a pack of cigarettes, and now she taps one out, then extends the pack to me. I shake my head. I love the smell of tobacco—it reminds me of my grandfather—but actually inhaling the smoke does nothing for me.

“I’m too old and set in my ways to quit,” she says. “But God forbid I smoke in my own damn house. I swear, the mob would burn me in effigy. You’re not going to start lecturing me on the dangers of secondhand smoke, are you?”

“No,” I promise.

“Then how about a light?”

I hold up the itty-bitty purse. “One lipstick, a credit card, my driver’s license, and my phone.”

“No condom?”

“I didn’t think it was that kind of party,” I say dryly.

“I knew I liked you.” She glances around the balcony. “What the hell kind of party am I throwing if I don’t even have one goddamn candle on one goddamn table? Well, fuck it.” She puts the unlit cigarette to her mouth and inhales, her eyes closed and her expression rapturous. I can’t help but like her. She wears hardly any makeup, in stark contrast to all the other women here tonight, myself included, and her dress is more of a caftan, the batik pattern as interesting as the woman herself.

She’s what my mother would call a brassy broad—loud, large, opinionated, and self-confident. My mother would hate her. I think she’s awesome.

She drops the unlit cigarette onto the tile and grinds it with the toe of her shoe. Then she signals to one of the catering staff, a girl dressed all in black and carrying a tray of champagne glasses.

The girl fumbles for a minute with the sliding door that opens onto the balcony, and I imagine those flutes tumbling off, breaking against the hard tile, the scattered shards glittering like a wash of diamonds.

I picture myself bending to snatch up a broken stem. I see the raw edge cutting into the soft flesh at the base of my thumb as I squeeze. I watch myself clutching it tighter, drawing strength from the pain, the way some people might try to extract luck from a rabbit’s foot.

The fantasy blurs with memory, jarring me with its potency. It’s fast and powerful, and a little disturbing because I haven’t needed the pain in a long time, and I don’t understand why I’m thinking about it now, when I feel steady and in control.

I am fine, I think. I am fine, I am fine, I am fine.

“Take one, honey,” Evelyn says easily, holding a flute out to me.

I hesitate, searching her face for signs that my mask has slipped and she’s caught a glimpse of my rawness. But her face is clear and genial.

“No, don’t you argue,” she adds, misinterpreting my hesitation. “I bought a dozen cases and I hate to see good alcohol go to waste. Hell no,” she adds when the girl tries to hand her a flute. “I hate the stuff. Get me a vodka. Straight up. Chilled. Four olives. Hurry up, now. Do you want me to dry up like a leaf and float away?”

The girl shakes her head, looking a bit like a twitchy, frightened rabbit. Possibly one that had sacrificed his foot for someone else’s good luck.

Evelyn’s attention returns to me. “So how do you like LA? What have you seen? Where have you been? Have you bought a map of the stars yet? Dear God, tell me you’re not getting sucked into all that tourist bullshit.”

“Mostly I’ve seen miles of freeway and the inside of my apartment.”

“Well, that’s just sad. Makes me even more glad that Carl dragged your skinny ass all the way out here

tonight.”

I’ve put on fifteen welcome pounds since the years when my mother monitored every tiny thing that went in my mouth, and while I’m perfectly happy with my size-eight ass, I wouldn’t describe it as skinny. I know Evelyn means it as a compliment, though, and so I smile. “I’m glad he brought me, too. The paintings really are amazing.”

“Now don’t do that—don’t you go sliding into the polite-conversation routine. No, no,” she says before I can protest. “I’m sure you mean it. Hell, the paintings are wonderful. But you’re getting the flat-eyed look of a girl on her best behavior, and we can’t have that. Not when I was getting to know the real you.”

“Sorry,” I say. “I swear I’m not fading away on you.”

Because I genuinely like her, I don’t tell her that she’s wrong—she hasn’t met the real Nikki Fairchild. She’s met Social Nikki who, much like Malibu Barbie, comes with a complete set of accessories. In my case, it’s not a bikini and a convertible. Instead, I have the Elizabeth Fairchild Guide for Social Gatherings.

My mother’s big on rules. She claims it’s her Southern upbringing. In my weaker moments, I agree. Mostly, I just think she’s a controlling bitch. Since the first time she took me for tea at the Mansion at Turtle Creek in Dallas at age three, I have had the rules drilled into my head. How to walk, how to talk, how to dress. What to eat, how much to drink, what kinds of jokes to tell.

I have it all down, every trick, every nuance, and I wear my practiced pageant smile like armor against the world. The result being that I don’t think I could truly be myself at a party even if my life depended on it.

This, however, is not something Evelyn needs to know.

“Where exactly are you living?” she asks.

“Studio City. I’m sharing a condo with my best friend from high school.”

“Straight down the 101 for work and then back home again. No wonder you’ve only seen concrete. Didn’t anyone tell you that you should have taken an apartment on the Westside?”

“Too pricey to go it alone,” I admit, and I can tell that my admission surprises her. When I make the effort—like when I’m Social Nikki—I can’t help but look like I come from money. Probably because I do. Come from it, that is. But that doesn’t mean I brought it with me.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

Evelyn nods sagely, as if my age reveals some secret about me. “You’ll be wanting a place of your own soon enough. You call me when you do and we’ll find you someplace with a view. Not as good as this one, of course, but we can manage something better than a freeway on-ramp.”

“It’s not that bad, I promise.”

“Of course it’s not,” she says in a tone that says the exact opposite. “As for views,” she continues, gesturing

toward the now-dark ocean and the sky that's starting to bloom with stars, "you're welcome to come back anytime and share mine."

"I might take you up on that," I admit. "I'd love to bring a decent camera back here and take a shot or two."

Users Review

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