



Stark After Dark: A Stark Ever After Anthology

By J. Kenner

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What happens after she says “yes”? Together in print for the first time, these four novellas—*Take Me, Have Me, Play My Game*, and *Seduce Me*—continue the story of billionaire Damien Stark and his fiancée, Nikki Fairchild, from J. Kenner’s Stark Trilogy, *Release Me*, *Claim Me*, and *Complete Me*, following the happy couple from their steamy engagement into wedded bliss.

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 armor. 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.

***Stark After Dark* is intended for mature audiences.**

Praise for J. Kenner and The Stark Trilogy

“Kenner may very well have cornered the market on sinfully attractive, dominant antiheroes and the women who swoon for them.”—***RT Book Reviews***

“J. Kenner has written a sensually seductive storyline that catches your imagination. . . . [*Release Me*] will suck you in from the very start.”—**The Reading Cafe**

“[A] sexy and exciting ride.”—***Fresh Fiction*, on *Claim Me***

“[An] immensely satisfying series . . . The roller coaster events of *Complete Me* give this novel a page-turning quality.”—*Heroes and Heartbreakers*

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

J. Kenner is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Release Me*, *Claim Me*, *Complete Me*, *Wanted*, *Heated*, *Ignited*, *Say My Name*, *On My Knees*, *Under My Skin*, and the novellas *Take Me*, *Have Me*, *Play My Game*, and *Seduce Me*. She spent more than ten years as a litigator in Southern California and Central Texas, using her rare free time to indulge in her passion of writing. She lives in Texas with her husband and daughters.

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Chapter 1

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.

Chapter 2

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.

Users Review

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