



Say My Name: A Stark Novel (Stark International)

By J. Kenner

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New York Times bestselling author J. Kenner kicks off a smoking hot, emotionally compelling trilogy that returns to the world of her beloved Stark novels: *Release Me*, *Claim Me*, and *Complete Me*. *Say My Name* features Jackson Steele, a strong-willed man who goes after what he wants, and Sylvia Brooks, a disciplined woman who's hard to get—and exactly who Jackson needs.

I never let anyone get too close—but he's the only man who's ever made me feel alive.

Meeting Jackson Steele was a shock to my senses. Confident and commanding, he could take charge of any room . . . or any woman. And Jackson wanted me. The mere sight of him took my breath away, and his touch made me break all my rules.

Our bond was immediate, our passion untamed. I wanted to surrender completely to his kiss, but I couldn't risk his knowing the truth about my past. Yet Jackson carried secrets too, and in our desire we found our escape, pushing our boundaries as far as they could go.

Learning to trust is never easy. In my mind, I knew I should run. But in my heart, I never felt a fire this strong—and it could either save me or scorch me forever.

***Say My Name* is intended for mature audiences.**

Praise for *Say My Name*

“Readers who need more of Kenner’s racy, sizzling Stark novels will delight in this new series, set in the same decadent, lavish world. . . . Kenner has crafted a hero whose compassion is remarkable, and who is strong enough not only to apologize and to change, but to offer her the kind of love she wants and needs, as well. . . . Fans of dark, intense and emotionally scorching romances will surely adore this series opener.”—*RT Book Reviews*

“It’s a heady mix of love and intrigue, and Kenner continues to deliver a

knockout experience that made me long for the next book even as I was more than satisfied with this story's ending. To say more would give too much away, and I encourage everyone who loved the original Stark trilogy to read *Say My Name* to find out what's there for themselves.”—**The Romance Evangelist**

“J. Kenner has given us one hell of a story with this start to the Stark International series. And if anyone can give Damien Stark a run for his money, it's Jackson Steele.”—**Cocktails and Books**

“If you enjoyed the Stark novels, you are going to love *Say My Name*!”—**Reading Keeps Me Sane**

“J. Kenner's best work to date. . . . The pull between these two is off the charts. They have this intense chemistry that pretty much makes their sexy times go through the roof! . . . It was great getting to see Nikki and Damien again. . . . Even though I know them from their series, they seem fresh. . . . J. Kenner knocked it out of the park with this one. Five-off-the-charts-hot-stars!”—**About That Story**

“J. Kenner never fails to provide a gripping and passionate story. *Say My Name* takes you to the edge and then pushes you over. Not that I was expecting anything less, but Jackson Steele is the perfect addition to the Stark series. . . . I cannot wait to see what unfolds next. . . . More Jackson! *More please.*”—**Obsessed with Myshelf**

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Editorial Review

Review

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“J. Kenner has once again given us a serial that is packed with steam, drama, and suspense that will keep us readers guessing and reading on. *Say My Name* is a wonderful beginning of a love story that is as complicated as the main characters. It is a great introduction to two characters who will no doubt capture the hearts of readers with their overpowering love for each other despite what seems like unbeatable odds.”—**Sultry, Steamy Reading**

“Your jaw will drop, your thighs will clench. . . . This book was angst. Pure and complete angst. It took my breath. . . . You have no idea what to expect from page to page and I loved that. J. Kenner does such an amazing job with this book, I couldn’t put it down and honestly, I didn’t want to. It. Was. That. Good.”—**The Boyfriend Bookmark**

About the Author

J. Kenner is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Release Me*, *Claim Me*, *Complete Me*, *Wanted*, *Heated*, *Ignited*, and the novellas *Take Me* and *Have 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.

one

The *thwump-thwump* of the helicopter's rotors fills my head like a whisper, a secret message that I cannot escape. *Not him, not now. Not him, not now.*

But I know damn well that my plea is futile, my words flat. I can't run. I can't hide. I can only continue as I am—hurtling at over a hundred miles per hour on a collision course with a destiny I thought I had escaped five years ago. And with the man I'd left behind.

A man I tell myself I no longer want—but can't deny that I desperately need.

I clutch my fingers tighter around the copy of *Architectural Digest* in my lap. I do not need to look down to see the man on the cover. He is as vivid in my mind today as he was back then. His hair a glossy black, with just the slightest hint of copper when the sun hits it just so. His eyes so blue and deep you could drown in them.

On the magazine, he sits casually on the corner of a desk, his dark gray trousers perfectly creased. His white shirt pressed. His cuff links gleaming. Behind him, the Manhattan skyline rises, framed in a wall of glass. He exudes determination and confidence, but in my mind's eye, I see even more.

I see sensuality and sin. Power and seduction. I see a man with his shirt collar open, his tie hanging loose. A man completely at home in his own skin, who commands a room simply by entering it.

I see the man who wanted me.

I see the man who terrified me.

Jackson Steele.

I remember the way his skin felt as it brushed mine. I even remember his scent, wood and musk and a hint of something smoky.

Most of all, I remember the way his words seduced me. The way he made me feel. And now, here above the Pacific, I can't deny the current of excitement that runs through me, simply from the prospect of seeing him again.

And that, of course, is what scares me.

As if to emphasize that thought, the helicopter banks sharply, sending my stomach lurching. I reach out to steady myself, pressing my hand against the window as I look out at the deep indigo of the Pacific below me and the jagged Los Angeles coastline receding in the distance.

"We're on our approach, Ms. Brooks," the pilot says a short while later, his voice crystal clear through my headphones. "Just a few more minutes."

"Thanks, Clark."

I don't like air travel, and I especially don't like helicopters. Perhaps I have an overactive imagination, but I can't seem to shake the mental image of dozens of absolutely essential screws and wires getting wiggled loose by the persistent motion of these constantly vibrating machines.

I've come to accept that I can't avoid the occasional trip by plane or helicopter. When you work as the executive assistant to one of the world's wealthiest and most powerful men, air travel is just part of the package. But while I've resigned myself to that reality—and even managed to become somewhat Zen about the whole thing—I still get all twisted up during takeoff and landing. There's something horribly unnatural about the way the earth rises up to meet you, even while you are simultaneously careening toward the ground.

Not that I can actually see any ground. As far as I can tell, we're still entirely over water, and I am just about to point out that little fact when a slice of the island appears in my window. *My island.* Just seeing it makes me smile, and I draw in one breath and then another until I actually feel reasonably calm and somewhat put together.

Of course, the island isn't really mine. It belongs to my boss, Damien Stark. Or, more specifically, it belongs to Stark Vacation Properties, which is a division of Stark Real Estate Development, which is an arm of Stark Holdings, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of Stark International, which is one of the most profitable companies in the world, which is owned by one of the most powerful men in the world.

In my mind, though, Santa Cortez island is mine. The island, the project, and all the potential that goes with it.

Santa Cortez is one of the smaller Channel Islands that run up the coast of California. Located a little behind Catalina, it was used for many years as a naval facility, along with San Clemente Island. Unlike San Clemente, which is still operated by the military and sports an army base, barracks, and various other signs of civilization, Santa Cortez lacks any development at all; it was used for hand-to-hand combat and weapons training. At least, that's what I was told. The navy is not known for being forthright about its activities.

Several months ago, I'd noticed a small article in the *Los Angeles Times* discussing the military's presence in California. The article mentioned both islands, but noted that the military was ceasing operations on Santa Cortez. There wasn't any other information, but I'd taken the article to Stark.

"It might be up for sale, and if so, I figured we should act fast," I'd said, handing him the article. I'd just finished briefing him on his schedule for the day, and we were moving briskly down the corridor toward a conference room where no less than twelve banking executives from three different countries waited with Charles Maynard, Stark's attorney, for the commencement of a long-planned tax and investment strategy meeting.

"I know you've been looking for potential sites for a couples' resort in the Bahamas," I continued, "but since we haven't yet found a suitable island, I was thinking that in the meantime, a high-end getaway location for families with easier access to the States might have real potential as a business model."

He'd taken the paper, reading as he walked, and then stopped outside the conference room's glass doors. I'd come to know his face during the five years I'd worked for him, but right then I hadn't even an inkling what he was thinking.

He handed the article back to me, held up one finger in a silent demand for me to wait, and then stepped inside the room, addressing the men as he entered. "Gentlemen, I apologize, but something has come up. Charles, if you could take over the meeting?"

And then he was back in the corridor with me, not bothering to wait for Maynard's reply or the executives' acquiescence, but absolutely confident that things would go smoothly, and just the way he wanted them to.

“Call Nigel Galway at the Pentagon,” he’d said as we moved down the hall back toward his office. “He’s in my personal contacts. Tell him I’m looking to acquire the island. Then get in touch with Aiden. He’s gone to the Century City site to help Trent with some problem that’s come up during construction. Ask if he can get away long enough to meet us for lunch at The Ivy.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to find my balance. “Us?”

Aiden made sense. Aiden Ward was the vice president of Stark Real Estate Development, and was currently overseeing the construction of Stark Plaza, a trio of office buildings off Santa Monica Boulevard in Century City. What I didn’t understand was why Mr. Stark would want me at the lunch, when his usual practice was to simply fill me in after the fact on any post-meeting details that I needed to track or follow up on.

“If you’re spearheading this project, it makes sense for you to be at the initial meeting.”

“Spearheading?” Honestly, my head was spinning.

“If you’re interested in real estate development, especially for commercial projects, you couldn’t ask for a better mentor than Aiden,” he said. “Of course, you’ll be pulling longer hours. I’ll still need you on my desk, but you can delegate as much as makes sense. I think Rachel would like to pick up some more hours, anyway,” he added, referring to his weekend assistant, Rachel Peters.

“Use the business plan that Trent put together for the Bahamas proposal as a model, and work up your own draft and timeline.” He glanced at his watch. “You won’t be able to finish before lunch, but you can take us through some talking points.” He met my eyes, and I saw the humor in his. “Or am I assuming too much? I thought that real estate was one of your particular interests, but if you’re not looking to shift into a managerial role—”

“No!” I practically blurt the word, my shoulders squared and my back straight. “No. I mean, yes. I mean, yes, Mr. Stark, I want to work on this project.” What I really wanted was to not hyperventilate, but I wasn’t entirely sure that was going to be possible.

“Good,” he’d said. We’d reached my desk in the reception area outside his office. “Call Nigel. Make the lunch arrangements. And we’ll go from there.”

Go from there had led in a more or less straight line directly to this moment. I'm officially the project manager for The Resort at Cortez, a Stark Vacation Property. At least I am today.

Hopefully, I'll still be tomorrow. Because that's the question, isn't it? Whether the news that I received two hours ago is going to shatter the Santa Cortez project, or whether I can salvage the project along with my nascent career in real estate.

Too bad I need Jackson Steele if I'm going to pull that off.

My stomach twists unpleasantly and I tell myself not to worry. Jackson will help me. He has to, because right now everything I want is riding on him.

Considering my frayed nerves, I'm especially grateful that our landing is soft. I slide the magazine into my leather tote, then unstrap myself and wait for Clark to open the door. As soon as he does, I breathe in the fresh scent of the ocean and lift my face to the breeze. Immediately, I feel better, as if neither my worries nor my motion sickness are any match for the pure beauty of this place.

And beautiful it is. Beautiful and unspoiled, with native grasses and trees, dunes, and shell-scattered beaches.

Whatever the military had been doing here, it didn't harm the natural habitat. In fact, the only signs of civilization are right where we've landed. This area sports a tarmac sufficient for two helicopters, a boat dock, a small metal building used for equipment storage, and another small building with two chemical toilets. There's also a Bobcat, a generator, and various other bits of machinery that have been carted in so that the process of clearing the land can begin. Not to mention the two security cameras that had been mounted to satisfy both Stark International security and the insurance company.

There is a second copter beside the one that Clark set down, and beyond it is a makeshift path that leads away from this ramshackle work area to the still-wild interior of the island. And, presumably, to Damien, his wife, Nikki, and Wyatt Royce, the photographer Damien hired to take seaside portraits of his wife and also pre-development photos of the island.

While Clark remains with the bird, I follow the path. Almost immediately, I regret not taking the time to change out of my skirt and heels before making this jaunt. The ground is rocky and uneven and my shoes are going to end up scuffed and battered. I'd planned to put on jeans and hiking boots, but I'd been in a hurry, and if I can get this project back on track, then I figure my favorite navy pair of heels are a small price to pay.

The ground slopes up gently, and as I crest a small hill I find myself looking down at a sandy inlet nestled against a cluster of rocks. Waves batter the stones, sending droplets of water up to sparkle in the air like diamonds. On the beach area, I see Damien slide his arm around his wife's waist as she leans her head upon his shoulder while they both look out at the wide expanse of the sea.

Nikki and I have become good friends, so it's not as though I've never seen the two of them together. But there is something so sweetly intimate about the moment that I feel as though I should turn back and give them time alone. But I have no time to squander, and so instead I clear my throat as I continue forward.

I know of course that they won't hear me. The sound of the ocean crashing against the shore was sufficient to drown out the helicopter's approach; it's certainly enough to cover my small noises.

As if to prove my point, Damien presses his lips to Nikki's temple. Something tight twists inside me. I think of the magazine in my tote—and the image of the man on the cover. He'd kissed me the same way, and as I remember the butterfly-soft caress of his lips against my skin, I feel my eyes sting. I tell myself it's the wind and the saltwater spray, but of course that's not true.

It's regret and loss. And, yes, it's fear.

Fear that I'm about to open the door to something I desperately want, but know that I can't handle.

Fear that I screwed up royally so many years ago.

And the cold, bitter certainty that, if I'm not very, very careful, the wall I've built around myself will come tumbling down, and my horrible secrets will spill out for all the world to see.

“Sylvia?”

I jump a little, startled, and realize that I have been standing there, staring blankly toward the sea, my mind far, far away. “Mr. Stark. Sorry. I—”

“Are you all right?” It’s Nikki who speaks, her expression concerned as she hurries toward me. “You look a little shaky.” She’s beside me now, and she takes my arm.

“No, I’m fine,” I lie. “Just a little motion sick from the helicopter. Where’s Wyatt?”

“He set up down the beach,” Stark says. “We thought it was best if he went ahead and got started on the shots for the brochure.”

I wince, because I am over an hour late. The plan had been for me to spend the morning in Los Angeles while Nikki, Damien, and Wyatt came early to the island. I’d arrive later, once they’d had time to complete the private portrait shoot, and I’d spend the rest of the morning working with Wyatt to capture a series of shots that we could use in the resort’s marketing materials.

Damien would pilot his copter back to the city, and then Wyatt, Nikki, and I would return with Clark. Nikki and I recently discovered that we share a love of photography and Wyatt has offered to give us some pointers after the work is finished.

“You didn’t bring your camera,” Nikki says, her forehead creasing into a frown. “Something *is* wrong.”

“No,” I say, then, “okay, yes. Maybe.” I meet Stark’s eyes. “I need to talk to you.”

“I’ll go check on Wyatt,” Nikki says.

“No, stay. I mean if Mr. Stark—if Damien—doesn’t mind.” I’m still uncomfortable calling him by his first name during working hours. But as he has repeatedly pointed out, I’ve spent a good number of hours drinking cocktails by his pool with his wife. After so many Cosmopolitans, formality when we’re alone begins to feel strained.

“Of course I don’t mind,” he says. “What’s happened?”

I take a deep breath, and spill the news I’ve been hanging on to. “Martin Glau pulled out of the project this morning.”

I see the change in Damien's face immediately. The quick flash of shock followed by anger, then immediately replaced with steely determination. Beside him, Nikki isn't nearly so controlled.

"Glau? But he's been nothing but enthusiastic. Why on earth would he want to quit?"

"Not want to," I clarify. "Has. Done. He's gone."

For a moment, Damien just stares at me. "Gone?"

"Apparently he's moved to Tibet."

Damien's eyes widen almost imperceptibly. "Has he?"

"He's sold his property, shut down his firm, and told his attorney to let his clients know that he's decided to spend the rest of his life in prayerful meditation."

"The son of a bitch," Damien says with the kind of contained fury I rarely see in his business dealings, though the press has made much of his temper over the years. "What the hell is he thinking?"

I understand his anger. For that matter, I share it. This is *my* project, and Glau has managed to screw us all. The Resort at Cortez might be a Stark property, but that doesn't mean that it's fully financed by Damien, or by Damien's companies. No, we've worked our tails off over the last three months pulling together a who's who of investors—and every single one of them named two reasons they were committed to the project: Glau's reputation as an architect, and Damien's reputation as a businessman.

He runs his fingers through his hair. "All right then, so we handle this. If his attorney is notifying clients today, the press will get wind of it soon, and everything is going to unravel fast."

I grimace. Just the thought makes my skin feel clammy, because this project is mine. I conceived it, I pitched it, and I've worked my ass off to get it off the ground. It's more than a resort to me; it's a stepping stone to my future.

I have to keep this project alive. And, dammit, I *will* keep it alive. Even if that means approaching the one man I swore I would never see again.

“We need a plan in place,” I say. “A definitive course of action to present to the investors.”

Despite the situation, I see a hint of amusement in Damien’s eyes. “And you have a suggestion already. Good. Let’s hear it.”

I nod and tighten my grip on my tote bag. “The investors were impressed by Glau’s reputation and his portfolio,” I say. “But that’s not something we can replicate in another architect.” As the moving force behind some of the most impressive and innovative buildings in modern history, Glau was a bona fide starchitect—an architect with both the skill and celebrity status to ensure a project’s success.

“So I suggest we present the one man who by all accounts is poised to meet or surpass Glau’s reputation.” I reach into my bag and pull out the magazine, then pass it to Damien.

“Jackson Steele.”

“He has the experience, the style, the reputation. He’s not just a rising star in the field—with Glau out of the picture, I think it’s fair to say that he’s the new crown prince. And that’s not all. Because even more so than Glau, Steele has the kind of celebrity appeal that this project can use. The sort of publicity potential that will not only excite the investors, but will be a huge boon when we market the resort to the public.”

“Is that so?” Stark says, his voice oddly flat. I see him catch Nikki’s eyes, and can’t help but wonder at the quick look that passes between the two of them.

“Read the article,” I urge, determined to prove my point. “Not only is there a rumor that the story surrounding one of his projects is going to be adapted into a feature film, but they’ve already produced a documentary on him and that museum he did last year in Amsterdam.”

“I know,” Damien says. “It’s premiering at the Chinese theater tonight.”

“Yes,” I say eagerly. “Are you going? You could talk to him there.”

Damien’s mouth twists with what I think is irony. “Oddly enough, I wasn’t invited. It’s only on my radar because Wyatt mentioned it. He’s been hired to take the red carpet photos and some candids of the guests.”

“But that’s my point,” I press. “It’s a red carpet event. This guy has celebrity sparkle all the way. We need him on our team. And the article also says that he’s looking to open a satellite office in Los Angeles, which suggests that he’s trying to move more into the West Coast market.”

“Jackson Steele isn’t the only name in the pot,” Damien says.

“No,” I agree. “But right now he’s the only one with a serious spotlight on him. More than that, I’ve already looked into the few others who might appeal to the investors, and none have current availability. Steele does. I didn’t present Steele as a possible architect in the original development plan because he was committed for the next six months to a project in Dubai.” At the time, I’d been grateful that Jackson was unavailable because I didn’t want to be in exactly this position. Now, however, things have changed.

“The Dubai project fell through,” I continue. “Political and financial issues, I guess. It’s all outlined in the article. I did some quick research, and I don’t believe Steele has another green-lit project, but it won’t stay that way for long. Jackson Steele can save the Cortez resort. Please trust me when I tell you that I wouldn’t suggest him if I didn’t absolutely believe that.”

And wasn’t that the god’s honest truth?

“I believe it, too,” Damien says. “And I agree with your assessment of the situation. If we don’t get Jackson Steele on board right away, we’ll lose our investors. The only other way to keep the project alive is if I fully fund the project, either using corporate assets or my personal funds.” He draws in a breath. “Sylvia,” he says gently, “that’s not the way I do business.”

“I know. Of course I know that. That’s why I’m suggesting we approach Jackson. I mean Steele,” I correct, biting back a wince at my unintentional familiarity. “This is a high profile project—exactly the kind of thing that he’s focusing on these days. He’ll sign on. Everything about it is what he’s looking for.”

Once again, Damien and Nikki share a look, and worry snakes through me.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “But is there something I don’t know?”

“Jackson Steele has no interest in working for Stark International,” Nikki says, after a brief hesitation.

“He—what?” It takes a moment for the words to sink in. “How do you know?”

“We met him when we were in the Bahamas,” Nikki explains. “Damien offered to bring him in on the ground floor for the Bahamas project, pulling him in even before Stark International acquired property. Full access to every detail of the project. But he made it very clear that he doesn’t want to work for Damien or any of Damien’s companies. He says that Damien casts a long shadow, and he’s not interested in being caught under it.”

“In other words, we won’t be landing Steele for this project,” Damien says. He glances at his watch, then at Nikki. “I need to get back,” he says, then returns his attention to me. “Call the investors personally. This isn’t the kind of thing I can sit on. I’m truly sorry, Syl,” Damien adds, and it’s the nickname that drives home how real this is. The project is dead. *My* project is dead.

I tell myself I should be relieved not to risk the memories. That I’ve been a fool to think that I have the strength to tempt my nightmares. That I should just let this project go rather than walk right back into everything I once ran from.

No.

No. I’ve worked too hard, and this project means too much. I can’t just let it go. Not like that. Not without a fight.

And, yes, perhaps there is a part of me that wants to see Jackson Steele again. To prove to myself that I can do this. That I can see him, talk to him, work so goddamn intimately with him—and somehow manage to not shatter under the weight of it all.

“Please,” I say to Damien, as I squeeze my hands into fists and tell myself that the staccato beat of my heart and the clamminess of my skin stem from fear of losing the project and not the thought of seeing Jackson again. “Let me talk to him. We need to at least try.”

“There will be other projects, Ms. Brooks.” His voice is gentle, but firm. “This isn’t your last opportunity.”

“I believe you,” I say. “But I’ve never known you to walk away from a floundering deal if there was any chance of saving it.”

“Based on what I know of Mr. Steele, there isn’t a chance.”

“I think there is. Please, let me try. I’m just asking for the weekend,” I rush to add. “Just enough time for me to meet with Mr. Steele and pitch the project to him.”

For a moment, Damien says nothing. Then he nods. “I can’t keep this from the investors,” he finally says. “But it’s already Friday, and we can make that work for us. Call them. Let them know we need to update them about the project, and schedule a conference call for Monday morning.”

I nod, quick and businesslike. But inside, I am jumping with glee.

“That gives you the weekend,” Damien continues. “Monday morning we’ll either announce that we have Jackson Steele on board, or that the project is in trouble.”

“We’ll have him on board,” I say, with a confidence born more of hope than reality.

Damien’s head tilts ever so slightly to the left, as if considering my words. “What makes you think so?”

I lick my lips. “I—I met him. About five years ago in Atlanta. Right before I came to work for you, actually. I don’t know if he’ll agree, but I think he’ll hear me out.” At least, I thought he would before I learned that he’d already turned down a Stark project.

Now, the entire playing field has changed. Before, I'd thought I was bringing him a kick-ass project on a silver platter. Me, doing a favor for Jackson. Me, in control.

Now I know the opposite is true.

He can walk away. He can say no. He can lift his middle finger and tell me to stay the hell out of his life.

I think about the last conversation we had—a conversation that had ripped me apart.

I need you to do something for me, I'd said.

Anything.

No questions, no arguments. It's important.

Whatever you need, baby, I promise. You only have to ask.

He had kept his word then. He'd done as I asked, even though it had just about destroyed us both.

Now there is something else I need.

And I desperately hope that once again I only have to ask.

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