

*Red Carpet Redemption, Yahrah St. John*

# Prologue

“We have to clean up your image, Dane,” his publicist, Whitney Hicks, informed him while they sat in his trailer in Mexico, going over Dane’s public appearances for late July. It was blazing hot and he’d come in to get out of the heat.

“It’s not my fault,” Dane Stewart responded, leaning back on the sofa and propping his legs on the sofa arm. “I had no idea Lia Montgomery was taken”

“Who according to tabloids can’t stay with one woman.”

Dane shrugged his broad shoulders. “Can I help it if a woman can’t manage to hold my attention?”

“You’re going to have to learn,” Jason Underwood replied. Jason had been his manager and agent for years. He was tall, lean and always in a suit. “Negative publicity could damage your image as America’s Sexiest Man Alive.”

“I beg to differ. I think it shows what a hot commodity I am,” Dane said with a smirk. He was thirty years old and in his prime.

“Thanks to your shenanigans, the studio wants you to do some damage control. They don’t want this kind of publicity attached to what essentially is your best acting work. You could get a best actor nomination for your latest film. Think of how this would catapult you into the stratosphere.”

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It had taken Dane years of callbacks and tending bar to be in the position he was in now. He didn't have to act in the big budget action flicks or romantic comedies anymore. Instead, his success in Hollywood had finally allowed him to choose a passion project like the film he'd just wrapped. Dane was proud of the work he'd done and didn't appreciate the press making him out to be some Neanderthal who couldn't keep it in his pants.

"Although I think this is all a load of hogwash," Dane responded, "I agree now isn't the most convenient time for this to blow up. I want my work to define me, not what I do behind closed doors."

"Good. Then you'll agree to the publicity I have scheduled?" Whitney inquired.

Dane trained his eyes on her. "Depends on what it is."

"You'll like this one." Whitney reached for the remote to turn on the television and start a recording.

Dane watched as a local newscaster talked about a young boy, six-year-old Jayden Turner, who was in need of a bone marrow transplant. The camera panned to the cute boy with a mop of curly hair and dark brown eyes. The doctor talked about Jayden's acute lymphocytic leukemia in which the bone marrow makes too many white blood cells. He went on to say the best form of treatment was a bone marrow transplant. Then the camera zoomed in on Jayden's mother, Iris Turner, a tall, slender woman with a beautiful smile.

Iris pleaded with the public to register to have their bone marrow screened. Dane immediately sat upright and listened to her impassioned plea. He admired her quiet strength. There was a tranquility to her he was

drawn to, even though she wasn't a dazzling beauty like many of the models and actresses he usually dated.

"Let me guess. You want me to be screened?" Dane asked over the hum of the television.

Whitney beamed. "Great minds think alike." She walked toward him and he scooted aside, making room for her. "This is exactly the kind of positive press you need."

"I won't make a mockery of what that mother is going through," Dane stated vehemently.

"And we're not asking you to," Jason chimed in. "Just a photo op after the screening. Your involvement will be a huge help raising awareness for Jayden's cause."

Dane inhaled deeply, staring at the screen. The mother was staring back at him and he could see how desperate she was for a chance to save her son's life. "I'll do it."

Whitney grinned. "I'm glad that didn't take too much convincing. Now here are my other ideas."

Dane listened as Whitney rattled off several other appearances, including late night television, a morning talk show and a stop at the local food bank, but all he could see was the haunting eyes of Iris Turner. Dane hoped his presence at the hospital wouldn't disrupt her and Jayden's life.

Iris Turner was praying for a miracle. She didn't know when or in what form it would come, but she knew God wouldn't be so cruel as to take away the precious gift he'd given her six years ago. Her son, Jayden.

"Do you think it will help?" her mother, Carolyn, asked as Iris sat at her parents' kitchen table, wringing her hands. It had been several days since the news story about Jayden had aired, and there was still no bone marrow match.

"I don't know. I hope so." Iris glanced down the hall to where her father and Jayden were playing in the living room. To the outside world, he looked like a normal kid; now all of Los Angeles knew how sick he was.

"It will." Her mother reached across the short distance to squeeze her hand.

Her family had thought Iris had lost her mind when she'd decided to become a single mom. Her mother had discouraged Iris, telling her Mr. Right would come along one day, but Iris had known it wasn't true. She was damaged goods and no man would want to sleep with her—let alone make a baby—if he saw her body in the dark.

Eight years ago, when she was twenty, she'd gotten mixed up with the wrong crowd, dating a musician who liked to drink and have fun. One night, he'd had a little too much fun and wrapped his car around a tree with Iris in it. She'd suffered severe burns to her arms

and thighs. Iris had lost count of the reconstructive surgeries she'd had since then to help with the disfigurement. Her arms had been transformed almost back to their original state, but after many painful procedures, Iris had finally given up and accepted she wouldn't be completely healed.

She'd attempted dating, but once the evenings had become intimate, men had shuddered, making a speedy departure. Some were more direct; one outright told her she was a monster. Iris hadn't dated since.

"Let's not dwell on it." Her mother went over to the stove and removed the kettle she'd turned on earlier. "How about a cup of tea?"

"Sounds great, Mom." Iris offered a smile. Her mother was not only her best friend but an excellent cook and homemaker. She'd always been there when Iris needed a shoulder to cry on or someone to accompany her to the endless medical treatments. Iris had wanted to be just like her, and part of that was having a child of her own to love and being the best mom she could be like her mother.

Six years ago, she'd decided the only way she'd become a mother was through artificial insemination. And it had worked! She'd become pregnant on the first try. Nine months later, she'd given birth to a beautiful baby boy. Recently, she'd learned her precious boy had a rare leukemia that couldn't be treated with chemotherapy alone. The doctor suggested that a bone marrow transplant could be Jayden's best chance.

Iris accepted the cup of tea her mother handed her and took a tentative sip. Chamomile always had a way of making her feel calm, and she was summoning all her inner strength for the fight ahead.

Her cell phone rang and she answered after several rings. "Hello?"

Iris listened intently to the caller on the other end before hanging up the line. "You will not believe it, Mom. It was the hospital. Their phones are being flooded with callers who want to know how they can help Jayden and if there's a GoFundMe page."

"I told you it was going to work out, Iris. You just have to believe."

Iris was beginning to think her mother was right. Maybe there was a miracle waiting around the corner for Jayden.

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"So what's this I hear about you dating another man's girl?" his sister, Fallon, asked Dane over the phone that day.

"Not you too," Dane said, padding into his kitchen in his bare feet. He removed a beer from the fridge, unscrewed the cap and took a generous pull.

"I've never known you to do anything so underhanded."

"Then you have to know I didn't think she was seeing someone. "

Dane loved being single and the freedom it gave him. He'd always done uncomplicated sex but now this disaster with Lia Montgomery had blown up in his face.

"All right, so what now?"

"Damage control," Dane said, drinking his beer. "I'll put in some appearances, be contrite and do some charity stops. Actually, I'm kind of excited about the one tomorrow."

"Oh really? What's it about?"

“There’s this young boy who needs a bone marrow donor and I’m going to have myself tested.”

“Dane! That’s wonderful and very selfless.”

Dane shrugged as he walked to his patio door and slid it open. The balmy ocean air wafted into the room, filling his senses. He loved his Venice Beach house, which he kept in addition to his mansion in the Hollywood Hills. It had cost him a mint, but the view of the Pacific out his back door was worth every penny.

“Yeah, well. I’m being tested. There’s no guarantee.”

“It’s the thought behind it.”

Dane wished he could take credit, but it was Whitney’s doing. “So,” he said, changing the subject, “when are you, Gage and that good-looking nephew of mine coming down for a visit? You haven’t been here in ages.” Fallon had recently married Gage Campbell, a wealthy financier who’d help save the family business and she’d given birth to a son, Dylan.

“I’m sorry, Dane. Getting Stewart Technologies back on its feet took a great deal of time. With Gage’s influx of cash, I’ve been able to get new research in the works to put us back on the map but that’s taken a while. I promise we’ll come soon.”

Dane never understood Fallon’s devotion to their father’s company and her sense of responsibility for its survival considering their parents had run it into the ground with frivolous spending. He’d offered some financial resources over a year ago when it appeared the company was on the brink of failure, but she’d turned down his offer, determined to save the company on her own.

“Good. `Cause I miss you, sis.”

“Back at you.”

From his patio, Dane stared out over the darkened horizon and thought about his family. Ever since he'd been able to read, their father, Henry Stewart, had talked to Dane about taking over the company, but it hadn't been his dream, and when he was old enough he'd run as fast as he could. Fallon had taken up the mantle and Dane was glad because, quite frankly, he'd never lived up to his father's expectations. The rumors of Dane's scandalous behavior had only added fuel to the fire.

But what did he care? Dane didn't need anyone. Or at least that's what he told himself. As long as he had a winning smile and there were beautiful women around, he would never be alone for long.

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The next morning, Dane arrived at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and was immediately engulfed by a large, noisy crowd of fans, mostly women. Some were holding banners with his picture; others screamed how much they loved him and wanted to have his babies. Dane reminded himself this was all part of the price of fame.

After climbing out of the low-slung seat of his Ferrari, several bodyguards surrounded him as photographers flashed cameras and journalists shot questions at him. Dane waved and signed a couple of autographs as he strode into the hospital entrance.

Whitney came toward him. Her bouncing blond hair hung in luxurious curls down her back and she was wearing her customary dark pantsuit. Dane appreciated her professionalism.

"Come with me." She led him down a long corridor to an elevator that within seconds had them disembarking onto the pediatrics floor.

Whitney moved ahead of him, and they soon stopped in front of two glass double doors leading to a room with brightly colored walls. “It’s a play area for children in the hospital. I thought it would be a good place to start, but Ms. Turner isn’t here yet.”

Dane glanced into the room and his heart clenched. There were several young children in the room. Two were in wheelchairs and the other three were at low tables coloring. He vowed at that moment to give a donation to the hospital; it was the least he could do.

He heard the chime of the elevator and the hairs on his neck stood up. Dane knew Jayden Turner and his mom had arrived. He turned around in time to watch Iris Turner walk toward him. She was a lot taller than she appeared on television and every bit as slender in a pencil skirt and ruffled blouse. She was much prettier in person.

There was a youthful glow to her unblemished caramel skin, big brown eyes and dark brown hair, which fell in soft waves past her shoulders. His body tightened, reacting to her beauty, and Dane tamped the feeling down. He didn’t mess around with single moms—that was borrowing trouble he didn’t need. But he couldn’t deny he was drawn to her.

“Dane, I’d like you to meet—” Whitney began, but he interrupted her.

“You must be Iris Turner. Pleasure to meet you.”

“You, as well.” She offered a hesitant smile. “Thank you so much for doing this. To have someone of your stature...” Her voice trailed off as Dane’s focus shifted to her son. “I’m sorry.” She blushed. “This is Jayden. Jayden, say hello to Mr. Stewart. He’s here to see if he can help you.”

“Help me?” The little boy looked up and Dane froze.

With his tight black curls, dark brown eyes and bushy eyebrows, Jayden bore a striking resemblance to Dane when he’d been young. Dane shook it off. He must be projecting because he felt sorry for him. He kneeled down. “I’m here to see if I’m a match to help you get better.”

“Why would you do that?” Jayden asked.

The innocent question caused all the adults in the room to laugh. “Because it’s the right thing to do.” Dane responded.

“Do you mind if we get a few photographs?” Whitney inquired from behind them. Dane had been so engrossed with meeting Iris and her son, he hadn’t noticed that a photographer had entered the room and was snapping away.

Iris glanced at Whitney and then back again at Dane.

“Only if it’s okay with you,” Dane said. He sensed fear in her eyes and he didn’t want to take advantage.

Iris nodded. “Yes, of course.”

“You mind if I pick you up?” Dane asked Jayden.

Jayden immediately held out his arms and Dane eased him into his embrace and stood.

The photographer asked Iris and Dane to move closer together into the frame. “Yes, like that. Smile, please. Heck, if I didn’t know any better I’d say you guys looked like a family.”

Iris quickly glanced up at Dane, but he merely laughed.

Within minutes, the photographs were taken and the nurse led Dane away for the cheek swab test that would register him as a bone marrow donor. Due to Jayden’s aggressive leukemia, they would have the results back

within a week. The entire process was over with quickly, and Dane realized Iris and Jayden hadn't needed to be there. It was merely a photo op to show America Dane wasn't some lothario who couldn't be trusted, but for him it was more. It was a chance to shed light on the issue of bone marrow transplants.

When he was done, Whitney was waiting for him in the corridor. "That's it for today. For the next couple of days, you'll have a full calendar of appearances and events, which will hopefully bring up your approval ratings."

"Am I being rated?" Dane inquired.

"Well, no, but we do informal polls on your image," Whitney replied. "It's my job to ensure you have the right kind of press."

"I appreciate it. Now if you'll excuse me." Dane headed for the playroom. He could still make out Iris's form through the glass doors. He was curious to know her story.

"Where are you going?" Whitney inquired.

Dane didn't answer. "If the PR stunt is over, you can leave. I'll see you on the plane tomorrow." He spun away and went inside the playroom. He found Iris huddled over the blocks with Jayden. As he approached, he noticed a wariness come over her and it made Dane nervous. "Hey."

"Hi."

"The testing didn't take long, so—I was wondering if you wanted to grab a cup of coffee and maybe a cocoa for the little man." Dane looked at Jayden, who was oblivious to them, too caught up with building a large tower with the blocks.

"Just us?"

Dane grinned. “You mean, you don’t want my entire entourage?” He glanced behind him to find the bodyguards were guarding the door. “Yes, just us.”

She nodded. “Okay, sure.”

Dane lent his hand and helped Iris up from the small chair. He was surprised when an electric shock surged through him at merely touching her. He was aghast at having a reaction when Iris was here with her sick child, and quickly stuck his hands in pockets.

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Iris swallowed and tried not to show how hurt she was by Dane recoiling from her. When he’d touched her, she’d felt the zing low in her pelvis, awakening sensations she had almost forgotten. Her heart had fluttered, making her breath catch in her throat, but it was clear Dane was disgusted. Since he had no idea about her injuries, his reaction had to be because he found her lackluster. In comparison to his latest dalliance that she’d read about online, Lia Montgomery, Iris was sure she was. She’d perked up when he’d asked her to coffee, but now she understood it for what it was: pity.

It didn’t stop her from staring at Dane from underneath her lashes. He was startlingly good-looking. With his hair cut short, his face was a marvel up close, all creamy tapioca skin, strong clean jawline, dark brown eyes, bushy ebony brows and tempting mouth. Dane was movie-star handsome and downright sexy without even trying. Take what he was wearing today, for example. The leather jacket, T-shirt and faded jeans were what any joe on the street would wear, but a woman could forget herself completely in his smile and would be thankful she had.

Impossible images flashed in her head of Dane without any clothes on. Each one was more inappropriate and more unlikely than the last. She blinked to clear her thoughts.

They made it to the cafeteria with the two bodyguards flanking them. After the two men had surveyed the place, she, Jayden and Dane were allowed to make their way to a four-seater table.

Iris was surprised when Dane pulled out her chair and scooted it underneath her before sitting across from her. When Jayden began to get fidgety in his chair, she reached inside her purse and fished out her iPhone. She handed it to him and watched with amusement as he found his favorite video game.

“Regular coffee okay?” Dane asked. “Or are you one of these LA women who drinks a soy latte with no foam or something?”

His low, rich voice washed over her like a caress and her body melted. “Nothing fancy for me,” Iris said. “With Jayden’s illness, I’ve gotten quite used to regular ole coffee from the hospital cafeteria.”

“Two regular coffees coming up,” Dane said, rising again to his feet. “And what about you, Jayden?”

“He’ll have milk.”

Jayden glanced up at Dane. “You promised cocoa.”

A broad smile spread across Dane’s sensuous lips. “So you do listen when you want to,” Iris teased, ruffling his curls affectionately. She looked at Dane. “A cocoa it is.”

“One cocoa and two coffees coming up.” Dane sauntered away and Iris couldn’t help but watch him. The man had swagger. Lots of it. And a great behind to boot. She couldn’t believe someone as famous as he had the time to spare for her. Iris was nobody’s fool.

She understood part of today's exercise had been to garner good press for Dane. But if seeing a famous A-list actor like Dane registering to become a donor could help Jayden, she would take a hundred pictures with him.

Dane returned several minutes later carrying two steaming cups of coffee and a cocoa with whipped cream on top for Jayden. "How did you manage that?" Iris wondered aloud.

"I have my ways," Dane said with a smirk, his dark eyes gleaming.

Jayden immediately began drinking his cocoa and got a white mustache. "Go wipe your face, Jayden," Iris said, laughing as she watched him get up to find napkins.

"So tell me, Iris—is it all right if I call you Iris?"

"Yes."

"Where's Jayden's father?"

Iris frowned. "That's a very impertinent question to ask."

"I'm sorry. I wondered where he was in all this and why he wasn't here supporting you both. I'm sorry if I overstepped."

"No, I'm sorry," she apologized. "I suppose I'm overly sensitive. It's just me and Jayden. Though my parents have been wonderfully supportive since he was diagnosed."

"How long ago was it?"

"About three months," Iris replied. "Jayden wasn't gaining any weight and was weak and lethargic, so I took him to the doctor. They ran a battery of tests that were initially inconclusive, but I knew something was wrong."

"A mother's intuition?"

“Something like that. I refused to give up so they kept digging and eventually Jayden was diagnosed with a form of acute lymphocytic leukemia.”

“Had to be hard hearing the news. I mean, he’s so young.”

“Yes, it was very difficult especially when I learned how hard it would be to find a donor. And then here you are.”

“Don’t make a saint of me just yet,” Dane responded. “I’m only registering.”

Jayden returned with the napkin and Iris used it to wipe his face, catching the spots he’d missed. “But you’re doing something and that means so much to me,” she said, meaning every word as she glanced up at Dane. Whether he was a match or not, or had just come to the hospital to boost his image, he was here, and it could mean the difference between life and death for her son.

“What else can I do to help Jayden?” Dane glanced down at her son with genuine concern. “I feel like getting tested seems so small in the grand scheme of things.”

“It isn’t. I wish more people like you would register. I think there’s a stigma attached to bone marrow donations because people have seen it on TV and heard it can be painful. But they’ve made advances and there’s more than one way to donate now.”

“I’ll certainly make sure to talk about registering when I make the rounds on the morning and late night shows.”

Iris’s eyes grew large. “You would do that?” She gulped a large amount of coffee in an effort to steady herself and not think about why Dane Stewart would help her, a nobody.

“Of course. Anything to help this little guy.” He glanced down at Jayden. “He should have his whole life ahead of him and if there’s anything I can do to prolong it, I will. Matter of fact...” He reached inside his leather jacket and produced a business card, handing it to Iris.

Her eyes filled with tears and instinctively she reached for Dane’s hand on the table to squeeze it. “Thank you.”

This time he didn’t pull away. Instead, he let her hold his hand a moment longer than was necessary. Iris’s heart bounced like a ball in her chest as she relived the excitement from his touch earlier. Her tummy fluttered and she could feel her breasts becoming taut as awareness flooded her entire being. She bit down on her lip, but when she glanced up at Dane, raw primal lust was etched across his face.

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Dane took in the glorious brown eyes staring back at him. Sensation galloped in his chest from the shocking contact and enveloped him like wildfire. He’d felt it earlier too and it made him want to touch her shiny dark brown hair. Their gazes clashed and mingled and something unspoken fizzled in the air between them. Something Dane couldn’t define. Was it lust?

He was taken by surprise because there was an answering hunger in her quiet gaze. Dane reminded himself he was repairing his public image, and to even consider messing around with Iris at a time like this would be low. Yet he couldn’t stop himself feeling this pull toward her and the boy. He wanted to be there for her, comfort her, *protect* her.

With his self-discipline vanishing, Dane abruptly rose to his feet. "I have to go."

Iris did the same, and he noticed how she nearly matched him in height. "Of—of course. I'm sorry to have kept you." She blushed alluringly as if she shouldn't have been caught looking at him.

"You didn't, but I have an early morning tomorrow."

"Thank you again for registering."

Dane crouched down to say goodbye to Jayden, who'd already finished his cocoa. "I hope you get better, Jayden. I'm rooting for you."

Jayden glanced up. "Thanks, Mr. Stewart."

The young boy's smile in spite of all he'd been through broke Dane's heart, and he quickly made for the exit without looking back at Iris. He couldn't. Instead, he pulled out his cell phone, made a call and snapped out instructions.

The bodyguards followed him to the lobby and out through the main entrance, where his car had magically appeared, along with Whitney, who was now by his side barely keeping pace with him.

"What was that about?" she asked.

"What?" Dane was disconcerted. He was still thinking about the beautiful woman he'd left upstairs whom he'd given his private number to. It was something he never did, but Dane felt like he could trust her.

"Iris Turner. You asked her to coffee."

Startled, Dane glared at her. "I'm not sure what you're implying, Whitney. I was merely being nice. I would think you'd appreciate the positive press instead of twenty-questioning me." He didn't wait for a response as he hopped in his sports car.

Adrenaline, sleek and sure, pounded through him as he revved the engine. Had the truth been written on his face? Could Whitney sense his interest in Iris? Her hand was so delicate, yet strong. He could *still* feel her touch as if she'd branded him, which was ridiculous. She was going through a lot and for some reason Dane wanted to help her. And if it was in his power to assist, he would.

There was nothing more to it than that.