



# The Lovers

*A Torquere Press Arcana*  
by Sara Bell

## Chapter One

"You can't be serious." Scott's voice rang hollow to his own ears, but this wasn't exactly a Hallmark moment. He was pretty sure they didn't make a card for when your mother was blackmailing you.

"I don't have a choice." Stephanie was pacing the short length of his dressing room, nails digging

into her arms like her skin was crawling. The fluorescent lights set in the dropped ceiling showed the sores on her face in sharp relief. She was forty-seven, but she looked closer to sixty.

"You do have a choice: rehab." Scott sat down on the leather sofa, the only piece of furniture in the room besides a built-in dressing table. Back in the old days, before his mother/manager had run his career into the ground, Scott was an A-list child star -- the youngest ever nominated for an Oscar. He'd had the biggest dressing room -- and salary -- of any actor on any picture he'd worked. Now, at twenty-eight, he was grateful to have this closet-sized room on the set of the daytime soap *A Thousand Wonders*.

Stephanie was trying to take even that away from him.

"We can get you in that same place that dried me out." Scott was no hypocrite. He'd done enough drugs by the time he was eighteen to float a small pharmacy. He and his mom used to party together. His friends -- what few he'd had -- thought his mom was the cool mom, the one who hosted keggers and pot parties. They weren't there to clean up the vomit after one of her benders or to toss a strange man out of the house because Stephanie was too wasted to remember the name of the guy she'd invited to share her bed. His mom's addiction was nothing new, but Scott was clean now. Had been for six years. He'd worked damned hard not only on his sobriety, but on rebuilding the acting career his mother's erratic behavior had nearly destroyed.

He wasn't going to let her screw him over again. Not without a fight.

"Rehab doesn't work for me. You know that." Stephanie pushed a lank, dirty-blond strand of hair out of her glassy eyes. "All I need is enough of the good stuff to keep me going so I can wean myself off naturally. Those rehab docs... they want you to go cold turkey, but who needs that shit? I'm already down to using half what I was. Couple more weeks and I'll be clean." Her bony fingers scrubbed over her face. "I don't see what the big deal is. You're loaded. You can slip me ten Gs without even feeling it."

*Ten thousand dollars. Jesus.* "Is that what you owe your dealer?"

"I'm square with him." She wrinkled her nose, and it was almost possible to see the beauty she'd been before she started using. "But it's getting harder for him to get top grade, and he's raised his prices. Besides," she actually smiled, "he knows I'm trying to get clean. He's helping me by making sure all my shit is pure so I don't need as much of it."

"I bet." Scott stretched his legs out in front of himself and leaned back. "So this guy at *International Exposer*..." The name of the trash tabloid left a foul taste in his mouth. "He contacted you for dirt on me?"

"I called him," Stephanie bragged. "Said I had a story for him if the cash was right, but didn't tell him what that story was."

Scott felt like hurling on the beige carpet, but he'd learned a long time ago not to show weakness with an addict. "Last time you got in a tight spot, it cost me a hundred and fifty thousand to bail

you out." He clenched his jaw. "I told you then I'd never do this again."

"I earned that money." Stephanie's drugged-out eyes flashed, the first animation she'd shown since barging in ten minutes ago, demanding cash. "I've had you acting since you were three years old -- got you parts other kids were gnashing their teeth over. You earned millions on my watch."

Scott couldn't argue with her there, but he thought it damned funny Stephanie only remembered the millions he'd made while she was at the helm. She always forgot the part about her squandering eighty-five percent of his earnings. If it hadn't been for the fifteen percent the State of California required studios to put in trust for child stars, Scott would be broke.

He watched her start pacing again. From the way she was jerking -- little shudders rolling under the surface of her skin -- he figured she was coming down. She kept looking at the door, and he knew from experience what that meant: she had a rock in her front pocket and wanted to get this over with so she could go outside and light up.

She wasn't the only one who wanted this to be finished.

"How'd you find out about me?" His voice was smooth and steady, and Scott was proud of that.

"I'm your mother. I know you." Stephanie shrugged, the collar of her too-big T-shirt slipping off her shoulder. "I suspected even when you were a kid, but once you told me you weren't gonna help me no more, I started doing some digging, found a guy willing to swear you and him used to have a thing going." She pursed her lips. "I got a right to some insurance."

"You'd really do it." The empty place inside him was starting to throb. "You'd really sell me out to the tabloids, knowing a story like this could kill my career."

"No." She shook her head, drab locks flying. "No," she said with more force. "I'm not gonna tell those guys nothing, because I know you're gonna help your mama out."

*Mama.* He'd grown up calling her that. Never "Mom" or "Mommy," but "Mama." He'd spent most of his life in California, but Stephanie was raised in Georgia, and that's what most kids in the South called their mothers. Scott wished he could feel nostalgic about the word but he didn't have it in him.

"And if I don't buy you off, what then?"

"You've got to." Stephanie's green-gray skin went white. "I'm about out of money. You don't help me, I'll die." She lifted her chin. "I'll have to sell the story if you won't front me the money. I don't want to, but you won't be leaving me any choice. I'm not gonna go through the DTs just because my son is too fucking selfish to save his mama's life."

It was the same argument she'd used last time, when she'd begged for the one-fifty to pay the dealer she'd stolen from. That was six months ago, but he'd bailed her out so many other times he

wasn't sure he could remember them all. Money to set her up in a new place because she'd been evicted. Money to replace the car she'd run into a wall. Money for hospital bills after she'd collapsed on a city street, dehydrated and tweaking. Money for the posh rehab facility she'd checked herself out of after two days.

Scott was done.

"I don't keep ten thousand in my personal account." He was a damned good actor, and Stephanie was hanging on his every word. "I'll have to draw it from one of my savings accounts. Could take me a couple of days to get it together." Scott figured a rational person would've seen through that one in a heartbeat but he was counting on Stephanie to be high enough to buy it.

She did.

"I pawned a couple pieces of your grandma's good jewelry," she said as if they were discussing a stock market buy instead of meth money. "I can make it maybe a day, day-and-a-half, tops." She wet her lips. "Any more than that and I'll make the *International Exposer* a real good deal."

"I understand." All Scott needed was twenty-four hours to put his plan into motion. By the time his mother realized what he was going to do, it would be too late. His heart was hurting like hell, but she'd left him no choice.

He stood. "Did you drive here?"

Stephanie shook her head, and there was a lightness about her that hadn't been there when she first came in. "Took a cab. He's still waiting outside."

"Good." Scott pulled three twenties from his pocket and pressed them into his mother's pockmarked hand. "Pay the cabbie and then use the rest of this to get yourself a decent meal." He doubted she would use a dime of it for food but he had to try.

She didn't thank him, just stuffed the cash into her pocket. She made it to the door, then turned back to look at him.

"I do appreciate this, Scotty." She smiled, and for a minute it was like looking at the old Stephanie again. "When your dad ran out on me, everybody said we'd never make it--I'd never be able to support you -- but I did right by you."

The sad thing for Scott -- sadder than the fact that she still thought he owed her something -- was that in Stephanie's addict brain, she really believed she'd been a good mother. He didn't bother to respond, just watched as she left. He gave her enough time to get out of the building before he picked up the phone.

The first call was to Steven Engersol, his agent. Scott barely let Steven eek out a hello before he laid out the situation and his plan to deal with it.

"And I thought my mother had issues." Steven whistled through his teeth. "You sure this is how you want to handle it? We could let Stephanie sell the story, then sue the paper for libel, make them print a retraction."

"It's not libel if it's true," Scott said, "and if my mother makes any money off this story, you know where it'll go." He let out a measured breath. "I'm surprised *The Exposer* wants dirt on me. I'm a D-listed has-been."

"Bullshit. You've hit some snags, but you were on top once and you will be again." Steven softened his tone. "I believe in you, and so does EBC or they wouldn't have hired you."

EBC, the Eclectic Broadcasting Channel, was the cable network that aired *A Thousand Wonders*. EBC wasn't quite up there with the big four networks, but they were getting there. And because they were on cable, they could take more chances, air more risqué, cutting-edge programs.

That didn't mean the network executives wouldn't fire Scott's ass the minute they found out he was gay. His character was a ladies man who'd knocked up both his girlfriend and her mother. That role would be a tough sell once the truth came out.

"You know they might fire me for this."

"And we'll sue their asses for discrimination, too." Steven was used to swimming with sharks, and Scott had no doubt he'd fight down and dirty if he had to. "Zane and Devin may think they're top shit because their little side project has become a heavy hitter, but they haven't even seen heavy if they try to fuck you over."

At the mention of Zane, Scott's heart gave a tumble. Zane and Devin Eastman were the brother team behind EBC. Devin was a lawyer and Zane was an action movie superstar. They'd started EBC right after Direct TV became a consumer hit, and the fledgling network became so successful it was now available through most cable companies. Zane still acted -- still brought in millions with each picture -- but between films he stayed involved with EBC. That was how Scott had met him.

Met him and fallen in love.

"Look, Steve, I've got a couple more things to take care of. You think you can set this up for me?"

"Not a problem. Any idea who you want to handle the interview?"

"Lira Huxley over at *Entertainment Watch*." Scott had done Red Carpet interviews with Lira -- back when he was allowed within ten feet of the Red Carpet -- and he liked her. "If she can squeeze me in this afternoon, the story will run tomorrow and we'll beat Stephanie to the punch." He checked his watch. It was only eleven-thirty, but he was done shooting for the day. "Just call me with the details."

"You got it."

He started to say good-bye but instead said, "Hey, Steven?"

"Yeah?"

"If you need to drop me over this -- if I do get fired -- I understand." It hurt to say it, but Steven had taken a chance on him, and Scott wasn't going to hold him back. Three years ago, when it became apparent Stephanie couldn't even manage herself, much less Scott's career, he'd had to accept the fact that she'd earned him such a bad reputation in the business most agents wouldn't touch him. But Steven had taken him on and done the impossible: found him steady work. Scott wouldn't repay him by becoming an albatross around his neck.

"You won't get rid of me that easy," Steven said with a laugh. "We play this right, your career will skyrocket. This may be the best thing that ever happened to you."

The best thing that ever happened to him was Zane, and Scott had no doubt that would be over with by this afternoon. He couldn't tell Steven that, so he thanked him and hung up. As soon as the "call ended" icon came up on his phone, Scott punched number two on speed dial. Zane answered on the second ring.

"I was just thinking about you." Zane's deep voice was like a tonic.

"I need to see you," Scott said. "It's important."

"Sure. You want to meet me at the apartment?" Zane hesitated. "You sound funny. Everything okay?"

"No, but I think it will be." Scott was a survivor. It would be agonizing, but he'd make it through this one way or another. "See in you about fifteen minutes?"

"See you then."

The apartment was a top floor, West Hollywood loft not far from the studio where *A Thousand Wonders* was shot. Zane owned the building but hadn't started leasing the other lofts yet. Scott tried to think of the place as a secret love nest, but in his more honest moments he saw it for what it was: a place to fuck without the paparazzi finding out. Scott kept an eye on the rearview mirror as he drove down Sunset. He didn't think anyone would be following him -- not yet -- but Zane's reputation was too important to mess with.

Scott's reputation was a joke.

He parked in the narrow lot behind the building -- a converted sewing factory -- let himself inside the lobby with his key, then took the stairs in favor of the elevator. He was hoping the four flight climb would work off some of his nervous energy. As he hit the top floor landing, he had to admit it hadn't worked.

He unlocked the door and stepped inside. He was surprised to find Zane already there, stretched out on the sofa. Zane's dark blond hair was tousled like he'd been catching a quick nap.

"Your car wasn't in the lot."

"I took a cab over. Touchstone is doing a revamped version of Macbeth, and I'm up for the lead." Zane pushed up from the couch. "The press has been sniffing around, trying to figure out why a meathead, muscle-flick star would want such a tough part."

"You're only a meathead, muscle-flick star if you let yourself be." If anybody else told him they were up for such a choice part -- the kind of part Scott used to be offered -- he'd have been jealous, but this was Zane. Scott was proud of him for daring a part so far out of his comfort zone. "Fuck the press. You and I both know you can do it."

"Are you my lover or the head of my fan club?" Zane's killer blue eyes twinkled. "I should hire you to do my PR." He stretched, his long, graceful body, a walking sin in tight jeans and a T-shirt that molded to his chest and showed just a hint of his washboard stomach when he raised his arms. "I thought it would be better if I took a taxi, just in case there was a reporter or two sniffing around." He shrugged. "If anyone saw us together I could just say you were thinking about leasing a loft and since we know each other from EBC I thought I'd show it to you personally, but it's better if I don't have to explain."

Scott got where Zane was coming from, and he knew he was being unfair since he'd been hiding his sexuality, too, but Zane's logic made him feel like an old Hollywood mistress, stashed away for her big-shot lover's pleasure. Not that it mattered.

His time with Zane was now being measured in minutes.

Zane edged past the sofa, his arms opening before he reached Scott. He put a hand on either side of Scott's waist and pulled him close. "You want to tell me what's going on? You look wrecked."

"It can... Shit." Scott leaned his head against Zane's shoulder. "I don't know where to start."

"Uh oh." Zane rubbed circles against Scott's lower back. "Last time I heard that phrase was the night Z.J. totaled my Saab."

Z.J. was Zane Eastman, Junior, Zane's oldest. Zane had five kids with his ex-wife. They ranged in age from sixteen to five: three boys and a set of twin girls. Not that Scott had ever been invited to meet them. Zane had made it clear when they'd started their affair fifteen months ago that he would never come out of the closet, not for anybody or anything. He'd been raised a strict Catholic, and though he no longer practiced the faith, homosexuality was still a dirty little secret as far as Zane was concerned. He had no desire to jeopardize his career or the esteem of his friends and family. Most importantly, he'd said, was his need to spare his kids the indignity of having the whole world know their old man was a queer.

Scott had accepted it, even though a part of him longed to be with Zane for more than a few stolen hours a week. He wanted to go out in public together, to attend premiers hand in hand, or even do something goofy and mundane like grocery shopping. Most of all, he wanted to go to sleep in the same bed as Zane every night and wake up looking into his lover's eyes the next morning.

Now it was a moot point.

"Hey." Zane tipped Scott's chin with one finger so they were looking each other in the eye despite the fact that Zane was a good two inches taller. "Whatever this is, it can't be that bad. Talk to me."

He knew he should spill his guts -- tell Zane all of it and be done -- but Scott also knew what was going to happen once the truth came out. He needed more time, just one more minute in Zane's arms. "Later," he said in a voice that didn't quite sound like his. "I want to be with you right now. We'll deal with the rest of it later." Scott leaned up and kissed Zane.

Zane tasted good, like the cinnamon coffee he drank by the gallon. Scott bit at his lips and tongue in that way that always drove Zane crazy. They cut a kissing, stumbling path to the silk-sheeted bed against the far wall. Clothes were shed, and once they were both naked, Scott took the time to run his hands over every inch of Zane's body, memorizing him for the long nights to come.

"You're perfect."

"Look who's talking." Zane smiled, honest-to-God dimples popping up at the corners of his mouth. He trailed his fingers over Scott's hairless chest. "Every time you do a shirtless scene I end up in the bathroom, jacking off."

"I had no idea you watched *A Thousand Wonders*." Scott licked his right nipple.

"I never... oh shit, that feels good." Zane tangled his fingers in Scott's hair. "I never miss an episode, not when you're on."

Scott was surprised to hear it, but he didn't have time to dwell on what that might mean because Zane's hand found his prick. The hard, even strokes were almost enough to get him off, but a hand job wasn't what he had in mind.

"I want you to fuck me."

Zane groaned. "You sure? We haven't done that in a while." His cheeks were flushed with excitement.

Zane was mostly a bottom, and that was fine with Scott, who was mostly a top. Every now and then they switched, which made for spectacular sex. Today it wasn't about the role reversal or even the bone-jarring orgasms Scott knew they'd both have.



This was about taking Zane into his body -- close as two people can possibly get -- one last time.

"I'm sure." Scott let go of him long enough to grab condoms and lube from the nightstand. He tore open the packet with his teeth, and then rolled the rubber onto Zane's rock hard cock. He slathered Zane with lube, then handed him the bottle.

"Hands and knees?"

Scott shook his head. "On my back. I want to watch you when you come."

"I can do that." Zane gave him a gentle push, easing Scott onto the bed. He nudged Scott's legs wide apart, taking time to stroke his super-sensitive balls before zeroing in on his hole.

Scott's cock twitched in appreciation.

Zane squeezed a good dollop of lube onto his fingers and with little fanfare shoved two of them straight to the hilt in Scott's ass just the way Scott liked it. He might not get fucked often, but when he did he wanted it hard and fast. His eyes rolled back when Zane nailed his gland.

"I'm ready. I want you in me."

"Just what I wanted to hear." Zane pulled his fingers out. His cock glistened in the light filtering through the loft's high windows as he lined himself up and slid inside.

Zane had a long, thick cock. He gave Scott ample time to adjust before he set up a slow, steady rhythm.

"Harder," Scott gasped out. Zane complied, power-fucking him, hitting his prostate on almost every thrust.

"Fuck, I'm coming." Scott didn't want it to be over so soon, but thick ropes of come shot onto Zane's stomach. He arched his back, and the movement set Zane off. He filled the condom, whole body jerking as he came.

The afterglow was short but nice. After Zane pulled out and cleaned them both up, he climbed back onto the bed. The two of them lay together for a few minutes, Zane stroking Scott's hair and planting soft kisses on his neck. All too soon, Zane said, "You ready to talk?" His fingers were gentle against Scott's scalp.

Scott sighed. He couldn't put it off any longer. If Steven arranged the interview for this afternoon like Scott hoped, he'd have to leave soon.

The thought made him ill.

"I think we should get dressed first." Scott climbed off the bed, heart in his throat. "Be easier that

way."

Zane got up and reached for his clothes. "You're starting to scare me."

"Sorry, I just..." He shook his head. "In a minute."

Once they were both dressed, Scott sat down on the edge of the bed. Zane was standing, and Scott could tell he was nervous as hell thanks to Scott's cryptic remarks. He silently cursed himself for mucking this up, then took a deep breath and plunged forward.

"My mom came to see me this morning."

Zane's eyes were sympathetic. "She was wasted."

Scott snorted. "That's one way to put it. She knows about me." When it didn't look like Zane was getting it, Scott clarified. "She knows I'm gay."

Zane's eyes went wide, and Scott could see the pulse beating at the base of his neck. "Oh fuck. Does she know about us? About me?"

It stung that Zane's first thought was about covering his own ass, but Scott pushed the pain aside. Zane had a right to be worried. He had a hell of a lot more to lose than Scott.

Scott shook his head. "She only knows about me because she followed up on a hunch." He rubbed the heel of his hand against one grainy eye. "Told me I had until the day after tomorrow to give her ten thousand dollars or she was going to sell the story to the *International Exposer*."

"Christ." Zane pushed his hair off his forehead with shaking fingers. He was still standing over Scott, but he looked like he was about to fall down. "Doesn't she realize what this could do to your career?"

"Is my career in jeopardy?" Scott made a pathetic attempt at a smile. "I thought maybe I had job security since I'm sleeping with my boss."

Zane didn't seem to think it was funny. "Damn it, Scott--"

"Relax, please. It was a joke. A bad one, but still a joke." He felt like wailing. If he'd harbored any illusions about Zane's feelings, they'd just been shattered. "My mother doesn't care about me or my career. Hell, she doesn't even care about herself. The only thing on her mind is her next fix." He remembered that feeling, the clawing need to get high. He felt sorry for Stephanie, but she'd made her choice. If Scott could get clean, so could she. "She said she needs the money so she can buy enough of the good meth -- God, what an oxymoron -- to wean herself off." Exhaustion was creeping in, weighing him down. "What she really wants is to set herself up for the next few months, party it up with her friends until the money runs out and she comes back for more."

"If you need me to give you the money--"

"I don't need your damned money." Scott cut Zane off, and quickly. Being a secret fuck and a kept boy were two different things. "If I was going to pay her off, I'd pull the money out of my own account."

"What do you mean, 'if you were going to pay her off?'" Zane narrowed his eyes. "You don't exactly have a choice."

"Yeah, I do." Scott swallowed. "If I give Stephanie that money, she's either going to party herself to death or be back looking for more before the ink on the check is dry. And if I let her take the story to the tabloids, she'll have that much more money to kill herself with." A brief memory of Stephanie the way she'd been when he was younger -- fun, easy going, and loving -- hit him hard, but he didn't allow himself to think about it for long. He couldn't help her if she wouldn't let him.

Scott lifted his eyes back up to meet Zane's. "I've thought of a better way to handle this situation."

Zane's look of horror would've been comical if it wasn't so fucking sad. "You don't mean--"

"I've already set it in motion," Scott said through dry lips. "As soon as Steven can arrange it, I'm going on air with Lira Huxley to tell the entire, TV-watching world that I'm gay."

## Chapter Two

Zane felt like the whole world had just rolled off its axis and he was in danger of sliding off the face of the planet. "You can't be serious."

"I said the exact same thing to my mother when she told me she was willing to out me." Scott laughed, a sound completely devoid of his usual charm and humor. "But she was serious and I am, too. I'm not going to be backed into a corner by an addict."

Zane understood Scott's reasoning, but knowing what this could mean for their relationship scared him shitless. "Maybe we could put her in a treatment program or something. I know this place--"

"Stop." Scott's beautiful green eyes -- eyes Zane got lost in every time he looked into them -- were hard. "I've already tried that. Stephanie isn't going to get sober until she makes up her mind to do it. You can't will someone clean."

"So you're going to shoot yourself in the foot just to beat her to the punch?" Zane knew he had no right to be mad, but damn Scott for not thinking this through. "You've been with *A Thousand Wonders* for almost two years. You've worked so hard to rebuild your career. Are you really willing to throw it away over money?"

Scott's porcelain perfect skin flushed to the roots of his black hairline. "You're still making this about money, and it's not." There was an edge of anger in his voice. "This isn't even about Stephanie. This is about me." His shoulders sagged. "I'm tired of hiding. I'll be twenty-nine-years-old in two months. I don't want to go into my thirties living this lie."

"We all lie about something," Zane said with more venom than he meant to. "I'm ten years older than you, and you don't see me airing my dirty laundry on national television."

"Is that what I am to you?" Scott rose from the bed, his movements slow and pained. "A pile of dirty laundry?"

Zane wanted to kick his own ass. He'd rather walk barefoot across broken glass than hurt Scott, and that's exactly what he was doing. "You know that's not true."

"Really?" Scott sounded anything but sure. "Are you willing to continue our affair?"

"Whoa." Zane held up both hands. "No one said anything about us ending things." The thought of not being able to see Scott -- not being able to hold and touch Scott every chance he got -- was obscene. "We can work this out."

"Can we?" Scott's slender, sculpted body was trembling. "Are you really willing to risk the whole world finding out you're gay? Are you going to tell your kids that Daddy's dating another man?"

The mention of his children made Zane's throat feel like it was closing up. When he was able to speak, he said, "You knew going into this I wasn't willing to come out." He was back to being mad. "I never lied to you, never led you to believe I could offer you anything more than I have."

"I know." Scott seemed to deflate. "I thought I could handle it, but now I'm not so sure." He turned his back on Zane. "I love kids, have I ever told you that?"

"No." Zane was thrown by the change in subject. "What does that--"

"You have a family I'll never be a part of, five children I'll never meet and if I do, I'll be introduced as a 'friend from work'." Scott turned back to face him. The pain was still etched over his face, but there was something else there, something like determination. "I want a family, Zane. Maybe I'm trying to replace the lousy family I got saddled with at birth, and maybe I've just decided that being gay doesn't mean I can't have the picket fence and the two-point-five kids."

Scott had never spoken to him like this before -- had never given any indication he wanted more than what they had. It scared him to think he wasn't enough, but it scared him more to think of losing one of the brightest parts of his life.

"Look, you and I... we can work something out." Desperation made him hoarse. "This doesn't have to be an all or nothing deal. We'll hire a lawyer, see if there's some way we can force your mother into treatment -- maybe even get an emergency gag order so she can't--"

"You're not listening to me." Scott walked out of the bedroom area. He was heading for the door, and all Zane knew was he had to stop the man.

"Please don't leave. Not like this." Zane put his hand on Scott's arm. "Don't leave me."

"I love you." Scott turned to face him, eyes sad and shuttered. "I've never said that to anyone else."

Zane's heart did an odd flip. Over the years, he'd heard "I love you" from various lovers, but until now it hadn't meant anything. Not like this, hearing Scott say it. He'd prayed Scott felt that way, but those words on Scott's lips were so precious it nearly brought Zane to his knees. It also gave him hope that the two of them weren't done, not by a long shot.

"If you love me, we can still be together."

"But we aren't together, not really." Scott let out a long, slow breath. "We meet up once or twice a week, fuck ourselves blind, and then we go on to our separate lives." His mouth turned down at one corner. "I see more of you on TV, doing interviews and being photographed by the paparazzi than I do in person." Scott shook his head. "That's a hook-up, not a relationship. Now that I'm coming out, I can have more. I *deserve* more." He touched Zane's cheek. "I want you to be proud of us, not feel like you have to hide me away."

"So that's it? Either come out as your boyfriend or we're through?" Zane didn't consider himself a genius, but he knew an ultimatum when he heard one. "Don't you think that's pretty fucking hypocritical since you had no intention of coming out yourself until your mom forced your hand?"

"Maybe." Scott sounded genuinely sorry. "I'm probably the biggest bastard on the face of the earth right now, but if I don't stand up for myself no one else will." His hand fell away. "Good-bye, Zane. You want me, you know where to find me."

Zane didn't try to stop Scott from leaving this time. Long after Scott was gone, he was still standing there, cursing himself for his own weakness, and for his stupidity.

Scott had said he loved him, and Zane was too big a coward to say it back.

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Lira hugged Scott tight. She was a good twenty years older than he was, but she didn't look a day over thirty-five. Her brown hair was pinned in a stylish up-do and she was wearing a pink linen pantsuit that brought out the roses in her cheeks. She stepped back and then took both Scott's hands in hers. "Are you sure this is what you want to do?" Her eyes were filled with compassion. "Steven told me the situation. This must be hell for you."

Scott just nodded. He was still numb from the confrontation with Zane. He'd never meant to push Zane in a corner, but he couldn't regret it. If he was going to start a new life, he wanted it to be one of honesty and integrity.

"I'm sure. There's no one I trust more than you to handle this," Scott said. "Steven told me you wanted to do it live."

"I talked to my producer, and he felt this was too big a story to sit on until tomorrow." She gave Scott's hands a squeeze. "There's always the chance your mother will go back on her word and break the story before you get a chance. Besides," she said with a grin, "we're all a bunch of drama queens around here. We love any excuse to do a live broadcast. We'll open with the story about you, and then our regular anchors will follow up with the rest of the entertainment report." She glanced at her watch. "Let's get you to hair and make-up, then I'll go over my questions with you and we'll do an off-camera practice run."

The next hour and a half went by in a blur. By the time he was seated in front of the rolling cameras, Scott's nerves had dissipated. He kept his eyes on Lira, opened his mouth, and let the truth fly. And when Lira asked him why he'd decided to come out now, after all these years, Scott told her the exact reason, right down to the amount Stephanie was trying to extort out of him.

Lira gave him an encouraging smile, one only Scott could see as the camera wasn't on her at that point. "Is there anything you'd like to say to your mom?"

"Yeah." Scott looked into the camera. "Mom, if you're watching this... I want you to know I forgive you." He hadn't even realized he meant that until the words came out. He did forgive her, but that didn't mean he was backing down. "When you're ready to get clean, call me and I'll help you."

"Thank you, Scott. Thank you for your bravery, and for your candor about such a painful subject." Lira smiled for the camera that was now on her face. "I'm Lira Huxley and you've been watching a very special interview with a very special man, Scott Winston. I now turn you over to regular entertainment correspondent Brad McPherson."

"And we're off air," the producer called out. The lighting changed, and Lira took off her mike. "You were great, Scott. I haven't cried during an interview in ten years, and you almost had me bawling."

Scott felt like bawling himself, but for far different reasons. He stood up and divested himself of his own mike pack. "I broke the cardinal rule of showbiz. I got personal."

"You didn't have a choice." Lira kissed his cheek. "It'll be all right. You'll see."

"From your lips to God's ear." He thanked her with a final hug and headed out of the studio. It wasn't until he was standing in the late afternoon sun that he pulled his cell out of his pocket and turned it on to check his messages. He had a text from Steven that read *Roy's office, 7:30 tomorrow morning. Mad as hell.*

It was written in all caps.

It wasn't like Scott hadn't expected this. Roy Chastain was the executive producer of *A Thousand Wonders*. Zane and Devin owned the network, but *A Thousand Wonders* was Roy's baby. He didn't allow anyone or anything to mess with his show.

Scott had the sinking feeling he was two steps away from the unemployment line.

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"Is Roy thinking about firing him?" Zane was sitting in the chair in front of his brother's desk, perched on the edge because he couldn't seem to make his legs be still. He hadn't slept more than an hour last night, and he'd come in this morning to find the whole place in an uproar. *A Thousand Wonders* filmed at the main studio two blocks away from EBC's executive offices, but word had made it here that Roy was meeting Scott in less than an hour, and it didn't look good.

"I don't know." Devin yawned wide enough for Zane to see his back teeth. "Is that why you insisted we meet you here at this ungodly hour, to talk about Scott Winston?"

"Spoken like a man with no kids." Christina, Zane's ex-wife, smiled when she said it. "Aimee and Ashley are up every morning at five-thirty, and since it's my week with the kids, that means I'm up at five-thirty, too."

Zane understood where she was coming from. They shared joint custody of the kids, and though their marriage had been a troubled one, they seemed to be doing a pretty good job of co-parenting now that they weren't living in the same house. They were also doing a jam-up job as business partners since Christine was awarded a portion of Zane's shares in EBC in the divorce settlement. She might look like a ditzy, blonde, big-boobed B movie siren, but Christine had a quick mind and a head-full of business sense. She'd been a real asset to EBC.

She turned piercing eyes on Zane. There was something in them that made him uneasy. "Not that I'm complaining, but if you did call us here about Scott Winston, don't you think Roy should be included in the conversation? *A Thousand Wonders* is his domain. Besides, we have a whole stable of lawyers and PR reps to deal with last night's fallout. It's not like we have to take care of it personally."

"I'm with Chrissie," Devin said. His hair -- a shade lighter than Zane's -- needed a good combing, and though their eyes were the same color, Devin's weren't bloodshot like Zane's. "Scott put Roy in an awkward position by doing that interview. It's Roy's show. He has the right to deal with it as he sees fit."

"Did you even watch the fucking interview?" Zane had. He'd been glued to the screen, heart breaking a little more with each word coming from Scott's mouth. "His own bitch of a mother was blackmailing him, for God's sake. How the fuck would you have handled something like that?"

"Hold up." Devin lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I did watch it, and my heart goes out to the guy, but you, of all people, know how this business works."

Zane's blood went cold. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Zane, what's gotten into you?" Christine was sitting in the chair beside him. She placed her hand on his wrist. "We don't even know what Roy's plans are. He may not even fire Scott."

"He sure as fuck won't." Zane jumped out of his chair, whole body vibrating. "You call him, Dev. You call him and tell him we don't work with homophobes. You tell Chastain he tries to fire Scott, *A Thousand Wonders* can find itself a new home."

"Now wait just a minute here." Christine stood up beside him. "You can't do that. It's our highest rated show. You can't just decide to cancel it. That's not our decision."

"It's not your decision either." Zane turned on her with a snarl. "You only own ten percent of EBC, and you wouldn't have that if your bloodsucking lawyer hadn't bled it out of me. Devin and I are the majority shareholders here, so why don't you sit down and shut up?"

Christine couldn't have looked more hurt if he'd just punched her in the face. Zane felt like a major asshole -- knew he was -- but he was like a wolf with a trap on its paw. He couldn't stop the pain, and he couldn't stop himself from snapping and snarling at everyone in his path.



"Chrissie, honey, would you wait outside while my little brother and I have ourselves a talk?" Devin never raised his voice, but his jaw was set like he was gearing up to kick ass and take names.

Christine gave Zane a murderous once over, then let herself out of the office.

"Sit down." Devin pointed at the chair Zane had been sitting in a few minutes ago.

Zane wasn't in the mood to be ordered around like some oversized golden retriever. "You can't--"

"I said sit. Better yet, do what you told Chrissie to do: sit down and shut up."

Zane sat.

"You're so far out of line I don't know whether to knock your teeth out or hug you and ask you what the fuck your problem is." Devin came around the desk to stand in front of Zane's chair. "I don't care what's happened between you and Chrissie, but she's the mother of your children. You don't get to treat her that way. Not ever."

"I know." God, Zane was fucking up right and left, treating all the people he loved like pure shit. And he did love Christine, just not the way a husband should love his wife. She'd been his best friend before, during, and even after their marriage. She'd deserved every dime she'd gotten in the divorce, and then some. None of this was her fault. "I'll apologize to her as soon as we're done."

"Damned right you will." Devin leaned against the desk, propping his rear end on the edge. "And now you're going to tell me why you're so worried about Roy Chastain firing Scott Winston."

"EBC has worked too hard on its image as a cutting edge network to allow even the hint of homophobia to taint that reputation." Zane had practiced what he was going to say before he'd called this meeting, but it didn't sound quite the same out loud as it did in his head. "Scott Winston can't help being gay." And neither could he, God help him.

Devin didn't say anything, just tilted his head to the side and studied Zane's face. Finally, he broke the silence with, "How well do you know Scott Winston?"

"I've seen all his movies." Zane's palms were starting to sweat. "He's a damned fine actor and an asset to EBC."

"I didn't ask for a press release on the guy. I asked how well you knew him." Devin made a clicking sound with his tongue on the back of his teeth. "He must be a pretty good friend of yours for you to go to bat for him like this."

It wasn't just Zane's palms sweating now. It was only seventy degrees outside -- mild for West Hollywood in spring -- but he could feel wetness between the back of his cotton shirt and his

skin. "I--"

"You didn't kick up this kind of fuss when Chrissie and I voted against you to cancel *Earl's Law*, and you and Earl Prescott went to school together."

"*Earl's Law* was getting slaughtered in the ratings," Zane said through a dry mouth. "*A Thousand Wonders* is EBC's highest rated program."

"And yet you want me to tell Roy Chastain we're canceling the show if he axes Scott." Devin pursed his lips. "Does that make sense to you? Because I gotta tell you, little brother, it sure doesn't gel with me."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Zane couldn't breathe, and his heart was racing so fast he could hear it beating in his ears. He thought maybe he was having a heart attack. He wiped his hands against his pants legs and then stood. "I better go out there and beg Christine to forgive me." He'd figure out a way to save Scott's job on his own. "I'll see you later."

He'd almost made it to the door when Devin said, "I know where you went when you were sixteen."

Zane froze. He didn't turn around, just stood there shaking from the top of his head all the way down. That heart attack feeling intensified. He wondered if he was about to die in his brother's office.

Devin stepped in behind him. "I know what Mom and Dad did to you, and I know why."

"You can't." Zane said it so softly, he wasn't even sure Devin heard him. "No one knows. I bought off everyone who did when I hit it big."

"They sent you to that camp." Devin was close enough to touch him now. He put his hand on Zane's quaking back. "That place that claims--"

"Shut up." Zane didn't whisper, not this time. "You shut up about that."

"They caught you with Cameron Perth, that boy down the street." Devin almost sounded like he was crying. "Dad beat the hell out of you, told everybody you'd fallen off your skateboard."

"Shut. Up."

"They sent you to that place, that boot camp that's supposed to turn gay kids straight."

"I said shut up." Zane whirled on Devin, punching as he went. "You shut up about me!"

Devin side-stepped the punch and pulled Zane tight against him. He was almost as big as Zane, and his arms were like steel bands that refused to let go no matter how hard Zane struggled. "I know, baby brother. I know you're gay, and I don't care." His face was wet where it pressed

against Zane's.

"I can't be." Zane wanted to collapse. His body didn't feel capable of holding together anymore. "Mom and Dad--"

"Are dead." Devin rubbed his back now that Zane was no longer struggling. "Dad was a mean bastard who ruled our house with an iron fist, and Mom was a weak woman who wouldn't take a shit unless Dad and the Church said she could." Devin stepped away, just enough so that Zane could see his eyes. "What they thought doesn't matter. I know. I think I've always known. It doesn't matter to me."

"It doesn't matter to me, either." Christine was standing in the doorway. Neither one of them had heard it open. "I figured it out a while ago."

"Oh God. You were listening at the door." Zane went to his knees, stomach caught in violent spasms. "The kids. My kids will hate me. Like Mom and Dad hated me." He was hyperventilating, air rushing in and out in big, chest-shattering gasps. "Can't breathe."

"Yes, you can." Christine came down on her knees beside him. "Deep breaths, Zane. Deep and slow. Devin, get him a bottle of water."

Zane wasn't sure how much time passed, with Christine on one side of him talking to him the same way she talked to one of the kids when they were sick or hurting, and Devin on the other side, telling him it was going to be okay. It seemed like an hour went by before Zane was able to sit up with his back against the wall, breathing almost normally.

"The kids..." He could hardly even make himself say it. "Do they know?"

"No." Christine was sharing wall space with him, sitting beside him with her hand on his knee. "I only know because I followed you."

"Jesus." Zane closed his eyes. It didn't get much worse than this. "When?"

"Almost two years ago," Christine said. "Right after you moved out."

"I don't understand." Zane opened his eyes and turned his head to look at her beautiful face. "You're the one who wanted the divorce."

"Because I knew you weren't happy." Christine sighed. "You're a fantastic father, and I think you tried to be a good husband, but there was a part of me that knew you were miserable. To be honest, I thought you were cheating on me with another woman."

"I was never unfaithful to you." He couldn't believe she'd actually thought that. "Never. Not once."

She leaned against him, shoulder to shoulder. "I believe you now, but back then I was so hurt, so

sure there had to be a reason you didn't love me anymore."

"But I do--"

"You know what I mean." She cleared her throat. "After you moved into your condo, I decided to do some amateur detective work." She smiled. "The Scooby Gang has nothing on me." The levity fled. "I think you know what I found out."

"I'm not even going to ask," Devin said. He was sitting across from them on the floor and didn't seem to have a clue, but Zane knew what she was talking about. Two months after Christine kicked him out, Zane had started a brief affair with Kevin Ivers, a fellow actor who was as deeply in the closet as Zane. Theirs had been a relationship based solely on sex, and it had faded quickly.

Kevin Ivers was no Scott Winston.

"Why didn't you use the information against me in the divorce?" Zane forced himself to keep eye contact with her, but it was hard. "You probably could've gotten more money -- maybe even sole custody of the kids." The thought made his heart squeeze.

"I would never use the kids to hurt you." She slugged his shoulder. "Shame on you for thinking I would. As for the rest of it..." She shrugged. "I was hurt at first. I thought long and hard about outing you just for spite. But after I gave myself a few weeks to process it, I was kind of relieved. Once I realized you were gay, I was able to understand it wasn't my fault the marriage failed."

"God no." Zane picked up her hand and squeezed it. "It was all me."

"Why did you marry me, Zane?" There was no accusation in her voice, only curiosity.

"My parents did a real number on me, honey. I honestly thought I could will myself straight."

"Oh yeah. That worked." Devin snorted. "For a smart man, you can be a total moron sometimes."

"You're a good one to talk," Christine said. "You knew he was gay when he married me, and you didn't bother to give me a heads up."

"You both seemed happy." Devin made a helpless gesture with his hands. "It wasn't my place."

"No, it was mine, and like everything else, I managed to fuck it up." Zane wanted a drink. A big, nasty shot of something ninety-proof. "I regret the hell out of hurting you, but I can't regret our marriage. We got five great kids out of it, and I got to live for sixteen years with my best friend."

Christine kissed his cheek. "I feel the same way about you, but if you ever tell me to shut up again, best friend or not, I'll get Devin to kick your ass."

"I'll do it, too," Devin said. "He may think he's a big tough guy, but I can take him." He looked down at his watch. "It's seven. Thirty minutes until the big meeting with Roy." He gave Zane his no-bullshit stare. "You're in love with Scott Winston, aren't you?"

They'd been sitting there for nearly half an hour, talking about his sexuality, and it still took everything Zane had in him to whisper a "yes."

"How long have you been seeing him?" Christine's tone was comforting, free of judgment.

"Fifteen months, two weeks, and three days, but who's counting?" Zane barked out a harsh laugh. "Fucked that one up, too. Scott told me yesterday he was coming out, told me I could either be open about our relationship or it was over." He put his head in his hands. "I've lost him."

"Only if you choose to." Christine pulled his hands away from his face. "You don't have to make a formal announcement like Scott did, but you don't have to stay in the closet, either."

Zane looked at her like she'd lost her ever-loving mind. "Do you know what it would do to my career if the whole world found out I was gay? No one's going to hire an action star who takes it up the ass."

"I could do without the visual, thank you very much." Devin drummed his fingers on his knee. "If it's really your career you're worried about, you can reinvent yourself. It's not going to be all sunshine and roses, but you're going to be forty in less than two years. It's time for you to move into meatier parts. You said yourself that's what you've been hoping to do, anyway."

"We all know this has nothing to do with your career," Christine said in a quiet, wise way. "Not ten minutes ago you said your kids would hate you. That makes me mad, Zane. You're selling them, and yourself, short."

"You didn't see Z.J. with his buddies the other day, calling each other faggot and queer." Zane swallowed. "The other kids might come to terms with it, but Z.J. is sixteen-years-old. He won't take it well."

"Oh, for God's sake." Christine rolled her eyes. "He's a teenager. They're weird by definition." She was still holding his hand, and she tightened her grip. "It won't be easy for him -- for any of them -- but they love you. We'll all adjust." Her tone softened. "If Scott is important to you, he'll become important to the people who love you, too."

"I can't -- look, I just don't know if I'm ready, okay?" Zane climbed up from the floor, knees popping. "I think we're all too damned old to be playing on the floor." He extended a hand to help Christine up. "Let's just focus on saving Scott's job. We'll deal with the rest of it as it comes."

Devin came to his feet. "You really think you can go to this meeting and maintain your professional objectivity?"

"I'm not sure," Zane said, "but I damn sure have to try."

## Chapter Three

Steven was already in the reception area outside Roy Chastain's office when Scott got there at seven-fifteen. Steven was wearing his usual three-piece suit, red hair combed to perfection, white dress shirt crisp and starched. His appearance was always immaculate, but he'd once confessed to Scott that if not for his wife's keen sense of style, he'd probably head to the office in jeans and a sweatshirt.

Scott greeted him with a firm handshake. "Any idea how this is going to go down?"

"No, but I've already set some precautions in place." Steven sat back down and indicated the chair next to him. As Scott was seating himself, Steven said, "I have a lawyer friend of mine on standby. In a sea of sharks, the guy's a great white. This thing goes against us, we'll be in good hands with him."

Scott was starting to feel better, but then the outer door to the reception area opened and Zane walked in, followed by his brother and ex-wife. Zane looked like hell, like he could use about forty hours worth of sleep. More than anything in the world, Scott wanted to go to him, to hug him tight and soothe away the frown lines around his eyes and mouth. That wasn't what Zane wanted, so Scott held himself back. He greeted Christine and Devin with handshakes, but gave Zane only a nod.

To his surprise, Christine wasn't satisfied with a handshake. She pulled Scott into an embrace that was surprisingly tight for such a small woman. "I was so sorry to hear about what your mother did to you." She pulled back, her eyes shining with sincerity. "No one should have to suffer through something like this."

"Thank you." Scott remembered himself. "I know Devin and Zane have already met him, but have you ever met my agent, Steven Engersol? Steven, meet Christine Eastman."

Christine shook Steven's hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise." Steven cast hard eyes on Devin and Zane. "If you're here on some sort of ambush--"

"Easy," Devin said. "We're here to offer Scott our support." He came up beside Scott and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "We've got your back."

Zane didn't say anything, but he gave Scott a subtle nod. Before Scott could figure what that might mean, the door to Roy Chastain's inner office opened and a dour-looking PA ushered them inside.

The expression on the woman's face didn't bode well for the meeting.

Roy was sitting at the head of the massive conference table that took up a good portion of his office. He didn't get up, but indicated with a wave of his hand they should all sit down around the table. Scott thought that was pretty ballsy of the guy considering he was greeting the people who

owned the network and controlled his livelihood, but then Roy Chastain had never lacked for guts. He was about fifty-five, but looked older thanks to the leathered skin of his face and his grizzled crop of white hair. He was wearing dress slacks and an open-throated shirt, but Scott thought he'd look more natural in jeans, a Stetson, and boots. Roy cussed like a sailor, smoked like a freight train, and had always reminded Scott more of the Marlboro man than a high-powered executive producer.

"You," Roy said, pointing a thick finger at Scott once he was seated, "have a lot to answer for."

"Now you see here," Steven started, but Scott laid a hand on his arm.

"I've got it." He pinned his eyes on Roy. "I'm gay. I won't apologize for that, or for doing the interview. You don't like it, that's too bad."

"I don't give two shits where you stick your dick or who you tell about it." Roy tipped his head at Christine. "Apologies, ma'am." He came back to Scott. "You're one of the main stars of my show, which makes what's happening to you my business. You should've called me the minute your mother pulled that stunt so we could've circled the wagons around you." Roy's face showed the two things Scott never thought to see: sympathy and understanding. "Your mother's some piece of work."

"Yes, sir, she is." Scott waited, but when Roy didn't add anything, he said, "If you're going to fire me, I really wish you'd get to it. The not knowing is starting to wear on me."

"You got stones, kid. I like that about you." Roy gave him a smile, and it occurred to Scott that smiles from Roy were rare. "I don't want to can you. I want to make you a deal."

"What kind of deal?" Steven said.

"You're a suspicious fellow, aren't you?" Roy folded his hands on the table. "Good thing for an agent to be, I suppose." His brown eyes were on Scott again. "These two," he pointed at Devin and Zane, "gave me the go ahead a while back to do an *A Thousand Wonders* spin-off. It's still in development, but I'd like you to be the main star. The working title is *A World of Our Own*." Roy picked a pen up from the table top and twiddled it between his fingers. "It'll be a thirty-minute daily, like what CBS has done with *The Bold and the Beautiful*, only more provocative."

Scott got what Roy was saying. Because EBC was cable, they could push more past the censors. *A Thousand Wonders* had more daring sex scenes than mainstream soaps -- had even done brief flashes of butts and boobs -- but if this was a spin-off and Scott was going to be playing the same character, he had to believe the public wasn't going to buy him as the horn-dog ladies man. Not anymore.

"Sounds like a great offer," Scott said, "but how are you going to get around the gay issue?"

"I'm not." Roy was smiling again, and this one was more calculated. "I want you to make your character the first openly gay role on *A Thousand Wonders*. We'll have him come out and fall in



love on the main show, and the spin-off will follow the ups and downs of both his new relationship and his life as an openly gay man. We'll run it as a guy who's tired of playing it straight, tired of sleeping with women to cover his real passions."

It took Scott a minute to shift gears from thinking he was about to be fired to being offered what could well be the role that reestablished him. His eyes wandered across the table to Zane, who gave him a hesitant smile.

It wasn't much, but Scott held on to that smile like a lifeline.

"It sounds good so far." Scott had played the Hollywood game long enough to know taking on a new part was a lot like buying a used car: best not to appear too eager. "You have someone lined up to play my love interest?"

"Matter of fact, I do." Roy clacked the pen against the tabletop. "You know Brady Duncan?"

It was a stupid question. Everyone knew Brady Duncan. He'd been at the center of a gay sex tape scandal last year that made the Paris Hilton and Pam Anderson tapes look like family fare. He'd been shot having sex with no less than three guys, but unlike Scott, Brady had never been in the closet. The nay-sayers predicted the tape would ruin Brady's career, but he'd faced the scandal with unrepentant good humor, and the opposite had happened. Brady was in high demand. "You think you can get him?"

"Already got him," Roy said. "Talked to his people last night. Brady is ready to sign on the dotted line. All we need is for you to climb on board and we're set."

Scott traded looks with Steven, and Steven took over. "I assume we're talking a substantial raise."

Roy nodded. "Top of the scale, and we'll move Scott to a four-days-a-week taping schedule until we get nine weeks ahead, then we'll cut him back to three and ease him into *A World of Our Own*."

Scott had to work not to let his jaw go slack. Top of the scale for a daytime soap actor was about three thousand dollars a work day. He did the math in his head: twelve grand a week. Nice.

"Where do I sign?"

Roy laughed. "Glad you're with us, but just so we're clear, you realize that you and Brady will be doing some damned racy scenes. We're talking full nudity, though you'll be shot from the back. You don't have some jealous boyfriend who's going to be disrupting my schedule, do you?"

Scott couldn't help it. His eyes drifted to Zane of their own accord. Zane looked at him for a minute, just one brief exchange before he lowered his head to stare down at the table.

A sucker punch to the gut would've hurt less. Scott thought he saw Christine give Zane a dirty

look, but he wasn't going to dwell on it. They'd have to work out whatever was between them on their own.

Scott cleared his throat. "No. I'm good to go."

"Glad to hear it." Roy stood, prompting them all to do the same. "I'll have the contracts drawn up and faxed to Steven's office. I'm glad we're--"

Whatever he was about to say was lost forever as a commotion sounded from the outer office. The door swung open with too much force, and Stephanie Winston burst in, the frantic PA right behind her.

"You little bastard." Spit was flying from Stephanie's chapped lips. "You cut me out."

"I told her not to come in, sir, that you were in a meeting." The PA looked like she was about to cry.

Zane and Devin were closer to the door. The two of them stepped between Stephanie and Scott just as Stephanie was about to lunge for him. Scott thought it was a nice gesture, especially considering Zane had just pretended Scott didn't exist, but nice gesture or not, it was totally useless. Stephanie was two steps away from tweaking, and Scott knew she wouldn't leave until she said her piece.

"I told you I was done supporting your habit," Scott said without inflection. Steven stepped in close and slung an arm around his shoulder in support.

"You told me yesterday you'd give me ten Gs." Stephanie's pupils were so big her eyes were black. "You're a lying piece of shit like your worthless daddy."

"Leann," Roy said to the PA, "call security."

Leann scampered to do as Roy told her, but Scott barely took his eyes off Stephanie. Her hair was dirty, and she was wearing the same clothes she'd had on the day before.

"I told you I'd take care of it, and I did, just not the way you wanted." Scott made no move to go to her, long practice telling him it would be a mistake. "You want help, you've got it. You want meth, you're on your own from here on in."

The rent-a-cops the studio used showed up before Stephanie had a chance to answer. She gave Scott the finger and left with them.

Roy came around the table. Steven still had his arm around Scott's shoulders, so Roy simply put a hand on Scott's arm. "That won't happen again, son. I promise you that."

"You're damned right it won't." Zane sounded furious. "I want Scott to have his own guard while he's here at work, and I'm authorizing you to hire more security personal, effective immediately."

"Are you all right?" Christine came to stand in front of him, her eyes so kind Scott could hardly bear it. "Is there anyone I can call for you?"

"No." Scott didn't look at Zane this time. There wasn't any need. "There's no one." He moved away from them all and said, "Look, I need to go. There are some things I need to take care of." He turned to Roy. "I'm not on the schedule again until Monday, but if the writers get the first of the new scripts ready before then, I'd love a sneak peak."

"You got it," Roy said. "I'll messenger them over."

"Thanks." And with a promise from Steven that he'd call Scott once the deal was set, Scott left.

He made it into the main hallway before Zane caught up with him.

"Scott, please, wait."

Scott stopped but didn't turn around.

"Look, you probably shouldn't drive." Zane came in close, too close considering all that had just happened. "Let me take you home."

Scott turned and then took two steps back. "You don't even know where I live." Zane had never dared go there, no matter how many times Scott had invited him.

"You'd be surprised how much I know about you." Zane tried for a smile, but it was a screen smile, fake and useless.

"I can drive myself. Wouldn't want to risk someone seeing us together now that the whole cat-out-of-the-bag thing has gone down."

"Scott--"

"Save it. If I wasn't sure where things stood before, I damn sure know now." Scott hadn't cried since he was four-years-old and he wasn't going to do it now, even if it did feel like his heart had been scoured with steel wool. "Like I told Christine, I have no one. You and my mother just proved it." He left Zane standing in the hallway and made an exit worthy of an Oscar.

## Chapter Four

"Devin was right," Christine said. "You really are an idiot."

"I think the term I used was moron," Devin said, "but idiot fits." They'd driven back to the main building in silence and were now back where they'd started, in Devin's office. "I love you, little brother, but what you just did to that man was criminal."

Zane felt like a big enough asshole without them telling him he was. "What did you expect me to do, out myself right there in front of Roy?"

"Yes," Devin and Christine said in unison.

"Look, I realize that you're having a hard time coming to terms with this, but either you get over it -- get yourself into therapy, if you have to -- or you get out of Scott's life." Christine heaved a sigh. "The poor guy's got enough on his plate without having to deal with you jerking him around."

Zane opened his mouth to defend himself, but nothing came out. He had no defense, and they all knew it. "I have to pick Z.J. up for his orthodontist appointment."

"Yeah, you do. And while you're at it..." Christine grabbed her purse off Devin's desktop, pulled out her wallet, and removed a card. "You might think about giving this woman a call. She's who I used to help me through the divorce and she's fabulous."

Zane took the card from her and looked at it. *Dr. Ellen Fox, Licensed Psychotherapist*. "I don't need a shrink."

"Right," Christine said. "And after popping out five kids, I don't need a tummy-tuck, either." She gave him a push toward the door. "Go. Prove to me you aren't a lost cause."

Zane drove to pick Z.J. up from school, the card burning a hole in his pocket. He grew up in a family that didn't believe in psychiatry. That boot camp his folks had sent him to certainly didn't take a therapeutic approach. He'd been beaten, forced to work in the blistering sun until his legs gave out, and starved nearly into a coma. The place would be outlawed these days, but back then they'd gotten away with it. "This is what happens to fags out there," he remembered the main "instructor" saying. Not exactly the "I'm okay, you're okay" approach.

Z.J. was waiting for him in the school vestibule. After Zane signed him out and the two of them were on their way to Zane's Jeep, Z.J. said, "You know, none of this would be necessary if you'd let me start driving again."

Zane got behind the wheel and waited until Z.J. was buckled in to say, "Fat chance, Kiddo."

"Shit." Z.J. crossed his arms over his chest, the world's most mistreated kid. "All this because I wrecked your car. I told you I was sorry. It's not like you don't have three other cars and more

money than God to fix the Saab."

"It's not about the car, and you know it." Zane pulled out onto the street. "You took my car without permission to go joyriding with your friends. Friends who were drinking, I might add."

"Yeah, but I wasn't," Z.J. protested. "The cops breath-tested me and everything."

"Breath-tested you at three a.m., you mean? Four hours after curfew." Zane felt for his son, but he and Christine had agreed to form a united front and remain firm. "You know the rules. You can start driving again when you've worked enough afternoons and weekends at the studio to pay off the amount it took to fix the car."

Z.J. slouched into the seat. "Fine."

"You could have been killed, son." Just the words terrified Zane to his marrow. Losing one of his kids was his greatest fear, and he never went to bed without praying all five would outlive him and lead happy, healthy lives. "I know it sounds like a big fat cliché, but I'm doing this for your own good."

"I know, I know." Z.J.'s blue eyes were still sullen, but at least he wasn't scowling any more. "You love me."

"Yes, I do." Zane might not have been able to say that to Scott, but there wasn't a day that went by where he didn't tell all five of the kids how much he loved them. He couldn't remember his own parents ever saying the words. He hadn't realized how much those words meant until he'd had kids of his own.

He wondered if Stephanie had ever told Scott he was loved. After this morning's display, Zane doubted it.

"You know I love you, too, right, Dad?" Z.J. didn't sound like a defiant teenager now. He sounded like a kid in need of approval.

Zane took one hand off the wheel to ruffle Z.J.'s messy crop of black-dyed hair. "Yeah, I do." Christine had been right about that. Zane's kids really did love him.

Would that love hold if they knew the truth?

As they neared the orthodontist's office, Zane decided to feel him out. "You remember the other day, when you and Kirk and Tommy were playing basketball in the back driveway?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You guys were calling each other some pretty raunchy names." Names he'd been called by his own father. "I just wondered why?"

"You mean the gay stuff?"

Zane nodded as he pulled into a parking space at the front of the medical complex.

"Oh, Tommy started that. He came out last year, and he's been teasing me and Kirk about being hot for his bod." Z.J. snorted. "As if. Even if I weren't into chicks, I wouldn't go after his scrawny ass."

"Tommy's gay?" Zane had known Tommy since the kid was in kindergarten. He'd never suspected.

"Yeah. He's got a thing for Bill Timmons, the head of the chess team." Z.J. made a face. "The guy's a total geek, but they're into each other and he's good to Tommy so I'm cool with it." He frowned. "Dad, you don't care, do you?" Z.J. turned in his seat. "You're not going to tell me I can't hang with Tommy anymore just because he's gay, are you?"

Zane almost laughed at the irony. "Of course not. Tommy's a good kid."

"Good." Z.J. tried to play it cool, but he looked relieved. He unsnapped his seatbelt. "Hey, I heard that one of the actors at EBC got outed by his own mom. That sucks."

"It's a little more complicated than that, but yeah, it does suck." The card in Zane's pocket was like a lead weight now. "Why don't you go on and sign yourself in. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Better have your autograph signing hand ready." Z.J. rolled his eyes. "Just once I wish we could go out in public together without being mobbed."

Zane just laughed, but that laughter died as soon as Z.J. was out of the car. He pulled the card from his pocket and stared at it long and hard before flipping open his phone.

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Scott hadn't been this nervous since starring in his first big screen role at age ten. Today was the filming of the first full-out gay love scene in daytime television history, and he felt like a sixteen-year-old virgin about to get laid for the first time instead of a seasoned professional actor. He'd been working with Brady Duncan for weeks now, and they got along well, had even hung out after work to get to know each other better. Brady might be a wild man off set, but once the cameras started rolling, he was a consummate pro. Scott had no reason to be worried the scene wouldn't go well, but that didn't stop the flips his stomach was doing.

It had been nearly six weeks since the fateful meeting in Roy's office. He'd heard from Zane only once, a cryptic voicemail message to let Scott know he was trying to work things out and not to give up on them, whatever that meant. After that, they'd had no contact. Unfortunately, the no-contact thing hadn't applied to Stephanie. She called Scott at least twice a week to let him know how badly she was suffering, what a terrible son he was, and how he owed her after all she'd

done for him. Each time she called him she was so high Scott could barely understand her. She'd said she was out of money, but she was getting money for meth from somewhere.

Scott was afraid to know how she was getting it.

"Hey." Brady came up behind him, his fingers digging into Scott's shoulders with an exquisite pressure. "You're so tight I bet I could crush concrete on these puppies." He continued to rub out the tension. "What's the matter, afraid you won't be able to resist my manly bod once we get naked under the covers?"

Brady was handsome as homemade sin, as his mother used to say back in her dry days when she was talking about some of the leading men Scott had worked with. He was taller than Scott -- six-two, at least -- and he had longish, rich brown hair with eyes that matched. And despite all the media hype, beneath his bad-boy image Brady was a good man, a decent man. He'd even made it clear to Scott he'd like to go out for real, not just as buddies. He'd promised Scott a night to remember. Scott didn't doubt Brady could provide it, but he'd said no.

Brady wasn't Zane, and Scott didn't want a substitute.

"That's it, isn't it?" Brady said in a stage whisper. "You're thinking maybe it's time to take a ride on the Brady Train."

Scott laughed. "You better think of a new line if you ever hope to get laid again this century." He closed his eyes and leaned back into Brady's hands. "You should give up acting and open a massage parlor." He moaned as Brady hit a particularly sore spot, and that's when footsteps sounded behind them and an all too familiar voice said, "Gee, I hope I'm not interrupting."

Scott turned, still in Brady's grip, to find Zane standing there with his fists clenched and his jaw locked. He wore the same expression he'd worn in the film *A Grave Mistake* when his ex-cop character was mowing down zombies with a chainsaw. Scott wondered briefly if Zane was thinking about doing the same thing to Brady.

If Brady picked up on the tension, he didn't show it. Instead, he pulled Scott to him and kissed him on the cheek. "See you naked on the set, lover boy." He gave Zane a wink and left.

Scott had only a second to wonder what the hell that was all about before Zane said, "I see you're enjoying your new co-star."

Zane looked good. He was dressed casual in tan chinos, a red polo shirt, and loafers. Last time Scott had seen him, he'd worn a haunted look in his eyes. That look was gone now. Now he just looked mad, and though Scott supposed he should be grateful to even see Zane after six whole weeks, one encounter in the wings of a studio set wasn't near enough to make up for the hell he'd been through.

Zane wasn't the only one who was mad.

"What's the matter?" Scott taunted him. "You jealous?"

"You fucking him?"

Scott blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Are. You. Fucking. Him?"

"You're doing this now?" Scott was due to strip down to his boxers and head for the set at any minute. "After six weeks with little more than an 'I'll call you,' you're going to rake me over the coals before a big scene?"

Zane had the good grace to look ashamed. "It's complicated. If you'll let me explain--"

The loudspeaker cut him off. "Scott Winston and Brady Duncan on set, please."

Scott almost reached out to Zane, but stopped himself. "I have to go."

"Yeah."

It took everything in Scott to walk away from Zane, but he did it. He couldn't afford to blow this chance, no matter how badly he wanted to stay and work things out with Zane.

Just before stepping on-set, Scott stripped down to his silk skivvies. He and Brady had taped the kissing and prep scenes yesterday so now all that was left was the main lovemaking scene. Brady was already in the bed, under the covers. Scott crawled in beside him and chucked his shorts, kicking them toward the foot of the bed. Then the director called action, and the scene they'd blocked out the day before began.

Even though both he and Brady were completely naked, Scott found nothing remotely sexy about filming the scene. The two of them were like wrestlers, rolling around together to find the best angle or hold. At one point the director called "cut" at which time one of the assistant directors pulled the cover's off them to expose Scott's ass.

Thank God for sunless tanning spray and full body makeup.

It took nearly two hours to get the scene down to the director's satisfaction. During each break in the action, Scott glanced toward the wings to see if Zane was there, but he wasn't. He told himself it didn't matter, but saying a lie over and over didn't make it pass for the truth. By the time the director called a halt to the taping, Scott was worn out and afraid he'd finally pushed Zane too far.

"You keep looking for him," Brady whispered as the crew cleared out. He pulled on his briefs. "You're worrying for nothing. The guy's crazy about you."

Scott's pulse picked up. If Zane knew that Brady had them figured out, he'd have a nervous



breakdown. "It's not what you think."

"So that wasn't your jealous boyfriend staring me down in the hallway?" Brady threw back the covers just as Scott slipped into his boxers. "The same jealous boyfriend who came to see me right after I was hired."

"Zane came to see you?" That couldn't be right.

"Sure did." Brady climbed out of bed. "Introduced himself just like he didn't have one of the most famous faces in America, then told me that while he was in full support of Roy's hiring me, he wanted me to understand you'd been through a lot, and he wouldn't tolerate me giving you a hard time." He laughed. "I figured he was worried about me giving you something hard, all right."

Scott was at a loss. "I can't believe he did that."

"A man in love can surprise you sometimes," Brady said. "He tried to act casual, like he was a friend or something, but I saw right through that. You're a pair of lucky bastards to have each other."

That was the problem, Scott thought as he left Brady, picked up his clothes, and headed to his dressing room. He'd never felt like he had Zane. He'd had a piece of Zane for a little while, maybe, but Scott was greedy. He wanted it all: good, bad, and in-between. As if his thoughts had conjured the man up, Scott opened the dressing room door to find Zane waiting inside.

## Chapter Five

Zane jumped off the sofa as the door swung open and Scott came in. He was so filled with nervous energy, it had been hard to sit still, anyway.

"I thought you'd left." Scott closed the door and leaned against it. He was carrying the clothes he'd worn earlier, but he was still wearing nothing but his boxers. He looked so good Zane's mouth watered.

"I left the set." Zane remembered what Dr. Fox had taught him about keeping his breathing even during stressful situations. "I couldn't bring myself to watch you kissing and touching him."

"You know how love scenes go," Scott said with a shrug. "Too much work to be sexy."

"Are you..." It was hard for Zane to speak, knowing he had no right to ask. "Are you and Brady a couple now?"

Scott didn't answer. He stood there against the door, watching Zane like he was searching for something. Finally he said, "I'll answer your question if you'll answer some of mine."

That was fair. It was probably going to be hard as hell, but it was fair. "Okay."

Scott clutched his clothes to his chest. "Where've you been?"

He and Dr. Fox had discussed this. She'd had Zane in therapy three days a week thanks to his insistence and motivation. She'd told him honesty was the way to go, and she'd been right.

"I've been in therapy," he said, his eyes never leaving Scott's beautiful face. "My doctor convinced me I needed to get my head on right before I asked you to come back to me."

Scott nodded once. "And have you?"

"Yeah. At least, I'm getting there." Zane wasn't sure it was going to matter to Scott -- not if he was with Brady -- but he was proud of the progress he'd made, and he had to tell Scott whether Scott cared or not. "Last week, I told my kids. Told them I was gay, and told them about you."

Scott's eyes went wide. "Your ex--"

"Christine already knew," Zane said. "She and Devin figured it out the day after your interview with Lira Huxley. Christine's the one who pointed me toward Dr. Fox."

"I've got to sit for this one." Scott came around the couch and eased down beside Zane. There was a cushion between them, but it still felt good to Zane to be this close to the only man he'd ever allowed himself to care about.

"How did your family take it?"

"Good, all things considered." Zane turned sideways with one leg tucked under him so he could look at Scott. "Aimee and Ashley are too young at five to really understand what gay means, but Conner is eleven and Nicolas is thirteen, so they both got it." He frowned. "Conner's having the hardest time. Christine and I talked to the kids together, and she's working with him. We're going to bring in a counselor if that doesn't work."

"Wow." Scott turned too, his face almost hopeful. "What about your oldest?"

"Z.J. surprised me. He took it better than anybody." Zane couldn't help but grin. "Looked me right in the eye and said, 'If you're happy, Dad, then so am I.'"

"I'm really glad for you." Scott stretched his arm over the back of the couch, where Zane's hand rested. He stopped when their fingers were only inches apart. "I wish I'd had a dad like you growing up. My own took off when I was two."

"My dad was nothing to write home about. I think that's why I try so hard with my own kids. I want them to have the things I didn't." Zane leaned toward him. "My folks pulled some nasty shit on me. I... I'd like the chance to tell you about it, to explain why I've done the things I've done."

"I'd like that." Scott's voice went soft and husky. "Me and Brady--"

"Wait. There's something you need to know, something I have to tell you regardless of whether I still have a chance with you." He called on everything he'd been learning, every cognitive trick in Dr. Fox's book. "I love you, Scott. You're the first man I've ever loved, and you'll be the only one."

"Oh, God." Scott closed his eyes. "I never thought I'd hear you say that."

For a minute, Zane lost all hope. Scott was going to tell him it was too late, that he and Brady were together and there was nothing Zane could do about it. Then Scott opened his eyes, and they were clear, bright, and filled with so much emotion it took Zane's breath away.

"I love you, too. So much I ache with it." Scott edged over, closing the distance between them. "There's nothing between me and Brady. There couldn't be." He caressed Zane's face, a touch so desperately needed that Zane was vibrating. "He's not you."

"I know this won't be easy. There's still the public to deal with." Zane sighed, remembering what Dr. Fox said about therapy not being an overnight fix. "It may take me a while before I'm ready to tell the world about us."

To his surprise, Scott accepted that. "I understand you have your career to worry about."

"Yeah, but I don't want to sneak around, either." Zane picked up Scott's hand, marveling that he was able to touch Scott again after the hell of the last few weeks. "If someone sees us together, we'll deal with it then. We've been together fifteen months, and we've never even been out to

dinner together." He kissed the hand he was holding. "Piss poor boyfriend I've been, huh?"

"The sex was good." Scott laughed, and there was a lightness about him Zane had never seen before. "What's going out for Chinese food and a movie compared to hot, sweaty, butt sex?"

"Speaking of sex..." Zane pulled out his wallet and removed a folded piece of paper from behind his driver's license. "Here."

Scott unfolded the paper, read it, and then lifted questioning eyes on Zane. "Why are you giving me this?"

"I meant what I said. You're the first man and the only man who'll ever capture my heart." He pointed to the paper of test results Scott was holding. "I'm clean, and I know you are, too."

"I remember showing you my last test," Scott said in a low voice. "I wanted to ditch the condoms then, but you said..."

"We've already established I'm an idiot." Zane plucked the paper out of his hands and tossed it onto the floor. "But I'm an idiot who knows what he wants." He pulled Scott close. "What I want," he said against Scott's lips, "is for you to make love to me, your cock in my ass with nothing between us but skin." He kissed the corner of Scott's mouth. "I want to feel you pulsing inside me when you come."

They couldn't find any lube. Scott ended up snagging a bottle of hand lotion from the drawer of the dressing table. He set it on the floor, urged Zane onto his hands and knees, and then went to work giving Zane the most erotic experience of his life.

For the next thirty minutes, Zane was sucked, fingered, and rimmed. A couple of times he almost came, but each time, Scott pulled him back from the brink only to take him there again. Just when Zane thought he couldn't take any more, Scott took them both down to the floor. He urged Zane onto his back, spread his legs wide and lined up his cock, then slid home in a long, sure stroke.

Zane was out of his mind with love, lust and pleasure.

The actual lovemaking didn't last long. Zane came quickly with Scott close behind him. It was fantastic, but what Zane enjoyed the most was the cuddling on the sofa they did afterward.

"I could get used to this no condom thing." Scott kissed his neck. He was lying on his side, his back against the back of the sofa, with Zane spooned in front of him. It wasn't the most comfortable position for two grown men, but Zane wasn't about to move.

"I could get used to all of it." He played with Scott's fingers. "Christine has the kids this week."

Scott nuzzled a sensitive spot at the base of Zane's throat. "And?"

"How do you feel about sleepovers?" Zane laughed. "That sounded pretty third grade, huh?"

"Maybe, but I happen to like sleepovers." Scott went still against him. "You sure you're ready to take that step. If the paparazzi catch us together..."

"Do I sound worried about it?"

"No." Scott kissed his neck again. "Make you a deal: I'll sleep over at your place if you sleep over at mine."

"You're on." Zane turned his head sideways to kiss Scott, and all talk of apartments, the paparazzi, and sleepovers was put on hold.

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Three weeks passed, and Zane was like a different person. He knew this because people kept telling him. Devin had commented on it that morning, and now here was Christine, dropping off the kids on Monday morning with a big grin on her face. It was summer vacation, so the kids scattered the minute they got there. Nick and Conner headed for the pool, Aimee and Ashley made for the playground on the far side of Zane's big, fenced back yard, and Z.J. went upstairs, cell phone glued to his ear.

"Your son has a new girlfriend," Christine told Zane as the two of them watched Z.J. go up the stairs. "She's a sweet little thing. Don't tell him I told you, but I think he wants to introduce you to her sometime this week."

"I won't say anything."

"Good." There was that smile again. "Love is definitely in the air around here." Christine batted her eyes at him. "A little bird told me Scott has spent the night with you every night that the kids aren't here."

"Not true," Zane said with a wink. "A couple of those nights, I stayed with him." He narrowed his eyes. "That little bird wouldn't happen to be my big brother, would it?"

"Maybe." Christine flushed, and turned her head to the side, confirming the suspicion that had been building in Zane's mind for a few months now. He decided the best way to deal with this was to get it out in the open.

"Christine, have you given any thought to dating?"

She shrugged, the flush deepening. "I'm too busy. The studio, the kids..."

"The kids are with me fourteen days out of the month -- more sometimes -- and you only have to come into the studio if a big decision goes down."

"Look, I'll think about it, okay?" She smiled and patted his arm. "So, you and Scott, you're serious then? As in the happily-ever-after kind of serious."

"Yes, we are." He sighed. He'd hoped they were good enough friends she'd tell him on her own, but he could see now he'd have to force the issue. "Probably about as serious as you and my big brother."

Christine's look of horror reminded Zane of the day he'd caught Aimee finger painting on the wall with her mother's ninety-five-dollar lipstick. "I... I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, I think you do." Zane slipped his arm around her and pulled her into his side. "You're in love with Devin, and before you deny it again, I should tell you, I think it's the best thing to ever happen to both of you." He kissed the top of her head. "Not that you need it, but you have my blessing."

She looked up at him, eyes big and unbelieving. "You really don't care?"

"Oh, Honey." He held her tight. "After the hell I put you through, I only want you to be happy. I can't think of anyone who'd treat you better -- be better to you and the kids -- than Devin." He grinned. "Of course, I'll have to give him a hard time about it, but that's just what brothers do."

He led Christine -- who still looked a little unsteady -- over to the staircase. They both sat down on the second step, side by side.

"You don't think it's weird," Christine said after a minute, "me dating my kids' uncle?"

"This is Hollywood. Weird is what we do." He took her hand, holding it tight. "You and I have done a great job of raising these kids, despite our divorce. I think we've managed nicely keeping them out of our personal problems." He squeezed her fingers. "Our kids will just have four parents instead of two. Twice the love, twice the people in their corner."

"You really think me and Devin and you and Scott--" Christine was cut off by the ringing of Zane's cell phone. "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother" chimed through the foyer.

"Hold that thought." Zane flipped open his phone. "Hey, Devin. Your girlfriend and I were just talking about you."

"Girlfriend?" Devin sounded distracted. "Christine's there?"

"Well, at least you aren't going to deny it," Zane said with good humor. "I'll tell you like I told her: I think it's great. I'm happy for both of you and--"

"Zane, I'm glad about that but I need you to shut up and listen to me for a minute." Devin's voice was deep and grave. "Have you heard from Scott?"

"No." The hairs on Zane's arms were standing up now. "Why?"

"Then you haven't watched the news this morning?"

"No." Zane stood up. "Jesus, Dev, you're scaring the hell out of me."

"With good reason." Devin sounded a hundred and fifty years old. "Stephanie Winston was found dead at the home of a known drug dealer last night."

## Chapter Six

The cops were nice, but Scott didn't really want them to be. Stephanie was dead, and it didn't matter how much kindness and compassion the detectives had shown him. The outcome was still the same.

Scott was sitting in his apartment, in the same spot he'd been sitting -- except for a couple of trips to the bathroom, one of which to throw up -- since the detectives left fourteen hours ago. He was sure the media had picked up the story by now. He thought briefly about calling Zane, but his feet wouldn't seem to carry him to his cell phone all the way in the bedroom a whole seven-hundred square feet away. So Scott sat on the sofa, thinking about his mother's last phone call, the one where she'd threatened to take enough meth to kill herself if he didn't pony up some cash. He'd been sure she was bluffing, trying to milk both his sympathies and his bank account.

Being wrong had never hurt so bad.

The doorknob jiggled and the door opened. Zane stood there, Christine behind him. Zane was holding the key Scott had given him.

"Hey." Zane approached the couch the same way one would approach a wild boar. "Scott? Scott, sweetheart, look at me, please."

Sweetheart? Zane wasn't big on endearments, and neither was Scott. He figured he must look like a total train wreck if Zane was calling him sweetheart. But he did as he was told. Lifted his head and looked into Zane's eyes.

The dam that was holding him back broke, and the tears started to fall.

Zane gathered him against his chest. In the background, Scott heard Christine making some calls -- heard Zane ask her to "please pack Scott a bag" -- but he let all that fade into the distance. He pressed his ear against Zane's chest, listening to his heartbeat.

Right now, that steady thump was the only thing he trusted.

At some point, Zane put him in the car and drove Scott to his house. Christine sat in the back, a soothing hand on his shoulder the whole time.

Scott closed his eyes and leaned back against the seat. It wasn't until they'd pulled into the circular drive of Zane's seven bedroom mansion that Scott said, "I can't be here. You've got the kids this week."

"Don't you worry about that," Christine said. "Our children are going to be proud to know you."

He expected Zane to take him into the guestroom, but Zane led him to the master bedroom, instead. He stripped Scott down to his boxers, folded back the covers, and put him in bed.



"I'm not tired."

"I know, Baby." Zane smoothed the hair off Scott's forehead.

Scott nestled into the pillows. His eyes were gritty from crying on Zane's shoulder earlier. His head was pounding and his stomach hurt. "Baby. That's two endearments in one day. You trying to set a record?"

Zane kissed his temple. "Rest. We'll deal with everything when you wake up."

Scott told Zane again that he wasn't tired. Then he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

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"Took some wrangling, but I finally convinced one of the detectives handling the case to tell me Stephanie's body would be released tomorrow morning." Christine sat down across from Zane at the kitchen table. She glanced out the bay window to the pool beyond where all five kids were splashing and playing. They'd commandeered Z.J. to watch over his brothers and sisters while the two of them worked out some details. The kids knew only that Zane had a houseguest and that Scott wasn't to be disturbed.

"We're going to have to tell them," Christine said. "Unless you want me to take them back to my place until Scott's settled some."

"No. This is their home, too. They have a right to know what's happening." Zane let out a hoarse sigh. "I'd really hoped they'd meet him under different circumstances."

"You can't control life," Devin said as he came into the kitchen. "I knocked but no one heard me so I used my key." He kissed Christine full on the mouth and sat down beside her. "Sorry I didn't get here sooner, but the media circus down at the studio is unbelievable. I've had fourteen phone calls in the last hour and a half wanting an official EBC comment on Stephanie Winston's death."

"I talked to Roy a few minutes ago." Zane got up and crossed the kitchen to the coffee pot. He poured three steaming mugs, added cream and sugar to Christine's, and brought them back to the table. He handed Devin his with a grimace. "He said the studio is jammed with reporters, and he's had to call the police twice just to shoo them away."

"Has anyone talked to Steven?" Christine took her mug from Zane's hand with a muttered "thanks." She took a cautious sip, and then said, "I imagine he's already turned his PR people onto it."

"I talked to him a couple of hours ago. Scott told him about us last week, so he figured calling here was a safe bet." Zane reclaimed his chair and set his mug on the table. "He's already issued an official statement, asking the press to please allow Scott private time to grieve." He snorted. "As if that pack of vultures is really going to listen."

"You know you're going to have to make a decision, right?" Devin folded his hands around his cup. "Either you stay on the sidelines for fear the press will out you or you stay by Scott's side through this whole thing, the funeral, the inquest into her death: all of it."

"My agent called this morning before all hell broke loose," Zane said instead of answering directly. "The Macbeth part is mine if I want it."

"And?" Christine looked wary, like she wasn't sure if Zane was going to man up or run away. "What does that mean?"

"It means we'll see whether they still want me once they find out I'm gay." Zane wasn't backing down, not for all the A-list parts in the world. "There's only one place I'm going to be for the foreseeable future, and that's stuck to Scott like glue."

Christine nodded her approval. "Then let's bring the kids in and give them the PG version of what's going on."

"Right," Zane said. "And while we're at it, I think they have a right to know about the two of you."

"You really aren't going to kick my ass, are you?" Devin was holding onto Christine like he didn't care one way or another if Zane didn't like it. "You sounded okay with everything on the phone, but there was so much going on it was hard to tell how you really feel."

"The only way I'll kick your ass is if you hurt her." Zane gave Christine the warmest smile he had in him. "She deserves nothing but the best."

"Agreed," Devin said. "Let's just hope the kids are as cool with it as you are."

Zane just nodded and went to fetch his children.

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Late afternoon sun was streaming through the windows when Scott woke up. He opened his eyes to find four faces staring down at him over the footboard. He recognized each child by name as Zane had bragged on them so much and shown Scott their pictures.

"Uh... hi." Scott sat up, clutching the sheet to his chest as he was wearing nothing but his boxers. "I'm, um... I'm a friend of your dad's."

"Let's hope you're more than that," Nicholas said. "You're in his bed."

"Daddy said you're his boyfriend." The pink cheeked little girl came to sit on the foot of the bed. The twins weren't identical, and Scott knew this was Ashley. "He said you kiss and stuff like he and Mommy used to." The face she made indicated kissing of any kind was gross.

*Oh boy.* Scott felt his face heat. He thought he'd rather face down a group of rabid reporters than these four kids.

Conner, the one who'd had the hardest time dealing with his and Zane's relationship, came around to the other side of the bed, blue eyes intense. "Dad told us about your mom. That sucks."

A deep spark of affection for this kid roared to life in Scott's chest. "It does. Thanks for understanding."

Conner just nodded, and then the bedroom door opened and tall, lanky Z.J. walked in. "I thought I told you monkeys to stay downstairs and let Mr. Winston sleep."

"Please... I'm just Scott to you guys." He tried to smile, but it felt wrong on his face. "They aren't bothering me."

Z.J. stayed firm. "Downstairs guys. I'll be down in a minute."

The other four went, grumbling all the way out into the hall. Z.J. waited until they were gone and said, "My dad told us about your mom. That bites."

"Your brother said the same thing." Z.J. was a miniature Zane, and Scott was beginning to feel uncomfortable under the weight of his stare. "Thanks."

"Look, I know this is a rotten time, but there's something I want to talk to you about." Z.J. shifted from foot to foot, like he didn't want to deal with this but had to. "I want to know what your intentions are with my dad."

"Excuse me?"

"If you love him then great. I support both of you. My dad's a great guy, and he deserves to be happy." Z.J. narrowed his eyes in the exact same way Zane did when he was warning someone off. "But if you're just in this for kicks -- if you hurt my dad -- I'll kick your--"

"I think he gets the picture," Zane said from the doorway. "As much as I appreciate your defending my honor, I think I can take it from here, kid."

"Okay." Z.J. nodded to Scott and left.

Zane sat down on the edge of the bed with a sigh. "I feel like I should pin a tag on his chest that says, 'The opinions expressed by this teenager are not necessarily those of the parents.'"

Scott shook his head. "Just proves he cares about you." A deep sadness welled low in his gut. "At least he's a better son than I was, apparently."

"You can't blame yourself for what happened to Stephanie." Zane came up beside him so they were both leaning back against the headboard. "I heard you tell your mother you'd be there for

her if and when she was ready to get clean. Not much more you can do for an addict than that."

"She called me last week." Scott felt dirty just talking about it, but he needed Zane to know the truth. "Told me she was going to overdose on purpose if I didn't give her what she wanted."

"Not to speak ill of the dead, but your mother was a selfish woman. Threatening you like that was a cheap, manipulative trick." Zane scooted over so their shoulders were touching. "I'm willing to bet, once the autopsy comes in, we'll find out your mother didn't set out to kill herself."

"Maybe, and maybe we won't ever know." Scott kissed Zane's cheek. "Thank you for bringing me here, but I should go. You've got your kids this week, and I don't want to confuse them. I should go back to my place." It was a depressing thought, but Scott loved Zane too much to cause a rift between him and his kids.

"Actually, the kids and I have already talked about it," Zane said. "They think it would be a good idea if you stay here this week, get to know them a little bit."

"Zane--"

"Why do you think Z.J. was asking about your intentions?" Zane put his hand on Scott's knee. "I told him I planned on asking you to marry me. He was feeling you out to see if you were worthy."

"Married." Scott wondered if he and Zane were even speaking the same language. "As in 'til death do us part?'"

"That's the one." Zane smiled. "It's legal in California this week."

"I just met your kids like five minutes ago. You can't throw me at them one minute and move me in the next." Scott was reeling. "And this whole thing with my mother. I can't--"

"Relax." Zane kissed him. "I'm not saying right away. I want you to stay here this week so we can deal with the fallout from your mother's death as a family. Me, you, Christine, Devin, and the kids. Then, after the dust settles, you can take all the time you need to bond with the kids so that we're all comfortable by the time you and I say I do." Another kiss. "Who knows? You and I might even want to add to the brood."

"More kids?" It wasn't that Scott didn't want a big family, but he'd never thought Zane would want more than the five he already had.

"Sure. You forget I was raised Catholic. My mom and dad were only ever able to have two, but the philosophy in the Church is the more the better." He slipped his arm across Scott's shoulders. "I may not be a practicing Catholic anymore, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't love more kids. I've always thought eight was a nice round number."

"Eight kids?"

"Yep," Zane said on a grin. "The five we've got plus three more. We could hire a surrogate, maybe even adopt." He laughed. "We could be the gay Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt."

It was more than Scott could take in. He'd wanted Zane to make a commitment, but now it was all coming toward him at lightening speed. "I can't... I don't--"

"It's okay. None of this has to be decided today." Zane urged Scott onto his side and cuddled in behind him. "I probably shouldn't even bring it up right now, except I wanted you to understand that you're wanted here."

"It's okay." Scott inhaled the scent of Zane surrounding him. "Just a lot to take in."

"Your mother's body is supposed to be released tomorrow." Zane stroked soft fingers up and down Scott's arm. "Would you mind if Christine and I made the arrangements?"

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't ask. I volunteered."

"That... thank you. That would be a big help." So this is what it was like to be cared for. To be taken care of because he was loved, not because his caregiver stood to make money off him.

"Is there anyone I should call, a relative, maybe?"

Scott shook his head. "My grandparents died years ago, and my mother was an only child like me. There might be some distant cousins somewhere, but I don't know them."

"If it's okay with you, I'll write up her obit for the paper and have the studio issue an official statement."

"Sounds good." Scott let himself go quiet for a minute. Then he said, "I love you, Zane."

"Me, too, baby." Zane kissed the back of his neck. "Me, too."

## Chapter Seven

The official cause of Stephanie Winston's death, as announced by the coroner and printed or broadcast from every news outlet in the country was cardiac arrest. She hadn't had enough drugs in her system for an overdose, but instead her abused heart had finally given up the ghost. It brought Scott a scant measure of relief to know she hadn't killed herself just to get back at him.

Zane's children had been incredibly sweet to Scott during his time of loss, and though he knew it would be a long road before they were ready to be a family, he was already starting to love them. He was also crazy about Christine, who'd accepted him with scary ease considering the situation. And Devin treated Scott like they'd been friends forever, helping with the arrangements and working with Roy Chastain to protect Scott's privacy.

For the first time in his life, Scott was learning what it meant to belong somewhere.

The morning of the funeral -- exactly four days after Stephanie had died -- dawned bright and sunny. The kids were at Christine's, staying with a sitter to keep them out of what could turn into a media circus. Only Z.J. had insisted on attending, and Zane hadn't objected. He was waiting downstairs with Christine and Devin.

Scott smiled to himself. Christine and Devin had told the whole family they were a couple, and though no announcements had been made, Scott figured they'd probably be getting married soon. The kids had taken it well so far, but Zane and Christine were watching them closely, ready to intervene if they were uncomfortable or needed help processing it all.

Zane came into the bedroom, looking more handsome than any man had a right to in his suit and tie. Scott was wearing a suit but his numb fingers were having trouble with the tie.

"Here." Zane turned Scott away from the mirror and made quick work of tying the tie. He then kissed the spot just above the knot. "You look nice."

"I look like a total basket case, but it fits my state of mind." Scott grabbed his jacket from the end of the bedpost. "Are we ready?"

"Almost. Before you go out there, I think you should read this." Zane looked nervous. "I may have caused more media interest than I should have, but I... well, you'll see." He went out into the hall and came back with a folded newspaper page. "It's your mom's obituary."

Scott's eyes scanned the brief column. *Stephanie Nicole Winston, Born May 8, 1961, died June 7, 2008. Preceded in death by her parents, survived by her son, Scott Winston and his fiancé, Zane Eastman.*

Scott looked at Zane, his hands shaking. "Fiancé?"

"I know I jumped the gun, but I've never loved anyone like this." Zane was babbling a little. "I'm sorry if I screwed up, but--"

Scott silenced him with a kiss. When he pulled back he said, "You know I want to marry you, but the press--"

"We'll deal with it. And if I lose roles because of this, then so be it." Zane laughed. "I own my own damned network. If I want to act, I can always cast myself." He took Scott's arm. "Come on. We should get going."

They'd opted for a private memorial service at a chapel near the beach. Scott had Stephanie cremated, but he felt he at least owed her a last goodbye. By the time they got there, the chapel was crowded, mostly with people from *EBC*, *A Thousand Wonders*, and *A World of Our Own*. Zane, Christine, Devin, and Z.J. sat with Scott in the front row.

There was no pastor. Instead, Scott invited anyone who wanted to say something good about his mother. Zane and Christine both tried -- God bless them -- to find nice things to say about Stephanie, but they hadn't really known her and it fell flat. Then Roy Chastain stepped up to the podium.

"Stephanie Winston was a hard woman and she made a lot of mistakes." Roy's leathery hands gripped the sides of the lectern. "I only met her once, and my impression of her was less than grand. But there's one thing Stephanie did right." His eyes found Scott out in the audience. "Stephanie Winston raised a fine son, a man I'm proud to know and call my friend. I can't think of a better legacy than that."

Roy's words touched him, soothed across the sore spots on his heart. Scott wasn't sure he'd ever understand the choices his mother had made, but as the service ended and the mourning party made their way down to the beach to scatter Stephanie's ashes, Scott realized one thing: every choice, every turn, every move his mother had made since she'd put him on that long ago stage at age three had led Scott here. Stephanie's choices -- wrong or not -- had led him to the man standing beside him and the fragile but precious family he was becoming a part of. Roy was right.

It was one hell of a legacy.

## Epilogue

"Scott, you've got to talk to him." Christine was wearing a beautiful silk suit, a pale blush color that brought out the roses in her cheeks, but she was ruining it by knotting the skirt in her hands. "Zane's tried, I've tried, and we even sent in Devin." She looked like she was about to cry. "You're up."

"I'll give it my best, honey." Scott kissed her cheek just as Devin came into the church vestibule.

"You hitting on my wife, Winston?" He gave Scott a good-natured slug on the arm. "Zane's still trying to talk to him, but he's not listening. Says he wants to talk to you."

"I'm on my way." He stopped short of the stairs that led to the church basement. "Where are Kayla and Brent?"

"Sitting with Z.J. and Page," Christine said. "Aimee and Ashley are in with the bride, and Nick's up front, trying to stall the minister."

Z.J., now almost thirty, had married a sweet southern girl, and they were expecting their first child any day. Page had taken an instant shine to Kayla and Brent, the children Zane and Scott had adopted as infants six and seven years after they'd married in a splashy ceremony fourteen years ago that had dominated the tabloids for weeks afterwards.

"Gotcha." Scott left Christine and Devin in the vestibule and headed for the basement.

The church had a special area for the groom and groomsmen to dress. Zane was standing outside the door to the dressing area, a scowl on his handsome face. "The kid won't talk to me. Says only his Pop would understand." Zane's expression told Scott what he thought of that.

In spite of the situation, Scott laughed. Zane would always be "Dad," and Devin was still "Uncle Devin," but since shortly after he and Zane had married, the kids had started calling him Pop. It was the most important title he'd ever worn, right up there with the title of husband.

"I'll talk to him." He edged Zane's too-perfect-to-be-fifty-two body out of the way and gave the door one solid knock.

"Conner, it's me, Bud."

The door opened at once, and Conner grabbed the sleeve of his tux, pulling him inside.

"Thank God you're here." Conner had grown almost as tall as Zane and looked even more like his dad than Z.J. did, but right now he looked ill. "Pop, I don't think I can go through with this."

It always amazed Scott that Conner, the one who'd had the hardest time adjusting to Zane's sexuality -- had formed the tightest bond with him. Scott loved all their children equally, but he and Conner had a special relationship. There was nothing they couldn't talk about, and Scott was



usually the first person Conner came to when he needed guidance.

It was enough to make Scott's head swell.

"Sit down." Scott eased him into a chair. "You look like you're going to pass out." He knelt in front of the chair. "What's this all about, son? I know you love Rebecca. I see it in your eyes every time you look at her."

"It's not that." Conner's face was red, and he was breathing too hard. "It hit me, when I was putting on my tux... Pop, this is forever."

"Yes, and I thought that's what you wanted." Scott adjusted the cufflink Conner had barely fastened. Anything to distract him a little. "The day you told me you were planning on asking Rebecca to marry you, you said you wanted to spend the rest of your life with her."

"Yeah, but..." Conner swallowed so hard Scott could hear it. "How do you know? How do you know you're picking the right person? How did you know Dad was the one for you?"

"Your first two questions I'm not sure I can answer. I don't think there's a set criteria for choosing a mate who's going to stay with you and stick it out." Scott came to his feet and pulled Conner out of the chair to stand in front of him. "The last question is much easier."

"With your dad, it's the little things." Scott went to work retying Conner's bow tie as he talked. "The way he smells when he first gets out of the shower, all spicy and clean. The way he chews his lip when he's thinking, or the sound he makes while he eats." He laughed. "Even the things that drive me crazy -- him grinding his teeth in his sleep and always forgetting to put the milk back in the fridge -- they just add to all the things that make him mine."

"Rebecca hums while she's driving," Conner said. He was starting to lose the shell-shocked expression he'd worn since Scott came in. "Even if the radio's not on, she's driving along and humming away. And there's this noise she makes when--" He went pink. "Uh, never mind."

"I think I get the picture." Scott cupped Conner's cheek. "I can't guarantee you your marriage will last, but if you're willing to put her in front of yourself -- to sacrifice for her happiness -- you'll be one step ahead of everybody else."

Conner tilted his head to the side. "You're talking about the way Dad was willing to sacrifice for you?"

"That's part of it." Scott thought back to the days just after Zane came out. To say his open relationship with Scott hadn't hurt his career would be a lie. There were some producers who didn't want to work with him, and he'd lost a lot of roles because he was no longer seen as "manly" enough. But there were others who did want to work with him, including the producers of *Macbeth*. The role established Zane as a serious actor, and he now had more choice parts than he could possibly take.

Scott, too, had experienced a career resurgence. *A World of Our Own* became a smash hit, and the film industry -- the same industry that once counted Scott a has-been -- had once again come knocking on his door. Like Zane, Scott had his pick of parts, but where Zane stayed in the mainstream, Scott chose mostly indie roles and art-house productions. It was hard coordinating their schedules sometimes, but Zane and Scott always put their family and their marriage first.

The fine young man standing before him was proof the strategy had paid off big time.

"Look, Conner. If you give Rebecca half of what's in your heart, your marriage is going to be a rousing success." He looked into Conner's eyes. "But if you really feel like you've made a mistake, I'll go up there right now and make the announcement."

"No." Conner took a deep breath, like he was gathering himself. "You're right. Pop. This is what I want." He gave Scott a sideways smile. "Guess it's just cold feet."

"Happens to the best of us." He hugged Conner tight. "I love you, son."

"Love you, too, Pop." Conner pulled away and straightened himself. "All right. Let's go."

Later, when Scott and Zane were sitting in the pew, Zane leaned over and said, "Do you have any idea how much I love you?"

Scott looked out across the church at their children, their family, and their friends. "Let's just say I have a really good idea."

The Lovers

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