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## DECLAN



“I’d like a moment to speak with my *fiancée* in private.” The words scrape against my tongue like sandpaper.

Iris’s eyes connect with mine. They widen before moving onto Cal in a silent plea for help. While her ability to read me like a polygraph machine makes her effective at her job, it is nothing but an inconvenience now.

Cal opens his mouth. Whatever look I send his way has him backing away slowly.

“See you both inside.” He gives Iris a half-assed salute before entering the ballroom.

The wedding planner checks the time on her watch. “I’ll be back in five minutes to grab you two. Don’t disappear on me again.” She winks before entering the kitchen.

My heart beats rapidly against my chest, and I attempt to take three deep breaths to slow the pace down.

*You did tell her to find you anyone with an XX chromosome and the ability to procreate. You’re the only one to blame here.*

I’m beyond the point of no return. Never did I think Iris would resort to this kind of plan without so much as asking me if I would agree. It’s a terrible idea that risks everything we have built together over the years.

*Calm down.*

*One...two...*

*Fuck this.*

“What the hell were you thinking?”

Iris doesn't so much as bristle from my tone, although her full lips purse from distaste. "I'm saving your ass, that's what."

"I'm failing to see how that's the case."

"Would you like me to schedule you an eye exam? I hear vision gets worse with age." Her usual joke about me being twelve years older than her falls flat.

My eyes narrow into slits. "Don't test me."

"And don't you dare look at me that way." She places a brown hand on her hip like a battle stance. The diamond on her finger stands out against her darker skin, drawing my attention to it. "If I didn't step in then you would have had to explain to a room full of a hundred guests why there's no blushing bride-to-be. What would you tell everyone? That she got lost in the mail?"

"No." I grind my teeth together. "Although a mail-order bride seems like a better alternative at the moment."

Her dark eyes damn near *twinkle*. "Face it. You've run out of time and options."

"Clearly." I give her a once-over glance.

Something flashes behind her eyes before disappearing. She lifts her chin ever so slightly in defiance while staring me straight in the eyes. "Way to make a girl feel special."

"Special is the last word I would use to describe you." It feels far too generic for someone like her.

She lets out a groan as she throws her hands in the air. "I don't know why I thought this was a good idea."

"That makes two of us. What exactly is your motive here?"

"I like you enough to want to save you from yourself. I'm sure it must be a chemical imbalance of some kind, so my therapist will be hearing all about this on Monday."

I blink at her. "Don't tell me you're marrying me out of the goodness of your heart?"

Her dark brows pull together, and she stands taller. "So what if I am?"

"Cut the act. Those ideas only exist in Dreamland films."

Her lips part. "I'm not acting, although your reaction makes me wish I was."

Something about this whole thing isn't sitting right. Why would Iris suddenly volunteer to be my wife after months of searching for a perfect



candidate?

*Because she didn't want to see you marry someone else,* the smallest voice in my head speaks up.

She couldn't... No. There's no way.

*Or could it be?*

That could explain her erratic behavior. I follow her gaze, finding her staring at the engagement ring. She traces the round edge of the diamond slowly. Dare I say *reverently*.

*Oh fuck.*

Attraction is one thing. Infatuation is a whole other deadly game I have no interest in playing anytime soon.

My molars smash together. "Are you doing all this because you're secretly in love with me?" The words leave my mouth in a rush. My heart beats hard against my rib cage, fighting for a way out.

Her having strong feelings besides indifference for me isn't something I considered. Hell, I never even *wanted* to think of it for a hundred reasons, but most of all because she's the best assistant I've ever had. Losing her isn't an option. Especially not when she is an essential part of my plan to take over my father's position.

The idea is shattered into a thousand pieces as Iris curls over and lets out the most obnoxious laugh. In the three years I've spent in her presence, I've never seen a crack in her sanity. Who knew all it would take is my ring on her finger to trigger a complete breakdown?

She reaches out for stability, grabbing onto the first thing within arm's length which happens to be me. Every muscle in my body locks up, and heat travels up my arm like I'm being consumed by flames. I stay ramrod straight as her laugh turns into some asthmatic wheeze.

Rather than feel relieved, I'm somewhat thrown off by her reaction. My stomach sours at her disdain toward loving me.

*You'll always be unlovable.* My father's voice slithers through my head at the most inconvenient moments, sending a chill across my skin.

I pluck her fingers off my bicep one by one. "Are you experiencing a kind of crisis?"

"No, you fool. And I'm not in love with you." She laughs again, making the most god-awful wheezing sound every time she inhales. "I'm doing this because we're friends."

"I will never be your friend." *And I never want to be.*

Her lips pull into a frown. “Liar. Friends help friends when they’re sick.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Remember the time I had the flu?”

I cross my arms. “I’m still not entirely convinced that was the case.”

“So you *do* remember!” Her laugh turns into a raspy cough.

“Only because I had to hire a clean-up crew to ensure every square inch of the place was scrubbed down.”

“Fine. What about the time I helped you when you got drunk on a business trip?”

“I never wanted your assistance.”

“You were tripping over your own feet and asking me to introduce you to my twin you didn’t know about.”

My tolerance for vodka is right up there with my tolerance toward people—nonexistent.

“Drunk you is so much nicer. You asked me to tuck you into bed and sing you a lullaby.”

“Now I know you’re lying. You’re one of the worst singers I know.” My lips threaten to curve into a smile, but I settle on a grimace instead.

She throws her hands in the air. “Okay, fine. I lied. But I wouldn’t have said no if you asked! Because friends help other friends.”

I’m tempted to pay any price for the word *friends* to be erased from dictionaries everywhere. I don’t have them. I don’t want them. And I don’t want to be them, especially not hers.

Her raspy laugh turns into a fit of coughs. Before I can stop myself, I grab her tiny purse from the table and shove it into her hands. “Fix that god-awful sound.”

She sifts through her bag to find her inhaler. “Concerned about my well-being?”

“Solely for a self-serving purpose.”

“Of course. How could I forget.” She smiles around the opening of the dispenser before breathing in the medication.

“Let’s get a few things straight.”

Her brows pull together, and her mouth opens, but I silence her. “Any kindness I showed to you in the past is strictly out of respect for you as my assistant. I don’t waste my time on something as pointless as friendship, so if you believe there was anything platonic between us, that falls on you, not me.”



Unlike most women who weep in my presence, Iris only shrugs from my harshness. “Silly me for believing you actually could possess any feelings besides disdain toward anyone else. I can assure you it won’t happen again.”

“I don’t feel anything besides a burning desire to achieve my end goal.”

She sighs. “There’s more to life than destroying your father.”

I ignore her as I check my watch, noting we’re running out of time. “I need to set some ground rules now.”

“Rules.” Her eyes widen to their limits.

“Every look.” The unsteady beat of my heart floods my ears. Her breath catches in her throat as I cup her cheek. My thumb strokes her soft skin, rubbing back and forth like I could brand my name with touch alone. “Every touch.”

Her eyes shut. Every cell of my body burns to retract myself. To put some distance between us because I shouldn’t touch her like this. It blurs too many lines. But I’m useless as I breathe in her coconut scent, and my lungs protest the invasion. “Every single kiss...is nothing but a lie.” My lips brush over the corner of her mouth, and my body feels as if it has been struck with jumper cables.

Her eyes snap open as I pull away, a storm clearly brewing in her head. I pocket my hands, appearing unfazed while her chest rises and falls with each ragged breath she releases.

“You—I—wha—” Her speech is as jumbled as her thoughts. I should feel flattered at my ability to incapacitate her, but it throws me off more than anything. My touch shouldn’t cause that kind of reaction. Not if she was honest when she said she was only doing this because she considers me a *friend*.

I seek to gain control over the situation again. To throw up some semblance of a barrier around myself. “There is nothing I won’t do to earn my inheritance. Remember that when you forget this is only a game to me.”

Her mouth opens, but she’s cut off by that shrill voice that will haunt me forever.

“All right, you two. The guests are getting antsy to meet the future Mr. and Mrs.” The wedding planner interrupts us. She points her clipboard toward the entrance to the ballroom like a military commander.

“Are you ready?” Iris latches onto my hand. Her smile is a watered-down version of the one she offered Cal earlier.

I remain silent, knowing anything that comes out of my mouth will only