

CHAPTER ONE

Iris



“It’s a crime to celebrate a day like today all by yourself.” Cal, my best friend and boss’s brother, interrupts me. Despite the rumpled state of his suit and dirty blond hair, he steals the attention of multiple waitresses who pass by our table.

I lock my phone and muster up a smile. “I’m not the one getting married.”

His eyes flicker over my face. “No, but you’re the puppet master who accomplished the impossible.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“Now I know something is wrong with you. Are you...sad Declan is getting married?” His voice drops lower than usual.

A laugh bursts out of me. “What? *No.*”

“Then what’s wrong?”

My head hangs, and a few spiral curls fall in front of my eyes.

I run a hand down my dress to smooth out a few nonexistent wrinkles. The cheery lavender fabric stands out against my brown skin, making me seem far happier than I feel. “I just got an email telling me I didn’t get the job.”

“Shit. I’m sorry to hear that. I know how hard you worked on the interview presentation.”

After the months I spent working on a presentation for the Kane Company’s human resources department, they rejected my job transfer. It stings more than it should. While I wasn’t exactly shooting for the stars, with an entry-level HR position, I had a good idea with a promising future. One that could benefit countless dyslexics stuck in a corporate rut. My plan could take the company to the next level, if only they’d give me a chance.

You can try again next time.

My smile wobbles. “I guess it wasn’t meant to be.”

“That’s some bullshit if you ask me.”

I laugh. “It’s true. At least Declan never found out. Could you imagine if I told him and then I didn’t even get the job? He would’ve never let me live it down.”

“He does tend to gloat.”

“Hence the party.” I point at the ginormous balloon arch with a massive grin.

Cal raises a brow at the flickering neon *She Said Yes* sign. “Understated. He’ll love it.”

I bat my lashes with faux sweetness. “I simply planned a party like he asked me to. He should have specified what kind of event he wanted.”

“Remind me to never piss you off.”

“I have a whole plan for the day that happens.”

Cal fake shudders. “Where is the wife-to-be?”

“Declan wanted to meet with her before the announcement.”

His eyes widen. “Why the hell would you let him do that?”

“Umm...because he hasn’t met her yet?”

“Exactly! That’s why it’s a terrible idea!” Cal runs his hands through his thick waves.

“You think he’s going to make her change her mind?”

“Knowing my brother, it wouldn’t take much convincing.”

“She signed a contract. It’s a done deal.”

“If you say so...” He shrugs.

“Maybe I should go check on them.” I turn toward the elevators.

Cal loops his arm in mine. “No. You’re taking the night off.”

“But—”

“You’re probably right. Declan wouldn’t risk losing it all now by doing something stupid. Even he knows when to hold back.”

“Now I know you’re lying.”

He chuckles. “Come on. Let’s go inside and wait for Declan. Just think about the way he will try so hard not to scowl and fail anyway. Hell, I don’t think I’ve seen him so much as look in someone’s direction without sneering since—” He cuts himself off.

“*Since?*”

He avoids looking me in the eyes. “Since forever. I’m pretty sure his dick is permanently chafed from jacking off every night.”

I smack his shoulder with a laugh. “Shut up! He’s my *boss*.”

“Doesn’t make it any less true. I’m surprised said appendage hasn’t fallen off from that kind of abuse.”

I let out another giggle.

“*Callahan*.” Declan’s voice booms.

A few stragglers scurry inside of the ballroom at the sound of Declan’s voice.

“He sure knows how to clear a room,” Cal says.

Whatever happiness I saw in Cal's eyes dies the moment Declan stops by us with a frown. The air morphs into something cold, with Declan's icy glare threatening to reverse climate change. His massive body blocks my view of the entire lobby. The spotlight behind him only highlights the sharpness in his features, bringing out the darkness in his eyes and the edges of his jaw.

Compared to Cal's golden-boy look of blond hair and blue eyes, Declan reminds me of the deepest part of the ocean—cold, dark, and unnervingly quiet. Like a monster lurking within reach, only a breath away from making someone his prey. From his dark hair to the permanent grimace etched into his face, he gives off a feeling that makes everyone turn in the opposite direction.

Well, everyone except me. Some might say he earned my loyalty through a paycheck, but that isn't the case. We share a mutual respect for one another that has stood the test of time. While our first few months working together were rocky, my commitment to succeeding as his assistant helped pave the way to our relationship today.

Somehow we click although we're opposites in almost every single way. I'm a Black woman. He's a White male. I smile and he scowls. He wakes up early every morning to work out while I wouldn't be caught dead at the gym unless it was to grab a smoothie at the café. We couldn't be more different if we tried, yet we make it work. Or at least *I* do.

I step between the two brothers. "Declan, what are you doing out here? Is it time for the announcement already?"

Declan drags his eyes away from Cal and down toward me. Most people cower under his stare, but I straighten my spine and look at him head-on like my nana taught me.

“She quit.”

I blink. “Who quit? The wedding planner?”

“No. The wife. Belinda.”

“Bethany quit?!”

Cal dares to look smug.

Declan doesn't bother looking away from my face as he detonates all my carefully laid plans. “Yes. Her.”

“This can't be happening.” I refuse to believe that he ruined months of my hard work. Finding him a woman willing to marry him and have his child so he could become CEO and earn his inheritance was nearly impossible.

Refusing to believe it doesn't change the facts.

“I hate to be the one to say I told you so...” Cal says.

“This is all your fault.” I glare at him.

Cal raises both of his hands up in the air. “No! It's not my fault my brother's attitude is bigger than his dick.”

Declan smacks the back of Cal's head. I ignore their bickering as I pace across the carpet, circling around them.

“You should have eloped while you had the chance.” Cal drains his glass before stealing my half-finished flute.

“Speaking from personal experience?”

Cal's nostrils flare. His hands ball up at his sides before he takes a deep breath and lets the anger melt off him. He turns his attention toward me. “That is why my grandpa made that inheritance clause in the first place. He knew Declan wasn't ready to become CEO and thought a family might soften him up. I mean, how can someone like him inspire the masses when he always seeks to destroy everyone around him?”

Declan's jaw clenches. Cal raises an eyebrow in a silent taunt.

I point at Cal. “Quit acting like a child and use that big brain

of yours to help us out of this mess.” Declan’s eyes are already focused on me as I turn toward him. “And you stop taking your anger out on everyone else. Your screwing up has nothing to do with Cal and everything to do with *you*.”

He only stares at me with that blank gaze I hate more than anything.

Cal scoffs. “Of course he fucked this up. His latest software update didn’t include a manual on how to be a decent human being.”

“You’re both hopeless,” I grumble under my breath as I grab my phone and dial Bethany’s number. It rings twice before going straight to voicemail. I call again but this time the voicemail picks up right away. “Shit!”

“No answer?” Cal has the audacity to sound amused.

“What did you do?” I hiss in Declan’s direction.

Declan picks at a piece of invisible lint on the sleeve of his jacket as if this is the most boring conversation of his day. “She wasn’t cut out for the job.”

“And what would you like me to do with that information given the fact that we have a hundred people waiting to hear about your engagement to some mystery woman? I’m all ears.”

He stares at me with narrowed eyes, and I glare right back at him with my hands on my hips.

Cal makes a loud slurping sound as if to remind us of his presence. “I’m also interested in hearing how this will all pan out. Father will be just thrilled to hear about Declan’s failed engagement.”

Oh my God. While his father is unaware of Declan’s letter from Brady Kane detailing the requirements for his inheritance, he isn’t stupid. There’s a reason he is a successful businessman after all. I have no doubt if he catches the faintest hint that this

engagement is false, he will go running to Brady's lawyer. And if the lawyer believes him, Declan could lose everything.

Think, Iris. Think. I try Bethany's number one more time, hoping a third time is a charm. The voicemail can be heard loud and clear through the tiny phone's speaker.

Cal whistles before making an explosion noise. "That's the sound of Declan's future dying."

"Don't you have somewhere to be? A seedy bar perhaps?" Declan snaps.

"Why pay for alcohol when I can get it for free on your dime?" Cal grins as he dangles his champagne flute in the air.

I try to tune them out as I consider my options.

What can you do? Quit once and for all?

No. I refuse to give up now. Not when I'm so close to helping Declan achieve his goal.

You could call the backup option you have, but Declan made her cry—

"You know, Iris is single." Cal's smile turns sinister. "She could step into the role like a natural since no one knows you better than her."

"No," Declan snaps.

Wait.

Yes.

Me!

It's not like I have much stopping me from stepping in as a substitute. With no boyfriend to speak of or prior commitments, I could easily replace Bethany.

Just because you can doesn't mean you should.

Well, if not me, then who? We are out of time and suitable fiancées.

I open my mouth only to be interrupted by a squeal from Tati, Declan's wedding planner. "There you are! I was wondering where the husband-to-be snuck off to." Tati's high-pitched voice echoes.

"You can't pay for this kind of entertainment." Cal drains my glass before leaning against the table with a smile.

"Where is the fiancée I've heard so little about?" Tati waves her clipboard like a magic wand.

I'm glad I withheld Bethany's identity just in case something like this happened.

You can't be seriously thinking about marrying him. You don't even love him.

I don't need to love him. It's a contract, not a love match.

Declan cuts off my thoughts, "Beatr—"

"Her name is *Tati*, dear." I press my hand against his chest. His body goes rigid, and I give him another pat in a way that says *act naturally*.

His dark brows pull together as he stares down at my hand like he wants to rip it off finger by finger. "What are you doing?" His words come out sharp enough to stab straight through my perfectly crafted exterior.

"Saving you the trouble of having to introduce me and explain our story." I shoot him the sweetest smile I can manage given the circumstance.

Are you really going to do this, Iris? the voice of reason speaks up.

I don't see much of an option here.

This is marriage! It's not something you can just back out of when you get scared.

I shut down every thought speaking out against my plan. It's only a few years of my life.

What about having a child?!

Well, I always wanted to be a mother.

Yeah. In five years!

At least I can get started on my five-year plan a bit ahead of schedule.

I swallow the lump in my throat and turn my attention back toward Tati. I step out of Declan's stiff embrace before grabbing his hand. The muscles underneath his suit bunch up, visibly tightening underneath the material of his jacket.

Great. We'll have to work on his aversion to your touch later.

"Tati, I wasn't fully honest with you when we spoke over the phone."

Her smile dims. "Oh."

"I was a bit hesitant about introducing myself as anything but Declan's assistant before meeting you in person. See, I've been working at the Kane Company for quite some time, and you know how easily gossip spreads."

She bobs her head as she clutches her clipboard to her chest.

"Of course. I get it."

"I was so scared of what people would think about me dating my boss, but we can't hide it anymore. We don't *want* to hide it." My voice hitches without me trying.

Declan's only sign of distress is the way he blinks at me twice. I've *never* seen him blink twice. Not when a deal he had been working on for two years blew up and sure as hell not when his grandfather died.

It makes me...*unsettled*.

I steel my spine and turn back toward Tati. "We're ready to move forward with our future. There's no reason to keep our love a secret anymore."

Cal gives me two thumbs-up behind Tati's back. *Oscar-worthy*

he mouths before prompting Declan to smile with his two middle fingers.

Tati's whole face lights up as she takes in our hands. "Wow! Tonight must be such a big deal for you both then, for multiple reasons." Her eyes drop to my naked ring finger.

"Oh, right. The ring!" I swing my gaze toward Declan's face.

The tic in his jaw is present for everyone to see.

Sorry, Declan, I'm saving you from ruining your entire future, even though it might not seem like it right now.

Declan tugs his hand from my grasp. He pulls out a platinum band with a beautiful solitaire diamond from his pocket. I'm somewhat surprised by the elegant ring. It's nothing like the ungodly monstrosity I chose for his future wife, which only confuses me. Did he pick up the wrong one at the store? I knew I shouldn't have trusted him with something so important, but he insisted.

Tati raises a brow in silent question, yanking me back into the moment.

"I asked Declan to hold on to it since we need to get it resized. The damn thing flew off my finger the moment I threw myself into his arms after he proposed."

"Oh no!" Tati pouts.

Cal slides into Tati's eyesight. "I told my brother it was a bad idea to propose in the middle of a rainstorm, but he insisted it was the perfect moment because Iris loves them."

"I've never seen anyone get down on their knees quicker than him." I wink at Tati and her cheeks flush.

Declan's frown becomes more pronounced, which only makes me laugh.