



Marriage  
for

One

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
ELLA MAISE

Marriage  
for  
One

ELLA MAISE

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*For anyone who has ever felt like they didn't belong.*

## CHAPTER ONE

---

ROSE

**N**ote to my past self: Do NOT, I repeat, do not say yes to marrying the handsome stranger you happen to know absolutely nothing about.

“Do you, Rose Coleson, solemnly declare to take...”

*No. Nope.*

“Jack Hawthorne to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

*Hmmm. Let me think about that. I don't. Nope.*

“Do you promise to love, honor, cherish, and keep him for as long as you both shall live?”

*Keep him?*

Wide-eyed and a little shaky, I stared straight ahead as the officiant said the words I was dreading. Was I really doing this? When the silence in the mostly empty and sort of depressing room stretched on and it was my turn to speak up, I was on the verge of hyperventilating. I tried my best to swallow the lump in my throat so I could speak, but I was afraid the words that desperately wanted to break free weren't *Yes, I do*.

I wasn't getting married in a lush green garden while the few friends I had cheered us on as I had always imagined I would. I wasn't laughing or crying from extreme happiness as every bride did at one point during the ceremony. I had no beautiful wedding bouquet, only one single pink rose which Jack Hawthorne had thrust into my hands without a word right after we met in front of city hall. I wasn't even wearing a white dress, let alone my dream wedding gown. Jack Hawthorne was wearing a tailored black suit that was quite possibly worth a year of my rent, if not more. It wasn't a tux, but it was just as good. Next to him, I looked pretty cheap. Instead of a beautiful wedding dress, I had on a simple blue dress—it was the only thing

I owned that was expensive and appropriate enough for the occasion, yet somehow it was still...cheap—and I was standing next to the wrong man, one who did nothing but frown and glower.

Also, there was the handholding, his grip surprisingly tight around mine, especially compared to my loose hold. Such a simple act, but holding a stranger's hand while you're getting married? Not fun. Hell, forget about handholding—I was about to be the wife of a man I knew nothing more about than what a quick Google search had provided.

Yet I had willingly and knowingly agreed to this, hadn't I?

"Miss Coleson?"

As my breaths started to come faster and panic began to take hold of me, I tried to pull my hand out of Jack Hawthorne's grip only to feel his fingers tighten around mine even more. I didn't know what I was thinking or what *he* thought I was going to do, but I couldn't lie and say running away hadn't crossed my mind.

His tight hold was a small warning, and then it was gone. My gaze jumped to his face, but he was staring straight ahead, eyes on the officiant, his sharp features set in stone. Cold. So cold. I thought I saw a muscle in his jaw ticking, but then I blinked, and it was gone.

The man showed his emotions about as much as a cement block did, so I tried to do what he was doing: focus on the present.

"Miss Coleson?"

Clearing my throat, I did my best to put steel into my voice so I wouldn't cry. *Not here. Not now.* Not every marriage is about love. What had love offered me anyway other than heartbreak and late-night emotional eating?

My heart was beating loud and fast in my chest. "I do," I finally replied with a smile I was sure made me look deranged.

*I don't. I think I really, really don't.*

As the smiling man repeated the same words for my non-smiling almost husband, I tuned everything and everyone out up until it was time for the rings.

God, to think I had been planning my wedding to a different guy only a few months earlier, and more than that, to think I'd thought weddings were always romantic... This wedding felt more like I was about to skydive from 13,000 feet, something I would much rather die than try, and yet there I was. Not only was I *not* in a garden surrounded by greenery and flowers,

the only piece of furniture in the room was a couch that was a rather ugly shade of orange, and for some reason, that single piece of furniture and the color of it annoyed and offended me the most. Go figure.

“Please face each other,” the officiant said, and I followed his instructions like a robot. Feeling numb, I let Jack reach for my other hand, and when his fingers gave mine a tiny squeeze, this time I met his questioning eyes. I swallowed, tried to ignore the little jump my heart gave and offered him a small smile. He was truly striking in a cold, calculating sort of way. I’d be lying if I said my heart hadn’t given a small jump the first time I’d laid eyes on him. Completely involuntarily. He had the strong-and-silent thing down pat. His equally striking blue eyes dipped to my lips and then came back to my eyes. When I felt him slowly push a ring onto my finger, I looked down and saw a beautiful wedding band with a half-circle of round diamonds staring back at me. Surprised, I looked up to meet his eyes, but his attention was on my finger as he gently rolled the ring back and forth with his thumb and index finger. The sensation was as alien as it could get.

“It’s okay,” I whispered when he didn’t stop playing with it. “It’s a little big, but it’s okay.”

He let go of my hand and the ring then looked at me. “I’ll take care of it.”

“There is no need to do that. This is fine.”

I didn’t know if Jack Hawthorne ever smiled. So far—the three whole times I’d seen him—I hadn’t been a witness to it, at least not a genuine smile, but I would have assumed if he was marrying someone he was in love with instead of me, there would at least be a small playful grin on his lips. He didn’t look like the grinning type, but surely there would be a hint of it. Unfortunately, neither one of us was the picture of a happy newlywed couple.

I reached for his hand to put on *his* wedding band, but call it nerves, clumsiness, or a sign, if you will—before I could even touch his hand, the cheap, thin ring slipped from my shaky fingers and I watched it fly away from me in slow motion. After the surprisingly loud clinking sound it made when it hit the floor, I ran after it, apologizing to no one in particular, and had to drop to my knees so I could save it before it rolled under the ugly orange couch. Although the light blue dress I had chosen to wear was by no means short, I still had to put one of my hands on my butt to cover myself

so I wouldn't flash everyone as I caught the damn thing before I had to crawl on my knees.

"I got it! I got it!" I yelled a little too enthusiastically over my shoulder, holding the ring up as if I had won a trophy. When I saw the unimpressed expressions around me, I felt my cheeks turn a bright shade of red. I dropped my arm, closed my eyes, and released a very long sigh. When I turned around on my knees, I noticed that my ringless, almost husband had made it to my side, already offering his hand to pull me up. After I got back on my feet with his help, I dusted off my dress. Looking up to his face, I belatedly noticed how stiffly he was holding himself—jaw clenched, the muscle tick definitely back.

Had I done something wrong?

"I'm sorry," I whispered, thoroughly embarrassed, and got a curt nod in response.

The officiant cleared his throat and gave us a small smile. "Shall we continue?"

Before he could drag me back, I discreetly leaned toward my soon-to-be-maybe husband and whispered, "Look, I'm not sure about...you look..." I paused and released another long breath before gathering enough courage to look straight into his eyes. "We don't have to do this if you've changed your mind. Are you sure? And I mean really, really sure you want to go through with this?"

His eyes searched mine as we ignored the other people in the room, and my heart rate picked up as I waited for his answer. As much as I was reluctant to do this, if he'd changed his mind, I'd be screwed six ways to Sunday and we both knew that.

"Let's get this over with," he said eventually.

That was all I got.

*Lovely.*

What an encouraging start to a new marriage—a fake one, yes, but still.

We walked back to stand in front of the officiant and I quickly and successfully managed to push the ring onto his finger on my second try. It fit him perfectly. Next to the beauty he had gotten me, the flat wedding band I had picked up for him just the day before looked just as cheap as my dress did, but it was the only thing I could afford. It didn't look like he cared anyway. I watched with curious eyes as he stared down at the ring and

then made a fist of the hand I'd just put the ring on, his knuckles whitening with the force of it before he took my hand again.

My attention shifted as I caught the end of the officiant's words: "...I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

That was it? I was married? Just like that?

I looked at my now official husband and didn't know how to react for a second. His eyes caught mine. What was a simple kiss after saying I do to a stranger, right? Thinking he was waiting to see what my move would be and wanting to get it over with so we could get the hell out of there, I was the one who took the first step. Our hands still clasped together, I avoided his eyes, rose up on my toes, and brushed a small kiss on his cheek. Just as I let go of him and was about to back up, his now free hand grabbed my wrist in a gentle hold and our eyes met.

For the sake of the few people around us, I forced another smile on my face and watched him slowly lean down to press a kiss to the edge of my mouth.

My heartbeat quickened because I thought he had lingered for a second too long, and that was a little too close and too long for comfort, but considering we were playing a part, I supposed an innocent kiss didn't mean too much. It didn't for me, and I was sure it definitely didn't for him.

"Congratulations. I wish you two a happy life together." The officiant's voice broke us apart, and I reached for the man's waiting hand.

As our only witness, who I knew for a fact was Jack Hawthorne's driver, shuffled around to congratulate the man who was now my husband, I closed my eyes and willed my heart to take it easy and look on the bright side of things. This whole charade benefitted me more than it did Jack Hawthorne. It didn't matter that I had been engaged to another man, Joshua, just weeks ago. This particular marriage to this particular man had nothing to do with love.

"Are you ready to leave?" my very real and official yet still fake husband asked, and I opened my eyes.

I wasn't. Suddenly I was feeling all hot and cold, which wasn't a good sign, but I met his gaze and nodded. "Yes."

Up until we exited the building, the driver following us from a safe distance, we didn't utter a single word to each other. Then the driver disappeared to get the car and we just stood there, watching the people around us in an awkward silence as if neither one of us knew how we'd

ended up out on the street exactly. After a few moments, we both started to speak at the same time.

“We should—”

“I think—”

“We should get back,” he said firmly. “I need to be at the airport in an hour if I’m gonna make my flight.”

“Okay. I don’t want to hold you up. I’m gonna need to change first before I get back to the coffee shop, and I can easily take the subway back to my apartment. I don’t want you to get stuck in traffic just because I—”

“It’s fine,” he answered distractedly. His eyes were not on me but on the black car that had just pulled up to the curb. “Please,” he murmured, and I felt his palm briefly touch the small of my back before it was gone then he moved to open the door to the car.

*Shoot!*

I didn’t know him enough to argue about how I’d get home, not to mention arguing was the last thing I had in me to do. In the time it had taken us to walk outside, I had started to feel sick to my stomach with each step. As he stared at me expectantly, I tried not to drag my feet too much as I took his unspoken offer and got in the car.

When he got in after me and closed the door, I shut my eyes with the finality of everything.

*Fuck me, I’m married.* Didn’t matter how many times I repeated it to myself, I still couldn’t believe I’d agreed to this.

“Everything okay?”

The hard, rough tone of his voice broke me out of my jumbled thoughts, and I turned my head to look at him with a small smile. “Of course. I should really say thank yo—”

“You don’t need to.” He gave me a curt nod before I could even finish then focused on his driver. “Raymond, change of plans. We need to drop by the apartment first, and then we will head to the airport.”

“Yes, sir.”

I swallowed and fisted my hands on my lap. *Now what?* I thought. *Now do we talk? Do we not talk at all? How does this work?* Surprisingly, he was the first one to break the bleak silence.

“I might be out of reach for a few hours each day, depending on my meetings, but I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.” Was he talking to his driver or me? I couldn’t tell. “If something comes up with Bryan or even

*Jodi*, if they give you any trouble about our marriage, leave me a message. Don't talk to either one of them until you hear back from me." Me then. He was staring straight ahead, but he was talking to me because Jodi and Bryan were my cousins. "If everything goes as planned, I'll be back in a week at most." He paused. "If you wish...you can accompany me."

*Nope.*

"Oh, thank you, but I can't. I need to work on the coffee shop, and as much—"

"You're right," he interrupted before I could finish. "I'd rather go myself as well."

*Well, then...*

I nodded and looked out the window. I wasn't sure if I'd managed to hide my relief well enough. Him being away for a week meant seven more days I could take to come to terms with my decision. I'd take every extra minute I could get.

"Where are you going again?" I asked, realizing I had no idea.

"London."

"Oh, I've always wanted to visit London—anywhere in Europe, really. You're lucky that you get to travel. I don't know if lawyers do a lot of traveling, of course, but..."

I paused and waited for him to say something, if nothing else just to help me make pointless conversation, but I had a feeling it wasn't happening. I wasn't wrong.

"Do you have a client in London?" I tried again, but I knew it was hopeless.

Jack lifted his arm and checked his watch while shaking his head as an answer to my question.

"Raymond, take the next turn. Get us out of here."

When there was nothing but silence in the back of the car, I closed my eyes and pressed my temple against the cold glass of the window.

Ever since I'd said okay to this crazy plan, I had done my best not to think about it too hard. Now it was too late to do any kind of thinking. We hadn't even had time to discuss where I would live. With him? Without him? Would we even get along if we lived together? *Joshua...* Would he hear that I had gotten married? And so soon after our breakup, too. Suddenly, every single question I had and ones I hadn't even known I had all rushed into my mind all at once.

Ten minutes had passed where no one in the car had uttered a single word. For some reason, that was causing me to panic more than anything. What had I gotten myself into, really? If I couldn't even manage to have a simple conversation with the guy, what the hell were we gonna do for the next twelve or twenty-four months? Stare at each other? Feeling sick, I pressed my palm against my stomach as if I could hold it all in—all the emotions, disappointments, forgotten dreams—but it was too late for that. I felt the first tear slide down my cheek, and even though I quickly tried to brush it away with the back of my hand because there was no reason for me to cry, I couldn't stop all the others that followed. In just a few minutes, I was full-on silently crying, the tears a quiet stream I didn't know how to stop.

Very aware that my mascara had probably made a mess of my face, I cried without making even a peep until the car came to a stop. When I opened my eyes and realized we were heading toward the wrong side of Central Park, I forgot about my tears and looked at Jack.

“I think...” I started, but the words died in my throat when I saw the expression on his face.

*Oh shit!* If I thought he had been angry when I dropped the ring, I was sorely mistaken. His brows snapped together as his eyes roamed my face and the tension in the car tripled.

I tried my best to wipe the evidence of my tears away without looking into a mirror. “This is the wrong side—”

“Take her to the apartment, please. I'll get to the airport on my own,” Jack said to the driver. Then his expression closed up, his face blanking as he addressed me. “This was a mistake. We shouldn't have done this.”

I was still staring at him in shock when he got out of the car, leaving his bride—AKA me—behind.

*This was a mistake.*

Words any girl who had gotten married only thirty minutes earlier would want to hear, right? No? Yeah, I didn't think so either.

After all, I was Rose, and he was Jack. We were doomed from the very beginning with those names. You know... the *Titanic* and all that.

The number of times Jack Hawthorne smiled: zero.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

JACK

After spending days trying to ignore what I had done, I was finally back in New York and still nowhere near ready to face the clusterfuck I had created. Exiting the car the moment Raymond pulled up in front of my building, I walked past the doorman and stepped into the elevator. As I was checking my voicemails, I tried not to think about who and exactly what kind of situation would be waiting for me in my apartment.

Would I have to carry on a conversation with her? Answer more questions?

I certainly hoped not because talking to her was the last thing I wanted to do. Not if I was planning on sticking with my plan of keeping her at arm's length.

The moment I stepped through the threshold, I knew she wasn't there. Feeling both relieved and annoyed at the same time—relieved because I was alone just as I liked, annoyed because she wasn't where she was supposed to be—I dumped my luggage in my bedroom and slowly walked through the apartment, just to make sure. Turning lights on and off, I checked every room, inspecting everything, looking for anything that was out of place, looking to see if *someone* had even been there after I left. When I reached the last room—the room she was supposed to be staying in—and found it just as it had been when I'd left for London, I rubbed my neck, hoping it would help with the headache I could feel coming on. Walking through the room, I stepped out onto the terrace to stare down at the busy city, wondering what I was supposed to do next.

*What have I done?*

---

A FEW WEEKS EARLIER...

As soon as I got the call from the lobby, I walked out of my office to wait for her in front of the elevators. My main goal was to intercept her before she could get to the meeting room where her remaining family members would join her in another thirty minutes. A few minutes later, the elevator doors slid open with a ping and Rose Coleson stepped out. Her brown hair was down in waves, her bangs long enough to almost cover her eyes. She had minimal makeup on, and she was wearing simple black jeans and an even a simpler white blouse. I waited as she walked over to the reception desk.

“Hello. How can I help you?” Deb, our receptionist, asked with a practiced smile on her face.

I heard Rose clear her throat and saw her fingers grip the edge of the front desk. “Hi. I’m here for the Coleson mee—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Deb noticed me waiting and, ignoring Rose completely, turned her gaze to me. “Mr. Hawthorne? Is there anything I can do for you? Your two-thirty appoint—”

“No, there isn’t.” Ignoring Deb’s surprised look, I focused on Rose Coleson. “Miss Coleson.” When she heard her name, she glanced at me over her shoulder and let go of the desk to face me. “Your meeting is with me,” I continued. “If you could follow me.”

Deb cut in as Rose took a step to follow me. “Mr. Hawthorne, I think you are mistaken. The Colesons’ meeti—”

“*Thank you, Deb,*” I interjected, not caring whether she took offense at my tone or not. “Miss Coleson,” I repeated, maybe a bit harsher than I’d intended. I needed to get this meeting done and move on with my day. “This way, please.”

After a quick glance at Deb, Rose moved closer. “Mr. Hawthorne? I think there might be a mistake here. I’m supposed to meet with Mr. Reeves —”

“I can assure you there are no mistakes. If you wouldn’t mind stepping into my office for some privacy, there are some things I’d like to go over with you.” I watched, impatiently, as she thought it over.

“I was told I was needed to sign something and then I could leave. I have another appointment in Brooklyn, so I can’t stay for too long.”

I gave her a curt nod.

After a brief hesitation and another look at our receptionist, she followed me toward my office in silence.

After a long walk, I opened the glass door for her to step in. I reminded Cynthia, my assistant, not to forward any calls, and then I waited until Rose was settled in her seat. Holding her bulky brown handbag on her lap, she gave me an expectant look as I took my own seat behind my desk.

“I thought the Colesons’ lawyer was Tim Reeves, at least the estate lawyer. Has there been a change?” she asked before I could utter a word.

“No, Miss Coleson. Tim is the one who drafted the will, and he is the one handling everything at the moment.”

“Then I’m still not sure—”

“I’m not an estate lawyer, but I did help the team who was handling your late father’s corporate cases on a few occasions last year. Can I get you anything to drink? Coffee, maybe? Or tea?”

“No, thank you. Like I said, I have another app—”

“Appointment you need to get to,” I finished for her. “I understand. That’s—”

“He was my uncle, by the way.”

“Excuse me?”

“You said father. Gary Coleson was my uncle, not father.”

I raised an eyebrow. This was something I already knew about, but apparently I was too distracted to remember every detail. “That’s right. I apologize.”

“That’s okay... I just wanted to mention it in case you weren’t already aware. I’m afraid it’s also the reason why I wasn’t mentioned in the will, which brings us back full circle, Mr. Hawthorne. I’m not sure what you could possibly want to talk to me about.”

This wasn’t going like I had planned. Granted, I hadn’t given how I wanted to do this much thought, but it was still not going smoothly enough.

“I read the will,” I admitted after taking in the stiff way she was holding herself: sitting on the very edge of her seat, impatient and ready to bolt. Maybe she’d appreciate a more straightforward approach, which was something I excelled at.

“Okay,” she prompted, raising an eyebrow.

“I’d like to talk to you about the property on Madison Avenue that was owned by your uncle.”

Her shoulders stiffened. “What about it?”

“I’d like to know what your plan is going forward regarding the property. I believe you and Gary had signed a contract a little while before his death indicating that you would have use of the property for a short time period, something like two years, and would only pay him a small amount of rent instead of the actual worth of the place. At the end of the two years, you would relocate. Correct?”

She frowned at me but nodded.

Satisfied that she was following me, I continued, “The contract was entered into the will, but Gary chose to add a stipulation I believe you only recently learned about. In the case of something happening to him during those two years, he wanted ownership of the property to transfer to your husband—”

“If I were married,” Rose finished, her chin held high.

“Yes.” I pointedly looked at her left hand and she followed my gaze. “If you were married, that is.”

Her eyes lifted back to mine in the next second and I watched a frown form between her brows.

“I already know about all of this,” she explained slowly. “Gary was excited about me marrying Joshua, my fiancé. They got along well, and he liked him—we both had a business degree, but evidently it looked like he trusted Joshua more—”

“Your *ex*-fiancé, you mean,” I reminded her.

She paused at my words, but her fingers finally let go of the death grip she had on her handbag as she tried to follow my meaning. “Yes. Right. Of course, *ex*-fiancé. It’s still a habit. We only broke up a few weeks ago. I’m sorry, but how do you know he’s my *ex*-fiancé?”

I paused, trying to be careful with my words. “I do my due diligence, Miss Coleson. Please continue.”

She studied me for a long moment as I waited patiently. “I wasn’t even aware that he would enter our contract into his will. I was also never supposed to have ownership of the property, that wasn’t in the contract. He was letting me have use of the property for two years only, after the time limit, I was to leave. Then my uncle and his wife, Angela, died in the car crash and I learned that in the will he was planning on leaving the property to my husband.”

“Maybe that was his way of giving you something. A surprise maybe. A wedding gift of some kind.”

“Yes. Maybe. Maybe that was his way of leaving us the place, but I’m not married to Joshua at the moment, am I? So I get nothing.” She shrugged. “I only knew that Gary thought Joshua’s presence would be necessary if I was serious about opening my own coffee shop. I disagreed with him. It didn’t matter that we’d started discussing the possibility of me using the space a year prior to Joshua even coming into my life. He didn’t think I could handle the work on my own, and Joshua was in between jobs so he thought it made sense. I didn’t. I believe he trusted Joshua more than he trusted me because he went to a better school. Also, can’t forget about the fact that I’m a woman and Joshua is a man. He was old-fashioned and didn’t believe women could handle themselves in the business world. However, when we talked about it again and I told him about my plans for the place, he agreed to let me use his property. Joshua wasn’t a part of the conversation then—or the contract, for that matter. He never made stipulations other than the fact that I’d only be able to use the space for two years and then I’d have to find myself a different location. That was all the help he was willing to give me. Nothing more, nothing less. I was thankful either way. I have no idea why he felt it was necessary to add Joshua in his will regarding something concerning me. And why am I telling you all this?”

I leaned back in my seat, getting comfortable. Now we were getting somewhere. “He still isn’t part of the conversation.”

“I... Excuse me?”

“Gary never used your ex-fiancé’s name. He never specified who would be the owner of the property in case he passed away. There is only the mention of a ‘husband.’”

“I don’t see how that matters. I was supposed to get married to Joshua sometime this year and he knew that, but in the end, I didn’t. Joshua broke up with me two days after their death. So, because I’m not married, Mr. Hawthorne, and I’m not planning on marrying anyone any time soon, I don’t get to use the space let alone own it. I talked to my cousins, Bryan and Jodi, but they aren’t interested in honoring the contract I’d signed with their dad, which means I’m not going to be able to open my coffee shop. At this point, I’m just trying to accept the fact that I threw away fifty thousand dollars—fifty thousand dollars that I managed to save by working for I

don't even know how many years at this point—on a space that was never going to be mine anyway. All that aside, I lost two people who were important to me in the same car crash that day. Even though I was Gary's niece, they never saw me as their own flesh and blood, but they were all I had after my dad passed away when I was nine. Whatever the case may be, instead of letting me get lost in the system Gary agreed to take me in and that's all that matters. So, to answer your previous question, I have no plans regarding the property because I'm not allowed to use it anymore."

A little out of breath and, from what I could tell, a lot pissed off, she stood up and hooked her bag over her shoulder.

"Okay, I really don't want to be rude, but I believe this was a waste of both our time. I was a little curious when I was following you here, I'll admit that much, but I don't have time to go over things I already know for no reason at all. I have a job interview I need to get to, and I can't afford to be late. I think we're done here, right? It was nice meeting you, Mr. Hawthorne."

Thinking our conversation was done, she extended her hand over my desk, and I stared at it for a second. Before she could decide to walk away, I let out a breath, rose from my seat, and looked into her eyes as I took her hand.

This was it. This was the part where I should've said *It was nice meeting you* and gone on with my day. I didn't.

In a calm and collected voice, I said what I'd been waiting to say. "You're not being rude, Miss Coleson, but before you go, I'd like you to marry me." Breaking our connection, I pushed my hands into my pockets, watching for her reaction.

After a short moment of hesitation, she replied, "Sure, how about we do that after my job interview, but before dinner. Because, you know, I already made plans with Tom Hardy and I don't think I can postpone—"

"Are you mocking me?" I stood absolutely still.

Her narrowed eyes moved across my face, searching for an answer, I presumed. When she couldn't find what she was looking for, the fight went out of her, and right in front of my eyes, her entire demeanor—which had hardened the second I'd started asking questions about her ex-fiancé—softened and she puffed out a breath.

"You weren't making a bad joke?"

"Do I look like someone who jokes?"

Making a noncommittal sound, she shifted in place. “At first glance...I can’t say that you do, but I don’t know you enough to be sure.”

“I’ll save you the trouble—I don’t make jokes.”

She gave me a baffled look like I had said something astonishing. “Okay. I think I’m still going to leave now.”

Just like that, she surprised me and turned away to leave. Before she could open the door, I spoke up.

“You’re not interested in hearing more about my offer then?”

Her hand was already on the glass knob when she stopped. With stiff shoulders, she let go of the door and turned to face me.

After opening and closing her mouth, she looked straight into my eyes from across the room. “Your offer? Just so we’re on the same page and I can make sure I didn’t hear you wrong, could you repeat said offer?”

“I’m offering to marry you.”

Hiking her bag higher on her shoulder, she cleared her throat. “Mr. Hawthorne, I think...I think I’m flattered that you’d—”

“Miss Coleson,” I cut her off bluntly before she could finish her sentence. “I assure you, my marriage offer is strictly a *business* deal. I’m sure you’re not thinking I’m expressing an interest in you. I was under the impression that you could use my help—was I wrong?”

“Your help? I don’t even know you, and I definitely don’t remember asking for any—”

“If you accept my offer, you’ll have enough time to get to know me.”

“If I accept your offer...which is a business deal disguised as a marriage. I don’t think I’m following you here.”

“Maybe if you explained what you’re having trouble understanding, I could help you.”

“How about everything? From where I’m standing, that sounds like a good place to start.”

“Right, of course. If you’ll take your seat, I’d be *thrilled* to go into more details. For example, I can make sure your life savings, which you already spent on a coffee shop that’s not happening, won’t go to waste.” I was guessing she could see from my expression that I wasn’t thrilled about any part of our conversation.

“How do you know that was my life s—”

“Like I said before, I do my—”