



## The Italian Proposal: His Virgin AcquisitionHer Little White Lie (Harlequin The Billionaires Collection)

By Maisey Yates



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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

USA Today Bestselling author Maisey Yates lives in rural Oregon with her three children and her husband, whose chiseled jaw and arresting features continue to make her swoon. She feels the epic trek she takes several times a day from her office to her coffee maker is a true example of her pioneer spirit.

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"I think the numbers speak for themselves. Marriage is definitely the most profitable course of action."

It seemed Elaine Chapman had finally come to the end of her lengthy presentation.

Marco De Luca scanned the expanse of his office, looking for hidden cameras or some other sign that she was here on assignment from a reality show. There was no way she could be serious.

He didn't spot a blinking camera light anywhere, nor did he detect an ounce of insincerity in her tone. He stopped his search and locked his eyes onto her determined face. She *was* serious. Although why that should come as a shock he wasn't sure. Ms. Chapman was known for using whatever means necessary to get ahead. Including her body.

Marco's gaze swept her up and down. "Marriage? To you?"

Elaine's face heated at the incredulous note in his voice. She knew she wasn't exactly Miss New York. Clearly Marco did too, as she seemed to recall reading somewhere that he'd once *dated* Miss New York, but she wasn't *that* bad.

"Of what benefit could that possibly be to me?"

He leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head, delineating muscles that weren't at all concealed by his tame button-up dress shirt. She forced her eyes back to his face. Who cared about his muscles? So he had them? Men did, after all. She did not need this distraction right now, or ever.

"Didn't you pay attention to the chart?" She held up the colored graph for his further inspection.

"I heard what you said. But none of it was worth hearing. I've allowed you to waste twenty minutes of my valuable time, time that you couldn't begin to afford to reimburse me for, and the business proposal you were supposed to come here and offer me turns out to be a marriage proposal? You're lucky I haven't called Security."

He studied the tired, bleak-looking woman standing in front of him. He had only seen her on a few occasions, and even then it had been from a distance, but every time, even at formal charity balls, she had been in some variation of a black or navy blue pantsuit, her blond hair scraped back into a tight, unforgiving bun.

She was one of those women. The kind who seemed to think that they had to look like a man in order to compete in the business world. The sort of woman who took great care to disguise every trace of femininity she possessed. And this one did a particularly excellent job. He also knew that if she *could* use her femininity to her advantage she would do so without shame or scruples. Though he hadn't experienced that personally.

"I've already explained how it benefits you." She straightened her shapeless suit jacket and continued. "You're a smart man, Mr. De Luca. You want the bottom line, so here it is: married men make more money than single men. That's a fact. And you can't pretend the statistic doesn't interest you. Your reputation for expanding your company at almost any cost is legendary. A marriage between the two of us is a business strategy. A valid one."

*James Preston.* The name swam through his mind. James was holding out on a multi-million-dollar deal because he couldn't imagine handing over his beloved resort to a man who had no concept of the joys of a loving family. So instead he was out to find some family man to take it over. A family man who would have neither the time nor the drive that Marco had to offer the resort. Marco wanted the deal, no denying that, and as it stood he wasn't going to get it. It had been gnawing at him for weeks. He didn't do failure. Not anymore. He'd had enough of it.

But marriage seemed like an extreme solution; he'd spent thirty-three years avoiding the institution, and he had no desire to enter into it now.

"And you honestly think I'm going to stoop to marrying you to increase my profit margins?"

She pursed her lips, clearly unhappy with his choice of words. "Yes. I do. You're a legend in the industry. Not just for all that you've achieved, although that's impressive enough, but also for your ruthlessness, and that is something we share. Although my aim is considerably lower."

"And how does this benefit you, Ms. Chapman?" He stood up from his position behind the desk and walked around to the other side of it, so he was standing directly in front of her, his arms crossed. "Because, businesswoman that you are, there has to be an angle."

Elaine took a deep breath to steady herself. She had answers to all of his objections carefully prepared, but being on the receiving end of his intense dark gaze caused her well-rehearsed argument to get jumbled in her head.

She had never seen a man as gorgeous as he was on this side of the silver screen. He was the epitome of tall, dark and handsome, and he made her want to ditch her normally feminist persona in favor of that of a swooning Southern belle.

*Swooning? Where had that come from?* She'd never swooned in her life! She wasn't even sure what swooning was.

She tried to collect her thoughts and continue on as rehearsed, but it was hard to concentrate when he was standing so close being all tall and handsome and intimidating and *handsome*. His masculinity was so potent it nearly reached out and grabbed her, or made her want to reach out and grab him. She had never had a fantasy before that she could recall, and here she was in the middle of a business presentation, entertaining predatory thoughts about the man to whom she was making her pitch. He was throwing her completely off balance.

She was starting to think she'd made a serious miscalculation. A very serious, very tall, very sexy miscalculation.

Taking a deep breath to banish her rogue thoughts, she pressed on, "My father, like most men his age, thinks a woman's place is in the kitchen. And while I have no problem with a woman being in the kitchen, if that's what she wants, it's not what I want. *I* want the company, and he doesn't seem to think I'm capable of running it."

"Are you capable of running a company?" He leaned back against the desk and her eyes were drawn to his big hands, which were clutching the edge of the desk, supporting his weight. They were nice hands, masculine and callused. She hated smooth hands on a man. Well, theoretically she hated smooth hands on a man. Actually, she hadn't given it much thought before.

She was letting herself get distracted again. This was not the time for latent hormones to be popping up and making themselves known. She wanted this. She needed this. Attractive or not, she was not letting this man stand in her way.

She drew up to her full height, which in her chunky heels put her at the bottom of his chin. "I am more than capable, and more than qualified. I have a business degree, I interned at a Fortune 500 company, and I'm currently working as the head accountant for a small marketing firm. You can rest assured that, with or without those qualifications, if I were my father's son he would hand over the reins of the company to me with pride."

"If you're so incredibly competent why haven't you simply branched out on your own?"

Her lips, lush when they weren't pinned together in an uncompromising line, tightened, and she narrowed her eyes. "I would have. But my father had me sign a noncompete clause when I worked for him back when I was in college. I'm banned from starting a new business that might compete in any way with Chapman Electronics."

"And you were foolish enough to sign it?"

He enjoyed watching the pink flush creep into her ivory cheeks. It made him wonder if she flushed the same color when she was aroused, which made him wonder just what it would take to arouse passion in a woman like Elaine. Spreadsheets, most likely.

"At the time I assumed the business would pass to me when he retired, so it seemed like a non-issue," she said curtly.

"And you think that a marriage of convenience is going to help you out of this little situation you've landed yourself in?"

"I told you, I've done my research." She took a step closer to him and put her hands on her hips, pulling that awful jacket tight, revealing a small waist and the gentle rounding of her breasts. "You're set to acquire my father's company upon his retirement."

"And how exactly does marriage work to your advantage?"

"The contracts have already been signed, haven't they?" He nodded in confirmation. "So he can't back out

now."

"Well, he could try, but it would be unpleasant for him." His voice held a hard edge that left her in little doubt that he was telling the truth. He seemed completely ruthless. She liked that.

"So I marry you, and as your wife I'll own half of your assets, which makes me half-owner of my father's business. I would have come to simply negotiate a sale, but there's a clause in your contract that says if you sell to me you'll forfeit the company."

"Yes, I am aware of the clause you're talking about. I got a little bit of a chuckle out of it, actually. But I had to wonder if it was added because of your gender or your competence." His deep, mildly accented voice held a hint of mockery that made her bristle.

"My father is the consummate male chauvinist. Ideally I'd send him to a therapist to explore his issues, and maybe we could reach some sort of agreement that way," she said dryly. "But that isn't likely. So here I am. My father's a good businessman, a worthy adversary. But I'm better. I found a loophole, a rather gaping one. The contract says I can't *buy* the business, however, there isn't anything in there about me inheriting the company—say, through a divorce." She couldn't disguise the self-satisfied note that had crept into her voice.

She studied his face, searching for a hint as to what he might be thinking, but there was nothing. The man was solid granite.

Marco laconically flipped through her stack of data. "It seems to me, Ms. Chapman, that you've presented a one-sided deal. You get your family company and I get what? An increase in profits based on hypothetical statistics? I don't think so. That's not how business is done."

He took great satisfaction in seeing her unflappable cool slip for a moment. "I know how business is done," she snapped. "I'm fully qualified. I went to Harvard."

"Time in a classroom does not teach you the reality of the business world. You know numbers. You know textbook scenarios. You don't know how things really work. As proved by your willingness to sign whatever piece of paper your father put in front of you."

She thrust her chin up in a gesture of defiance. "I know how things work. Money makes the world turn. And this will mean money for you. You'll make more in gross profit from this than you ever could have made with my father's small potatoes business. Chapman Electronics barely makes fifteen percent of what *one* of the De Luca Corporation's subsidiaries pulls in annually. Marrying me has the potential to boost profits by ten percent in each of the companies owned and operated by the De Luca empire."

The tip of her tongue darted out and slicked over her bottom lip. Her lips were actually very full and tempting when they weren't pinched together. He could easily imagine them parting beneath his own as she granted him entry into her mouth. Imagine her shedding some of her hardened shell and melting beneath him.

She did a wonderful job of downplaying her natural femininity. Such a good job that most people would miss it entirely. But natural beauty like hers was impossible to bury completely. She had large, generously lashed china-blue eyes, finely arched eyebrows, and clear pale skin. She wasn't made-up and finished to a highly glossed sheen like the women he typically went out with, but there was a freshness to her look that intrigued him.

It had been a long time since a woman had intrigued him at all. In his experience women were all very much the same in the presence of a rich man. Flirtatious, transparent and, once the sparkle wore off, boring.

"And how long do you see such a marriage lasting?" It was the sheer mercenary quality of the proposition that had him asking questions. It was interesting to meet someone as committed, as driven as he was, to the pursuit of success.

"Certainly not 'till death do us part'. I figure twelve months should be enough to make it look as though we gave it a legitimate try. Sadly..." she gave a little shrug of one of her padded shoulders "...as happens with more than fifty percent of marriages, ours just didn't stand the test of time."

This was where the real bottom line was revealed. He still didn't believe she would want only Chapman Electronics. She was right in her assessment of it as small potatoes. And a woman who was willing to sell her body for a contract would not be interested in small potatoes.

"And after that twelve months is when you think you'll get your hefty settlement? Are you going to cry abuse? Say that I was unfaithful?"

"Hardly! I told you I want the company. Nothing more or less than that."

"But what will become of my newly increased profits when we divorce?"

"That's the beauty of it," she said, her smile had become a smirk. "When your wife leaves you and breaks your poor heart, your profits will increase even more. I've done my research."

"So you've said."

She gave him a pained look and continued. "Empathy is a very powerful emotion. Most of the men you'll be doing business with have been divorced, generally because commitment to their business outweighed commitment to their wife. When your wife leaves you, you'll have the whole lot of them standing around ready to dole out cigars and sympathy."

Everything in him was on high alert. His blood was pumping faster, just as it did when he knew he was on to a profitable deal. He lived for this. Lived for the challenge-the danger, even. And it wasn't in him to shy away from either.

He didn't need more money. No question. But he wanted it. The boy who had slept in grimy alleyways and crowded homeless shelters craved the security. Needed to push farther and farther away from those low points, keep pushing past all that he had been. Needed constant success, where before there had only been failure and struggle.

"There would have to be a prenup. And don't think for one moment I'll be content to let you or your lawyer draw it up and start making demands. The way I see it, I could send you out the door and I will have lost nothing. You, on the other hand, will have lost everything. Where I only stand to gain, you could lose."

She was slightly shocked that he seemed to be on the verge of accepting her offer. Obviously she had hoped that he would, but a very large part of her hadn't believed she had a prayer. "I have no issue with you having a prenup drafted. I don't want anything from you but what's rightfully mine."

He looked her up and down in a way that made her feel as if she was on the auction block.

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