



The Marriage Mistake (Marriage to a Billionaire)

By Jennifer Probst

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The third installment in the *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling Marriage to a Billionaire series by “one of the most exciting breakout novelists” (*USA TODAY*) Jennifer Probst.

Carina Conte has had a crush on her brother Michael’s best friend, Max Gray, since she was a teenager back home in Italy. Now she’s earned her MBA and come to work at Michael’s new venture, America’s fastest-growing bakery empire. But some things never change: her overprotective family still treats her like a child. With three drop-dead gorgeous siblings, she’s still the ugly duckling of the bunch. And Max, the company’s new CEO, still barely notices her.

Max knows Carina Conte is strictly off-limits, for the sake of his job *and* his friendship with Michael. But hot-blooded lust wins out at a conference when the two share a scorching one-night stand—and are busted by her mother! Now, forced by old-world Italian tradition into a marriage he’s not ready for, Max is miserable—and Carina is furious. Her new husband is about to realize that hell hath no fury like a woman transformed...

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Jennifer Probst's novels, novellas, and ebooks range from sexy contemporary romance to erotica. She lives in upstate New York. For more about this multitalented *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author, visit JenniferProbst.com.

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The Marriage Mistake

Chapter One

"I've hired a new associate. She'll be under your direction, and you will be responsible for her training."

Max cut his gaze to the man seated across the table. His nerve endings prickled at the announcement, but he remained silent. He stretched out his legs under the conference table, crossed his arms in front of his chest, and quirked a brow. He'd worked endless hours and sweat blood to get the family empire of La Dolce Maggie, the U.S. branch of Italian-based La Dolce Famiglia, off the ground, and damned if he'd step aside nicely. "Looking to replace me, boss?"

More like a brother than a boss, Michael Conte shot him a grin. "And deal with your mama coming after me to kick my ass? No such luck. You need help with the expansion."

Max smirked. "Seems your mama is tougher than mine. Didn't she instigate a shotgun wedding with your wife? Good thing you loved her, or you would've been screwed."

"Funny, Gray. The wedding wasn't the problem. It was your doubts about my wife that truly screwed us up."

Max winced. "Sorry. Just trying to protect a friend from a money-hungry woman. Anyway, I love Maggie now. She's strong enough to take your crap."

"Yeah, now it's like a mutual admiration club between you two."

"Better than war. So, who's the hotshot coming in?"

"Carina."

Max snapped his mouth shut. "Excuse me? Carina, your baby sister? You've got to be kidding me—isn't she still in school?"

Michael poured himself some water from the cooler and took a sip. "She graduated last May with her MBA from SDA Bocconi, and she's been training at Dolce di Notte."

"Our competitor?"

Michael smiled. “Hardly. They are not looking to conquer the world like us, my friend. But I can trust them to teach her basic skills in the bakery business. I wanted her to train with Julietta but she refuses to lag in her older sister’s shadow. She’s been begging me to come to America and her internship is up. It is time she now join the family company. Capisce?”

Ah, hell. Yeah, he understood. Max was being reassigned to babysitting duty for the youngest sister of the clan. Sure, he loved her like a sibling, but her tendency to burst into tears over emotional scenes did not go well with business. Max shuddered. What if he hurt her feelings and she crumbled? This was a bad idea all around.

“Um, Michael, maybe you should put her in accounting. You always said she’s capable with figures, and I don’t think management is a good fit. I’ve got a crazy schedule and I’m in delicate negotiations. Please give her to someone else.”

His friend shook his head. “Eventually, I will move her to CFO. But for now I want her with you. She needs to learn proper management and how La Dolce Maggie works. You’re the only one I trust to make sure she doesn’t get in trouble. You’re family.”

The simple words slammed the last nail into his vampire home. Family. Michael had always taken care of him, and he’d proven himself worthy. He’d also dreamed of a place carved out just for him. The peak of the food chain, so to speak. No one had ever questioned his job as CEO, but lately he wondered if missing the prized Conte blood in his veins hurt his position. Contracts were temporary, and his was renegotiated every three years. He craved a more permanent place in the empire he helped build, and the expansion of three more bakeries could be his crown jewels. If he did his job well, he’d secure himself at the top, right beside Michael—as a permanent partner instead of an appointed CEO. Worrying about a young girl fresh from business school would only distract him. Unless . . .

He tapped his finger against his lower lip. Perhaps Michael needed to be reminded of how critical his efforts were for the company. By throwing Carina certain challenges, he’d be sure to highlight her deficiencies and young age, all the while keeping her under his so-called protection. After the expansion, Max intended to approach Michael about partnership. Carina may be able to help his cause, especially if he mentored her and she depended on his feedback.

Yes, perhaps this was for the best.

“Okay, Michael, if this is what you want.”

“Good. She’ll be arriving in about an hour. Why don’t you come to dinner tonight? We’re having a small welcome celebration for her arrival.”

“Is Maggie cooking?”

Michael grinned. “Hell, no.”

“Then I’m in.”

“Smart man.” Michael crushed the paper cup, threw it in the trash, and closed the door behind him.

Max glanced at his watch. He had a ton of work to accomplish before she arrived.

• • •

Carina stared at the sleek wooden door with the shiny gold sign. She swallowed past the tightness in her throat and swiped her damp palms down her black skirt. This was ridiculous. She was grown up and well past the days of mooning over Max Gray.

After all, three years was a long time.

She smoothed back a strand of hair from her sleek topknot, straightened her shoulders, and knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

The sound of his husky voice drifted past her memory and grabbed her in a choke hold. It was rich and creamy smooth, hinting at naughty sex and mischief that only a nun could ignore. Maybe.

She opened the door and strode in with fake confidence. Carina knew it didn’t matter. The business world only observed what lay upon the surface. The knowledge soothed her—she had gotten very good at hiding her emotions during her training. It was simply a matter of survival.

“Hello, Max.”

The man behind the sprawling teak desk gazed at her with a strange mixture of warmth and surprise, almost as if he wasn’t expecting the woman who stood before him. Those piercing blue eyes sharpened and roved over her figure before his face smoothed out to a polite welcome. Her heart teetered, dropped, and held steady. For one moment, she allowed herself to drink in his appearance.

His body was lean and trim, and his impressive height always added an intimidating demeanor that was an edge with most of his deals. His face reflected the image of a demon and angel caught in a love affair. Sharp cheekbones, an elegant nose, and a graceful curved brow held hints of aristocracy. The sexy goatee hugged his jaw, accented the plump curve to his lips, and bespoke pure sex. Thick, coal black hair fell in untamed waves across his forehead and set off the rocketing blue of his eyes. As he moved toward her, he walked with an easy grace a tall man usually didn’t pull off, and the enticing scent of his cologne teased her senses. The odd combination of wood, spice, and lemon made her want to bury her face in the curve of his neck and breathe in.

Of course, she didn’t. Not even when he held her briefly in a welcome hug. Her fingers rested over broad shoulders barely contained in his custom-made navy suit. She’d long ago faced her own personal kryptonite and learned core lessons. Acknowledge her weakness. Accept it. Move on. The simple rules in business applied to all areas of her life now.

She smiled up at him. “It’s been a long time.”

“Too long, cara.” Unease flashed in his eyes, then disappeared. “I heard you graduated at the top of your class. Well done.”

She gave a brief nod. “Thank you. And you? Michael says you’re working hard on expanding La Dolce Maggie.”

His jaw clenched. “Yes. It seems you will be assisting me in this aspect. Have you spoken with your brother yet?”

Carina frowned. “No, I came straight to headquarters so I could put in a few hours first. I figured he’d give me the tour. What division is he starting me with? Accounts payable, budgeting, or operations?”

He studied her face for a while, his gaze an actual caress as he probed every feature. She held tight and submitted to the inspection. She needed to get used to his presence since she’d be bumping into him at work. Thank God she’d be buried in accounting. Her core concentration and skills with figures were solid, and Max would rarely need to peek in on her progress.

A smile curved those sensual lips and briefly distracted her. “Me.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your division. You’ll be working with me as my assistant. I’ll be training you.”

Horror flooded her. She took a step back as if he was the demon who requested she sign away her soul. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.” A crazy laugh escaped her lips. “I mean, I don’t want to get in the way. I’ll speak with Michael and convince him to start me somewhere else.”

“Do you not want to work with me?” He lifted his hands. “There’s nothing to worry about, Carina. I will take good care of you.”

An image of him slipping his fingers in her damp heat and stroking her to orgasm blazed before her vision. God knew he’d take care of a woman. In all ways. Color flooded her cheeks so she turned quickly as if studying his office. Ridiculous. She was losing her control within five minutes of their first meeting.

Her heels clicked on the wooden tile as she paced and feigned interest in the large photo of the waterfront opening. This was her ultimate test, and she refused to fail. Max was a silly crush from her youth, and she’d no longer live her life in an emotional prison. She’d come here for two main reasons: Prove her worth, and exorcise the ghost of Maximus Gray.

Failure so far on both accounts.

She cleared her throat and faced him once again. “I appreciate your willingness to train me,” she said pleasantly, “but I’d feel more comfortable elsewhere.”

His lip quirked. “Suit yourself. But I think your brother has a clear idea of what he wants. Why don’t I give you a brief tour while I ring him? I don’t think he expected you until later.”

“Fine.” She lifted her chin in challenge. “Perhaps it’s time to remind my brother he is no longer in charge of me.”

Carina made sure to lead the way out.

• • •

What the hell was going on?

Max trotted obediently after the cool, poised woman in front of him and tried to gather his wits. This was not the young girl he'd last seen in Italy, who was emotional, dramatic—self-conscious.

No, this Carina Conte had grown up. He used to get a kick out of her admiring gaze and shy habit of ducking her head when something embarrassed her. Carina was used to listening to the demands of others. She was a people pleaser, extra sensitive, and a lovely girl he'd always felt quite overprotective about. But the woman he'd met this time seemed completely in control and capable. The idea of her standing up to her older brother shocked him. He wondered at the quick stab of disappointment in the changes, then shrugged it off. Maybe she'd end up being more of an asset to the company than he'd originally thought.

Of course, her body had bloomed, too. Or had he just never noticed? Max ripped his gaze away from the full curve of her rear as she swung her hips in the ancient rhythm created to drive men mad. Shorter than her older sisters, she teetered on four-inch heels that showed off the muscled length of her legs. As he introduced her to various employees and they made their way around the ground floor, he noticed that she'd grown in other ways, also. Especially in her cleavage.

Heat rushed through him and squeezed. The delicate white blouse opened at the neck and revealed a touch of lace. Her full breasts strained against the material as if dying to escape, turning her respectable business suit into a vehicle for a stripper. Horrified at the sudden veer of his thoughts, he quickly imagined nuns in underwear and got himself back in control.

Carina was off-limits. He was her guardian and second protector. Max shook his head and studied her face in an almost academic light. She'd always been a pretty girl, but usually slapped on so much makeup he couldn't really see her features. Today, scarlet red lips were her only accessory. The olive tint to her skin gleamed under the light and tempted a man to touch. Those untamed curls had disappeared into a severe topknot that set off heavy brows and high cheekbones. Her nose was all Italian, and dominated her face, but the power of those stormy dark eyes held a person captive and refused to let go. She'd never be rail thin, and he wondered why most women wanted to be. The lush curves that strained against her straight-edged suit was all temptress.

Did she have a lover?

Crap, where did that thought come from? He rubbed his eyes and half groaned with relief at the sight of Michael down the hallway.

Her brother threw his arms out in the ancient family tradition, but Carina didn't rush into his embrace. Instead, she smiled, walked slowly down the hall, and hugged him back. The strength of their bond shimmered around them, and once again Max experienced a pang of loneliness. He always craved a sibling to share his life with. At least, Michael and his sisters were his adopted family. But after Max's father took off, only one goal remained and kept him on the path to revenge: success.

So don't screw it up.

He nodded to the inner voice and refocused. Michael flung his arm around Carina's shoulder and walked over. "I'm so happy you are finally here, mia bella. I told my driver to take you directly to the house, though. Maggie has been waiting for you."

Carina tilted her head up and grinned. "And how is my sister-in-law doing?"

“Cranky.”

“Do you blame her?” She laughed. “I told your driver there was a change in plans. I figured I’d grab a tour, set up my desk, and head to your house. Max gave me a brief overview of the layout.”

Michael clapped him on the back and turned to Carina. “You’re in good hands. Why don’t you take the office next to his? It’s been empty for a while, and I can get the boxes cleared out today. We’ll hold a strategy meeting tomorrow on some new developments.”

An uncomfortable silence settled around them. Michael looked confused at the sight of his sister’s stony expression. “Yes, it seems we need to lay out some ground rules first. Can we meet in your office?”

Max nodded. “I’ll leave you two and catch up tonight.”

“No, Max. I’d like you to join us,” Carina said.

Her direct gaze caused an odd sensation to prickle his skin, but he ignored it. He assented and they convened in Michael’s office. The chairs were deep and comfortable, made for long hours of conferences. He fought a chuckle when her petite frame got swallowed by the plush velvet, and she inched her rear to the edge of the seat. She tossed him a disgusted glance that told him his amusement had been caught, and primly closed her legs, heels placed firmly on the floor. Those well-defined calves were made for gripping a man’s hips as he thrust inside her.

Jesus, get a grip. He was an old man at thirty-four. Sure, the hot librarian look was a shock, but Carina was still like family and years younger. Sheltered. Innocent. She’d probably die of embarrassment if she suspected her appearance rocked his world . . . and parts of his anatomy.

He quickly dispersed the image.

“Michael, I have some concerns about my place here. Maybe you can let me know what you see as my role, and we can make the necessary adjustments.”

Her brother drew back. Seems like he wasn’t the only one surprised by the rational Carina Conte. “You should not worry about this, cara. Eventually, you will take the position of CFO, but for now you will assist Max in all aspects of running La Dolce Maggie. I need you to learn all levels of the operation first. Of course, you will live with Maggie and me. I’ve set up a private suite, and you may decorate it any way you’d like. When you have concerns, come to me and we will work them out.” Michael practically beamed with pride at his generous offer.

Somehow, Max suspected trouble brewing. Big trouble. He waited for the feminine temper explosion.

Carina nodded. “I see. Well, that is quite generous of you and I appreciate the offer. Unfortunately, I did not come to New York to live in my brother’s house and shadow his CEO. I have my own plans. I’m moving into Alexa’s old loft apartment this weekend. As for La Dolce Maggie, I think I’ll serve the company better in accounting and operations since that will be my permanent position. Max does not need someone distracting him from his role here.”

Max quickly snapped his mouth closed and prayed no one noticed. Where were the fireworks and family drama? Carina was a passionate, emotional young woman who never held her tongue and followed every

feeling she ever had. That was why she got into so much trouble. He remembered the time she jumped out of the car to follow a stray dog into the woods and got lost. Dio, what a fiasco. They thought she'd been kidnapped, and had found her hours later with a filthy ball of fur in her arms in a makeshift shelter she'd constructed out of twigs and leaves. Not even a tear in sight, she'd announced her confidence in being found and walked out with that dog while her brother screamed and Max nearly passed out with relief.

Michael stared at her. "Absolutely not. You are my sister and will stay with us. New York is a scary place. As for the company, I do not need another person in the accounting department at the moment. You will learn more from Max."

"No." She smiled pleasantly, but her word shot through the room like a balloon pop.

"What?"

"You are not listening to me, Michael. If we can't communicate in an adult manner, it's not going to work out. I've already received two job offers from businesses in Manhattan, and I haven't given them my final decision. I want to prove my worth here, but if you continue to treat me like a little sister, I won't be able to do my job properly. This would not be fair to anyone. Now, if you have a valid reason other than wanting Max to keep an eye on me and out of trouble, I'd like to hear it. If not, I will happily move onward with no hurt feelings. Capisce?"

Max prepped for the Italian temper of his friend and boss. There was one thing Michael pursued with the vigor of medieval warfare—the protection of his baby sister. His word meant law in the Conte household, passed from generations of old-school traditions. The idea of Carina suddenly challenging his decisions the moment she landed on his turf fascinated the hell out of him.

And then the world tilted on its axis.

Michael gave a brief nod. A hint of a smile touched his lips. "Very well, cara. I want you to stay in my home because Maggie will enjoy your company. We can show you around until you become more comfortable in your surroundings. As for the company, I know your skills excel with figures but I need you to get training in all aspects of the business, most especially management. Max is the only one I trust to properly hone your skills."

Huh?

Max looked around for the cameras but found none. Carina looked pleased. "Very well, I agree that Max will be the best person. I've missed Maggie, too, so I'll stay for the whole week. But then I really need to move—living with my older brother is not what I expected when I came out here. It's time I get my own place, and Alexa's loft sounds perfect. Agreed?"

He didn't look happy about losing the last half of the agreement, and Max waited for more negotiations.

"Agreed."

The siblings grinned at each other. Who were these people?

"Now, let me visit the restroom, then would you take me home? I'm exhausted and need to change."

“Of course. We are having a small dinner party to celebrate your arrival, but you’ll have a chance to nap.”

“Wonderful.” She gracefully rose from the chair and stopped in front of him. “Thank you for the tour, Max. I will see you tonight.”

He nodded, still dumbstruck at the civil meeting he’d just witnessed. She left the room and he stared at his boss. “What the hell was that about? Why aren’t you laying down the law like you always do? And what happened to her? She hasn’t cried or gotten upset once since she’s arrived.”

Michael waved his hand in the air and shrugged on his suit jacket. “Maggie convinced me she needs to be respected as an individual in order to make her own decisions. Do I hate it? Si. But she’s grown up now, and needs to find her own way.” His eyes shadowed. “I am her brother, not her papa. But I appreciate you keeping an eye on her, mio amico. I trust you to keep her safe and help her learn what she needs in order to run this company.”

Unease slithered down his spine. “Run the company?”

Michael laughed. “Of course. She is a Conte and will one day take the full reins of La Dolce Maggie. That is what we are training her for.”

Max stared up at his friend, and coldness seeped into his chest. Would he ever truly feel like family and good enough to own a portion of the business? Was he being selfish or ungrateful? They’d built La Dolce Maggie together, but in his gut, Max knew he was replaceable. Carina may be appointed CFO, but would also own a portion of the company. He never demanded permanence from Michael, afraid their friendship would cloud a decision that should be strictly business. Why did he always feel the need to fight harder to truly belong? Sure, his asshole father took off, but the constant struggle of worthiness was getting weary.

“I shall see you at seven tonight. Thanks, Max.”

The door shut behind him.

Max was left in the room with silence. With memories. And with a sick feeling in his gut that never seemed to go away.

Users Review

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