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THE FINAL OFFER

Would you marry your distant cousin if you found out after you were already in love? From Arkansas to New York surely there is no chance that could ever happen to Gary and Mia.

Gary Matthews is intelligent, affluent, sexy, and handsome, but all of these wonderful attributes could appear futile since he has no control over the actions of his exes, his biological mother, nor the health of his business partner of his thriving litigation consulting firm. In spite of it all, Gary maintains that he will give his fiancée, Mia Nixon, the best he has to offer, which is him, as is. While he fights to maintain the success of his firm, keep his ex-girlfriends away, and keep his meddling biological mother out of his business, his personal life with Mia is unraveling. Does Gary have enough fight left to give her the best he has to offer and mend the torn threads, or will he stand firm and give Mia the final offer before he calls it quits?

M I A

We were so in love.

THE sound of a roaring car engine and falling glass interrupted our once serene and tranquil afternoon. I remember that sound because it was the beginning of another change in the relationship with the man that I loved dearly.

We had been engaged for almost a year and I had not made a single step toward planning our wedding. I was paralyzed by fear that had commandeered my entire being and had me completely idling. My best friend, Dena Thomas, on the other hand was eager, willing, and ready to start the planning. She practically begged me to start. It was not about event planning as her lucrative and main source of income nor was it about the money she'd make because she had offered to do the wedding for free. Dena just wanted us married and soon. She was still riding the cloud of our introduction that she concocted over two years ago, and I was running scared at the very thought of marrying the wrong man whose past could potentially land me six-feet under in a tragic way. "I'm afraid, Gary! I'm afraid of what would happen to me if I marry you and I'm stuck for the rest of my life in fear and misery!" I had yelled those words to my fiancé, Gary Matthews, as I packed my bags to run away to Arkansas two months after we were engaged. He was definitely all I ever wanted in a man, but drama followed him like a shadow.

Gary is a partner at Matthews and Jefferson Consulting, LLC. His former assistant, Lynn, was in jail awaiting trial for trying to kill me by running through a red light and ramming a truck into my car, a Corvette. A tiny car compared to the dump truck like vehicle she was driving. Since the accident, Lynn's conniving children had vanished. They were not our current concern, but one of Gary's ex-girlfriends, Nina Briggs, resurfaced frequently. Nina wanted Gary back and I was tired of dealing with her nonsense. I was tired of seeing her almost everywhere I went and I really wanted to pummel her. I wanted to physically harm her badly, but I had been taught and got frequent reminders from others that a lady should not resort to fighting. Real women used their words not their fists. I thought that was a bunch of bull and I wanted to behave like Dena. I wanted to use my fists, my feet, and any other object to harm Nina. She would not leave us alone. Because of her, Gary and I stepped away from each other for a couple of months; well, I stepped away from him. During our hiatus, he went out with a lady named Roni, who was a bit of a psycho also. He says he never slept with her and did not understand why she was so obsessed with him. He pretended like he was clueless regarding advances and feelings from other women toward him. I don't believe him, but what can I say, I had left him at that time. I was certainly not without fault. I had allowed Dena to pull me into so much mess over the years that both of us should have at least

one misdemeanor, if not a felony. I carelessly recreated my own scene of drama while I was in Arkansas during my first hiatus. I just pray it doesn't reemerge at the most inopportune moment. I should've let that giant remain asleep.

It was a beautiful day, I had finished my yoga session and I was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. Dena called me every morning at seven-thirty. She was an early riser, regardless of the time she drifted off to sleep the night before. I saw her name and our picture flash on the screen. She was on time with her call.

I removed the ear bud from the Bluetooth device around my neck and pressed it into my ear. "Good morning, lil' devil," I joked as I twisted the wand to open the blinds over the kitchen sink.

She gasped. "I know you didn't call me a devil. I'm the furthest thing from it."

"Okay. I apologize." My voice dripped with sarcasm. I meandered around the kitchen opening all of the blinds to let the natural light in then back to the stove to check the omelets.

"You know you always try to act like Miss Innocent and Miss Corporate America and your butt did a one eighty when you left there. Just as ratchet as the next person now," she exclaimed.

I chuckled. "You're a lie. I have my quirks, but I ain't ratchet, far from it."

"See there, I ain't ratchet," she mocked me.

"Whatever, Dena. I have an image to uphold. In this case, it is what people think of me. My reputation is how they choose me to present, to speak at their events, facilitate, consult, and yada, yada, yada. There's nothing in running around behaving ratchetly. I know I just made up a word."

She giggled. "I heard you, but I know Jesus' disciple is not putting her fate in the hands of another human being. Your steps and your success are ordered by God! Anyway, Miss Angel Wings, why are we wasting time discussing 'ratchet' anyway? What are you doing?"

I was slightly taken aback by the comment, especially coming from her, but she was right. I sometimes forget that people are neither my source nor my provider, but the image and behaviors I was speaking of at that moment were also those of a mature Christian and I was tempted to pop back at her with such a comment, but I changed my mind. "I'm preparing a to-go breakfast for my sweetie before he rushes through here grabbing unhealthy stuff on the way out the door. He's running late today."

"Well, aren't you a sweetheart." Her tone had changed.

"I'm doing the best I can."

"Okay. I need to go to the park today. It's supposed to be a beautiful day, seventy-five degrees for the high, low humidity, no rain, a perfect day for swinging. What do you have on your agenda?"

"I just have a conference call for my life coaching class later today. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I just need to get on the swings. Swing away some stress, some evil thoughts. I just need to swing."

Dena and I have been swinging away stress since we were kids. We'd meet at the park by the swings, spread out a blanket with food, swing for a little while, and then sit on the blanket and talk. It was always at her request though, at least once per quarter like clockwork.

"Oh, okay. What time?" I sprinkled shredded cheese inside the omelet, flipped it onto the croissant, added a couple of slices of avocado and quickly wrapped it in wax paper and foil, then slid it into a sandwich bag.

"Around eleven o'clock would work, not too early, not too late."

"Okay, I think I can work that in. My call is late afternoon."

"We shouldn't be long."

"Hold on for a second, Dena." I reached for the phone to put it on mute.

"Good morning, babe." Gary leaned in to kiss me as he rushed through the kitchen adjusting his tie with his jacket draped over his arm. He pulled the refrigerator door open and grabbed an orange juice. He took a swig and set the bottle on the countertop. His tailored navy blue pants swathed his firm glutes and rested neatly on top of his Dover Split toe shoes from Edward Green that I had picked up for him the day before.

"Hey, honey. You look nice. I like. And you smell good, too." I stepped back in admiration and gave him a seductive once over.

"Thank you." He blushed as he adjusted his cufflinks.

"Here you go. I made two smaller ones today." I handed him a bag with turkey sausage, croissant with egg, shredded cheddar, Pico, and avocado and another one with a tiny omelet on a croissant with similar ingredients. He loved my little creations in the kitchen. He used to cook all the time, but now I had turned into the perfect housewife without the title.

"Thank you. I appreciate you." He leaned in again for more kisses with tongue. "Ummm, I gotta go." He moaned and looked at me seductively. He winked at me and turned to walk out the door. I followed him toward the garage.

"Okay, see you later. Love you."

"I love you more." He hung his jacket on the hanger in the back seat of his truck and hopped in.

I yelled, "Knock 'em dead today. I know you will."

He gave me thumbs up. I leaned on the door then blew him a kiss and waited until he backed the truck out of the garage before I pressed the button to let the garage door down.

I pressed the mute button and focused my attention back to Dena. "Oh, how I love that dude. Okay, ma'am."

"It took you long enough," she spat.

“It did not. Anyway, do you need to swing or do you need to chill? Because I was thinking, you should come here and I can expand this breakfast menu to add some grits and waffles or French toast or something.”

“Can you add some wings too?”

“Ummm, now you’re running out,” I murmured as I looked in the freezer for wings. “Yes, I can add wings.”

“Swing, chill, it’s all the same to me. I’m on my way. I’ll be there in forty-five or less. Bye.”

“Good-bye,” I said for not, because she had already disconnected the call.

She always hung up before I could say goodbye. My phone vibrated. I touched the text message icon and smiled as I shifted my weight to one leg.

Hey, love, I wanted to tell you how much I really appreciate what you’re doing and all you do for me. This croissant is good as hell! I know you don’t care much for the kitchen and other domestic stuff but you’re awesome and I appreciate it and I don’t take any of it for granted. I got you.

I could hear his voice saying those words and it made my heart smile. He loved me and appreciated me and I knew it. Before I sold my house and moved in with him, I had a maid, Millie, who came once per week to clean, do laundry, and sometimes cook for me. I abhor domestic duties. I kept things tidy because I didn’t like a mess, but I certainly didn’t enjoy it. My parents made me do so many house chores growing up; I vowed to never do them when I got my own house.

During my first budget session with Gary, that was the first area he reviewed to save money until we determine our expense to income ratio while I worked to get my business running smoothly again. He promised it wouldn’t last forever, but we needed to make some observations before going overboard on “nice to haves.” I replied to the text after reading it a few times with a smile plastered on my face. *Thanks, babe! You really know how to make my day. :-)*

I could tell he was typing so I sent another quick note. *Does this mean I’ll never see Millie again?*

Ha, no, that’s not what that means. You’ll be able to see Millie for a couple of things soon.

Thanks, babe. Love you. Getting ready to fix wings and waffles for me and Dena.

Okay, love you too, have fun.

Dena arrived on time as she always does. We sat by the pool and lounged for over two hours talking, eating, and drinking mimosas as the light wind kissed our skin and the sun gave us our daily dose of Vitamin D. She didn’t complain about her deadbeat boyfriend, Monty, but actually said a few good things about him. He had been with the same company for more than a year. They were in love again. We talked about life and leaving a legacy for our children, grandchildren, our sorority, our alma mater, and the world in general. She shared some of the documents she’d started on like her will and her living will. I know this needed to be done, but I was a little concerned about why she was all of a sudden focused on it

now. I didn't push it; I reviewed the documents and handed them back to her and made a mental note to get mine done also.

"I'm really happy that you and Monty are doing better these days. It seems he's much better to you and everyone else when he's working."

"Yeah, he's one of those men who have a problem if his woman makes more money than him."

"I figured as much. When are you all getting married?"

She twisted her face. "I don't know. He's mentioned it a few times lately, but he doesn't want a big to do wedding. He thinks that I want something extremely elaborate because those are the types of weddings I plan, but that is so far from what I want. Simple is so much better for me. My nerves can't take it."

"But, you're pushing the wedding of the century on me?"

"Yes, because that's what you need." She smiled. "I plan extravagantly for other people and especially for my BFF."

"Oh, really?" I stared blankly at her.

"Mia, my treat today." She stood up. "Mani-pedis on me, before your class." She was good at changing the subject.

"Let's go."

"Wow. That was easy."

"You said the magic words—your treat. What's difficult about that?"

"You're silly. Let's go. I'll even drive."

"Well, you kind of have to since I haven't purchased a car yet."

"Gary has a fleet in the garage. Pick one. You're not driving yet because you don't want to. He's running and carting you around like Miss Daisy."

I shot her a look and she held up both hands. "But hey, I'm like Kermit, that's none of my business."

"Ha! You're stupid, Dena." I laughed as her reference to the social media memes with Kermit the frog where the tag would say something extremely messy, mean, or condescending and ended with '...but that's none of my business.'

"Help me clean the kitchen and we can roll."

I contemplated telling her about my encounter with Nina, Gary's ex-girlfriend, the other day, but I decided against it. I ran into her at the grocery store. She had intentionally bumped my shopping cart twice while I was shopping. I quickly completed my shopping and left the store and I mentally beat myself up for the remainder of the day because I felt I should have responded in some type of way. Later that night, Gary was so focused on his work; he didn't notice my irritation with myself. So, it was easy for me to bury myself in a novel and fall asleep, but I remember when he turned off the light and pulled me close and planted a kiss on my shoulder before I heard his muffled snoring.

If I told Dena the story she would've been ready to go find Nina. By noon we were in our chairs getting manicures and pedicures. The place was crowded for midday on a Wednesday. Something was certainly on my friend's mind, but she wouldn't spit it out and I decided not to pressure her about it. We tried to maintain a mutual understanding. Unless it was life threatening, we would not automatically intervene unless it was requested. We'd had our issues in the past by one of us jumping into the business of the other one unrequested and it didn't turn out well. Dena and I laughed and chatted for a few minutes, but then Dena leaned her head back on the chair as the massager shook her body to the different settings. I didn't like that thing so I decided to listen to "The Empress Has No Clothes" on my Audible app. The narrator speaking in my ear was low enough that I could hear and understand the book and hear anything going on around me, which is why I still heard the commotion at the register.

"I can't believe the type of service you provide and the people you let enter this establishment," the lady yelled as she looked in our direction. Kayla, the shop owner, was trying to calm her down but the lady was too irate to hear anything.

I turned to look at Dena and nothing was lost on her; her eyes were wide open. "Who the hell is this trick?" She leaned forward. "She looks familiar." She narrowed her eyes as if that would help her to see clearer.

"She needs to calm down, looks like she's performing. I'm not giving her the satisfaction by looking her way."

"Girl, that's that chick Gary went out with."

"What? When?" I sat up straight.

"Mia, that's Roni."

She was about six feet tall with her stilettos on, sturdy, dark brown hair, nothing special, just a normal lady with an apparent attitude at the moment. Gary had never mentioned her physical attributes; he never said much about her at all. We both had agreed to 'wipe the slate clean' and start over, never asking about what happened while we were apart. Neither one of us knew at the time, that would be a huge mistake on both sides.

"What the hell are y'all looking at?" she snapped.

"Free my feet, Hannah." The nail tech appeared puzzled by Dena's request. Dena removed her feet from the bowl and leaned forward to wipe them off with the towel.

"No, no, no, Ms. Dena. You stay in your seat," Hannah begged.

Hannah stood up to see what was going on.

"Now, Sarah, you know you're gonna have to pass me that towel. This woman just might be crazy enough to try us in this place today. You know good and well, you and Hannah can't protect us," I said.

“I know y’all just came in here to mess with me.” She snapped in our direction, but she wasn’t coming any closer.

Dena and I looked at each other, confused. “Is this heffa schizophrenic? We’ve been coming here for years and have never seen your crazy ass. What are you talking about?” Dena yelled as she pulled the arm of the chair up so she could stand.

“Dena, be quiet. Please don’t entertain this fool unless she comes over here.”

“Well, if she makes that bad decision, I’ll be ready for her ass.”

Kayla’s husband, Mike, stopped working on his customer and walked to the front. “Ma’am, I’m sorry you’re gonna have to leave, you’re upsetting our customers.”

“Upsetting your customers? They’re upsetting me! I just stopped in here to get my nail fixed and y’all trippin’,” she yelled.

“Ma’am, please leave or we’ll have to call the police,” he pleaded. “Ma’am?”

“My name is Roni, not ma’am, damn!” She snatched her purse off the counter and tried to storm out, but her stilettos caused her to walk a bit more carefully.

Dena and I returned to our chairs and Mike watched as Roni got into her car.

“Well, so much for a relaxing afternoon. We can’t go anywhere without freakin’ drama. We’re too old for this ish, Mia.”

“I know, Dena. We’re not starting it, but somehow, we always end up in it.” As Mike and his wife were standing in front of our stations explaining to everyone what had happened, the sound of crashing glass and a roaring motor invaded the sound of soothing music and conversation—a sound that sent all of us scrambling to safety. Roni had driven her car through the building and my relationship with Gary had changed again.

Eighteen months later...

Chapter 1

MIA

VALENTINE'S Day had come and gone and it was 4:30 a.m. "Gary! Oh my God...that feels so, oh, good, baby." I managed a whisper after he touched that spot. My back arched into shallow breaths, shivers swarmed around my feet, marched slowly up my calves to my thighs, to my spine, and then back down. My eyes did a fancy swirl, my head flipped back, and my toes curled. "Ahh." My entire body shuddered and I collapsed onto the bed. Why is makeup sex the best? We had just completed round four. I knew the playful tug would arrive just as it did every morning. I'm glad I'd always made sure cleanliness was at the top of my list of priorities. Using the flushable feminine cleansing clothes in the middle of the night if I got up to use the bathroom and the dab of toothpaste on the back of my tongue before going to bed made me comfortable enough to let him do what he did every morning which was wake me up with kisses, licks, and sucks anywhere on my body.

He lingered for a few minutes staring at the ceiling. The sun had made its way through the window and reflected off the mirror and onto our bodies sprawled on the bed.

"You okay?" He smacked my thigh and got up to walk into the bathroom. I stretched out across the bed. Gary walked back into the room a few minutes later with a hot towel. We both turned toward the TV when the anchor announced the concert coming up at the end of the month. "You still want to go to that?" he inquired as he moved the towel across my body.

"Of course, I do." I never turned my attention away from the TV. "Why would you ask that? You know I'm the biggest fan ever since...since before I was a teenager."

"Wow, okay, I just asked, making sure." He walked back to the bathroom, draped the towel on the rack, and returned to the bed. He kissed me on the cheek and gazed at me. "I love you, lil' girl and I'm sorry about last night."

"I love you, too." I snuggled into his arms.

I was in a car accident caused by his obsessive ex-Administrative Assistant that resulted in a miscarriage and me being in a coma for several days. She's in jail now. I was getting my nails done when one of the obsessive women from his past, Roni, whom he had taken on a date, ran her car through the building and claimed failed brakes. I'm not sure what he did to her, but we have not heard from her since she changed her story after the first one didn't stick. She claimed she was in emotional duress and made a mistake and put the car in drive instead of reverse. He wanted to "protect" me so I allowed him to talk me into moving in with him after we were engaged. Our wedding plans had been off and on at my emotional call. He still does not want me to work because he wants to "provide" for me which was the reason for

our disagreement last night, and now we're here—emotions running high, then low, and then back to high again, all stemming from the pieces of me. I needed help badly. My current therapy sessions were beginning to make progress and he was scheduled to join me after a couple more sessions.

I snuggled in tighter, rubbed my leg over his, played with his nipples, and cooed. “Gary Matthews, baby you make me feel so good, and thank you for everything you're doing for me, but you are very good at distracting me. We still need to talk about Nina. You want me to stay home so I won't encounter some of this foolishness on the outside. Me not working will not solve that. I'm done walking away from her.”

I knew it was not the best time to talk about it but he had avoided this conversation ever since I told him she bumped my cart at the grocery store and he brushed it off, saying it was probably someone else and was more irritated because I had gone to the store without him.

“Mia Nixon, I'm not trying to distract you. I was just making love to my fiancée. The woman who I'm dying to marry but also keeps blowing me off. I'm not trying to distract you; I'm trying to love you and show you that it's time for us to move on with our lives, happy, raising a family, enjoying our families, and contributing to society, just living a simple, normal, and joyful life.” He rubbed his fingers through my hair and then reached for my hands and pulled it toward his lips to kiss it.

I looked up at him and sighed as I contemplated my next comment. He continued, “Babe, Nina is no longer a problem. I promise. Can we talk about that some other time? I'm not trying to spoil my day nor yours by talking about her. She should be the least of your worries.”

“But, how do you know that? As long as I'm breathing and moving around this city, she will be a problem. She's in love with you and obviously wants you back, and she pops back up every few months in some kind of way. And I'm not sure if she thinks that harassing me would help her to get you back or what, but one thing it will guarantee her is an ass whooping. For sure.”

He pushed up to press his back against the headboard with a frown plastered on his face. “No, she is not in love with me. She just likes drama. Don't worry about her, anymore.”

I was slightly irritated that he moved from our cuddling position on the bed, but I guess cuddling is not the perfect position for an imminent argument. I moved to mirror his position. “Gary, honey, look.” I paused for dramatic effect. “I love you more than anything or anybody in this world.” I paused again then continued in a matter-of-fact tone. “But I bullshit you not, if you don't get Nina's ass under control, I'm gonna kick her ass—hard. And I'm not playing. This is high school shit and I don't have time for it.” I was looking directly into his eyes, my voice slightly elevated. I had allowed profanity to invade my vocabulary a lot more than usual.

He started shaking his head. “You need to calm down. Babe, outside of a lady, whose face you did not see, bumping your cart at the store, what has she done lately? And fighting over a dude is high school shit.”

I rose up on my elbows. “Trust me, I will not be fighting over you, I’ll fight because she crossed the line.”

He sighed. “Now Mia, you know that’s not who you are. That’s not how you handle things. Is there something you’re not telling me? Do we need to get a restraining order?” he bellowed. His tone surprised me a little as I’m sure my tone and words had surprised him without notice.

“I, uh, yes, I do.” I shook my head. “No, no I don’t. I’ll handle it myself.” I threw the covers off me, stepped onto the cold, hardwood floor, and walked into the bathroom for a shower. “When I finish with her silly ass, she’ll want a restraining order against me,” I mumbled.

“Babe, come on now.” He followed me into the bathroom. “Don’t start shutting me out again. Tell me what’s going on. What happened?” He rubbed my shoulder with his massive hand and pulled me into a side hug. “I’m sorry, let’s talk. Let’s talk. Please.”

“I don’t have a desire to talk now. I need to take a shower. I’m meeting Dena at the gym in less than an hour.” My tone was flat. I pulled away from him and looked toward the floor. Tears were threatening to gush out of my eyes. I was getting madder by the second. So, I put a shower cap on and hurriedly stepped into the shower to let the water hit my face.

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