

SPECIAL EXCERPT FROM



SPECIAL EDITION

Life, Love and Family

When tycoon Ben Robinson enlists temp Ella Thomas to help him uncover family secrets, will the closed-off Prince Charming be able to resist the charms of his beautiful Cinderella?

*Read on for a sneak preview of
FORTUNE'S SECRET HEIR,
the first installment in the 2016 Fortunes of Texas continuity,*

ALL FORTUNE'S CHILDREN.

For a long moment, Ella feared she'd gone too far.

Then the storm clouds faded from Ben's eyes and his voice turned smooth again. "I am like my father. Always have been. Something a nice girl like you would do well to remember."

Even through her knit mittens and his overcoat, she could feel the tension in his muscles. "That sounds like a warning."

"I said you were intelligent from the get-go."

She moistened her lips, even though doing so just made them colder. "I felt a lot safer with Randy's flirting than I do right now." She could not fathom the insanity that made her admit it aloud. Maybe it was the way she couldn't drag her eyes away from his.

"Much as I disliked seeing him flirt with you, you were definitely safer."

Her chest felt so tight it was hard to breathe. She imagined she could see her own reflection inside his eyes. "Ben—"

He took a step back and pulled her hand once more through his crooked arm. "It's getting cold standing here, and Bonita's chocolates are waiting."

She figured that the famed street would be spectacularly beautiful during warmer months. And it wasn't without charm now, with snowflakes drifting around them, dusting the buildings and the snow-plowed street with a fresh coat of white.

Maybe someday she'd visit Boston while the trees were green and the flowers were in bloom.

But now she was here with Ben.

She exhaled and fell into step with him again.

They eventually reached the chocolatier's shop, which was set down a short staircase from the street level and was smaller inside than she'd envisioned. But the very air was sinfully redolent of chocolate confections and she couldn't help but admire the beautiful displays behind the glass-fronted cases. "I'm gaining weight just looking."

A woman wearing a pristine white apron and a black bow tie appeared and Ben gestured at one of the larger boxes on display. "Give me one of that size and fill it with anything chocolate that has a nut in it. It's for my secretary and she doesn't touch chocolate without nuts. Nothing fruity, either."

The clerk plucked an empty box from under her counter and tucked shimmery white tissue paper in it before deftly beginning to fill it with chocolates of every size and shape.

"Your secretary is a lucky woman," Ella said dryly, because she'd noticed the tastefully discreet price tag that was even more enormous than the box itself.

"Indeed, she is," the clerk agreed. She stopped near Ella to select several round confections topped with walnut halves. "Would you like a sample of anything?"

"Oh." Ella shook her head. "I couldn't."

"Sure, she could." Ben stepped next to her, touching her shoulder as he leaned over to examine the displays.

"Your husband is right." The clerk's hand hovered over the trays of precisely arranged chocolates. "Perhaps a white ganache or an almond praline?"

Ella opened her mouth to correct the clerk, but Ben's hand moved to the back of her neck, scorching even through the scarf, and the words caught in her throat.

“Give her one of those Manhattan truffles.”

She almost did a double-take at the quick wink he gave her. Instead, she just felt heat course down through the rest of her from the source at the back of her neck, and when the clerk set a silver foil cup containing a glossy round truffle on top of the glass, she quickly sank her teeth into it, biting off half.

Dark, heady chocolate dissolved blissfully on her tongue, but it was nothing compared to having Ben slip the other half of the truffle out of her fingers and pop it into his mouth.

She actually felt faint and considered tearing off her coat to run into the snowy outdoors for relief.

“There’s a first,” Ben murmured. “Our first whiskey truffle together.”

The clerk fit the lid in place on Bonita’s chocolates before sliding the box toward Ben across the glass. “You sound like newlyweds,” she said with a benevolent smile. “I can always spot the newlyweds. Can I get you anything else?”

“Pack up a dozen of these.” He flicked the empty foil cup and slid a credit card toward her in exchange.

“My pleasure.” The clerk took the card and greeted a customer who entered behind them before moving toward her cash register.

Ben’s hand fell away from Ella’s neck and she moved near the door where she had a slim hope of catching her breath while he finished paying for his purchases.

The snow was falling even harder when they went up the short flight of stairs to reach the street level. “Why did you let her think we were married?”

“It’s the theme for the day, evidently.”

“Yes. Karma for you lying to Randy about being my fiancé.”

She was grateful to see Johnny and his car waiting at the curb and aimed straight for it.

The driver opened the door for her and she ducked her head and climbed in, sliding across the seat for Ben to follow. Then she sat forward to offer Johnny one of her Manhattan truffles once he closed the door after Ben and got back behind the wheel.

“Don’t mind if I do, miss.” He plucked a round truffle from the small box and popped it in his mouth before pulling out into the traffic that hadn’t lessened a speck despite the snowfall. “Back to the hotel, sir?”

“I thought we’d hit Little Italy for dinner, but it’s still early.”

“Already be a line forming outside of Giacomo’s,” Johnny said. “Always is.”

Ella pulled off her mittens and unwound her scarf, since the car interior was toasty warm and she still felt like she was burning up from the inside. “What’s Giacomo’s?”

“Best Italian joint in the North End.” Ben set the large bag containing Bonita’s chocolates on the seat between them while he pulled out his cell phone and studied it. “They don’t take reservations and there’s hardly any space inside, but it’s worth the wait every time.” He returned his phone to his pocket, then pulled open his coat and dropped his scarf in the bag with the box of candy. “Give Ms. Thomas the city tour, Johnny. And turn down the heater. We’re roasting back here.”

Ella couldn’t help but wish that the cause of his overheating had less to do with the town car’s heater and more to do with her.

At least then he’d be sharing her similar discomfort.

The warm air blowing from the heating vents disappeared and Johnny launched into his role again as tour guide as he drove through the city, pointing out landmarks, some famous and some so obscure she felt almost certain he was pulling her leg. He ended in the North End, dropping them off again at Ben’s request on Hanover Street in front of the restaurant where a line of people stood outside on the sidewalk, not seeming to care about the weather as they waited.

It took the better part of an hour, but eventually it was their turn to weave their way through the closely set tables crowded inside the small restaurant. They sat at a table for four with two strangers and Ella’s bemusement only increased from there. Wine. Seafood. Pasta. It was loud and noisy and delicious and so close that Ben’s knees were pressed against hers beneath the table the entire while.

And for the first time since she’d met him what seemed so much longer than a mere week ago, he seemed to actually relax, not checking his phone for the entire time.

After the filling meal, she expected Ben would want to return to the hotel, but again he surprised her, choosing to walk to a nearby pastry shop where he insisted she try a cannoli. And even though she was positively stuffed, she managed to consume half of the delicious cream-filled dessert before begging off. “I’m going to explode,” she told him plaintively, “if you keep feeding me like this.”

He smiled and finished the cannoli the same way he had her chocolate truffle. Then he pulled her out of the pastry shop and down the street a few more doors and into a dimly lit pub where she sat on a high bar stool at the crowded bar and Ben stood so close beside her that she felt engulfed by him.

It was more intoxicating than the wine, the food, and the desserts could ever be.

Her head was already spinning so she was grateful when Ben, looking amused, ordered her a soda in place of the cognac he'd ordered for himself.

When they finally climbed into the rear of the town car and Johnny dropped them off in front of the hotel, it was after midnight.

"Thank you, Johnny," she said when he opened the car door for her yet again. "I feel like I had a personal tour guide."

He beamed. "My pleasure, miss."

Ben shook the driver's hand and Ella couldn't help wonder if there'd been an exchange of cash in the action. The snow had stopped falling when they'd had their dinner, but now the night was even colder, an icy wind cutting easily through her layers, and she quickly went inside the hotel.

At that time of the night, the gloriously beautiful lobby was nearly deserted and when Ben pressed the call button for the elevator, the doors slid open immediately.

Feeling unaccountably edgy, she pushed the button for her floor and moved to the back of the car, leaning against the wall. He might be able to put aside the things they'd said on the street outside of the chocolatier's, but she wasn't finding it so easy.

Ben hit the button for his own floor and the doors glided shut, closing them in alone. "Tired?"

What she felt was wired. And he was the single cause of it. But she shrugged her shoulders, leaving him to interpret it however he chose. "Johnny should have been tired. But he didn't seem to be. I hope he gets paid well by the hotel."

"He doesn't work for the hotel. He has his own business. Employs ten other drivers the last time I asked."

"Impressive." She looked at the floor display. The elevator seemed to be crawling and even though they had the entire car to themselves, Ben had chosen to lean in the corner less than a foot away from her, his hands stretched out against the rail that ran the perimeter. The glossy shopping bag from the chocolate shop hung from his thumb that he tapped slowly against the rail. The rustling the bag made as it swayed sounded loud, but not as loud as the thumping inside her chest. "Thank you for dinner and...and everything."

He inclined his head slightly, his eyes typically unreadable. "Now you can say you've seen at least a bit of Boston."

"Yes." She stared down at the carpeted floor and moistened her lips, wishing the elevator would hurry up. When the doors dinged softly a moment later, she automatically stepped forward, only to feel Ben's hand clasp her arm.

Her eyes flew to his face, but he was looking at the elevator doors and she realized they were opening to admit more hotel guests and they hadn't reached her floor yet at all.

She subsided, and Ben tugged her even closer when the elevator continued to fill with the increasingly boisterous group until her back was pressed against his chest as she stood directly in front of him, his hand on her waist through her coat.

She stood stock-still, even though she had the worst desire to sink back into him.

The other guests were clearly celebrating and they tumbled out again a few floors later. Alone again, Ella had no reason to remain plastered against Ben and she gave him a smile that felt awkward and tight as she stepped away. "Looks like they were having a good time."

His eyes were hooded again. "You don't have to be afraid of me, Ella."

She started. "I'm not afraid of you!" She looked at the floor display again. She felt like an absolute idiot and didn't like it one bit. "Maybe *you* should be afraid of me," she muttered, proving that she was still fueled by too much wine, sugar and the intoxication of *him*.

Before he could respond—if he even wanted or intended to—the elevator stopped again, this time at her floor, and the moment the doors opened, she stepped off. "Good night, Ben."

Then the doors closed again and Ella's shoulders slumped.

She hauled in a deep breath and made her way to her room on legs that felt like mush.

*

Ella presented herself at Ben's suite the next morning exactly two minutes before nine. She wore her navy blue skirt once again, this time with a silky white tee, and she left the blazer behind.

Ben answered her knock and seemed thoroughly back in his usual mode, with his cell phone at his ear with one hand and a newspaper in his other. He gestured at the dining table in his living area. "Breakfast. Help yourself."

She didn't have to ask if Randy was already there; she could see for herself that he was not. She crossed the room and studied the breakfast selection laid out on the sideboard. Ben had enough food there to feed a dozen people, and she filled a plate with fluffy scrambled eggs, two slices of crispy bacon and a blueberry muffin of decadent proportions. Then she sat at one end of the gleaming table and tucked in.

She felt famished and blamed it on fruitlessly chasing Ben through her dreams all night long. It was just as well that he didn't join her at the table, instead pacing around the living area as he made one call after another, clearly conducting business as usual even from a distance. She hadn't finished even half of her food when they heard a knock on the door.

Ben gave her a look and went into the adjoining room, pulling the doors closed.

She huffed out a breath, trying to rid herself of her nervousness, and crossed the room to open the door. "Good morning, Randy."

Even though it was a Saturday, he was dressed in a dark suit and tie every bit as professional as Ben's. But unlike every time she looked at her handsome boss, the effect from Randy was totally wasted on her. She invited him in, gesturing at the breakfast spread across the room. "I hope you're hungry. Mr. Robinson has a small feast here."

Randy's gaze was frankly curious as he entered the suite and looked around. "Is he here?"

She didn't want to lie outright, even though this entire exercise was based on pretense. "He's on a call," she said. "He'll join us if he is able." She led the way to the dining area. "Can I pour you a coffee or some juice?"

He glanced toward her plate. "Is that your breakfast? Finish eating. I can pour my own coffee."

He seemed insistent, so she returned to her seat and a moment later, he joined her, sitting opposite her. "Pretty sweet suite you've got here," he said cheerfully as he tucked into his own breakfast.

He probably figured she'd shared the room with her "fiancé," and even though she hadn't, she still felt her face warm. "Yes, it's very nice. Thank you for coming again. I hope it wasn't too inconvenient."

His lips twitched. "Nothing's too inconvenient when it comes to Robinson Tech."

Her conscience nipped again and she rose to refill her own coffee cup. "Do you live near here?"

"My folks have a place in Back Bay. Too high rent for me, though," he added ruefully. "I have an apartment in Watertown."

With that door opened so conveniently, Ella sat down again and cradled the china cup between both hands. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

He shook his head. "Mom always said she wanted more kids, but she had a lot of trouble carrying me."

"That's too bad."

He nodded around a mouthful of toast that he chased with coffee. "I was born really prematurely," he said eventually. "Just twenty-six weeks. I spent the first four months of my life in the hospital."

She hid her dismay. Even before Antonia had left Robinson Computers, Gerald had left the country on a business trip. Ben's notes about his father's schedule and whereabouts during those years had been carefully reconstructed. If Randy had been born several months early, there was no possible way that Gerald Robinson could have fathered him. Not when he and Antonia were in different parts of the world when their child would have been conceived. "Well, I'm glad things turned out okay for you," she said. "My, um, my little brother was also premature," she confided. "He has cerebral palsy."

"That's gotta be tough."

"It's a concern, of course, but Rory's the tough one. He's overcome a lot. Mostly his CP affects his legs." She smiled. "He wants to design computers someday."

"Then you're marrying into the right family."

Ella laughed because he expected it. She took a few more sips of coffee, then excused herself and went to find Ben.

He was in the bedroom, sitting at a desk near the windows with another view of the outdoor terrace. The newspaper was unfolded on top of the desk and his cell phone was sitting on top of that. But she had the distinct impression that he'd been staring out the terrace when she'd interrupted.

She kept her eyes diligently away from his unmade bed, but it was difficult. "He's not your brother." She kept her voice low, even though she'd pulled the doors closed after her.

"How do you know?"

She relayed the information. "There's no way he could have been conceived when his mother was still interning for your father. The dates are just too far out of line, knowing he was so premature."

"Maybe he wasn't early. Nearly thirty years ago? Babies were regularly claimed as 'premature' to explain away a birth that came a little too soon after a wedding."

"I'll see if I can find the hospital records. A long hospital stay like he's described is more than just glossing over a baby made a few weeks before the I do's. Which there weren't anyway, not right away. Even though Randy says his mother and Ronald Bell met in Colorado Springs, don't forget that I couldn't find any record of their marriage until they moved to Massachusetts years and years later. I don't know whether or not Ronald Bell is his natural father, but for your purpose, it's not important anyway. What *is* important is that Gerald *isn't*."

He scrubbed his hand down his face before he reached out and grabbed his phone. But all he did was tap the edge of it against the newspaper covered desk. "Fine."

She wasn't sure if he was dismissing her or not. "What should I tell him now? The poor guy thinks he's got a crack at working for Robinson Tech."

"Tell him the job requires relocating. Maybe he'll lose interest."

Ella shook her head. "He won't." But she left the bedroom, leaving the doors closed again. She rejoined Randy at the dining table and picked up the fancy, silver coffee server. "More?"

"Sure." He held out his cup and she refilled it before topping off her own. "Do you mind if I ask how many other candidates you're considering?"

"Three." It was appalling how quickly she came up with answers, but that was the number of individuals currently on her latest list of baby mama suspects. "I do need to tell you that relocation would be necessary. Is that—"

"—not a problem," Randy assured.

"Right." She started to sit when she noticed the French doors opening again and Ben appeared.

Randy noticed, too, and immediately stood, extending his hand. "Mr. Robinson. Good to see you again."

Ben gestured at the food. "I hope you helped take care of getting rid of some of this stuff."

Randy grinned. "My starving student days are still fresh in my mind. I try not to pass up too many meals that are offered to me."

"You've got an impressive resume. And Lester Tomlinson speaks highly of you."

"He's BRD's vice president." Randy looked surprised.

"I know." Ben's gaze traveled over Ella for a moment before returning to Randy. He pulled a card from his lapel pocket and handed it to the younger man. "Give my secretary Bonita a call on Monday. We'll set you up to come to Austin. Get a close up look at what we've got to offer you."

Randy eagerly took the card and he smiled brilliantly at Ella. "Thank you!"

Ben looked vaguely amused before he walked Randy toward the door of the suite. "Might want to save the thanks, once you find out working for Robinson Tech is more of a calling than a job."

Randy's smile didn't waver a watt. "I'm up to the challenge, I promise."

Ella sat down at the table, cradling her coffee, and waited until Ben returned once Randy was gone.

He gave her a glance before pouring himself a cup. "What are you looking at me like that for?"

Warmth bloomed inside her chest as she watched him. "You're a softie," she said. "You're going to give him a job."

"We give lots of people jobs," he said dryly. He plucked a slice of bacon from the heated dish and ate it with his fingers. "Even more jobs with our latest expansion. I am *not* a softie."

He was acting as if he hadn't done anything at all out of the ordinary. When she knew just how far from ordinary this situation had been. "Actually *giving* him a job had never been part of your plan."

"Plans change. Aside from trying to flirt with my HR rep, he's got skills."

"You're not worried he'll go around telling people you're engaged to me?"

"I'll make sure he won't." He sounded unconcerned and polished off the bacon slice before wiping his fingers on a napkin. "So Randy's off the list. Who's next? Someone in Chicago, you said?"

She scrambled a little to keep up with the sudden shift. "Uh, yes. Chicago. Nancy Belgard."

"She was with the advertising firm my father once used."

"Yes. I have the notes in my room if you want to go over them."

He shook his head, glancing at his watch. "Later."

She immediately rose and moved the used plates to the sideboard. The food she and Randy had eaten hadn't made a dent in the generous buffet. "It'll only take me a few minutes to get ready to leave for the airport."

"A commendable trait, considering my experience with most females. But we don't have to race back to Austin all that fast. The sky's clear and there's still plenty of the city that you haven't yet seen. Not to mention Cambridge. And your water taxi ride, of course."

He hadn't said a word the night before about more sightseeing. "That's very generous of you, but—"

"I'm not generous, Ella. I'm selfish. I want what I want when I want it."

She watched him over her coffee cup as she took a long sip. It *was* really good coffee.

When she was finished, she set the empty cup next to the used plates. "Saying something doesn't make it so, Ben," she said as she headed for the door. "So far, the only selfish thing I've seen you do was eat the other half of my truffle yesterday. But if you selfishly want to show me more of this fabulous city, I suppose I can suck it up and go along." Smiling impudently, she pulled open the door, only to gasp when he followed her and reached above her head to push it shut again.

"I *am* selfish," he said flatly, and planted his mouth on hers.

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