

SPECIAL EXCERPT FROM



SPECIAL EDITION

Life, Love and Family

Computer programmer Vivian Blair believes the secret to a successful marriage is compatibility, while her boss, Wes Robinson, thinks passion's the only ingredient in a romance. When she develops a matchmaking app and challenges him to use it, which one will prove the other right...and find true love?

*Read on for a sneak preview of
FORTUNE'S PERFECT VALENTINE,
the second installment in the 2016 Fortunes of Texas continuity,*

ALL FORTUNE'S CHILDREN.

“So this little square picture of a key opening a heart is going to change the dating habits of the entire nation. I tap it with my fingertip and magically it will lead me to my true love.” With a mocking snort, Wesley Robinson pushed the smartphone aside. “What a crock of crap.”

Vivian Blair scowled at the man sitting behind the wide mahogany desk. At this moment, it didn't matter that he was her boss, who also happened to be Vice President of Research and Development at Robinson Tech. Nor did it matter that he happened to be the sexiest man she'd ever laid eyes on. This project was her baby and she had no intentions of letting him make a mockery of her hard work.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked, her voice rising along with her irritation. “This little button you're calling a crock of crap just happens to be a product of your company. A company owned and operated by your family, I might add. Have you forgotten that you approved this idea months ago?”

Ignoring her outburst, he calmly answered, “I've not forgotten anything, Vivian.”

Throughout the six years she'd worked for Wes Robinson, he'd rarely called her by her given name, and on each occasion it had never failed to rattle her senses. Her boss was always strictly business. So having her name roll off his tongue was the closest he ever got to acknowledging she was a flesh-and-blood woman.

Vivian shifted on the edge of the wingback chair and did her best to refocus her jolted thoughts on their debate. “Then why are you so intent on degrading the product? I thought you were convinced it was going to make the company a pile of money.”

With confident ease, he leaned back in the oxblood leather chair. After slipping a pair of tortoise-framed glasses from his nose, he leveled a somewhat smug gaze on her face. Vivian had the very unprofessional urge to stick her tongue out at him.

“I still believe the app is going to make money. And probably lots of it,” he agreed. “But that doesn't mean I believe the theory behind the dating site will hold up. In fact, I'm willing to bet that after a few months the app's popularity will sink, simply because the public is going to realize that My Perfect Match won't fulfill its promise. Still, I'm willing to gamble the initial sales of the app will outweigh its short lifespan.”

It was hard enough for Vivian to deal with having his eyes sliding leisurely over her face, but hearing him discount her hard work was even worse.

Leaning forward, she said briskly, “Forgive my bluntness, Mr. Robinson, but you're wrong. Completely wrong. My Perfect Match will work. My scientific research assures me that compatibility is the key to finding a perfect mate. The app will lead the consumer to a list of questions that follows strict criteria of the most important issues and topics in a person's private life. If they're answered truthfully, the computer will be able to match you with the perfect person based on corresponding answers.”

His short laugh was weighted with sarcasm. “Sorry, but you just spouted a bunch of hooey. When a man sidles up to a woman at the bar, you think he has a list of questions on his mind?” Not waiting for her to

answer, he plowed on, “There’s only one question on his mind. And that’s whether she’ll say yes or no. He doesn’t give a damn whether she eats fish twice a week, walks a mile a day or has a cat for a pet.”

Vivian’s back teeth clamped together as she fought to hold on to her dignity and her temper. “I might remind you that this app isn’t an instrument for locating a one-night stand!” She tapped the screen of her phone. “This is a social aid to help lonely people find a perfect partner—one to spend the rest of their lives with happily. Or have you heard of that concept before?”

A wry expression crossed his face, and Vivian allowed her gaze to take a slow survey of his rugged features. At thirty-three years old, he was definitely coming into his prime, she decided. Piercing blue eyes sat beneath an unyielding line of dark brows, while a wide nose led down to a set of thin, chiseled lips. She couldn’t remember a time she’d seen his strong, angled jaw without a dark shadow of day-old stubble or his short, coffee-brown hair in a style other than rumpled disarray. Yet she had to admit it was that touch of edginess that often pushed her thoughts in a naughty direction.

Many of Vivian’s coworkers at Robinson Tech had trouble telling Wes apart from his identical twin, Ben, who was the newly appointed COO of the company. But Vivian could truthfully say she never got the two men mixed up. Unlike his brother Ben, Wes was rarely ever spotted in a suit and tie. Instead he usually arrived each morning for work in khakis or jeans. Yet it wasn’t exactly their fashion choices that set the two men apart. Wes’s quiet, reserved manner was totally opposite his brash twin’s demeanor.

Clearly bored, he said, “I suppose you’re talking about marriage now. I’ve heard enough on that subject this past month to last me a lifetime.”

Since his brother Ben’s wedding was taking place in about two weeks, on Valentine’s Day, Vivian could only assume he was referring to that marriage. As far as she knew, Wes had never had a long-term girlfriend, much less been engaged. But then, she hardly knew what the man did outside this massive office building. She was only an employee, one of many who worked for the Robinson family.

Moving her gaze to a point just over his shoulder, she studied the skyline of downtown Austin. The capital of Texas had always been her home, yet she doubted that beyond this building, her footsteps had ever crossed Wes’s path. Or, for that matter, the path of any other member of his wealthy family. That was just one of the reasons she never allowed herself to look at him as anything more than a boss, rather than a man with enough sex appeal to make a woman swoon.

Giving herself a hard mental shake, she countered his statement with a question. “What else? If a person finds their perfect mate, the natural progression is marriage.”

Vivian’s gaze slipped back to his face just in time to see the corners of his mouth turn downward, and she realized this conversation was giving her more peeks into the man’s private feelings than she’d ever expected to see. But then she’d never planned for this meeting to turn into a debate about dating or love or sex. Vivian hardly discussed such things with any man, much less her boss. Awkward couldn’t begin to describe the turmoil she was feeling.

“Marriage is hardly the reason consumers will purchase the app,” he said wryly. “But regardless of their motives, the concept won’t work. The connection between a man and a woman is all about chemistry. It’s the sparks—the fire—that fuse two people together. Not whether their likes and dislikes are the same.”

Sparks? Fire? Maybe it would be nice to have a man take her into his arms and set a torch to her senses. But that sort of mindless passion didn’t last. She had only to look at her own parents to see what happened between a man and a woman once the heat died and reality set in. Her mother had struggled to raise three children while her father had moved on to a younger woman. Now her mother lived alone, too disenchanted even to try to find a man to love her.

“Maybe attraction does initially pull two people together, but it hardly keeps them together,” she argued. “And that’s the problem My Perfect Match will fix. That’s why it’s going to be a huge success. Lasting relationships will eventually prove our product works.”

The faint smile on his face was etched with amusement and was far too patronizing for her taste.

“I admire your enthusiasm, Ms. Blair.”

He clearly didn’t agree with her, and that notion bothered her far more than it should have. Vivian understood that this project had nothing to do with personal viewpoints. It was about producing a product

that would ultimately make money for the company. Still, hearing his jaded ideas on the subject of relationships between men and women was maddening to her.

"But you think I'm wrong," she ventured. "If you're so sure this concept is going to be a bust, then why did you agree to it in the first place? In two weeks, on Valentine's Day, the app is scheduled to make its grand debut to the public. Don't you think it's rather late in the day to consider axing it?"

He cocked a brow at her. "What gave you the idea I want to ax it? Just because I don't believe in the concept? Look, Ms. Blair, I'm a businessman first and foremost, and I happen to believe consumers are just gullible enough to fall for this sort of baloney. As far as I'm concerned, whether it works or not is a moot point."

Wes watched as Vivian Blair's spine stiffened and her fingers fluttered to the top button of her crisp white shirt. Clearly he'd flustered the woman, which surprised him somewhat. He'd never seen her any way but cool and professional. During her six years as one of a team of computer developers employed by Robinson Tech, she'd proved herself to be dedicated, innovative and smart. She'd never failed to impress him with her work, but as a woman, she'd never really drawn a second look from him. Until this morning, when she'd snatched off her black-rimmed glasses and glared at him.

Her hazel eyes had thrown heated daggers straight at him, and her fiery reaction had caught him by complete surprise. All at once, he'd forgotten she was an employee. Instead, his mind had taken a momentary detour from work and started a subtle survey of her appearance.

He'd never thought of Vivian Blair as anything more than a coworker, a brainy, no-nonsense developer. She dressed neatly but primly in blouses and skirts that covered her slender frame with enough fabric to make even the strictest father nod with approval. What little jewelry she wore usually amounted to no more than a modest string of pearls or a fine gold chain and cross. Her pumps were low-heeled and pedestrian. And though her brown, honey-streaked hair was shiny and long enough to brush her shoulders, she rarely wore it loose. Instead she favored pulling it back into a bun or some sort of conservative twist.

No. Vivian Blair's appearance wasn't one that caught a man's attention. But seeing all that life sparking in her eyes had shown Wes a different side of her. And now, as her wide, full lips pressed into a tight line, he could only wonder what it might feel like to press his mouth to hers, to make those hard, cherry-colored lips yield softly to his.

Leaning slightly forward, he rested his forearms on the desktop and forced her gaze to meet his.

"Do you have a problem with that?" he asked.

If possible, the line of her lips grew even tighter, while her nostrils flared with disdain.

"Why should I?" she countered stiffly. "Your job is to make money. Mine is to create products. With My Perfect Match, we've both succeeded. Or, at least, we will succeed once the app goes on the market."

She was obviously trying to get her emotions under control, and for a moment Wes considered shooting a remark at her that would stir her temper all over again. It would be fun to see, he thought. But she wasn't in his office for fun, and he hardly had time for it. Not with his twin brother, the COO of Robinson Tech, expecting Wes to put some new innovative idea on his desk every other day.

"You're on track now, Ms. Blair."

Her expression rigid, she reached for the small notepad and pen she'd placed on the edge of the desk when she'd first sat down for their meeting.

"So is the live remote still on for tomorrow?" she asked.

"I've already spoken with the producer of Hey, USA this morning. Our segment is set to be broadcast at nine fifteen central tomorrow. So I expect you to be ready well before that time."

She nodded. "And where do they plan to shoot this remote? The conference room?"

Wes shook his head. "Right here in my office." He jerked his thumb toward the window behind him. "We'll sit in front of the plate glass so the backdrop will be the skyline of the city. I think the producer—she wants an urban feel to the segment. You know, the image of city people hurrying and scurrying—too busy to find a date, so they rely on an app to find them one," he added drily.

"My Perfect Match is more than finding a person a date. It's—"

He held up a hand before she could slip into another sermon about compatibility and long-term relationships. Wes didn't want anything long-term. And he sure as hell wasn't looking to make any woman his wife. He'd seen his mother suffer through too many years of a loveless marriage to want the same for himself.

"Save it for the camera tomorrow," he told her. "The public is who you need to convince, not me."

She clutched the notebook to her chest, and Wes found himself wondering if she'd ever held a man to herself in that manner. He couldn't imagine it. But then, he didn't have a clue about her social life. Could be that once she was away from the Robinson Tech building, she tore off her professional demeanor and turned into a little wildcat. The idea very nearly put a smile on his face.

"Do you have any idea what sort of questions the interviewer will be asking? I'd like to be prepared."

"You've had plenty to say on the subject during our meeting this morning," he told her. "And I'm sure you won't have any problem speaking your mind tomorrow. You'll simply explain the product and how it works. I'll speak for Robinson Tech and what the company stands for. The national exposure will be great."

She dropped the notepad to her lap, but Wes's gaze lingered on the subtle curves of her breasts beneath the white shirt. Damn it, what was wrong with him? He didn't need to be ogling this woman. There were always plenty of women in his little black book who were ready to go out on a date with him. He certainly didn't need to start having romantic notions about Vivian.

"Yes, the publicity is just what the app needs," she said primly. "I only hope everything goes smoothly." Annoyed at his straying thoughts, he frowned at her.

"Why should it not?"

Clearing her throat, she said, "I've never been on television before."

He leveled a pointed look at her. "I'm sure there are plenty of things you've never done before, Ms. Blair. And there's always a first time for everything."

She straightened her shoulders, and once again Wes spotted a flash of anger in her eyes.

"You're very reassuring," she said.

"I'm not your caretaker, Ms. Blair."

"Thank God."

The words were muttered so quietly that at first Wes wasn't sure he heard them. And once he'd concluded he'd heard correctly, he couldn't quite believe she'd had the audacity to say them.

"What did you say?" he demanded.

Louder now, she answered, "I said, are we finished here?"

Any other time he would've upbraided an employee for making such a retort, but seeing Vivian Blair turn into a firecracker right in front of his eyes had knocked him off kilter.

"Yes. Be here in my office no later than eight forty-five in the morning. I don't want any glitches or mishaps happening before the interview."

"I'll certainly be on time."

She quickly rose to her feet and started toward the door. Before Wes could stop himself, he added, "And Ms. Blair, tomorrow for the interview, could you not look so—studious? My Perfect Match is all about romance. It might help if you—well, looked the part a bit more."

Her back went ramrod straight as she fixed him with a stare. "In other words, sex sells," she retorted. "Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

To a woman like Vivian, he supposed he sounded crude. But she should have understood that this was all about business. Still, something about the disdain on her face caused a wave of heat to wash up his neck and over his jaw. He could only hope the overhead lighting was too dim for her to pick up his discomfort.

Clearing his throat, he purposely swiveled his chair so that he was facing her. He'd be damned if he let this woman make him feel the least bit ashamed.

"Ms. Blair, there's no cause for you to be offended. I'm not trying to exploit you or your gender. I'm trying to sell an idea. Having you look attractive and pretty can only help the matter."

Even from the distance of a few feet, he could see her heave out a long breath. For one split second he was so tempted to see that fire in her eyes again that he almost left his chair and walked over to her. But he forced himself to stay put and behave as her boss, instead of a hot-blooded male.

Tilting her little chin to a challenging angle, she asked brusquely, "And what about your effort in all of this, Mr. Robinson? Do you plan to wax your chest and unbutton your shirt down to your waist?"

It took Wes a moment to digest her questions, but once they sank in, his reaction was to burst out laughing.

"Touché, Vivian. I expect I deserved that."

"I expect you did," she said flatly, then turned and left the room.

As Wes watched the door close behind her, he realized this was the first time in days that he'd laughed about anything. Strange, he thought, that a brainy employee had been the one to put a smile on his face.

Shaking his head with wry disbelief, he turned his chair back to the desk and reached for a stack of reports.

By the time Vivian returned to her work cubicle, she felt certain that steam was shooting from her ears. Before today, she'd never allowed herself to think of Wes Robinson as anything other than her boss. She'd kept herself immune to his dark good looks. A rather easy task, given the fact that he was so far out of her league, she needed a telescope to see him. But their meeting this morning had definitely given her a full view of the man. And what she'd seen she certainly disliked.

"Hey, Viv, ready for lunch?"

Pressing fingertips to the middle of her puckered forehead, she looked over her shoulder to see George Townsend standing at the entrance of her work cubicle. In his early fifties, he was a tall, burly man with red hair and a thick beard to match. Other than a set of elderly parents who lived more than a thousand miles away, he had no family. Instead, he seemed content to let his work be his family. Most everyone in the developmental department considered George a social recluse. Except Vivian.

During the years they'd worked together, she'd grown close to George. Now she considered him as much of a brother as she did a coworker. And she was thankful for their friendship. In her opinion, the man was not only a computer genius but also a kind human being. He didn't care about her appearance. Nor was he interested in the size of her apartment or bank account.

"Is it that time already? I'm not really hungry yet." Actually, the way she felt at the moment, she didn't think she'd be able to stomach any kind of food for the remainder of the day. Thoughts of Wes Robinson's smart-mouthed remarks were still making her blood boil.

"It's nearly twelve," he said with a frown, then added temptingly, "and I brought enough dewberry cobbler for the both of us, too."

Sighing, she put down her pencil and rose to her feet. For George's sake, she'd do her best to have lunch and try to appear normal.

"Okay," she told him. "Let me log out and we'll go."

Once she left her desk, the two of them walked through the work area until they reached a fair-sized break room equipped with a row of cabinets, refrigerator, microwave, hot plate and coffee machine.

Even though it was lunchtime, only a handful of people were sitting at the long utility tables. Since Robinson Tech was located in downtown Austin, most of the employees who worked in Vivian's department went out to lunch. There were several good eating places within walking distance and they all strived to give quick service to the workers on a limited time schedule. But usually Vivian chose to bring her own lunch and remain in the building.

"Looks like most of your friends are out today," George said as the two of them took seats across from each other. "Guess they don't mind walking in the cold."

Vivian didn't mind the cold, either. But she did mind sitting at a table with a group of giggling women with little more on their minds than the latest hairdo, a nail salon or a man.

"The wind was very cold this morning," she agreed. "I was already here at the building before the heater in my car ever got warm."

As she'd readied herself for work this morning, she'd also dressed more warmly in dark gray slacks and dress boots. The gray cardigan she'd pulled over her white shirt had looked perfectly appropriate to her, but now, as she glanced down at herself, she was doubting her fashion choices.

Damn Wes Robinson! What did he know about women and sex and romance, anyway?

Probably a whole lot more than you do, Vivian. It's been weeks since you've been on a date, and that evening turned out to be as exciting as watching a caterpillar slowly climb a blade of green grass.

"Well, Mr. Robinson's office must have been plenty warm," George commented between bites of sandwich. "You looked pretty hot when you got back to your desk."

Vivian shot her friend an annoyed look. "You noticed?"

He smiled. "I just happened to look up. Did anything go wrong with the meeting?"

She let out a heavy breath. "I just don't agree with some of the man's ideas, that's all. And frankly, I'll be glad when the introduction of My Perfect Match is over and done with. I'm a computer developer, George. I don't work in advertising."

"But you are going to do the TV spot in the morning, aren't you?"

The smirk on her face revealed exactly how she felt about being on a national television show that pulled in millions of viewers each morning. "I have no choice. Wes—I mean, Mr. Robinson—wants me to explain how the app works."

"Well, it is your brainchild," George reasoned.

Reaching across the table, she gave his hand a friendly pat. "I could've never created the app without your help, George. You're the wizard here. As far as I'm concerned, you can explain how the thing works far better than I."

He chuckled. "Only the technical parts. All those questions and what they're supposed to do for the person answering them—well, that's more your line."

Vivian had stood in line for nearly ten minutes this morning at Garcia's Deli just to get one of Mr. Garcia's delicious pork sandwiches called the Cuban Cigar, but now each bite she took seemed to stick at the top of her throat.

Shaking her head, she said, "Not really. Those questions were compiled by a set of psychologists who are experts in human relationships. But I do believe in them. And you should, too, George. Otherwise, our little brainchild will be a bust."

And after the way she'd defended the new app to her cynical boss, seeing it fall flat would just about kill her.

He shrugged one thick shoulder. "I'm not worried. We've developed some stinkers before and survived. Not everything we create is going to be a huge success."

No. In this age of fast-moving technology, it was hard to predict what the public would spend its hard earned money on. Yet Vivian knew first-hand that being lonely was a painful thing. Her many failures at finding true love were the main reason she'd come up with My Perfect Match. At the age of twenty-eight, she would be silly to consider herself an old maid, yet she was growing tired of playing the dating game and falling short of having any sort of meaningful relationship to show for it. Her own frustration led her to believe there were plenty of lonely people out there who'd be willing to give the app a try.

"That's true. But I've really stuck my neck on the chopping block for this project. More than anything, I want it to be a huge success. That's why I can't falter in the interview tomorrow."

George's coarse, ruddy features spread into a reassuring smile. "Don't think about your nerves. Just look into the camera and pretend you're talking to me. You'll be great."

Great? Sitting in front of a television camera with Wes Robinson at her side? She'd count herself lucky to simply hold herself together.

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