



Fortune's Secret Husband (The Fortunes of Texas: All Fortune's Children)

By Karen Rose Smith

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Award-winning author Karen Rose Smith lives in Pennsylvania and has sold over 80 novels since 1991. Her romances have made both the USA TODAY list and the Amazon Contemporary Romance Bestseller list. Believing in the power of love, she envisions herself writing relationship novels and mysteries for a long time to come! Readers can e-mail Karen at www.karenrosesmith.com or follow her on Twitter @karenrosesmith and on Facebook.

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Lucie Fortune Chesterfield was late!

It was her own fault. She'd forgotten her phone and had to run back to the Austin, Texas, apartment she was subletting to retrieve it. In a rush now on her way out again, after disembarking from the elevator in the lobby, she stopped cold.

Was she seeing things? Was that Chase Parker leaving the building? Not possible. Just because he still invaded her dreams—

The doorman stood at his counter and she ran to him and pointed to the departing tall, broad-shouldered man whose Stetson was tilted at an angle she thought she recognized.

The doorman did a double take. "Lady Lucie, I thought you'd left."

Irving hadn't been at his station when she'd rushed back in for her phone. "I forgot something and had to return to my apartment. Do you know who that man is?"

Lucie was very used to doormen and chauffeurs and pomp and circumstance. Born in England and living on the Chesterfield Estate, she was considered "almost" royalty. Her mother's adopted father had been an earl. Her own father had been knighted. In England and the United States, her family was sometimes hounded and followed by paparazzi searching for that money shot. After the scandal her sister had become involved in, Lucie was more than aware of her actions and couldn't just run into the street chasing a tall Texan who resembled a ghost from her foolish past, a ghost so secret not even her family had known all the details about her association with him.

Irving, in his fifties and balding, turned red to his scalp as he reached out to the shelf under the counter and retrieved a business card.

"I'm so sorry, Lady Lucie. I saw you the first time and assumed you'd left for the morning."

She'd been following a routine. Each morning after breakfast, she'd been scouting out properties for an office for the Fortune Foundation, which was planning to open a branch in Austin.

Irv, as he preferred to be called, went on to explain further as he handed her the business card. "The gentleman gave me this and said he'd be back later."

Lucie read the card aloud in a low tone. "Chase Parker—" There were two numbers listed.

At the idea of Chase being in close proximity, she felt a tremble race through her. At seventeen, she'd been on a youth trip to Scotland. And then...

She had to forget about Chase Parker, ghost or not, and concentrate on this trip to visit her relatives in Texas. She had agreed to help the Fortune Foundation set up a branch in Austin for the benefit of children there.

"What do you want me to do if he comes back again?" Irv asked.

She fingered the card in her hand. What did Chase want with her now? He obviously knew she was here. Why hadn't he called first? Should *she* phone *him*?

No. He'd forgotten about her easily. The past was in the past. If he had a reason to see her, she'd find out soon enough what that was.

Answering Irv's question, she said, "If I'm in, buzz me just as you do with everyone else."

"As you say, Lady Lucie. There is one other thing—"

She really had to be going, but Irv looked worried about something, so she waited.

"That reporter's been out there again from the news station. I saw him yesterday afternoon, but he was gone until you got back."

"As long as he stays outside, there's really nothing we can do about him."

"I don't want him accosting you as you leave," Irv maintained, "or as you return. You know, we can always arrange for your driver to pick you up in the garage instead of at the front entrance."

"He'd soon catch on to that because he knows I'm usually out and about. I'll deal with him if I have to, Irv. Please, don't worry about me."

"But I do," Irv said with a boyish smile. "Somebody has to. With your relatives living in Horseback Hollow, you need somebody to worry about you here."

Everyone thought they knew her family's history—from the articles in the tabloids and in the more respectable media. Irv was right, though. Her relatives were in Horseback Hollow about five hours away.

"I have friends here, too. In fact, I'm supposed to be meeting them for brunch. So I really need to be going. Barry is waiting to drive me. You have a good day."

"You, too, m'lady."

The temperature in Austin, Texas, in March was around sixty during the day and went to a low of forty at night. Lucie had chosen a grass-green suit for this brunch, a professional look, since she would be visiting office spaces with a real estate agent afterward. The three-quarter-length sleeves of her jacket were perfect for the weather.

As she pushed her straight brown hair over her shoulder and stepped from the car, she checked the sky. All blue, not a cloud in sight.

Thanking Barry, telling him she'd text him when she finished brunch, she headed for the restaurant that her friends had chosen for this get-together. It was a bit of an elite location. Cavette's catered to a crowd that didn't have to worry what they spent on brunch, lunch or a late dinner. No paparazzi were allowed inside, and there was a security guard stationed in the restaurant who would react quickly if he had to. Celebrities in the area who often stopped in at Cavette's were assured of their privacy and a backdoor exit should they need it.

The restaurant was tastefully decorated with lots of real greenery. Lucie stopped briefly at the hostess's desk but spotted her friends at a table against the wall. Ella Thomas had recently returned from her honeymoon with Ben Fortune Robinson. Vivian Blair was engaged to Ben's twin brother, Wes. Ella spotted Lucie first.

Ella was a beauty with thick, long, wavy auburn hair and blue-blue eyes. Lucie respected her. She wore minimal makeup and preferred to be admired for her brains rather than her body. She'd dressed today as she usually did, in dress jeans, a Western-cut blouse and expensive boots. In contrast, Vivian was taller than Ella with hazel eyes and honey-streaked brown hair that she wore pulled back today. She also wore glasses—very stylish ones. A computer programmer, she'd dressed in a navy pantsuit with a red blouse. She was shyer than Ella but smart and fun. Lucie liked both of these women immensely and was glad to call them friends. As she took a seat with them, she noticed they'd already ordered her a mimosa.

"You don't have to drive this morning," Ella counseled her. "Let loose. Champagne and orange juice are a good way to start your day."

Lucie laughed. "I can't let too loose. I want to choose the right office space for the Fortune Foundation. It has to be utilitarian, but classy, too, with just the right square footage to fit what they want to do."

"And what is that?" Vivian asked after a quick hug.

"What I'm looking for would mostly be a functional space. If we have programs for kids, they would probably be at other sites."

"Or maybe at a community center?" Ella offered. "I can see the Fortunes building one of those."

"Just how long are you going to be in Austin?" Vivian asked.

"I'm free until April, when I fly to Guatemala with my mother to start a project there."

"How do you like living in Austin? I know your sister likes living in Horseback Hollow."

Lucie took the napkin from her plate and spread it onto her lap. "Amelia loves Horseback Hollow. But truth be told, I prefer Austin. It's more metropolitan than Horseback Hollow."

Vivian and Ella both exchanged a look. "You won't get any arguments there," Vivian said. "In Horseback Hollow, everybody knows everybody's business."

"And in Austin," Vivian supplied, "they just know Lady Lucie Fortune Chesterfield's business. Any reporters lately?"

"Irv says one's been hanging around, but I haven't run into him face-to-face yet." She took a sip of her mimosa. "You both look good," Lucie said to them, narrowing her eyes. "Are you happy?"

Ella sighed. "I couldn't be happier."

"Me either," Viv agreed. "And not only with Wes. We think the app I developed, My Perfect Match, is going to continue to be a huge hit. I mean, after all, it brought me and Wes together, though not exactly in the way I intended."

Although she was listening to Viv, Lucie couldn't help letting her mind wander again to Chase leaving his card with Irv. "Just when you think you have life planned out, fate shoves it in another direction."

"Exactly," Viv responded. "And I'm trying to think of a way to balance My Perfect Match. Tell me something, Lucie. Do you think it's better to hook up with someone you know you're compatible with, or should you hook up with someone who sets your heart on fire?"

Wasn't that a question for the test of time? Because of her own experience, Lucie responded sadly, "Flames die down. Compatibility might be better long-term."

"That sounds like experience to me." Ella motioned to Lucie's mimosa. "Come on and drink that, and tell us who taught you about flames."

Lucie had slipped Chase's card into her jacket pocket. Now she touched it, and when she did, she remembered all too vividly the touch of his hands. Her cheeks grew warm, and she blamed that on the mimosa. What could it hurt to talk about it a little? "Come on," Viv coaxed. "You know all about *our* love affairs."

"What was his name?" Ella prompted.

"His name was Chase."

"Now, that's a good Texas name if I ever heard one," Viv noted. "But he couldn't have been a Texan if you were living in England."

"Oh, but he *was* a Texan. His father owned an oil company and they were wealthy. I was seventeen when we met in England at the start of the trip to Scotland. Chase was a group leader. I thought it was love at first sight, but I guess it was just lust at first sight. We got caught together in the hostel room. So much about it was against the rules. A leader consorting with one of the tourists, being in his room alone together, both of us undressed..." She trailed off. "Chase got fired, and I was sent home." At least that was the gist of the story.

Contrite, feeling disgraced in the eyes of her parents, Lucie had vowed to herself to never do anything so reckless again. She'd maintained that vow by pouring all of her energy into setting up orphanages with her mother in developing countries. Their lives were about helping needy children.

"You never saw or heard from him again?"

"I received a letter. I wrote him many, but I never heard from him after that first one."

"You didn't call him?"

"Not what a proper lady would do," Lucie answered almost teasingly, though there had been other reasons not to call, too.

Should she tell them about Chase dropping off his card at her apartment? No. He might not even come back. She was sure nothing would come of it.

Lucie had learned early on the best way to turn attention away from herself was to listen to another's story, and she knew these women had stories to tell. Ella's husband, Ben, had recently found out he was a Fortune and that his father, whom he'd always known as Gerald Robinson, was really Jerome Fortune, who had disappeared years ago. Ben was now on a quest to locate other relatives. The Robinsons might be Fortune cousins.

"Has Ben gotten any further in proving that his father is really Jerome Fortune?"

"His father is thwarting him at every turn," Ella said with a frown. "His sister, Rachel, who uncovered the connection and confronted their dad, is sure their father is hiding something. Ben wants the truth. He has seven siblings who want to know about their roots, whether his father wants to deny the past or not. Thanks to you, he located Keaton Whitfield, who's his half sibling."

In one of those quirks of fate, Lucie had already known Keaton, an architect in London. He'd designed a house for one of her mother's friends, and he and Lucie had run into each other at a few parties. He was what the Americans would call a stand-up guy. When Ben had asked for an introduction to him, she'd readily complied.

"Hasn't he located anyone else who might be related?" Lucie asked. Apparently Ben's father had had several affairs.

"Right now he's on the trail of Jacqueline Fortune, who may or may not be his paternal grandmother," Ella revealed.

"This is a mystery unraveling before our eyes," Viv said with enthusiasm. "I can't wait for the next installment."

Brunch was full of more Fortune stories, including the party Kate Fortune had planned for her ninetieth birthday. Lucie, Viv and Ella kept their voices low because Kate Fortune's residence at the Silver Spur Ranch near Austin was still a secret, except to the Fortune family. In the past, Kate had been the target of blackmail and kidnapping attempts. Now, looking for an heir for her company and not wanting media attention about it, she intended to keep her presence in Austin quiet.

When Lucie checked her watch, she saw the day was moving ahead without her, and she really had to get on with looking at properties. After goodbyes to Viv and Ella, she called the real estate agent who was advising her. They agreed to meet at the first location on Lucie's list and then tour the others together afterward.

By late afternoon, while Lucie sat in the car on her way back to her apartment, she was quite discouraged. None of the spaces had seemed quite right. She was becoming more and more sure that she might also have to help find satellite locations for the actual kids' programs themselves—summer lunches, music, art, sports. Building a community center might be a possibility, unless the foundation could find already established and

deserving programs to fund.

Barry pulled up in front of her apartment building. She was tired and all she wanted to do was soak in her tub. After she climbed from the car, Irv came to meet her at the curb. That was unusual, since the doors had an electric sensor.

He said quickly, "Just in case you wanted to get back in your car and go in the other direction, I wanted to warn you, the man who was here this morning is waiting at my desk."

Lucie stood at the curb and peered through the glass doors into the lobby. Her heart began to beat in triple time. The man at Irv's desk *was* Chase Parker. She couldn't tell exactly how much he'd changed from when he was twenty-one. After all, he'd be thirty-one now. But she could tell he was still as tall and straight-shouldered. The Western-cut jacket he wore fit him impeccably, his black jeans and boots just as much so.

He turned toward her now, and that tilt of his Stetson told her some of the young man still remained.

"It's fine, Irv. Apparently he has some business with me, and I have to see what that is."

She squared her shoulders, forgot her fatigue and started forward to meet her past head-on.

Lucie walked through the glass doors and approached Chase, thinking his dark hair was still the color of the finest imported chocolate. His dark brown eyes seemed to take in everything about her all at once. Even in that wonderfully cut jacket, she could tell he was more muscular than he'd been at twenty-one but not too bulked up. He was long and lean and still looked like everything good about Texas.

Before Lucie took another step toward the unknown, she turned to Irv who'd come in behind her. "Not a word of this meeting to anyone, not anyone." After all, Irv knew Chase's name from the business card. If the press associated their names, if reporters started digging, a new scandal could erupt.

"Not a word, Lady Lucie. You know you can count on me."

"Thank you, Irv. You don't know how much I appreciate that. Was that reporter around here at all today?"

"I didn't see him...or the news van."

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