



Fortune's Valentine Bride (The Fortunes of Texas: Whirlwind Romance)

By Marie Ferrarella

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Editorial Review

About the Author

This USA TODAY bestselling and RITA ® Award-winning author has written more than two hundred books for Harlequin Books and Silhouette Books, some under the name Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide. Visit her website at www.marieferrarella.com.

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"Don't take this the wrong way, Blake," Wendy Men-doza said to her brother as she tried, and failed, to find a comfortable spot on her bed, "but with all this hovering about you're doing, I'm beginning to feel like a watched pot."

Blake Fortune dragged over the chair he'd brought into his younger sister's bedroom earlier and straddled it. "Isn't that actually a good thing?" he pointed out. "Watched pots aren't supposed to boil, or, in your case, give birth prematurely."

Which was, between the terbutaline injections to stop her contractions and the enforced bed rest, exactly what the doctor and she were trying to prevent.

But that didn't mean that she had to be happy about this state of affairs, Blake knew. And the longer she lay there, inert, the more restless she grew.

"Isn't there something you could be doing?" she pressed, more accustomed to his teasing than his concern. "I mean, I really do appreciate you deciding to drop everything and come running back to Red Rock to hold my hand, but having everyone practically walking on eggshells around me is *really* making me feel very tense and nervous."

Which was, he knew, counterproductive to what they were all really trying to do—keep her pregnant until the baby was strong enough to survive on its own when she emerged.

"If this keeps up," Wendy warned, "I'm going to wind up giving birth to a neurotic baby who's going to go straight from the delivery room to some psychiatrist's couch."

Blake laughed, shaking his head. At least she hadn't lost her offbeat sense of humor. The whole family had gone through one hell of a trauma when that tornado had hit. And then on top of that, when Wendy had suddenly gone into premature labor, it had put a scare into all of them.

Thank God for modern medicine, he thought. Now she was back to her feisty self—except for not being able to get out of bed, he amended.

"Well, obviously the tornado had no effect on your imagination," he commented. But one look at her expression told him that she was being serious. She wanted him out of her bedroom. He supposed that if he were in her place, he might feel a bit crowded, too. "You've already kicked me out of your house to bunk with Scott at his place," he reminded her. "You want me to go altogether?"

Reaching out, Wendy caught her brother's hand and threaded her fingers through his. She loved all her siblings, but, as the baby of the family, Blake was the brother she was closest to. He was the second

youngest. Together they were the bottom of the totem pole.

"No, I don't want you to go altogether," she told him with feeling, "but I don't want you putting your life on hold because of me, either." He'd been her constant companion for two days now. It was time he got back to his career, to his life. "With computers and teleconferencing, you could work anywhere. Why don't you set up a temporary office at Scott's and take care of business before Dad comes, breathing down your neck for dropping the ball, or whatever cliché he favors these days."

John Michael Fortune, who she felt certain did love his family in his own, private way, was ultimately responsible for the turn her life had taken. If her father hadn't insisted on sending her here, to Red Rock, Texas, in hopes of waking up her heretofore sleeping work ethic, she might have never discovered the two ultimate passions of her life: baking and Marcos—not necessarily in that order.

Her newfound passion for baking and creating desserts had come to light when she had gone to work at the restaurant that Marcos managed for his aunt and uncle, who were friends of her parents. At the time it was clear that Marcos felt he was being saddled with her and that he thought she was a spoiled little rich girl, totally incapable of doing anything right.

Marcos had been looking to fire her, while she in turn was looking for ways to prove herself. What neither one had been looking for was a life commitment, but they'd found it, in spades. Now she was married to Marcos and expecting his child any day.

A baby that had almost been born nearly a month ago, thanks to the tornado that had ripped through Red Rock just minutes before her family, who had flown out for her Christmas Eve wedding, were to take off for Atlanta.

It still left her breathless when she thought about it. One minute, she was saying her goodbyes, the next, they were being all but buried alive in debris as the tornado buzz sawed through the airport, collapsing it all around them.

The shock of it all, including having Marcos's badly injured brother, Javier, lapse into a coma, was too much for her. She found herself going into labor *way* before she was anywhere near her due date. Luckily, her doctor was able to temporarily curtail her contractions with injections. The hope was that she could hold on long enough for the baby's lungs to develop sufficiently to sustain the infant outside the womb.

Right now the process seemed as if it was taking forever. And having Blake constantly slanting wary glances in her direction really wasn't helping anything, especially not her frame of mind.

The problem was Blake could see her side of it. If the tables were turned, he wouldn't want people hovering around him, either, no matter how much he loved them. "I suppose you have a point."

Wendy smiled broadly, relieved that Blake wasn't offended by her strongly worded "suggestion." But then, this was Blake and, most of the time, they really did think alike.

"Of course I do."

Blake was already focusing on another project, one that had gone begging for his attention much too long. It was time to stop allowing it to take a backseat and get started on it in earnest.

"Actually, there has been something I've been meaning to do ever since we were practically buried alive in that airport," he confessed to her.

Wendy wasn't sure she was following him. "You were thinking of business at a time like that?" she asked incredulously. "God, Blake, you're more like Dad than I thought."

No, he highly doubted that any one of his father's offspring would ever be placed in the same category as their dad. The man ate and slept business and, while he expected the same of his children, none of them, Blake thought, would ever measure up to the old man's expectations. Blake sincerely doubted that anyone—besides a robot—could.

"Not business exactly," he explained. For the moment, he moved his chair in even closer to Wendy's bed, lowering his voice. This was something he wasn't ready to share with the immediate world—at least not yet. "When it looked like we actually might not make it, I promised myself that if we *did* survive, I'd stop putting my life on hold and do what I should have done years ago."

Intrigued, Wendy sat up a little straighter in her bed. She pushed another one of the pillows behind her, tucking it against her back. "Go on," she encouraged, curious where this was going.

"I promised myself that, if I survived, I was going to go after the woman who I allowed to slip away all those years ago." Smiling broadly at the plan that was, even now, evolving and taking on layers in his mind, Blake paused a second for dramatic effect, then shared the woman's name. "Brittany Everett."

"I changed my mind," Wendy told him. "*Don't* go on." She blew out a breath, sincerely disappointed with Blake's revelation. She'd hoped that the socialite Brittany Everett, would be a thing of the past in Blake's life. Actually, she'd secretly been hoping that when her brother's thoughts finally took a more serious turn toward things of a romantic nature, it would be images of Katie Wallace that ramped up his body temperature.

Everyone but Blake, apparently, knew that Brittany was just a spoiled Daddy's girl. In addition, she was someone who gave all "Southern belles" a bad name.

Trying her best not to look annoyed, Wendy slumped back on her pillows.

"What do you *see* in that woman?" she demanded in frustration. Before Blake could answer, she held up her hand. She was in no mood to hear any accolades for a woman she had never liked. "I mean, other than the obvious—that she could tip over if she turned around too fast." The woman under discussion had a pretty face, a large chest—and a completely empty head, not to mention no heart to speak of.

Wendy was pregnant and her hormones were undoubtedly all over the charts, Blake reasoned, so he let her last comment go and only said defensively, "You don't know Brittany."

Now, there he was wrong, Wendy thought. "Oh, but I do, Blake, I really do," she countered. Fixing him with an exasperated look, she insisted, "Blake, she's not good enough for you."

He laughed. When Wendy was very young, she'd been very possessive of him and jealous of any time he spent with anyone besides her. He supposed that there was still a tiny bit of that little girl left, even though she was now a married woman.

"You'd say that about anybody."

His protest made her think of Katie. Katie was extremely likable and had a great deal going for her. Katie's family lived practically next door to hers in Atlanta, and they had all grown up together. She was kind, pretty and smart—and not even the least bit self-serving.

Brittany, on the other hand, was convinced that the world existed only for her own pleasure. Not only that,

but it all revolved around her, as well.

Granted, Brittany and Blake had dated during his senior year, but from what Wendy had heard via the grapevine, she hadn't changed a bit.

"No," Wendy said firmly, "I wouldn't."

But Blake was convinced that he was right and that she was only acting like the overprotective little sister she'd once b...

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