

THE FORTUNES OF TEXAS

FORTUNE'S
PROPOSAL



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Allison Leigh

 **HARLEQUIN**[®] THE FORTUNES OF TEXAS

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Though her name is frequently on bestseller lists, **Allison Leigh**'s high point as a writer is hearing from readers that they laughed, cried or lost sleep while reading her books. She credits her family with great patience for the time she's parked at her computer, and for blessing her with the kind of love she wants her readers to share with the characters living in the pages of her books. Contact her at allisonleigh.com.

In loving memory of Larry

Chapter 1

“Happy New Year, Deanna. Hope you have fun tonight.”

The farewell was echoed three times over as Deanna Gurney watched the last of her co-workers at Fortune Forecasting head out the office door.

She sighed faintly and looked at the round watch on her wrist.

It was nearly eight. Four more hours, and she could put the close on another year.

She sighed again and slowly tapped the end of her red pen on the surface of her desk as she stared blindly at the article she was supposed to be proofreading.

The tapping might as well have been a clock ticking.

A new year was supposed to be the start of new things, wasn't it?

Unfortunately, she couldn't help but think that the "new" was likely to turn out worse than the "old."

Depressed by her own thoughts, she shook her head and focused again on the article that her boss had decided just had to be completed before the office took their brief New Year break.

Trust Andrew Fortune not to realize that his latest burst of creative, financial genius was inconveniently timed when it came to the rest of his staff.

She corrected a spelling error and felt her gaze drifting upward to the opened doorway of her boss's office.

Drew wasn't sitting at his desk. If he had been, she would have had a straight-on view of him. Instead, she only caught the occasional glimpse of him as he paced around his spacious office, passing behind his desk occasionally to stop and look out the windows that offered a near-panoramic view of San Diego. During the day, she knew he'd be able to see all the way to the coastline.

Now the only thing he'd see out those windows was the night sky and city lights.

Even as she watched, he paced past the doorway, completely oblivious—as he had been for most of the day, since he'd spread the word that he wanted this last project done before they shut down for the long weekend—to anything that was transpiring beyond his office doorway.

He wore a Padres ball cap on his brown head, the bill pulled down low over his brow. A sure sign that his mood was just as dark as the grim set of his angular jaw suggested. When he was feeling particularly good-natured, that hat would have been turned backward with the bill scooting down his neck and there would have been a cocky half twist to his lips, a faint dimple in his right cheek and a wicked glint in his dark brown eyes. He'd have been holding a golf club in his hand, practicing his putting across the smooth, thick, beige carpet that lined his office instead of clenching the end of a baseball bat in his hand.

The faint buzzing of her cell phone drew her attention and she picked it up off the desk, looking at the display.

Gigi.

She sighed again and set the phone down, unanswered.

Her mother had already called her a half dozen times that day. Deanna had no desire to talk to her, yet again. Hard as it had been, she had already said what she'd had to say.

But the vibrating phone reminded her that she did have work to do that didn't involve lollygagging around, worrying about her boss's state of mind.

She had plenty of reason not to feel particularly celebratory. But Drew Fortune had the world by the tail. He was thirty-four years old—eight years older than she—and handsome as sin, plus he was poised to take the helm of the hugely successful trend analysis firm his father had founded decades earlier. And if not for the fact that she knew what his plans for that day were supposed to have been—flying to Texas—she was certain that he would have been heading out with one of his leggy, buxom blondes on his arm who'd have undoubtedly ensured that she rang in his new year in a major way.

Deanna made a face and scratched her red pen through a redundant phrase.

“Hell, Dee. That page looks like it's bleeding.”

She didn't look up at her boss. "It's one of the things you pay me for, remember?" She corrected another misspelling.

Brilliant, he was. But a good speller?

Not exactly.

"Seems to me I'm also paying some other folks who ought to still be around." Drew sat on the corner of her desk and picked up her cell phone as if he had every right to do so. He tapped the end of his baseball bat against the toe of his leather shoe.

"We didn't need the rest of the staff here to finish up the article." Everyone had pulled together the data that he'd needed. The only thing left now was for her to finish proofing it, send it via email to their bazillion clients and then to the newspaper that was printing it in Saturday's New Year's Day edition.

He made a low sound that seemed distinctly displeased. "So you decided who stayed and who went?"

"Everyone stayed as long as they did because you asked them to," she said evenly. "But once their tasks were complete, did you really expect them to sit around and twiddle their thumbs until I finish my end of it?"

He grimaced.

"Besides, it's New Year's Eve," she re-

minded. "People had plans that didn't necessarily include hanging around here." Including him, because he was supposed to have been on the company jet hours ago.

He lost interest in the phone and picked up her stapler instead. "Did you have plans?"

She sighed, set down her red pen and folded her hands on top of the draft. "Yes, as a matter of fact."

"A date, I suppose." His dark, level brows were barely visible beneath his pulled-low cap. "What was his name? Mike?"

She kept her expression calm. It was easy enough. She'd had plenty of practice staying calm in the four years she'd worked for him. And before that, a lifetime of being Gigi's daughter. "It was Mark, actually." Which Drew knew very well because he'd met the man several times during the nine months she'd dated him. "And we broke up."

His brows pulled together. "Since when?"

Since my mother. The caustic answer leaped into her brain, but she held it back. The problems that she had with Gigi had nothing to do with her work. "A few months ago."

Drew's lips twisted. "Nothing like true love," he muttered. He set down her stapler

and pushed off the desk. “So who is the date, then?”

She couldn’t imagine what was spurring his sudden interest in her love life, but then she couldn’t imagine what had put that hard, grim look on his face either, or this sudden, unusual...hovering...while she worked.

“Dates. Plural.” She smiled slightly, wryly enjoying the novelty of the speculative look from him that she earned. “Three of my girlfriends,” she added. “So stop looking so impressed. We’re planning a spa weekend, as it happens.”

Her phone vibrated again and she pressed a button, silencing it. “No men at all,” she concluded. And no frantic calls from Gigi, she vowed silently.

Her mother had made it very clear that she’d expected her little Deedee to drop everything and come sit by her side in her latest hour of need, even if it was New Year’s Eve. And she’d made it abundantly plain how she considered Deanna’s refusal to do so an utter betrayal.

But then, Gigi was nothing if not melodramatic.

It didn’t matter to her mother that Deanna had spent most of her life rearranging her life to accommodate Gigi’s needs.

“Where at?”

“Up in La Jolla.” She named the resort. “I was supposed to meet them two hours ago so we could all drive up together. Instead, I’ll have to meet them there.” She knew better than to expect Drew to apologize, though. That wasn’t exactly his method. And it wasn’t as if La Jolla was far. A handful of miles only.

It just was not what they’d planned.

And all because Drew was in a clearly bad temper.

He was pressing the end of the bat into the thick carpet, his expression still black, and she chewed the inside of her lip as she tried not to watch him.

But it was hard.

He was a man made to be watched. Thick brown hair that was usually just this side of ruffled—unless he had an important meeting and then he’d slick it back and look even more devastating. Wide shoulders and a lean build that looked just as good beneath his custom-made suits as they did when he was shirtless and entertaining clients on the beach.

Yes, Drew Fortune was certainly watchable.

But not touchable, her mind whispered.

She knew better than to mix business with pleasure. She’d learned that well simply by

watching the messes that her mother made. That her mother was continuing to make.

Not that Deanna had to worry that Drew might think of her in that way anyway. She did her job and she did it well, and that was the only thing he cared about.

Which was exactly how she wanted it. Give her professional respect over a romantic dalliance every day of the week and twice on Sundays.

She enjoyed her work with Fortune Forecasting, and ordinarily, she liked working for Drew Fortune. And right now, given Gigi's latest exit from reality, Deanna needed the distraction of her work more than ever.

She picked up her pen and forced her attention back to the page. "I'll be done with this in ten minutes," she promised. "Then you can get out of here, too." So could she. She'd join her girlfriends and try to forget for a few days that her mother—still jobless since her last one ended in its usual emotional meltdown—was on the verge of financial ruin and blamed Deanna for not wanting to save her.

She couldn't understand at all that Deanna simply couldn't save her.

"Hallelujah," Drew was saying, his tone

flat, almost as if he were answering her own silent thoughts. "Just get the article done."

Her jaw tightened a little with annoyance. What did he think she was doing?

Once again, her cell phone softly buzzed against the surface of the desk and she opened the top drawer of her desk, tossed it inside and closed the drawer again.

She still imagined she could hear it silently vibrating against the collection of pens and paper clips inside.

"Why don't you just turn the damn thing off if you're not going to answer it?"

Good question. "She'd just start calling the office line, then."

He lifted the baseball bat and rested it over his shoulder. "She?"

"Gigi."

"Your mom must be pretty anxious to talk to you. Six calls from her at least."

Which he knew because he'd looked at her cell phone. "She's annoyed that I didn't include her in my little New Year's vacation." At the mammoth understatement, her pen nearly went right through the paper as she struck out another phrase. "Did you know that you repeated yourself twice here about the Decker rebound?"

He sat again on the edge of her desk and slid the paper out from beneath her pen. He glanced at it, then handed it back. “That’s what I’ve got you for.”

Misspellings were usual for him. Repetitive phrasing was not.

She quickly continued reading, but for some reason it was harder than it usually was ignoring the bulge of his very well-shaped thigh beneath his charcoal-gray trousers.

And there was at least a yard of space between them.

“I, um, I hope you’re already packed for your trip to Texas.” She realized she was skimming the last paragraph and made herself slow down. The last thing she wanted to do was disseminate something with an error that she should have caught just because she was feeling particularly distracted by her boss. “Because you’re supposed to meet the jet at the airfield in two hours.” She’d arranged, then rearranged the corporate jet for him, when it became clear earlier that day that he was not going to make the first flight as she’d scheduled it, nor the second.

He was supposed to be in Red Rock by morning where his father, William, was to be married. And even though Drew had a jet at

his disposal, the earliest he'd be arriving now would be the middle of the night.

"What's the weather supposed to be like there at this time of year anyway?" She knew Red Rock was about twenty miles outside of San Antonio, but only because she'd looked for it on the map.

"Breezy with a scent of hell," he muttered.

She lifted her eyebrows a little, giving him a quick glance. "I know you're no fan of marriage—" he made that abundantly clear to every woman who passed through his revolving door "—but this is your father's wedding. Aren't you happy for him?" William Fortune had lost his wife—Drew's mother—four years earlier.

She remembered that time distinctly and not simply because she'd just begun working for Drew. It was the only time she'd ever seen him completely devastated.

It was also the only time she'd ever come close to making the mistake of forgetting that he was her boss.

Perilously close.

She blew out a silent puff of air, feeling ridiculously warm.

Four years had passed since that time, but

it might as well have been yesterday for how clear it was in her mind.

He'd kissed her.

One time.

One...very...memorable time.

And she'd been a head case for much too long afterward.

Which was all over now, thank goodness. No way would she let herself fall into the same behavior as her mother.

"No, I'm not happy." His voice was short. "And why are you nodding?"

She blinked, focusing in on the present and the look Drew was giving her. "I, um, I was just glad to be finished with the proof." She raced through the last few sentences and was relieved that it was perfect as drafted and set down her pen.

She turned to her side desk where her computer sat and moved the papers next to her. "Don't you like the woman your father is marrying?"

"Lily? She's his cousin's widow." He leaned across the desk and slid open her drawer, pulling out the cell phone. It was buzzing, yet again.

Afraid he was going to answer it, she snatched it out of his hand and slid it into the

side pocket of her jacket. She definitely didn't want chancing her mother getting her boss's ear. "So?"

"So I don't see why they have to rush into anything. Wouldn't it just be easier to talk to your mother?"

She let out a faint laugh. Her fingers worked quickly over the keyboard as she made her corrections to his document. "You're obviously dreading the trip to your father's wedding. Maybe you shouldn't be giving me advice on dealing with my parent."

He exhaled roughly and shoved off the desk again. "It's not the wedding," he muttered. "Not entirely."

Her fingers slowed fractionally and realizing it, she hastened her pace again. Letting Drew get under her sympathetic nerve was not a wise course of action.

His father was getting married. Effectively replacing his mother. And Deanna had seen for herself, up close and personally, how deeply affected he'd been when she'd died.

"Your brothers will be there," she offered, trying to be helpful. He'd told her once that he had four of them, but only he and one other brother, Jeremy, didn't live in Texas. "How long's it been since you've seen them?"

“We were all in Red Rock together a few years ago.”

She didn’t have any siblings and so often had wished she had. She wouldn’t have felt so alone in the world. “Well, then, aren’t you looking forward to that?”

He swung his bat like a golf club, but he looked anything but leisurely. “What the hell does it matter?”

Irritation skittered along her nerves. “I guess it doesn’t,” she snapped back, “except that this whole project—” she waved her hand over the stacks of papers littering her desk “—that you insisted had to be done now, is obviously just a way for you to put off going to Texas. Were you hoping that we wouldn’t actually get it finished, so you could claim that you couldn’t get away at all?”

Drew nearly did a double take at his assistant’s tart words. Her hazel eyes were practically snapping up at him and a blaze of color was burning in her lightly tanned cheeks.

Usually, she was the soul of calm.

And for some reason, the fact that she suddenly wasn’t was just one more thorn under his saddle.

“Guess I didn’t realize how important your spa weekend with the girls was,” he countered.

Her lips tightened. "You know, Drew, sometimes you are such a—" She broke off and shook her head so hard that her brownish-red hair bounced around her shoulders. She turned her softly pointed chin back to her computer monitor and began typing, her fingers pounding furiously over the keys.

"A what?"

"Nothing." She was typing even faster, the keys clicking madly.

"Just say it, Dee." He blamed the urge to goad her even more on his father. William wasn't satisfied with ruining his own life with his damn marriage plans, but now he wanted to ruin Drew's, too. "Why hold back now?"

She gave him a stern look that reminded him, strangely enough, of his mother. Probably because his mother was on Drew's mind, because she clearly was not on William's mind, he reasoned.

"Why don't you just go back into your office and let me finish without distraction?" she countered. She lifted her left hand to wave it in dismissal, and her right hand never stopped moving over the computer keyboard. "Decide what you want your new business cards to say when you replace your dad as the CEO

now that he's retiring. Maybe that will improve your mood."

"Maybe the fact that I'm not likely to be the new CEO will improve yours."

The clacking keys went abruptly silent.

She stared up at him and the fiery green glint faded in her eyes, leaving confusion in their depths. "What?"

He tightened his grip around the baseball bat.

He wanted to throw the damn thing through one of the windows.

"I'm not taking over as CEO." The words tasted like acid-coated boulders.

She looked bewildered. "But everyone knows you're taking over for him."

"Yeah, well, I guess Dad didn't read the memo." His voice was short.

"Drew—"

He exhaled. "As far as I know, he's not planning to close down this office. He just wants to close me down."

The high color faded from her cheeks and she looked pale. "But you do a remarkable job here."

"Not remarkable enough for him."

She shook her head a little, making her hair swing again. "Your father's never seemed any-

thing but proud of the work you've done here. For heaven's sake, he even told me once when he was visiting the office how he thinks you're a chip off the old block."

"And there's the problem," he said flatly. "Since he thinks he didn't really get his act together and start up this place until he married my mother and settled down, he's gone and decided that I have to do the same damn thing!"

He swung the bat hard and it connected with the soft cushion of one of the upholstered chairs sitting outside the door to his office.

The cushion dented, and Deanna let out a startled squeak.

Neither was as satisfying as a broken window, and cursing his father, he tossed the bat onto the chair and stomped back into his office.

Deanna followed him, her hands clenched around the lapels of her drab brown jacket that matched her knee-length drab brown skirt. "Your father thinks you should get married?"

His head was pounding. He wanted a drink. He wanted a cigarette and he'd finally managed to quit the damn things six months earlier. He wanted to forget that the past year had ever happened and he particularly wanted to forget his father's ultimatum.

If only he could.

He threw himself down onto the chair behind his desk and yanked off his hat. “He doesn’t just think it,” he said wearily. “He expects it. Or no CEO for Drew.”

She slowly sank down onto one of the chairs facing his desk. She looked dazed, which was probably the only reason she wasn’t smoothing her skirt circumspectly around her pretty knees the way she usually did. “Are you sure you’re not—” she swallowed and moistened her lips “—well, overreacting? Maybe you misunderstood what he meant. Maybe you heard the word *marriage* and a wire in your brain went poof.”

He gave a bark of laughter that was completely devoid of humor. “Oh, he was perfectly clear. My life lacks balance, he said.” He hunched forward, clenching his fists on top of his desk. “I’m too committed to the company, he said.”

His fist hit the desk, sending a pen rolling off the side. “What the hell else should I be but committed? This company is everything to me and he damn well knows it. But now, dear old Dad has decided that unless my neck ends up in a marriage noose again, I’m suddenly not fit to run it after all.”

Deanna's eyes were wide. "Um...again?"

He could practically feel the steam wanting to pour out of his pounding head. "And he'll go find someone who isn't even a Fortune to head things up instead." Even more than the marriage nonsense that William had been threatening for much of the past year—ever since he'd gotten involved with Lily—telling Drew just that morning that he'd bring in someone else to run the company if Drew didn't heed his words had been an even worse slam.

Their telephone conversation—if the argument that had ensued could be called that—had disintegrated from there.

Drew was still stinging from it.

"I'll be damned if I'll work for somebody else at what should be my own freaking company."

Her brows drew together, creating a little vertical line between them. "You'd just give it up, then?" She lifted her hand and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Walk away from everything you've worked for?"

"It's not like I have any women around I'd remotely consider marrying. Dad decided to marry Lily and look what happened. He's lost his marbles."

“I—I’m stunned,” she said after a moment. “I don’t know what to say.”

He scrubbed his hands down his face and leaned back in his chair again, watching his assistant through his narrowed eyes.

But his mind was still replaying the argument with his father.

Despite his wedding to Lily scheduled for the following day—a new year and a new life with his new wife—William had had the cojones to bring up Drew’s mother, Molly. To use her memory as a tool in his arsenal against Drew’s footloose lifestyle.

That had been the ultimate slam.

And he’d responded in kind. If William were so concerned about Molly, then what the hell was he doing getting married again?

Drew pinched his nose and closed his eyes again. The angry words still circled in his head. “As if a marriage certificate has anything to do with success,” he muttered. “It’s insane.” He looked at Deanna.

She was sitting straight as a poker in her chair. Instead of twisting the life out of her jacket, her hands were now twisted together in her lap. She still had that frown etched on her face and her eyes were dark with concern.

“I, um, imagine for you, marriage certainly is a deal breaker.”

And Drew had never failed to close a deal.

He'd always had the singular ability to put the right pieces together, even when people—including his father—said it would be impossible.

His brain suddenly shifted. Boulders rolled and he saw a glimmer of light. “This is a deal,” he murmured, wondering why he hadn't seen it before.

Maybe Deanna was right. He'd heard *marriage*, and the wiring in his brain had short-circuited.

Her eyebrows had climbed up her smooth forehead. “Excuse me?”

“A deal.” He sat forward. For the first time that day he felt a grin hit him. “And all I need is a signed marriage license to seal it.”

The corners of her lips curved in response to his, but she was still watching him warily. “Usually that involves a marriage,” she pointed out. “Which you've already said you're not interested in.”

“I'm not,” he assured. “But a marriage license just comes with wedding. All I need for that is a wife.”

She lifted her hands. “Exactly.”

“I can hire a wife.”

She blinked for a moment. “You can’t possibly be serious.”

“Sometimes you need specialized people at the table to close a deal. I just need the right woman to agree to the terms.”

“Which are what?”

“Sign the paper, say ‘I do’ and then act like my wife for a short while—long enough for Dad to calm down, retire like he’s planned to do all along and name me as his replacement—then go on her way.”

She snorted softly and shook her head. Her hair gleamed under the overhead light. “Do I need to remind you that the women you usually date—before they reach the three-month expiration, that is—will be looking for a whole lot more out of your deal than going on her way?”

Because he usually marked his way out of his brief romantic entanglements with gifts of jewelry that Deanna arranged for him, she had a point.

“I’d need someone convincing,” he mused. He drummed his fingers on the desk as his thoughts coalesced into the perfect solution.

He looked his assistant square in the eyes. “Someone like you.”