

A romantic couple embracing. The man, with dark curly hair and a beard, is wearing a light blue shirt and has his eyes closed, smiling. The woman, with long dark hair, is wearing a red top and is smiling at him. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

MENDOZA'S SECRET FORTUNE

Marie Ferrarella

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Mills & Boon Cherish

Marie Ferrarella

Mendoza's Secret Fortune

«HarperCollins»

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MAY THE BEST MENDOZA WIN!The Fortunes are not the only hotties in Texas; their longtime friends the Mendozas are legendary for their good looks and ardent hearts. Tall and dark, with soulful eyes, Matteo Mendoza is a pilot whose charms have too often been eclipsed by his more outgoing brother, Cisco. Now, Matteo has set his sights on Cantina hostess Rachel Robinson. Brother, look out! After several years on a self-imposed «romance diet,» Rachel finds Matteo to be a treat she just can't resist. But she's already been through her own family heartbreak—the last thing she wants is to come between the Mendozas! Can She learn that following her heart might lead to the greatest fortune of all?

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MEET THE FORTUNES MENDOZAS!

Mendoza of the Month: Matteo Mendoza

Age: 28

Vital statistics: Brown bedroom eyes and a quiet soulfulness that could melt a lady's heart.

Claim to fame: So far, the Miami-born pilot has been flying under the radar. But not for long!

Romantic prospects: They'd be a lot better if his flirtatious brother Cisco wasn't around. The two of them always seem to be in competition—especially for the heart of gorgeous and elusive Rachel Robinson.

“To my brother, love is just a game. But for me, the stakes are much higher. I will fight for Rachel if I have to. She's the one I've been waiting for. So far, she's been holding back. Why? Could my radar be that far off? Is she really interested in Cisco? Or is there something else she could be hiding?”

The Fortunes of Texas: Cowboy Country Lassoing hearts from across the pond

Mendoza's Secret Fortune

Marie Ferrarella



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USA TODAY bestselling and RITA[®] Award-winning author **MARIE FERRARELLA** has written more than two hundred books for Mills & Boon, some under the name Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide. Visit her website, www.marieferrarella.com.

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To Marcia Book Adirim, whose mind works on many more levels than mine does

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[Chapter One](#)

“Hey, Rach. Nice to see you again!” the regular lunch customer at The Hollows Cantina called out as he walked into the dining area with several friends.

With a compliant smile, the hostess drew several menus into her hands and led the rather vocal men to table number four, listening to them as they swapped stories and laughed.

She was getting pretty good at this, Rachel Robinson silently congratulated herself, especially since nothing in her previous life could have prepared her for doing something like this. Back then, she'd been accustomed to being the one who was served, not the one doing the serving.

Poor little rich girl.

That was the title, Rachel thought, that probably would have best described her as little as five years ago, but not anymore. She had taken great pains to hide any hint of her past life. No one in this tiny, one-horse town nestled approximately four hundred miles away from Austin had any idea that

she was one of Gerald Robinson's daughters. They had no clue that her father was a wealthy computer genius who had more than left his giant mark on the tech world.

Her father had left his mark in other places as well, places she'd learned about only when she had accidentally stumbled across the truth five years ago. Her discovery had prompted her sudden exodus to Horseback Hollow, a place she had found by closing her eyes and then jabbing her index finger at a map of Texas.

A place where she was hoping to get a completely new start and be herself rather than Gerald Robinson's daughter.

It seemed rather ironic to her to be here at this point in her life. She had already reinvented herself once. Her childhood had been spent mostly on the outside looking in.

Odd girl out, that was her.

She was always the tallest girl in her class, at times taller than all the boys, as well. Tall and thin as a rail, which made her an easy target for other girls who felt their own stock was enhanced if they could bring hers down by several notches.

So they did.

Though she had thought of herself as an outcast, her father, in one of his rare times at home rather than at work, insisted that she was "special." To that end, he saw to it that she was enrolled in a number of different classes—dance, tennis, piano, whatever it took—and Rachel discovered that she was good at all of them.

That discovery fueled her confidence, and Mother Nature stepped in to take care of the gawky, awkward issue. Thinking she was doomed to go through life all knobby knees and elbows, Rachel was delighted to find herself transforming from a plain duckling to a lovely swan.

It was a transformation that did *not* go unnoticed by the local males. Suddenly the center of attention, she continued to be so through her college years. She was flying high when her entire world came into question at the end of her senior year, courtesy of a former friend turned jealous rival. A rival who chose the dance floor at the senior-week dance to humiliate her by making certain allegations and so-called secret facts about her father public.

That was when Rachel's world came crashing down around her. A short time later, she arrived in Horseback Hollow.

Though done in haste, it had turned out not to be such a bad move after all. She didn't mind hard work. It brought her a sense of satisfaction. And here she wasn't anyone's daughter or sibling. She was just Rachel Robinson, hardworking restaurant hostess.

And she liked it that way, Rachel thought as she deposited the menus on the table, presenting each of the three men with the daily-special cards.

As she distributed them, she became acutely aware that one of the men was sizing her up closely. He leered at her. Rachel quickly looked away.

"Your server will be right with you, and let me know if there'll be anything else you need," she said, addressing the trio.

"Maybe you could get us some extra napkins for these two to use when they stop drooling," the oldest man at the table suggested.

Rachel flashed an automatic smile and told him, "I'll see what I can do, sir."

She was about to head back to the hostess station up front when the one who had been eyeing her so closely said, "Don't rush off so fast." He caught her by the wrist. "Where have you been all my life, darlin'?"

The inner feistiness that she always tried to keep under wraps broke through. She heard herself answering, "Well, for the first half of it, I wasn't even born."

Rather than being put off because his friends laughed at her response, the man, still holding her wrist, said, "Lively. I like that in a woman."

With a hard tug, Rachel pulled her wrist free. “Pushy. I don’t like that in a man,” she replied sweetly.

The man who had asked for extra napkins laughed and said, “She sure got your number, Walt.” She certainly did, Rachel thought. And that number was a big zero.

* * *

Matteo Mendoza was running late. There were few things he hated more, but sometimes—like today—it just couldn’t be helped. Still, he knew that his older brother, Cisco, would have some sort of asinine remark to toss his way. He braced himself for the onslaught.

Preoccupied, he passed by the table with the boisterous cowboys and heard the whole exchange play out. The young woman was certainly far too beautiful for the job she was doing, but that didn’t mean she deserved to be treated with anything but respect. Rather than look for his father’s table, he approached this one first.

“Problem here?” Matteo asked, coming up behind the attractive hostess.

“Just havin’ a little fun. Nothing serious,” the man called Walt said, raising his hands to indicate that it was hands-off from now on as far as he was concerned.

“Thank you,” Rachel said to the tall, dark and handsome knight in shining armor who had ridden up to defend her honor. She moved away from the rowdy cowboys’ table. “But that wasn’t really necessary. I can take care of myself.”

Matteo inclined his head, as if to agree with the young woman. “Nobody said you couldn’t,” he replied.

With that, he moved farther into the dining area, scanning it to find where his father and brother were seated.

For the most part, when he joined his brother, Cisco, and his father for lunch at The Hollows Cantina, Matteo was thinking about going home. Home in both his and Cisco’s case was Miami. Being here, in this little town with the improbable name of Horseback Hollow, was nothing short of an overwhelming culture shock.

Initially, he and Cisco had come to this slow-as-molasses, underdeveloped Texas town because their baby sister, Gabriella, had inexplicably fallen in love in Horseback Hollow.

Specifically, he and Cisco had come out here for Gabi’s wedding to Jude Fortune Jones.

But the wedding had come and gone, and much to Matteo’s chagrin, he and Cisco were still here. Their father had prevailed upon them to stay a little longer—as a personal favor to him.

Orlando Mendoza had been the first of their immediate family to come out here from Miami. It wasn’t a sense of wanderlust that had prompted the patriarch’s relocation, but rather a feeling of urgency, a search for a purpose. Orlando was desperately trying to find a way to go on with his life after losing the love of his life, his wife, Luz.

A former air force pilot who had retired to care for his ailing spouse, Orlando found new purpose in his life when he came to Horseback Hollow. He joined Sawyer and Laurel Fortune in their fledgling venture, the Redmond Flight School, and also used his expertise to help operate the occasional charter service they ran.

It was while he was flying one of the planes—a plane, as it turned out, that had been intentionally tampered with—that he suffered a plane crash and had gotten seriously injured. The moment she got the news, Gabi had been quick to fly in from Miami in order to nurse him back to health.

As luck would have it, Gabi wound up nursing herself right into a love affair. Marriage turned out to be a by-product of that affair.

It was obvious to Matteo that Gabi, as well as his father, really liked this town and preferred it to Miami. His father had already tried subtly to talk Cisco as well as him into relocating to Horseback Hollow. Orlando made no secret of the fact that he wanted nothing more than to have his entire family living somewhere in proximity.

Although he loved and respected his father, Matteo couldn't see himself staying here indefinitely, much less living here.

"No offense, Dad, but this place is just too small, too mundane and too rural for my tastes." Snagging another tortilla chip, he popped it into his mouth and then continued, "It's like everything moves in slow motion around here. They even roll up the sidewalks at ten o'clock." He nursed his tall, cold glass of beer.

"Now, Matteo, you know you are exaggerating," Orlando chided him.

"There's no nightlife here," Matteo countered, "not to mention that there's just no excitement whatsoever in this town." He leaned over the table to get closer to his father. "I'm not like you, Dad. I'm young. I need excitement."

Orlando laughed the way a man might when he saw himself in his son's words. Everyone needed to take risks and behave foolishly, getting it out of their system when they were still young. He fully understood that. But he also had a father's desire to have his children learn from his mistakes so that they wouldn't repeat them.

"Oh, there's excitement here in this town, *hijo*," he assured Matteo. "Trust me, there is excitement. It's just of a different nature."

Matteo smiled just before he tilted back his glass again. Obviously he and his father had *very* different definitions of "excitement," and he could understand that. At sixty-one, his father had earned the right to kick back and take it easy, while he, a pilot like his father and twenty-eight to boot, wanted nothing less than to take on anything that life might want to throw at him. Doing so got his adrenaline going and made him feel alive. He'd always had a competitive streak, especially when it came to his brother. He and Cisco had been competing against one another for as long as either one of them could remember.

"Give this place a chance," Cisco said with the thousand-watt smile that all the women within a ten-mile radius always found to be nothing short of spellbinding. "I know I am."

Matteo looked at his jet-setting older brother in disbelief. He'd been right. Cisco *had* decided to stay on for a while. He couldn't help wondering why. Cisco loved the pace in Miami as much as he did.

"You're staying?" he asked. There had to be an angle that Cisco was playing, but what?

Cisco lifted his glass in a mock toast to his brother, then drained it before answering, "That's what I just said."

Cisco liked to party more than he did. His choosing to stay here didn't make an iota of sense. "Why?" Matteo asked.

Cisco raised his broad shoulders and let them fall again in a vague, careless shrug. "Dad and Gabi seem sold on Horseback Hollow. That means there's got to be some merit to this town, right? I intend to stick around awhile and find out if I see it for myself. Might be some good real-estate investments going begging here." And then Cisco all but lit up. "Speaking of merit," he said, his attention directed toward something—or someone—he saw over his brother's head.

Curious, Matteo turned around in his chair, looking behind him. Which was when he saw her. The hostess he had verbally defended against the clowns at the other table a few minutes ago. She was heading their way. Matteo caught himself sitting up a little straighter.

When he had come to her assistance, he'd noted her height and the color of her long hair. He had of course observed that she was very attractive, but hadn't gone out of his way to really take in each aspect of her beauty. Besides, her looks had nothing to do with his coming to her defense, and his attention had been focused more on the men annoying her, anyway.

He could see her head-on now. Suddenly everything that had previously been on his mind evaporated from his brain. Matteo forgot all about missing Miami or being stuck in what he'd thought of as a one-horse town.

Forgot about everything except what was right there in front of him and coming closer.

Heaven in an apron.

He could almost feel the electrical charge this beautiful young woman seemed to radiate with every step she took.

Matteo had to remind himself to continue breathing. Air kept getting stuck in his lungs. And if his mouth were any dryer, dust would have come spilling out the second he tried to talk.

He wasn't the only one who was mesmerized by this vision. Out of the corner of his eye, Matteo saw that Cisco suddenly sat up, snapping to attention, his laid-back attitude becoming not quite so laid-back the second the hostess came into his line of vision.

As if on cue, the hostess stopped at their table, smiled and introduced herself to the trio.

"Hello, my name is Rachel, and I'll be your server this afternoon. One of our regulars called in sick, and I'm covering for her." She glanced from Orlando to his two sons. Recognizing the one on the older man's right as the man who had come to her defense just a few minutes earlier, her smile grew wider in acknowledgment—chivalry should always be applauded. "Have you gentlemen decided yet?"

Matteo knew what he would have liked to order. *Her*. He kept that response to himself.

After his father and Cisco had placed their orders with the dark-haired, blue-eyed beauty, Matteo knew that he had ordered something, but for the life of him, he couldn't remember what less than three seconds after the words had left his mouth.

He had been fixated on the way her lips moved as she spoke and the way his entire system reacted to the melodic sound of her voice.

"Are you all right, Matteo?" his father asked once Rachel had retreated to the kitchen.

Cisco smirked. Annoyance flared in Matteo's veins. Now what?

"Yeah, sure. I'm fine, Dad." He turned to look at his father, puzzled. "Why would you ask that?"

"Well, I have known you for your whole life, and in all those years, I do not remember a single time when I saw you eating a salad as your main course. I believe you referred to salads as—"

"Cow food," Cisco interjected, unable to remain silent any longer. His laugh was full-bodied and hearty. And, right now, very annoying to Matteo. "I think my little brother was mesmerized by the lovely Rachel and didn't know what he was ordering, Dad."

"I wasn't mesmerized," Matteo protested with indignation, giving his brother a dirty look.

Matteo loved his older brother, but he hated being teased by Cisco. Cisco could be relentless, picking at him for days on end about a single thing if the spirit so moved him.

Now he grinned that wicked grin of his. "Hey, brother, I thought that she was a really hot little number, too."

Orlando could see that this had the makings of another family fight. Matteo sounded as if he was taking offense for the young woman—who surely hadn't a clue that she was the subject of this discussion, the older man surmised. As for Cisco, Orlando knew that the older boy loved to get Matteo riled up.

"We are all agreed that she is a very attractive young lady, Cisco. There is no reason for a dispute—or for you to give your brother a hard time," Orlando chided his older son.

Matteo frowned. He knew his father meant well, but he didn't need him coming to his aid this way. He wasn't ten years old and unable to hold his own against Cisco. Even at ten, he hadn't welcomed the interference.

"It's okay, Dad," Matteo said evenly, shifting his eyes to his brother. "Cisco didn't mean anything by that."

"Actually, I did," Cisco contradicted him. "Are you declaring dibs on Rachel? 'Cause if you are, it looks like maybe you've found that reason to hang around Horseback Hollow for a while—until she rebuffs you in favor of someone else, of course." Matteo's brother chuckled to himself as he continued eating the triangular chips from the bowl in the center of the table.

"You mean you?" The question came spontaneously to Matteo's lips, without any real thought necessary on his part.

Cisco's grin spread wider, annoying Matteo almost beyond words. "Just possibly."

“Matteo, Cisco,” Orlando chided them sharply. “You’re not children anymore, bent on competing until one of you collapses in exhaustion,” he said. “It is time for you to behave like men.”

“Men compete, Dad,” Cisco reminded his father in all sincerity. “You know that.”

For a moment, Orlando was catapulted back in time. He remembered his late wife, vividly remembered what he had gone through in order to win her hand in marriage. Remembered, too, what it had ultimately personally cost him.

“Sometimes men compete,” Orlando admitted, then added, “but not my sons.” He made the four words sound like an edict. “They do *not* compete against one another.”

“Don’t worry, Dad,” Cisco assured him with a well-intentioned smile on his face. “It’s not really a contest, is it, Matteo?” It wasn’t so much a question as it was, in Cisco’s opinion, a statement of fact. He raised his eyes to his brother’s, waiting for a response. Or more accurately, waiting for his agreement.

Matteo knew just what his brother was inferring. That Matteo didn’t stand a chance at winning over the striking young hostess, because Cisco had always been the lucky one when it came to all of their bets. More important, the one who always got the girl because he was so outgoing, charming and downright irresistible.

But Cisco was also the one whose relationships did not last, not even as long as the life cycle of a rose.

Terminating those relationships was always of his brother’s own choosing, but that didn’t change the fact that when all was said and done, Cisco wound up standing alone.

“She’s a person, not property,” Matteo pointed out tersely.

Cisco remained undaunted. “I completely agree,” he replied in an even tone. He leaned forward just a touch. “So, tell the truth, brother. Does the lovely Rachel make you rethink leaving this tiny town?”

“She makes me rethink having you for a brother,” Matteo informed him in as level a voice as he could manage. He was fighting the urge to cut Cisco down to size, but he had a feeling Cisco was looking forward to just that—so he refrained from playing into his brother’s hands.

“Boys, *bastante*,” Orlando declared, calling an end to the discussion before it got completely out of hand. “No fighting,” he emphasized. “I asked you both here for a nice, peaceful lunch. I thought this restaurant might remind you a little of the ones you liked to go to back ho—back in Miami.”

At the last moment, Orlando corrected himself. Referring to Miami as “home” was counterproductive to what he was currently attempting to promote—a sense that this place, Horseback Hollow, with its peaceful surroundings and room for growth, held a great deal of potential. Potential he felt that someone like Matteo—more so than Cisco—could tap into.

His youngest son was a pilot, like he was, but while he had been a risk-taker in his youth, Matteo admittedly was turning out to be far steadier at this point in his life than Orlando had been when *he* was twenty-eight.

Losing Luz just reinforced for Orlando that life was fleeting. However many years—or months—he had left, he wanted to spend them with his children. But at the same time, he knew that strong-arming them was not the way to proceed successfully.

Cisco—for the time being—was a done deal. He was staying in Horseback Hollow—he had even rented a small ranch house just outside of town. And of course, Gabi had already settled in here. Matteo, however, was going to require some major—and just possibly underhanded—convincing in order to get him to stick around. When they had come to eat at this restaurant, Orlando had thought his dilemma of winning his youngest son over was all but insurmountable.

Now, however, he finally had some hope. Many a man had done some unpredictable things in order to impress a young woman, and from what he could see, Matteo seemed to be pretty taken with that attractive hostess.

Orlando kept the conversation flowing, talking up the merits of Horseback Hollow, the closeness of its local citizens and how living here made a man focus on what was really important in life: his family and his health.

In recent months, the patriarch had regained the latter and was in the process of reinstituting the former. With just a little luck and a healthy dose of his persuasion, Orlando felt he would succeed here, as well.

When the hostess returned shortly with their orders, Orlando carefully observed his younger son's reaction to her. That made him feel this indeed was the right path for him to concentrate on. His youngest son all but lit up like the proverbial Christmas tree when the woman approached.

Orlando noted that his older son seemed to come to life a little more, as well.

This had all the earmarks of an intense rivalry, Orlando observed. He had always tried to discourage that sort of thing, thinking that brothers should support one another, not attempt to best each other at every turn—especially when Cisco usually triumphed over Matteo. The last thing he wanted was for the latter to suffer another loss at the hands of his brother, but at this point, he couldn't think of another way to get Matteo to consider remaining in Horseback Hollow for a little while longer—and ideally, permanently—than bringing his son together with this hostess.

His secret hope was that if Matteo—and Cisco—did remain here for a number of weeks, both would be won over by the town's charm, and they would come to see that the merits of living in a small town trumped living in a large, indifferent metropolis where people lived next door to one another and remained strangers.

"Senorita, please, another round of cervezas for all of us," Orlando said once their server had emptied the tray she had carried to their table.

"Coming right up. And I'll bring back another bowl of tortilla chips, as well," Rachel promised, picking up the empty woven basket and placing it on her tray. "Anything else?" she asked, her eyes sweeping over the three men.

"Maybe later," Cisco replied.

Rachel smiled as she inclined her head. "Later, then," she agreed cheerfully. "Anything else for you gentlemen?" she wanted to know, glancing at the other two men at the table.

Matteo stared down at what was to be his lunch. He honestly couldn't remember asking for the salad. In any event, that was *not* going to satisfy his appetite. "Yes. I'd like a cheeseburger, please," he said.

"Is something wrong with your salad?" she asked.

"No, I just thought that the cheeseburger would be more filling," Matteo explained, feeling as if he was tripping over his own tongue. He had never had Cisco's glib ability to spout clever rhetoric at the drop of a hat.

"Then you'd like me to take the salad back?" she asked.

"Not if it gets you into trouble." Now, why had he said something so stupid? Matteo upbraided himself. He should have just said yes and left it at that.

But to his relief, she smiled. "That's very considerate of you, but no, it won't." Picking up the salad, she placed it on her tray. "One cheeseburger, another round of cervezas and a bowl of chips coming up," she told him.

Captivated, Matteo watched her hips sway ever so slightly as she walked away from their table. He could have sworn his body temperature went up a full five degrees.

Maybe more.

[Chapter Two](#)

Orlando looked at his youngest son and chuckled knowingly. "Well, I'm guessing there's at least one thing the Cantina has to offer that will have you coming back here again."

"Don't count on it." Cisco cavalierly waved away his father's words to his brother. "Matteo doesn't know a good thing when he sees it. I, on the other hand, can spot a good thing a mile away."

Cisco leaned back in his chair, tilting it on its rear legs in order to get a better view of Rachel as she rounded a corner and disappeared into the kitchen.

"She's not a 'thing.' She's a woman," Matteo snapped at his brother. He didn't care for the way that Cisco had reduced the woman to the level of a mere object rather than giving her the proper due as a person.

"She certainly is that," Cisco agreed with a wide, appreciative and yet very devilish grin.

"No," Orlando announced firmly, instantly commanding his sons' attention.

"No, what?" Cisco asked as he looked at his father. They hadn't said anything that required a yes-or-no decision.

Orlando frowned, turning his affable face into a stern, somber mask. "No, you two are not going to butt heads and who knows what else while competing for the same woman."

Among Cisco's many talents was the ability to look completely innocent even when he was completely guilty. He assumed that look now as he turned his gaze on his father.

"What makes you think that Matteo and I are going to compete for the same woman, Dad?"

An exasperated look flashed across the patriarch's face. He was not about to be hoodwinked—or buried beneath his silver-tongued son's rhetoric.

"Is the Pope Catholic?" Orlando asked.

"Last time I checked," Cisco replied. His tone was respectful. The gleam in his eye, however, gave him away.

Orlando shook his head firmly. "And there you have your answer," he told Cisco. "I never said very much when you boys were growing up and insisted on turning everything into an emotional tug-of-war. I even thought—God forgive me—that it might help you two to build your character—"

"Matteo's a character all right," Cisco joked. "However, as far as I'm concerned—" He got no further.

Orlando looked as if his patience was wearing thin and might even be in danger of giving way entirely. "But above all, I want you two to remember that you are brothers. No prize is worth sacrificing that relationship. Not even a woman you might think you love."

But he, Orlando added silently, was the exception that proved the rule. However, that wasn't something he was about to share with his sons. It went against the point he was trying to make.

"Don't worry, Dad. There isn't going to be any competition," Cisco assured his father as he slanted a quick glance at his brother.

Orlando nodded his silver head. "That's good to hear."

"By the way she looked at me, I've already won," Cisco concluded with that smile that always managed to get right under Matteo's skin.

And his brother knew it, Matteo thought, unable to do anything about it without getting on his father's bad side.

But he had to say *something*, however innocuous. So he did. "In your dreams," Matteo retorted.

"I agree with you there, Mattie. That little lady certainly is the stuff that dreams are made of," Cisco told his brother. "Besides, what difference does it make to you? Aren't you the one dying to leave this place in the dust and take off for good ol' Miami?"

Although when push came to shove—and under duress—Matteo would admit that he did love his brother, there were times when he would have liked nothing better than to strangle his irritating sibling with his bare hands.

Cisco had a way of getting to him like nobody else could. So much so that if Cisco said "black," it instantly made him want to shout "white!"

Because of that feeling, it came as not much of a surprise to him when Matteo heard himself say, "Maybe I've changed my mind. Maybe I've decided to stick around Horseback Hollow for a little while longer."

Delighted and confident that given enough time here, he would be able to convince Matteo of the merits of living in this wonderful small town, Orlando leaned over and clapped his youngest son on the back. “That is wonderful news, my boy. Wonderful.”

Matteo almost felt guilty about his father’s reaction. He wasn’t staying here because of his father. He was going to be hanging around a few extra days or so to see if he could win over the hostess before she succumbed to his sweet-talking brother.

“Yes, well, someone has to protect Horseback Hollow’s unsuspecting women from the likes of him,” Matteo told his father, nodding at his brother.

“And you’ve elected yourself that protector?” Cisco hooted, amusement highlighting his face at his brother’s declaration. “That’s one mighty tall order, little brother.”

“Don’t call me that, Cisco. I’m not your little brother,” Matteo told him.

Cisco’s amusement only grew. “Well, you’re certainly not my big brother, now, are you, Mattie? I *am* the older one.”

Matteo scowled. “Two years isn’t all that much,” he reminded his brother. And not even a full two years at that, Matteo thought.

“Oh, but it can amount to a lifetime under the right set of circumstances,” Cisco countered with a very mysterious grin that *really* annoyed Matteo.

Orlando sighed. He had had just about enough. Listening to this back-and-forth banter and bickering required something stronger to drink than just beer, but it was still too early in the day to contemplate downing any hard liquor.

“Might I remind you two boys that you no longer *are* boys. You are men,” Orlando told his sons. “It is time to take on that responsibility and act accordingly—or do I have to drag you both into a back alley and use my belt on you?”

The truth of it was that their father had never used his belt on either of them in a back alley, or any other area for that matter. But a reply to that declaration was temporarily tabled because Rachel had returned, bringing with her three freshly opened individual bottles of dark beer as well as Matteo’s cheeseburger and the new bowl of chips.

Setting down Matteo’s meal in front of him and placing the bowl of chips in the center of the table, Rachel proceeded to refill the men’s empty beer glasses, beginning with Orlando’s.

“Will there be anything else?” she asked with a gregarious smile as she made the rounds between the three men.

Cisco spoke up unexpectedly. “You could settle an argument for us,” he said.

Instinct had Matteo shoot his brother a silencing look, but it was already too late.

“What kind of an argument?” Rachel wanted to know, filling Cisco’s glass.

“If you had to go out with one of us, which would you choose?” Cisco asked her innocently.

The question seemed to catch her completely off guard, but Rachel managed to recover gracefully without missing a beat.

“That all depends,” she responded, going on to Matteo’s glass.

“On what?” Cisco asked her before Matteo had a chance to.

Her eyes met Matteo’s for one brief and surprisingly intense moment before she looked back at his brother. “On who would ask me first.”

“All right,” Cisco said quickly, making sure that he got the jump on his brother. “Rachel, would you go out with me tonight?”

It all happened so fast that Matteo felt as if he had just been torpedoed—and sunk—by an enemy sub.

“My shift doesn’t end until eight,” Rachel replied, still not giving him a definite answer.

It was her way of stalling. It wasn’t that she wasn’t flattered, because she was—the man who had asked her out just now was every bit as good-looking as his brother—and it wasn’t that she was trying to play hard to get, because she wasn’t. The reason she was stalling was because she was hoping

that the one who had *really* caught her attention, the cute younger brother, who had come to her defense earlier at the other table, would put in his two cents and ask her out, as well. Then she knew who she'd pick.

But from what she could see, the one she had heard referred to as "Matteo" seemed to fold up his tent and just withdraw, allowing his brother to have total access to the entire playing field.

In this case, that meant her, Rachel thought.

"Perfect," Cisco was saying, referring to when her shift ended. "I'll be waiting out front."

Ever since she'd left her home in Austin five years ago, Rachel had been somewhat leery when it came to dating. She'd already gone through her ugly-duckling period and her swan period, during which time she had preened and posed, absorbing each and every flattering word that was sent her way, and viewing it as gospel.

But in time she had learned that those compliments were just empty, meaningless words, easily spoken and even more easily forgotten. She had more important things on her agenda than dating these days. She was busy not just finding herself, but also finding her place in the scheme of things.

Her place in the world.

She was working here as a hostess, but she had recently won an internship at the new Horseback Hollow office of the Fortune Foundation, which had opened its doors several weeks ago. As of yet, the office was still not fully up and running, but she intended to be there right from the start, learning everything she could from the ground up.

Her plan was to make something of herself.

To that end, she was going to continue with both positions, amassing as much money as she could. Her father had offered to support her when she'd left home, as he well could, but she had refused his money. She wanted to make it on her own so that no one else could take the credit—or the blame—for what she had become. It would be all on her, one way or another.

She might not appear so to the patrons seated here at the Cantina, but she was fiercely dedicated, not to mention full of pride.

Ordinarily, this sort of a work agenda would leave a person with no room for anything else, but she knew that having some sort of a social life was important. She supposed this "date" tonight qualified as just that.

She would have preferred being asked out by the younger hunk, but the one who *did* ask her out wasn't exactly shabby, either. Who knew? Maybe she would wind up having a better time with him than Mr. Cheeseburger, she mused.

So Rachel nodded and gave the man who had just asked her out a smile.

"All right, if we're going to go out, I'm going to need to know your name," she told him.

Cisco inclined his head in a polite, surprisingly formal bow as he said, "Francisco Mendoza at your service." Raising his eyes to hers, he added, "Everybody calls me Cisco."

"Then I guess I'll just have to join the crowd," she told him. With that, she looked at the other two occupants of the table. "Since I'm taking names, you are—" she asked Matteo.

"A day late and a dollar short," Cisco supplied before Matteo could answer her.

If looks could kill, the one that Matteo slanted at him would have completely vaporized Cisco in under ten seconds. The scowl abated somewhat as he turned to look at the hostess and told her, "Matteo Mendoza."

"And I am Orlando Mendoza," Orlando told her. In typical old-fashioned, courtly manner, Orlando rose slightly in his chair and bent forward so that he could take her hand in his. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it as per the custom of his ancestors.

Rather than appear amused, Rachel looked touched and just slightly in awe.

"Mendoza," Rachel repeated, then asked, "Brothers?" as her eyes swept over all three men.

"You are only partially right." Orlando laughed, fully aware that the young woman had asked the question tongue-in-cheek. "And partially a flatterer." He glanced at Cisco and told his son, "This one can hold her own against you."

Cisco's eyes were filled with humor as well as a healthy measure of appreciation as they met hers. "I'm sure she can."

Realizing that she had already spent way too much time at one table, Rachel flashed another quick smile at the trio and began to withdraw, saying, "I'd love to talk some more, but I've got another order up," before she turned on her heel and left.

"And that, little brother," Cisco said as soon as he felt that the hostess was out of earshot, "is how it's done."

Matteo looked at his older sibling, more than a little annoyed at the latter's presumption. "I don't need pointers. And even if I did, it wouldn't be from you."

"Touchy, touchy," Cisco observed with a pitying shake of his head. "You might not be aware of it, little brother, but you definitely are in need of something." He dug into the chicken enchiladas before him. "I just beat you to the punch with Rachel—and the worst part of it is, you let me."

"Beat me to the punch," Matteo repeated incredulously. "Is that what all this is to you? A game? Just a game?"

Cisco refused to get embroiled in an argument, especially one that didn't look as if it could have a clear winner—at least not verbally. He took another bite before saying anything in reply.

"What it is, is invigorating," Cisco told him. "And I intend to have a really good time with the fair Rachel."

Matteo's scowl grew deeper. "If you know what's good for you, you'd better treat her like a lady," he warned Cisco.

"Or what?" Cisco asked, curious as to just where this conversation was going. "You'll beat me up?" Orlando felt that he had sat by in silence long enough. The last thing he wanted was to see this escalate beyond a few hot words traded. Even that was too much.

"Stop it, you two. You are brothers. Remember that," Orlando ordered. "And Cisco, you had better behave like a gentleman with this girl. I will not stand for anything less," he warned his older son.

Cisco didn't want to provoke his father, but the whole thing had made him curious. His father must have sown a few wild oats in his day. There was still a hint of a wicked twinkle left in his eye.

"Don't you remember being young once, Dad?" Cisco asked him.

Orlando made no effort to deny it. "Yes, I do, which is exactly why I am saying this to you now." And then he turned his attention to Matteo. "And you, you have no business telling your brother what to do after you neglected to act according to your own feelings."

Matteo just looked at him, mystified.

"She was waiting for you to say something," he told Matteo. "And you let her slip through your fingers."

Matteo had no idea she was anywhere *near* his fingers to begin with. He had just been working up his courage to engage her in a conversation when Cisco all but pounced on the hostess.

"If you ask me, the better man won," Cisco commented to his father with just a hint of a smirk directed at Matteo.

To be honest—and he was, in the depths of his own heart—he had only asked the hostess out because he saw that Matteo was exhibiting interest in her. Beating him to the punch was, he thought, a good way to light a fire under his brother and get him moving so that the next time, Matteo would be the one who was first to ask her out.

"No one asked you," Matteo snapped.

Orlando looked from one son to the other and wearily shook his head. "You know, perhaps I was too hasty to try to convince you boys to move out here to live. The peace and quiet I had for all

those months made me forget how you two were always going at one another when you were growing up. Apparently you haven't outgrown that trait."

Cisco laughed. "I see right through you, Dad. You can talk and complain all you want, but admit it. You missed having us around, competition and all—not that it was ever much of a competition once I decided to throw my hat into the ring." He gave Matteo a smug, superior look that he knew would bother the younger man.

"You're delusional," Matteo told him.

"And you have no memory of things at all. Otherwise, you'd know I was right. If I set my sights on something or someone, the game is already over because, for all intents and purposes, I have won it. All that remains is to collect my winnings," Cisco concluded. He secretly watched Matteo from beneath hooded eyes to see if his words had succeeded in pushing his brother into action. In his opinion, there were times when his little brother was too laid-back. Goaded him this way was for his own good. And if not, well, it was Matteo's loss, right?

"Enough," Orlando warned. "I invited you two here to have a nice family meal—so eat!" He looked from one son to the other. After a beat, both complied with his command.

Orlando found the silence gratifying and refreshing. At least now he could hear himself think. And what he was thinking about was how nice the silence was.

Chapter Three

Rachel closed the door to her apartment behind her and walked into the kitchen. A minute later, she did a U-turn and crossed back to the door. Not to open it again in hopes of catching the man who had just dropped her off because she'd had second thoughts about not asking him in for a drink, but to flip the top lock into place to ensure her safety. The original lock that came with the door was rather flimsy at best.

Five years and security was still an afterthought for her, Rachel thought with a shake of her head.

That was because five years ago, she was living with her seven siblings in a palatial home in Austin. The servants who took care of the house were the ones who made sure doors were locked and everything was always secured. The entire house and grounds were wired with a state-of-the-art security system.

It had been a whole other world then. As one of Gerald Robinson's daughters, her every need had been anticipated and met. Had she wanted merely to float through life, doing nothing more strenuous than enjoying herself and contributing nothing to the world around her, that option had been there for her to take.

But she had always been the stubborn one who wanted to make her own way, earn her own money, *be* her own person. And never more than now—for herself as well as to atone for her father's indiscretions.

Maybe, Rachel mused as she stepped out of her high heels on the way to her tiny bedroom and more comfortable clothes, that earlier way of life had jaded her somewhat, spoiling her for the actual realities of life.

What other reason could there be for her feeling like this after the evening she had just had?

Cisco Mendoza had been as good as his word, waiting for her outside the Cantina when she'd walked out at a few minutes after eight o'clock tonight.

Any other woman would have felt like Cinderella, being whisked off not in a coach that had formerly been a pumpkin but in a shiny, fully loaded black luxury SUV. When she'd asked him where they were going, he'd given her a sexy wink and said in an equally sexy voice that it was a surprise.

She had to admit to herself that *that* had made her a little nervous. Growing up in Austin as the child of a very rich man, her mother and the family housekeeper had made her and her siblings acutely aware of being on their guard against possible kidnappers. Having money did not come without a certain downside.

She was fairly certain that Cisco Mendoza didn't know about her real background—although she couldn't be 100 percent sure—but then again, there were other reasons for women to go missing.

Cisco must have noticed her tension, because several minutes into their road trip, he laughed and told her where they were going. He was taking her to Vicker's Corners, a town that was roughly twenty miles away and had once been as quaint as Horseback Hollow. But the citizens of Vicker's Corners had chosen to embrace progress, and the town was now well on its way to becoming far more urban than rural.

"I'm taking you to The Garden," he'd added. And then, just in case she wasn't aware what that was—she was, but she pretended she wasn't because he seemed to delight in surprising her—he went on to tell her, "It's a trendy little bistro. I thought you might like to have a little change of pace. It's different from The Hollows Cantina," he promised.

She knew he meant it was more romantic than the upscale restaurant where she worked. Apparently Cisco Mendoza was pulling out all the stops.

She wished her heart was in it—but it wasn't, no matter how hard she tried.

She'd told him that she appreciated his thoughtfulness, then felt the need to point one little fact out, careful to keep it generalized so that he didn't know she was well-informed about the restaurant in question.

"If it's so trendy, wouldn't getting a reservation on the spur of the moment be really difficult? They're probably booked way in advance." She made it sound as if she was guessing, but the truth was that she *knew* for a fact The Garden was booked solid.

Cisco's grin had gotten wider at that point—and, if possible, sexier.

Another wink only intensified that impression, especially when he said, "Leave that part to me. I've got a few strings I can pull. That should be able to get us in."

She was surprised that he was being secretive about that connection of his. She knew better than to pry and try to find out anything beyond what was being volunteered. She was just rather stunned that Cisco wasn't trying to impress her with his mysterious connection.

But that wasn't the real problem as she saw it. The bistro had indeed turned out to be trendy as well as really captivating. It had stained-glass windows, copper ceiling tiles and a vintage art-nouveau crystal chandelier in the entryway.

Moreover, the food was perfect, the conversation was interesting and Cisco was charming, funny and a complete gentleman from start to finish. The date didn't end abruptly or last too long. In the words of Goldilocks, Rachel thought, changing into a pair of jeans and a baggy sweatshirt, it was "just right."

So why had she left Cisco at the door, hotfooting it inside and *not* inviting him in, not making herself available to be kissed good-night?

As she went in, Cisco had acted as if there was nothing out of the ordinary going on, but she could tell that she had surprised him—and disappointed the man, as well.

Rachel walked back out into her living room and flopped down on the sofa. Picking up her remote control, she turned on the TV and automatically began flipping through channels.

She was searching for something—*anything*—to distract her.

Rachel frowned, wondering if there was something wrong with her.

It had been a perfectly nice date, and she had had a perfectly nice time. Granted, there hadn't been a magical spark of chemistry blowing her away, but hey, that was lightning in a bottle, right? Finding something like that was exceptionally rare.

Especially since her mind kept drifting off, envisioning that *other* Mendoza at her side instead of his equally handsome, equally intelligent older brother.

Right up to the end, as she waited on their table earlier today, she kept hoping that Matteo would be the one who would ask her out or, barring that, the one who ultimately showed up in Cisco's place,

murmuring vague apologies for his brother and saying something about Cisco being unavoidably detained.

She had found out fairly early in their time together tonight that Cisco was a real-estate investor. So being detained by an important deal was perfectly plausible.

But Cisco hadn't been unavoidably detained, and Matteo hadn't come to take his brother's place. Cisco had been the one waiting for her, the one who followed her home so that she could leave her car there and then ride in his as they went out.

On paper, the man was perfect—and very easy on the eyes, as well. But she heard no bells ringing and no banjos playing when they were alone together. And she really didn't want to settle for anything less than bells and banjos. More than anything else, she wanted a magical relationship—or nothing at all.

It was just as well that it had been Cisco tonight and not Matteo, she told herself, still flipping channels and looking for something numbing and mindless to help her unwind. Cisco had told her that his younger brother was a pilot “like our father.” She felt that flying was somewhat risky, and flying for a living just increased that risk.

The last thing she needed was to lose her heart to someone who had a dangerous occupation and might not be there in a week or a month.

This way, there were no unnecessary complications for her to deal with. Just a nice date. End of story, she told herself.

“Face it, Rach. This is *not* the time for you to get involved with anyone.” First, she had to get her life in gear and on track—find out where she was going with this Foundation internship she'd taken on. Once that was settled, *then* she could think about getting romantically involved with someone and falling in love, she thought, giving herself a mental pep talk since she had no one to turn to for any sort of support. “Don't go putting the cart before the horse. Remember, you've got a plan and order is everything.”

It made for a good argument, she thought, watching channels as they whizzed by.

But deep down in her soul, she wasn't completely convinced.

* * *

Just as she had anticipated, Rachel didn't sleep all that well following her date. Every time she managed to doze off, her brain would conjure up fragments of dreams.

For the most part, they had to do with her evening out. But oddly enough, instead of the charismatic and confident Cisco, she saw Matteo at her side.

The dreams seemed so vivid that she felt they were actually happening—until she would wake up and find herself in her bed.

Sweating profusely—and very much alone.

After she'd gone through three such cycles, Rachel gave up all attempts at getting any sort of decent rest.

Besides, she reasoned, it was actually already too late for that. Her alarm was set to go off at seven-thirty. That was in less than another hour. She was going to work at the Fortune Foundation this morning, and she wanted to get there early, before her workday actually started. She wanted to absorb everything she could about the company.

Rachel already knew that the Foundation had been founded in the memory of Fortune patriarch Ryan Fortune, a man who had been a firm believer in paying it forward. He had lived his life that way, personally doing just that at every opportunity.

She'd learned that from the people who had been chosen to run the Horseback Hollow branch of the Fortune Foundation: Christopher Fortune Jones and his new wife, Kinsley.

The couple were returning from their honeymoon today, and Rachel wanted to be right there when they came in—not just to welcome them back, but to be able to listen to everything Christopher had to say.

She sympathized with Christopher and the way he had initially felt about the Fortunes when he had discovered that he and his siblings were actually directly related to the wealthy family. He had learned about this unexpected connection not all that long ago, and it had turned his entire life upside down until he finally made peace with the information.

That had taken a bit of doing on his part, as had adjusting to the fact that his mother, Jeanne Marie, was actually one third of a set of triplets. She and her sister had been given up for adoption. Her brother, James Michael, had grown up not knowing a thing about his two sisters, with only the vaguest memory that they existed.

It was through his relentless efforts to find them that his two sisters were told of their true identities. Both women took it a lot better than their families did at first.

Amazing how being part of that family created such drama for some people, Rachel couldn't help thinking.

The next moment, she pushed the thought aside.

She couldn't just sit around, contemplating life's little tricks and secrets. She had a job waiting for her. A job that *wouldn't* be waiting long if she started coming in late—or calling in sick.

Now, where had that last thought come from? Rachel upbraided herself. It certainly hadn't been on her mind a moment ago.

This was what happened when she broke with her routine, she chided herself. Last night had been an aberration from her normal course of operations, and now she was paying the price by feeling just a little bit better than death warmed over.

Or maybe just as bad.

Knowing she needed a boost, Rachel stopped in the kitchen to pour herself a cup of coffee. Her coffeemaker was ready for her, as she'd set the timer to brew at the ungodly hour of four-thirty in the morning.

Closing her eyes as she took her first sips, Rachel gave herself a moment to allow the jet-black hot liquid to go slowly coursing through her veins, bringing everything in its path to attention.

How did people live before coffee was invented? she idly wondered.

"Better," she pronounced after a few more moments had gone by. She felt almost human now.

Fortified, Rachel set the cup down on the counter and hurried off to take a quick shower.

It was only belatedly, several moments later, that she realized a face had flashed through her mind's eye when she'd closed her eyes to savor her coffee.

The face belonged to Matteo Mendoza.

This time she didn't bother trying to deny it or to talk herself out of her obvious attraction to the man. Instead, she just found herself wondering if she was going to see Matteo again.

And if so, when.

* * *

Rachel made it to the Fortune Foundation office at ten to nine, approximately fifteen minutes before the newlyweds arrived.

Their attempt to slip in quietly was quickly thwarted. Several of the other people who worked in the office saw them the moment they walked in and greeted them with hearty words of welcome.

Rachel added her voice to theirs, genuinely delighted to see the happy couple.

"Welcome back, you two," Rachel cried, speaking up to be heard above the rest. "We missed you."

Christopher laughed as he looked in her direction and replied, "No offense, but we didn't miss you."

Chris looked back at his wife, and Rachel knew exactly what he'd meant with his last remark. That Kinsley filled up his whole world and there was no space left over for anyone else, so no one else could possibly be missed.

Rachel felt envy pricking her. The love Christopher and Kinsley had for one another was almost visible.

She caught herself wondering if she was *ever* going to find someone who loved her like that—someone whom *she* could love like that, she silently added.

If the way she'd felt yesterday evening after her date was any indication, the answer to that was a depressing but resounding no.

Pushing that daunting thought aside—and knowing that the couple undoubtedly was on cloud nine and not quite ready to descend and start working just yet—Rachel came over to them.

“So, how did the big family reunion go?” Rachel asked him. When Christopher looked at her, clearly puzzled, she clarified her question. “At the wedding. That was the first time you actually met some of the other members of the Fortune family—your family,” she corrected herself. “Right?”

Christopher nodded, the look on his face telling her that he was partially reliving the scene in his mind. “Right.”

“And?” Rachel prompted him eagerly.

“And,” Christopher continued after taking in a deep breath, “it was kind of rocky at first. I wasn't sure how they'd all react to all of us, or to me,” he said glibly. He spared no words criticizing his own behavior. “I mean, I hadn't exactly welcomed the news with open arms initially myself. To tell you the truth, I was pretty surprised that they even showed up at the wedding.”

“But your mother invited them,” Rachel pointed out.

“That made no difference.” And then he smiled. The smile was equal parts humor and relief. “But just as when I first met most of them in Red Rock last year, they turned out to be a lot more understanding than I expected. I can truthfully say that they are a *very* nice bunch of people as a group *and* individually,” he added. “To be honest, if I had to pick my own family, I couldn't have done a better job than picking the Fortunes. They're charitable and decent, and they don't behave as if they feel they're privileged or something particularly special.”

Christopher abruptly stopped talking. “You've got a strange look on your face, Rachel. Is there something on your mind you'd like to talk about?”

Yes, there is. But you didn't come back to work to be burdened by my problems.

“No,” she said out loud. “I was just curious.”

But maybe now wasn't the time to satisfy her curiosity. After all, there was the matter of that little gold band on his left hand. That undoubtedly would take him a bit of time to get used to, too—even *after* the honeymoon.

For now, Rachel decided, she was just going to keep a low profile and do her job—or jobs, she corrected herself, since, just for a moment, she had forgotten about her job at the Cantina.

The second she thought of the Cantina, an image of Matteo flashed through her mind. Something else she couldn't think about right now, she silently chided.

With effort, she focused on what she had to do right this moment, at the Foundation—but it wasn't easy. Thoughts of Matteo continued to tease her brain.

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