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Judy Christenberry



A TEXAS FAMILY
REUNION



Children
of TEXAS

Mills & Boon American Romance

Judy Christenberry
A Texas Family Reunion

«HarperCollins»

Christenberry J.

A Texas Family Reunion / J. Christenberry — «HarperCollins»,
— (Mills & Boon American Romance)

The Last Barlow? David Buford/Barlow has finally found his long-lost family, but the joy he feels at being reunited with his brother and sisters is complicated by his growing feelings for his «cousin» Alexandra. Will Alex ever be able to look at David as more than a protector and start thinking of him as a man—even a potential husband? It turns out David doesn't have much to worry about—Alex already knows he's the one for her. The trouble is, they don't have the courage to tell each other their feelings. Luckily, David's new family is there to step in and give these would-be sweethearts some help! But David and Alex aren't the only ones being gently pushed toward the altar!

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Dear Reader,

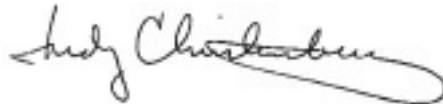
I knew all along David would be the resistant one. It would be too much to expect every long-lost Barlow to want to be found. Poor David thought he already had enough family, but ultimately had to relearn what “family” really means. Who better to teach him than his blood siblings?

I think David’s attitude is quite understandable—not everyone reacts well to change. We try to plan our lives and then when things change, we can be left floundering. That certainly has been true for me. My life hasn’t turned out as I planned it long ago. In some ways it is so much better; in others, it’s not so good. But I’m trying to make the best of what I have. David learns to do the same, and comes to love his old family while learning to relate to his new family. I hope you enjoy David’s journey.

Since David is the last of the five living siblings, you may be wondering if I’m doing a ghost story with poor Wally. The answer is no, I don’t write paranormal. The last book is about Vanessa, who has been in every book but hasn’t had her own story. Since we all know she’s firmly planted in the family camp, her story will be about what she does best—rescuing someone who also needs a family.

Thanks for your loyalty throughout this series. I love writing books about family, and I’ve enjoyed these stories especially. If you have any comments or questions, you can reach me at my Web site, www.judychristenberry.com.

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Judy Christenberry". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

A Texas Family Reunion

Judy Christenberry



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy Christenberry has been writing romances for over fifteen years because she loves happy endings as much as her readers do. A former French teacher, Judy now devotes herself to writing full-time. She hopes readers have as much fun with her stories as she does. She spends her spare time reading, watching her favorite sports teams and keeping track of her two daughters. Judy lives in Texas.

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Chapter One

Will Greenfield was enjoying the quiet solitude of the office one afternoon in February. The winds were blowing outside and the temperature hovered just below freezing. The weak winter sun struggled to make a difference, but it wasn't succeeding.

When he heard the outer door of Greenfield and Associates open, he looked up to see if his partners, Jim and Carrie Barlow, were returning. She'd had a doctor's appointment this morning, and Jim had gone with her. But the man who'd opened the door wasn't anyone he'd met before.

"Hello," Will said. He stood and walked around his desk and into the outer office. "I'm Will Greenfield. How can I help you?"

The man looked familiar, although Will was certain they had never met before.

"I'm not a potential client, Mr. Greenfield," the man said. "I'm here to see what kind of operation you run."

Will stared at the man probably twenty-five years his junior. "And why would you be interested in that if you're not a potential client?"

"My cousin is going to be working for you," he said tersely.

Will knew immediately to whom he was referring. "You're Alexandra Buford's cousin?"

"Yes. My name is David Buford."

"Does Alexandra have doubts about coming to work here?" Will asked.

"No, but I wanted to be sure you were legitimate."

"I see," Will said slowly. He had recently decided to hire a new agent when Carrie had become pregnant. Carrie wouldn't quit work completely, but she'd have to slow down a little.

"What kind of clients do you handle?"

"We do mostly insurance work. Occasionally we search for people or handle cases the police have given up on."

The man crossed his arms over his chest, and again Will was struck with a feeling of familiarity.

"Do you do any divorce cases, things like that?"

"Normally, no. Why? Do you have something against divorce cases?"

"They seem rather unsavory to me."

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Buford?" Will asked.

"I own a software company, Buford Works."

"And Alexandra didn't want to work for you?"

"No. She liked working in law enforcement, but she was tired of working the crazy hours. She doesn't have much seniority, so it would be a while before she could work days."

"So she said," Will said, watching the man.

"Is this a one-man office, just you and Alexandra?"

"No, I have two partners who aren't in today."

"Will she be the only woman?" David Buford asked sharply.

"No. One of my partners is female."

"Oh, good."

"Yes," Will agreed, still watching him closely.

"I won't take up any more of your time, then. Oh, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't tell Alex I was here. She doesn't—" He broke off as the door behind him opened.

"David!" Alexandra Buford exclaimed, obviously surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to see where you'd be working, Alex. You know, check out the working conditions, the parking, that kind of thing," her cousin said.

Alexandra turned to her new boss. "Did he say anything to you to make you think I didn't want to work for you, Will? Because I can assure you I do want this job."

Will smiled as he noted the flash of anger in her brown eyes. “Don’t worry, Alexandra. I didn’t think you’d changed your mind.”

“Good! So you can go now, David, now that you’ve checked out the parking at my new job.”

“If you haven’t started work yet,” he said, “why don’t I take you to lunch?”

“No, I don’t have time. I want to set up my desk so I’ll be ready to start,” the young woman protested.

“You might as well accept his offer, Alexandra,” Will said. “Your desk hasn’t arrived yet. They called and told us it would be a couple of hours before it comes.” He smiled at David Buford.

“Then why don’t we eat at a restaurant near here so you can get back quickly,” Buford suggested to his cousin.

“I guess so,” the young woman said grudgingly.

“I apologize for interrupting your work, Mr. Greenfield,” David Buford said, reaching out to shake Will’s hand.

“No problem. I’m glad to have met you. Stop by anytime.”

Once they’d left, Will sat back down at his desk and tried to return to work, but something about the man—or was it his name?—continued to puzzle him.

Will kept musing, searching his memory. Was the name Buford in any of the cases they were working on? It was funny that Alexandra’s name hadn’t struck him as familiar when he’d interviewed her. So why did it when it was attached to her cousin?

He was just getting up to search through a few files when the office door opened again and his partners, Jim and Carrie Barlow, entered the office.

Will hurried around his desk to greet them. He hugged Carrie and shook Jim’s hand, asking, “What did the doctor say?”

“He said I’m fine, and there’s no reason I should sit at home on a pillow all day,” Carrie said, rolling her eyes at her husband.

“I’m glad to hear it. I want you to train Alexandra so she’ll be ready to take over when you’re on maternity leave.”

“It shouldn’t take long,” Carrie said. “After all, she’s a police officer, or was.”

“That’s true,” Will agreed.

Jim frowned. “I thought she was coming in this morning to get set up?”

“The desk was delayed, so she went out to lunch with her cousin.”

Jim nodded. “Any messages?”

“Yes, that lady you phoned in Longview called back. She left another number where she could be reached during the day.”

“Terrific. I’m hoping to get the name of the people who adopted David from her. She used to be a neighbor of my family’s.” Jim retrieved the message from his desk. “If you’ll excuse me,” he muttered, and dialed the number.

“He can’t wait to find David,” Carrie murmured to Will. “Did anything else happen while we were gone?”

“Well, Alexandra’s cousin appeared. He wanted to see what kind of a company she was going to work for.”

“That’s sweet. I’m glad she has family who look out for her.”

“I don’t think she really needs to be looked out for, Carrie. She was a police officer.”

“I know, Will. I just think it’s nice. I was worried because she said she was an only child.”

“Well, now you don’t have to worry,” Will said, and gave Carrie a quick hug. “I have to get back to work now.” He disappeared into his office.

Carrie smiled and slid into the chair behind her desk. She turned on the computer and began to input the files she’d been working on. She’d become so involved in her work she didn’t realize her husband had gotten off the phone until he spoke to her. “Yes, dear?”

"I said, that's strange."

"What?"

"The family who adopted David has the same last name as Alexandra."

"Really? But Buford isn't that unusual a name, is it?" Carrie asked.

"No, I suppose not. Maybe it's just one of those crazy coincidences."

"So does the family still live in Longview?"

"No. The lady isn't sure where they moved. She said they left Longview about three years after my parents' deaths."

"Alexandra's from here, isn't she?"

"Plano, she said," Jim muttered, naming a northern suburb of Dallas.

"What are you doing?"

"I just thought I'd look in the phone directory to see if there were any David Bufords listed in the area." He picked up the phone again and dialed a number, then asked the person who answered if a family named Buford had moved from Longview ten or twelve years ago.

When he hung up, Carrie asked, "Well?"

"Nope."

"Do you have more numbers?"

"Yeah. Are you willing to help make the calls?" He sent her a teasing look.

"You know I am, sweetheart, but I won't interfere if you want to make them all yourself."

"No, it doesn't have to be me who finds him, as long as we find him." He wrote down some numbers and brought them over to her desk.

After receiving a kiss from her husband, Carrie, too, began to dial the numbers he'd given her and to ask questions. Neither of them was having much luck when Will came out of his office again.

"What are you doing?" Will asked.

Jim explained what he'd learned.

"Buford is David's name now?" Will asked. Then he slapped his forehead with his hand. "I just met him!"

Both his partners stared at him.

"Who?" Jim asked.

"Your brother. It's got to be him. I thought he looked like someone I know. It was you!"

"Was his name Buford?" Carrie asked.

"Yeah. He introduced himself as Alexandra's cousin, David Buford."

"Where did he go?" Jim demanded, excitement in his voice.

"He took Alexandra out to lunch. They should be back soon, but I don't know if he'll come up with her. She didn't seem to appreciate his overprotectiveness."

Carrie grinned. "I know how she feels."

Jim scowled. "I don't overprotect you."

"Not by yourself. You and Will work together to protect me."

"Come on, sweetheart, you know we're only trying to make sure you're safe," Jim said.

She ignored him. "Did he really look like Jim?"

"Yes, he did. He isn't quite as tall, but he's still over six feet. His hair is dark, like all the Barlows, but he has blue eyes."

"My dad had blue eyes. Mom had brown," Jim said.

Just then Alexandra entered the office.

"Where's your cousin?" Will asked.

"I sent him back to work. I'm really so embarrassed that he came here checking up on my workplace."

Jim stepped forward. "Alexandra, was your cousin adopted?"

"Why, yes. How did you know?"

“We think he may be my long-lost brother. He was adopted by a family named Buford in Longview twenty-three years ago. He was five years old. They moved from Longview about three years later.”

Alexandra stared at Jim. “The times fit. His family lived in Longview and moved to Plano about the time of my fifth birthday.”

“Can you call him and get him to come back?” Jim asked.

“Yes, of course, but—”

“Don’t tell him why, if you don’t mind.”

“Yes, but—”

“You could tell him you left your purse in his car,” Carrie suggested.

“Oh, no, he’d check before he came back. I’ll just tell him I need to talk to him.” She pulled out a cell phone and quickly dialed a number. “David, where are you?”

After a pause she said, “Because I need you to come back. I need to talk to you. No, I can’t explain on the phone.”

Another pause. “Okay. Thank you.”

She looked up at Jim. “He’ll be here in fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you. If he’s my brother, we’ll be reunited for the first time in twenty-three years.”

“Now that I look at you, I guess David does resemble you a little. But he has blue eyes.”

“Our father had blue eyes.”

“Oh.”

“Why did they move to Plano?”

“My father had started a company up here and he offered his brother a job when he’d lost his in Longview. So my uncle moved his family to Plano.”

“What happened to the company?” Carrie asked.

“Oh, after college, David took it over. My father had died and Uncle Joe tried to keep it going, but he wasn’t a very good businessman. David is a near genius. Since he took over the company, he’s quadrupled sales, and earnings have gone up significantly. David has made a small fortune for our mothers. They now live comfortably together.”

“Good for David,” Jim said with a smile.

“We can’t be absolutely sure he’s your brother, Jim,” Alexandra hurriedly said. “But they did live in Longview.”

“I know. We’ll see when he gets here.” Jim turned to Will. “Did you mention my name to him?”

“No. He asked if I was the only member of the firm, and I told him I had two partners, but I didn’t mention you by name.”

“Will he remember his former family name?” Carrie asked. “I mean, he was only five.”

“I think he will,” Jim said quietly. “If he’s shut out those memories, we’ll help him to remember who he really is.”

“Should you call Vanessa?” Carrie asked.

“Not until I’m sure. I don’t want to get her hopes up. Or Rebecca’s, either. We can plan a get-together once we know for sure.”

Alexandra said softly, “It seems strange to think of David belonging to another family.”

“It doesn’t mean he won’t still be a member of your family, Alexandra,” Jim replied. “It just means his family will have expanded.”

“If he does turn out to be your brother, how many brothers and sisters does he have?” she asked.

“There were six of us. Wally, the second oldest, died overseas. We were both in the marines. And I have three sisters, Rachel and Rebecca—twins—and Vanessa, the baby of the family. Vanessa is Will’s stepdaughter.”

“In the Buford family,” Alexandra said, “he has two sisters and me, his cousin. Gives him quite a big family altogether, doesn’t it?”

“We won’t know if David is Jim’s brother until we meet him,” Carrie reminded her.

“I know, but—”

Alexandra was interrupted by the sound of someone coming up the stairs, and they all turned to the door.

David Buford entered the room, his gaze seeking out Alexandra. He didn’t relax until he saw that she was okay.

Jim stared at his baby brother, his eyes tearing up. He no longer had any doubts.

Carrie stepped forward, holding out her hand. “Hello. I’m Carrie Barlow, one of Will’s partners. This is my husband, Jim Barlow.”

They all saw something flicker in David’s eyes, but he lowered his gaze and extended his hand to Jim. “David Buford, Alexandra’s cousin.”

He looked at Alexandra. “You wanted to talk to me?”

“Actually, Jim wanted to talk to you, David. Do you recognize him?”

Not looking at Jim, he replied, “No, I don’t.”

Silence fell. Then Jim said, “We know you were adopted, David. What was your name before your adoption?”

“I don’t remember,” he said. “I’m sure you’ll forgive me if I ask what gives you the right to ask me such a personal question.”

“Nothing to forgive,” Jim said, “but I believe you’re my younger brother, David Barlow, who was adopted by a family named Buford after our parents were killed in a car accident twenty-three years ago.”

“I don’t think so,” David said, turning away.

“Is your birthday August twentieth?” Jim asked.

“No! I have to go.”

“Yes, it is, David!” Alexandra exclaimed. “Why are you lying to Jim?”

“I’m not lying!” David snapped. “I...all right, my birthday is August twentieth. But I’m sure there are a million other people born on that date.”

“Yes, but how many of them are named David Buford?” Jim asked.

“Probably no more than three or four,” David muttered, staring at the floor.

“Oh, David, coincidences don’t happen that often,” Alexandra exclaimed.

“Why not? We’ve already had one coincidence, haven’t we?”

When Jim would’ve spoken, Carrie touched his arm. Then she said, “David, you’re the last of the long-lost six Barlow children. Did you know that?”

He looked up first at Carrie and then at Jim. “You’ve found everyone but me?” he asked.

“Wally died overseas as a marine,” Jim said softly. “Our sisters—Rebecca and Rachel, the twins, and Vanessa—have all reconnected. Vanessa was adopted by Vivian and Herbert Shaw. After Herbert died, Vivian hired Will Greenfield to find her daughter’s siblings. Rebecca was living in Arkansas. Rachel was here in Dallas. Now she lives in West Texas.”

David looked up at Jim and then quickly turned away, blinking rapidly as if trying to stop the tears. “I see. Perhaps I am David Barlow, your long-lost brother. I knew my name was Barlow but I didn’t think anyone was looking for me.”

“Is that why you denied being David Barlow?” Jim asked, frowning.

“Partly. I certainly don’t want my mother upset. I owe her and Dad a great deal for rescuing me.”

“And you think it would upset her for you to be reunited with your biological brother and sisters?” Carrie asked.

“Yes, I do. She’s dependent on me for her income and well-being. My sisters depend on me, too.”

“Yes,” Alexandra said, shaking her head. “Your mother raised you to be the big brother her daughters didn’t have. You were always taught to take care of everything for them. Too much, in my opinion.”

“You’re exaggerating, Alex! Mother doesn’t make that many demands.”

“You know I’m right,” Alexandra insisted.

“Look,” Jim said with amusement, “I don’t want to cut short your argument, but, David, I’d like to arrange a meeting between you and our sisters. Would you object to that?”

“If we can do it quietly. I don’t want Mom to know.” David shrugged. “I know that sounds strange, but I really do owe her, the whole family, in fact, everything.”

“Of course. I understand,” Jim said. “If you’ll give me your number, I’ll call you when I’ve got something set up.”

David reached in his suit jacket and pulled out a business card. “Here’s my number at work. Give me a call there, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not. Are you usually free on weekends?”

“Better if it’s a workday night. I spend a lot of weekends at my mother’s.”

“I’m sure we can arrange something,” Jim said. He reached out his hand. “I’m glad to see you again, David.”

David stared at Jim’s hand. After a minute he took it in his and let his gaze meet Jim’s. “I’m glad to see you again, too.”

Jim pulled David into an awkward embrace. Then David broke free and hurried out of the office.

Alexandra shook her head sadly. “I can’t believe he did that!”

“What?” Carrie asked.

“Denied he was Jim’s brother until he was forced to admit it. Then he asked Jim not to let his mother know about his other family.”

“Would she be upset?” Jim asked.

“Oh, yes! She’ll probably throw a fit. Ever since her husband died, she’s clung to David, and she wouldn’t want anyone coming between them. But he knew, when he heard your name. And he denied it!” Alexandra exclaimed.

“Don’t be too hard on him,” Jim said softly. “He might not have made it if your aunt hadn’t adopted him when she did. David was the youngest of the boys and therefore the most vulnerable.”

“How old were you?”

“We were five and eight,” Jim admitted.

“Wow...you were very young too,” Alexandra said.

“I guess.” Jim grinned wryly.

“Jim’s a big brother to the world,” Carrie said as she slid an arm around her husband’s waist.

“Well, I think David’s lucky, he just doesn’t know it yet,” Alexandra said.

Chapter Two

Alexandra couldn't get the scene out of her mind, of Jim confronting David and trying to get him to admit his kinship. She'd worried about David for some time now. Because he had assumed both his father's and his uncle's responsibilities she feared he might be overloaded.

Not that David listened to her. He'd been raised to think a woman couldn't take care of herself or think for herself. His mother played the role of the southern belle to the nth degree. Her own mother was that way, too, but Alexandra had always been determined not to follow the same path.

Which explained her career choice; law enforcement was not for hothouse flowers.

"Do you want us to call you Alexandra or Alex?" Carrie asked as she carried over some supplies to Alexandra's new desk.

"It doesn't matter. I answer to both," she said with a smile.

"I noticed David calls you Alex," Carrie said.

"Yes. I was five when I first met him. He thought that because I was a girl, I would be easily dismissed, but I was determined to show him otherwise. I was in my tomboy phase. Maybe I still am."

"And he hasn't noticed you're a beautiful woman now?" Carrie asked, raising her brows.

Alexandra felt her cheeks flush. "I'm not beautiful, Carrie. But I do have a boyfriend."

"Well, I think you're very attractive, and I'm glad someone appreciates you. Is he a policeman?"

"Yes, he is. That was another reason I left my job as a cop. They frown on fraternizing."

"So you've made plans to marry?"

"Not yet, but I think... I hope my leaving will make things better." Alexandra smiled, thinking of her boyfriend. Neil had been one of her instructors at the police academy. After she'd finished the course and been assigned nights, he'd asked her out to dinner. They'd begun seeing each other when they could, but her schedule didn't fit well with his.

She was seeing him tonight. As far as she knew, he didn't know about her change of job. It had happened quickly while Neil was on vacation. He'd gone to Tennessee to see his family.

"You'll have to invite him to visit us. I'd love to meet him," Carrie said.

"I haven't even introduced him to my family yet. My cousins are gorgeous," Alexandra said. "I don't want him to be...distracted."

Carrie chuckled. "Well, I can't wait to introduce you to Vanessa, Will's stepdaughter and Jim's sister. Also the twins, Rebecca and Rachel. They're all beauties, and you kind of have their look."

"Well, if it helps me do my job, that's all I care about."

Carrie perched on top of Alexandra's new desk. "I think it will help you. Men normally are not suspicious of pretty women." She grinned. "Anyway, I'm glad you're joining us. Will and Jim can be a little protective, but they do let you do your job."

"Will said you're pregnant. Are you going to keep working after your baby is born?"

"Yes. I'll take a couple of months off and then come back gradually. We have enough work now to keep four of us busy, so it may get a little rushed when I'm out of the office."

"That's okay. Will said we work as a team here, and that's one of the things that attracted me to this job. I work well on my own, too."

"You come with high recommendations from your sergeant."

Alexandra actually blushed. "He's an old friend of my father's."

"Whatever the reason, he sure thinks the world of you," Carrie said with a laugh. She pushed herself off Alexandra's desk. "If you need anything else, let me know."

"Thank you, Carrie. I appreciate your friendliness."

"We're like a family, Alexandra. I think you'll enjoy it here."

Alexandra watched the pretty blonde walk back to her own desk. Carrie and her husband seemed to have a loving relationship. Alexandra hoped that was true. They were such nice people.

She'd been impressed with Will, too, and had looked forward to starting her new job. Of course, she should've known David wouldn't believe she knew what she was doing.

From the moment her cousins had moved to Plano and settled just a few blocks away, she'd fought David for control. Since he was three years older, it wasn't exactly a fair fight. And her girl cousins had followed David around, doing whatever he told them to do. She'd tried to free the girls from his will, persuade them that he wasn't their boss, until the oldest cousin, Janet, had asked why they would want to do the opposite of what David said. He only had their best interests at heart. Their mother had said so.

Alexandra had immediately asked her own mother why they would want David to tell them what to do. Her mother had explained that some women preferred that men guide their decisions.

Alexandra was repulsed by such an idea. Her father always called her his little radical, even at five. She abandoned the effort on her cousins' behalf, but she refused to allow David to control her life.

"Alexandra," Jim said from his desk, "I've talked to my sisters, Vanessa and Rebecca, who live in Dallas. They're very anxious to meet David, but I've talked them into waiting until next Monday night. That way Rebecca's twin, Rachel, who lives in West Texas, will have time to get here."

Alexandra nodded. "Sounds good, but I'm not sure David will continue to associate with you and your sisters."

"Why not?"

"You heard David talk about his mother. He always tries to do whatever she wants. She only has to say she might like something and David finds a way to get it for her. He made a deathbed promise to his father to take care of his mother and sisters."

"You can't fault him for that," Jim said, frowning.

Carrie joined the conversation. "I agree with Alexandra. Being protective is one thing, but taking away choices stifles a person's development."

"But David just tries to grant his mother's wishes," Jim protested.

"But how can she appreciate what she gets if she never has to lift a finger to get it?" Carrie argued.

"Maybe his mother is too old to learn new tricks, sweetheart. Anyway, it's not our business. So we're all agreed next Monday night would be a good time to have my sisters and David meet?" Jim asked.

"Yes," Alexandra confirmed.

WHEN DAVID GOT BACK to his office, he found one of his best employees waiting for him.

"Hi, Pete. What's up?" he asked as he took off his jacket and settled behind his desk.

Pete Dansky shut the office door and moved closer to David's desk. "We've got problems."

David's head snapped up. "What are you talking about?"

"Our government contact just called me. He said we must have a spy, because someone else submitted a bid very close to ours in design."

"That can happen," David said slowly. "Did it have—"

"It had everything ours had except for the last bit of work you and I did. I described it to Williams and he told me it wasn't there."

"Then we still have a chance?" David asked.

"Yes, as long as the last bit doesn't get passed on."

"Are those papers in your office?"

"They're in my safe!"

"Good. But we can't let anyone work on them but you and me, and that's going to slow things down. Can we meet the deadline?"

"I don't think so. Even if you and I work day and night, I doubt we can finish."

"So we have to find who betrayed us and fast." David leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. A long minute passed. At last Pete said, "David? Are you napping or thinking?"

"I'm thinking. I need to make a phone call to some people who can help us."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. It's a detective agency that my cousin works for. I'll see if they can take our case and how soon."

"And you think they'll be able to find the spy?"

"Yeah, I do. What I need you to do, Pete, is list all the employees who had access to the files."

"Okay. I'll be back with a list in ten minutes."

"Good."

Once Pete had left his office, David got the number of Greenfield and Associates and dialed it. When a woman answered who wasn't his cousin, he assumed it was Carrie.

"This is David Buford. I need to know if your firm does personnel reviews."

"Yes, David, we do. What have you got in mind?"

He explained the situation.

"I see. Let me pass you to Jim. Hang on."

It was a couple of minutes before Jim picked up the line. "David, Carrie explained your situation and what you want. I think we can do the job, assuming we have complete access to your employee files and are allowed to interview anyone we want. I've got a few things I can put off. We can start tomorrow morning. Does that work for you?"

David told him it did, and they hung up. He felt satisfied. He might not've seen Jim for twenty-three years, but he sensed that Jim hadn't changed. He'd been honest as a boy, and he still was. David could trust his older brother.

THE NEXT MORNING Jim was sitting in David's reception area when he arrived. Which was good. What wasn't good was that Alex was sitting next to him.

"What's she doing here?" he demanded when he saw his cousin.

Jim raised one eyebrow. "She works with us now, remember?"

"Of course, but yesterday was her first day. Isn't she kind of green?"

Jim rose to his feet. "Suppose the three of us go into your office, David," Jim suggested. "We can discuss things there." Alexandra stood up, too, her face flushed with anger.

David led the way into his office. After they followed him in, he closed the door. "Well?"

"Look," Jim said, "we didn't hire Alexandra to train from scratch. We hired her because she's already been trained in most things. She's quite able to do an interview and assess the data in the files. If you have a problem with that, you'll have to hire another firm."

Alexandra protested. "No, I don't want you to lose—"

Jim stopped her. "This is not your decision, Alexandra. The four of us discussed it yesterday and decided this would be our approach. It's up to David to decide whether or not to accept what we're offering." He stared at David.

"Of course. I just thought..." David said. "Your wife seemed..."

"Carrie is the one who suggested Alexandra come. Alexandra has done a lot more interviews than Carrie."

"You have?" David asked, frowning at his cousin.

"Of course I have, David. That's a big part of a cop's job, talking to people, either as victims or criminals."

"Oh, yeah. Well, that's fine. I didn't mean to make a fuss. It just took me by surprise."

"So you're satisfied?" Jim asked.

"Yes, of course. We thought you could work in the conference room next door, unless you need separate rooms?"

"No, we're going to work together. We'll look over the files and then start pulling people in to interview."

"Okay, sure. And I'll take you both to lunch."

"It would be better if you ordered in food for the three of us and anyone else you trust so we can discuss any questions we have."

"Oh, right. Yeah, Pete Dansky. We'll bring in lunch."

"Great. Then we'll see you in three hours," Jim said with a smile and moved to the door, Alexandra following.

EARLIER, JIM AND ALEXANDRA had discussed how they would handle the interviews. Jim had suggested they take turns being the lead, and Alexandra had said she felt comfortable with that. Once they were in the conference room, they each took two files and read them.

"Anything in either of yours?" Jim asked.

"No, they look fairly straightforward."

"Okay, let's interview these four, one after the other. You be the lead on your files and I'll be the lead on mine."

The four interviews were completed in only half an hour. Jim and Alexandra put those files aside and moved on to another four. When they had questions about something in a file, they called Carrie. She found the information online and reported back.

By noon, they had cleared twenty-four employees. When the last interview ended, David and another man came into the room, loaded down with packages of food.

"How'd the morning go?" David asked.

"So far, so good," Jim said. "You have some great people working for you."

"We only have a couple of questions," Alexandra said. "One person had actually worked for the company who made the duplicate bid. She hadn't listed it on her previous employments. Her name is Judith Green."

Both men stared at Alexandra.

"She did?" David asked. "And she told you that?"

"Alex noticed the time gap in her list of previous employers. Apparently, whoever interviewed her didn't ask the right questions."

"Maybe whoever it was was distracted by a pretty face," Alexandra challenged, staring at her cousin.

"It wasn't me!" David declared.

"It was me," the other man said. "I remember because I did notice the time gap in her résumé. I asked her and she said her mother had been sick and she took time off work to nurse her back to health."

Alex made some notes on her pad. "We'll check that out, Mr.—" She broke off since she hadn't been introduced to him.

"Oh, sorry," David said. "This is my right-hand man and best friend, Pete Dansky."

"Hello. I'm Alexandra Buford, and this is Jim Barlow."

Pete shook both their hands, but his gaze returned to Alexandra. "You have the same last name as David?"

"Yes, he's my cousin."

"That's right. He said his cousin worked for your company, but I thought—"

"Give them a chance to eat their lunch, Pete," David said hurriedly.

"Right. We brought in some cheeseburgers and fries." Pete began pulling out neatly wrapped packages. Soon they were all eating.

Jim asked, after taking a bite of his hamburger, "What does Miss Green do for the company?"

"She tests our new programs to be sure they work."

Jim exchanged a look with Alex. "I think we should get Carrie to do a check on her mother and that illness she had. She can do it while we continue our interviews." He pulled out a cell phone and hit a button, then proceeded to tell Carrie the details.

When he disconnected, he said, “My wife will check it out and let us know as soon as she can. Will can go out and get her some food. We’re expecting our first child, and I trust him to take good care of her.”

“Congratulations, Jim,” David said in a stilted manner, drawing a curious look from Pete. Then he returned to business. “So what’s the other question?” he asked. “Alex said you had a couple....”

Alexandra took over. “There was a man who had been fired by you and then rehired. About five years ago. He didn’t seem to have an adequate explanation for that.” She stared at David.

“Oh. That was Bill Bardwell. Yeah, he’s okay. I fired him because he fell asleep at work several times. Then his wife came to see me. They’d had a baby and then she got sick, and he was taking care of her and the baby all night long. I apologized to him and rehired him.”

Jim nodded and said, “The only decent thing to do.” He took another bite of his cheeseburger and chewed.

“You and Alex seem to work well together,” David said, watching Jim.

“Yes, we do,” Alex said instantly, as if challenging him to prove differently.

“I just wondered...I mean, Alex is very....”

Jim grinned. “So’s my wife. And she’d kill me if she thought I was hitting on Alex instead of doing my job. Your cousin is safe with me, David.”

“That’s a strange thing to accuse the man of,” Pete protested.

“I just like to make sure,” David snapped. He turned bright red and stood up suddenly. “Right. I’ll be in my office if you have any other questions.”

There was a stunned silence in the conference room after David’s abrupt departure. Finally Pete rose to his feet. “I don’t know why David’s acting the way he is. It’s not like him. He’s a good man.”

“I know he is, Pete, but thanks for saying that.” Jim smiled at him.

“You say that like you’ve known him a long time.”

Jim picked up a French fry, studying it, as he said, “I knew him when he was a lot younger.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

“It doesn’t matter. I know he’s concerned about Alex. He’s just trying to protect her.”

“I’ve told him I know what I’m doing,” Alexandra said. “He doesn’t want to believe it.”

“Give him time, Alex. He seems to be dealing with a lot right now,” Jim said. He stood and gathered up the remains of their lunch and threw it in the trash can. Then he offered his hand to Pete. “Thanks for bringing us lunch and eating with us. We’ll let you know as soon as we’ve figured it out.”

“David and I will be waiting to hear from you,” Pete said.

He left the conference room. Only minutes later, Jim’s cell phone rang. It was Carrie.

Chapter Three

Carrie said that she'd talked with Judith Green's mother. She'd pretended to be a health insurance salesperson and Mrs. Green hadn't been interested in purchasing any. She'd said she'd never been sick a day in her life.

When Carrie had asked about any children, whether they might need health insurance, Mrs. Green had explained that her daughter worked for Carey & Co., and they had excellent insurance.

Carey & Co. was David's competitor.

"Well, that was a slam dunk," Jim said with a smile. "We'd better call her back, and call David and Pete in, too."

"I'll take care of it," Alex said as she stood. "We've finished faster than I thought we would."

She stopped by the secretary's desk and asked for Judith Green to be called. Then she walked to David's office door. It was open and she stuck her head in. "David? We think we've found the leak. Do you and Pete want to sit in on the interview?"

"Already? You bet." He got up and followed Alex out, asking his secretary to call Pete to join them. The four of them were together before Judith arrived.

When the young woman came into the room and saw the four people sitting at the table, she paused and then took a chair. "You asked to see me again? Is there something I didn't tell you?"

Alexandra smiled. "Judith, Pete said you told him you hadn't worked the six months prior to taking this job because your mother was very sick."

"Yes, that's right," she agreed at once. "I didn't mention it this morning because I didn't realize it mattered."

"Normally, it wouldn't, but we've spoken to your mother and she denies ever being sick a day in her life."

"You spoke— She doesn't like to admit to being sick." Judith seemed a little more unsure of herself.

"She also said her daughter had excellent insurance with her employer."

"Yes, that's true. Our company has great insurance." She smiled at David.

"She said your employer was Carey & Co.," Alex said.

Judith jumped to her feet. "No! No, she...made a mistake."

David spoke for the first time. "Judith, we'll give you the opportunity to resign at once, or we'll fire you and sue you for industrial espionage. Your choice."

DAVID WAS VERY PLEASED with the job Alex and Jim had done. He offered to take them to dinner to celebrate the successful conclusion.

"I can't," Alex said hurriedly. "I already have plans."

David wasn't sure he believed her. Then he turned to Jim. "How about you and Carrie join me and Pete for dinner?"

"Thanks, David, but we'll all be dining together on Monday of next week. Why don't we celebrate then?"

"Okay, that'll be fine. I do need to find someone else to replace Judith right away, I have to admit. We're under a deadline."

"Why not ask Susan?" Alex suggested. "She's taken courses in computers."

"No, I don't—" David began.

"Who's Susan?" Jim asked.

"My youngest sister," David replied.

"Relatives you trust can be good employees," Jim said.

Pete said, "I met her, but I didn't know she had any interest in computers."

“Yeah, well, my mother doesn’t encourage her because she thinks it’s not feminine to do computer work.”

Alex cast Jim a wry look.

Pete said, “That’s crazy. What’s she doing for a job?”

“She’s a salesclerk at a dress store,” Alex said, “and she told me she doesn’t like the work.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll call her,” David agreed. “I’d better call Mom, too. Hopefully, she’ll understand.”

“Tell your mom the company needs Susan. That should help,” Alex suggested.

“Yeah,” David agreed. “Why don’t you come with me to tell her about the job, Alex.”

“I told you I had plans for the evening.”

“Neil again, I suppose?” David asked unhappily.

“Yes,” Alex replied. David didn’t seem happy with her choice for a companion, but then he’d never been happy with the men she dated.

Jim said, “Thanks for the work, David, and I hope Susan takes the job, but we’ve got to get back to the office. I’ll call you about next Monday night later in the week.”

“Right, thanks, Jim.”

Pete stood beside David as the other two left. “Is your mother really opposed to women working with computers? That’s crazy.”

“I know. Mom’s that way.”

“Want me to go with you to tell her?”

David smiled. “No, I’m a big boy. I can face her on my own. You can go with me to talk to Susan, though.”

“Sure, good idea, since I’ll be the one to train her. I can see if we’ll work well together.”

They set out for the dress store where Susan worked. When they entered the place, Susan was ringing up a sale. As soon as she’d finished, David asked her if she could take a break. She got approval from her supervisor and the three of them went to a small café next door.

Once they were seated and ordered drinks, David explained their problem. “We’ve got to find someone who knows computer software to fill a sudden vacancy at the firm. And I thought of you.”

Susan’s eyes opened wide with excitement. Then she slumped back in her seat. “I’d love it, but you know how Mom is. She’ll be so upset if I—”

“I know, honey, but I think it’s time you worried about making yourself happy rather than Mom.”

“Wow, you sound like Alex,” Susan said with a giggle.

“Maybe I do. I thought Mom would change with time, but she hasn’t. Alex is right. You have the right to choose work you’ll enjoy. Maybe it isn’t in computers, but you’ll never know until you try.”

“You’ll back me up?”

“I will.”

“And I’ll be the one to train you,” Pete said, smiling warmly at Susan.

David shot a look at his best friend. Pete seemed really eager to train Susan. Taking a second look at his sister, he realized she was quite pretty. Hmm.

“Do you have to give notice to the store?”

“I think you’re supposed to, but I’ll tell my supervisor this is an emergency. It is, isn’t it?” Susan asked.

“Absolutely!” Pete said.

“Yeah, Pete’s right. It would be best if you came with us right now.”

“Then let me talk to my supervisor. They’ve got plenty of help right now. I don’t think my leaving will be a problem. Then I can follow you to the office and start this afternoon.”

“Maybe I should wait for Susan and ride with her to the office, so she won’t get lost,” Pete suggested.

David told him that was good thinking, though he knew it was totally unnecessary. But Susan wasn't objecting, either.

He left them together and drove to his mother's home, which she shared with her sister-in-law—Aunt Gladys, Alex's mother.

"Mom, I need to talk to you," David announced after he'd entered the house. His mother and Gladys were sitting together knitting in front of the television.

"Yes, dear?"

"I've talked Susan into quitting her job and coming to work for the company."

That got his mother's attention. "What? Oh, no! I can't allow that! You should've talked to me first."

"I'm sorry, Mom, but Susan has a lot of training in computer work. I think she should be using it, not working in a dress store. She doesn't even like the job, according to Alex."

"Alex is always trying to talk her into being independent!" his mother snapped.

Gladys laughed. "That's my girl! Strong-minded as ever."

"Yes, she is, isn't she. She was at the office this morning, helping us find a spy. She and Jim interviewed and checked backgrounds and found out who had been passing our information on to the competitor. That's why we need Susan. If she doesn't like it, I'll help her find another job, Mom. I'll make sure she's happy."

"Who's this Jim?" his mother demanded.

"He works with Alex at Greenfield and Associates. They did a great job."

"Is Alex interested in him?" Gladys asked hopefully.

"No, I think she's dating a cop," he said casually.

"Oh! I didn't know. She never tells me anything."

"Well, if this Jim's not married," his mother said, "Alex could introduce him to Susan."

"He's married, Mom. Susan will find someone." His other sister, Janet, was married, and it seemed to be his mother's goal in life to marry off Susan.

"I had hoped you'd introduce Susan to someone, but you never have."

"I did try a few times, Mom, but it never worked out."

"Well, I don't like you hiring Susan to work for our company. She shouldn't have to work there."

"She thinks it might be fun to try, Mom. So can I tell her you don't mind?"

"I suppose. But if she doesn't like it, you must help her find a nice job at once."

"I promise, Mom."

Though his mother protested his leaving so quickly, he headed back to the office. He found Pete and Susan in Pete's office. He was already teaching her "Quality Assurance," which had been Judith's job.

"Everything going okay?" David asked.

The pair jumped as if they'd been doing something illegal.

"Oh, David, yes, everything's fine," Susan said. "Pete is doing a wonderful job of teaching me what to do. Did...did you talk to Mom?"

"I did, and she agrees, as long as I promise to find you another job if you don't like this one."

"Thanks, David," Susan said.

"No problem. Pete, everything okay with you?"

"Sure, everything's great," Pete answered, but his smile was directed to Susan, not David.

David made a mental note to keep an eye on his friend. He thought a lot of Pete and wouldn't mind having him in the family. In fact, he preferred Pete to his current brother-in-law, Janet's husband, Jerry. He worked in his father's stock brokerage firm and David found him pretentious and snobbish. But David's mother was very impressed with him.

Returning to his office, David sat for a moment to think. He knew Alex would approve of what he'd done today, though he hadn't done it for her approval. He'd been worrying about Susan for a while now. She hadn't seemed happy. Maybe now....

His thoughts turned to Alex. He'd always tried to be a big brother to her, too, since she had no brothers. His desire to protect her was what had prompted him to pay a visit to Greenfield and Associates.

Of course, she didn't appreciate his efforts. But she was working with Jim. She'd be okay. He wished he could say as much about her latest boyfriend. Neil Logan was a divorced cop and seven years older than Alex, who was only twenty-four, the same age as Susan.

He focused his mind on his work. He'd given enough time to thinking about his family today. Besides, thinking about the company was important to his family, since they enjoyed the proceeds.

ALEX WAS THRILLED. She'd just successfully completed her first case at her job, and tonight she'd get to tell Neil about her job change. Now if he was interested in a future with her, there was nothing to keep them apart.

She was in the kitchen when she heard Neil's knock on the door. They usually ate at her apartment since Neil said it would be better if they kept their relationship quiet. That was another reason for her leaving the police force. She wasn't comfortable with secrets.

When she opened the door, Neil swept her into his arms and kissed her. "Hey, did you miss me?" he asked.

"Of course I did." She smiled. He always wanted to know if she'd missed him, even if it was only a day or two since she'd seen him. "How was your family?"

She listened patiently while he talked about his family. She was waiting for him to finish, hoping he would ask about what she'd done during his vacation. Dinner was over before he got to that stage. By then, Alex was more than a little irritated.

"So, what did you do while I was gone?" he finally asked.

"I got a new job," she said casually.

"You what?"

"I got a new job."

"You left the police force?" he asked, astounded. "You should've discussed it with me first!" His tone held anger.

Alex stared at him in disbelief. David had been concerned, but he hadn't acted like this. "Why? Don't you think I can make decisions for myself?"

"Of course I do, but I think I know what's best for you."

Why hadn't she noticed how controlling he was? He usually dominated the conversation, it was true, but she'd figured that was because he'd had more experience and thus, more to say. It seemed she'd been mistaken.

"Don't worry," he said. "I can probably pull some strings and get you back on the force."

"No, thank you," she said clearly.

"Yeah, I can talk to the sergeant and tell him you made a mistake and—"

"I don't want you to talk to the sergeant, and I didn't make a mistake!"

"Come on, Alex, I'm just trying to help. I don't want you working somewhere else."

"Doesn't it matter what I want?"

"Sure, baby, but we won't get to see each other as much."

"Why not? I won't be working nights, and it won't matter if someone sees us together if I'm not on the force."

"I don't think it would be a good idea for me to be seen with a quitter." Neil reared back in his chair, as if challenging her.

Suddenly Alex knew what she had to do. "You're probably right," she said.

He grinned at her. "I knew you'd come around. I'll talk to the—"

“No, I’m not agreeing to come back to the police force. I’m agreeing that I shouldn’t be seen with you.”

“So you want to keep our relationship a secret?”

“No. I want to end it.”

“What are you talking about?” he roared.

“You heard me. I don’t want to see you again.” She stood and went to the door, holding it open.

“Come on, honey, you can’t mean that.”

An hour ago, she probably wouldn’t have meant it, but now she saw Neil in a different light. He no longer had any authority over her. “Yes, I can. I’ve made a choice that I’m happy with, and I wouldn’t want to embarrass you by being seen with you.”

“But if we keep meeting here, no one will know.”

“Hurry up and go, Neil. Bugs are getting in.”

He stalked out of her apartment. “I had plans for us,” he said from the doorway. “We could get married. We could have a couple of kids and you wouldn’t have to work.”

An hour ago that plan would’ve thrilled her. Thank goodness she’d woken up in time.

Before she could say anything else, Neil continued, “After all, you get money from the company your family owns. It’s not like we’d be hard up.”

“Goodbye, Neil.”

“You think about it. Let me know when you come to your senses.”

“Right.” She closed the door in his face.

After he’d left, she plopped down on her sofa. She’d made the right decision; she had no doubt about that. But she hated that she’d wasted so much emotion and time on a man who wanted to control her and take advantage of her income.

She’d been a poor judge of character. Maybe it was because he was a higher rank on the force and had seemed so interested in her. She’d almost slept with him. She’d been tempted a couple of times, but something held her back.

Now she was glad she hadn’t given in to momentary urges. He was a handsome man, but underneath... She wondered about his marriage and divorce. Maybe his wife—

The phone rang.

“Hello?” she answered, fearing it was Neil.

“Alex? It’s Susan. Have you heard my news?”

“No, I haven’t. Tell me!”

“I’m now working for our company! David convinced Mom I should try it and see if I like it. I can’t believe she agreed!”

“I can’t, either, but I’m very happy for you.”

“Oh, me, too. I spent the afternoon at the new job and it’s quite absorbing.”

“I’m glad.”

“And do you know the best part?” Susan asked.

“You get to work with David?”

“No! I get to work with Pete.”

“Ah, he is cute, isn’t he?”

“You’ve met him?” Susan asked in surprise.

“Yes, Jim and I worked at the company today to find the spy.”

“Oh, that’s right. The spy was fired and that’s why they had an opening. I’m so glad you found her, because it got me out of that awful dress shop Mom loves.”

“I know. She and my mom go there all the time.”

“Yeah. They haven’t changed their style in twenty years. Do you think we’ll ever be like that?”

Alex chuckled. “I don’t know. If not that, we’ll probably have other faults that will drive our kids crazy. If we have kids.”

“What’s wrong?” Susan asked, picking up on Alex’s depressed state. They’d been in the same grade in school from kindergarten on and had shared a lot of things. She knew her cousin well.

“Nothing,” Alex said, not wanting to talk about breaking up with Neil just yet.

“Maybe I can talk Pete into taking me out to dinner and you and Neil could come with us!” Susan immediately suggested. “I’d love to meet him.”

“Maybe David can double-date with you.”

“Why not you and Neil?”

“I’m not going to be seeing him anymore.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Alex, I didn’t know.”

“It just happened tonight. I discovered that’s he a control freak. He doesn’t want me to make any decisions.”

“Like Mom?”

“Worse. And he seemed to know about the income I get from the company, too. He wanted to live off it someday.”

“Oh, that’s horrible.”

“Yeah. So maybe you can get Pete to take you out to celebrate your getting the new job.”

“I’m having second thoughts. I mean, Pete’s my boss. I guess I’ll ask David. He’ll probably tell me I shouldn’t date him if he’s my boss.”

“It is something to think about, Suse. I mean, I was blinded by the fact that Neil had a higher rank than me.”

“I will think about it. But I’m excited about the job. It’s a new start for me.”

“Yes, it is. I’m proud of you.”

DAVID WAS WORKING at home. He had a condo near the office and worked most evenings. After all, he didn’t have a social life.

He’d tried dating, and he’d discovered women liked to date wealthy men. He had a nice car, a nice home, had the title of president of his company. But they didn’t like dating a workaholic. After his last girlfriend had complained about how boring he was, he’d given up dating.

He answered his phone after it rang, expecting it to be his mother. “Hello?”

“David, it’s Susan. I just wanted to thank you again for my new job. I really enjoyed myself today.”

“I’m glad, honey, but don’t decide too quickly. Give yourself time to be sure.”

“I will. Oh, and I like Pete, too.”

“I’m glad.”

Apparently Susan still had something to say, but she wasn’t saying it. But she wasn’t hanging up, either.

“Was there something you had a question about?”

“Um, yes. What is your policy about dating?”

It didn’t take David long to figure out what his sister wanted to know. “You mean Pete?”

“Is he seeing someone right now?”

“No, I don’t think so, but...well, you know Mom’s kind of a snob, don’t you?”

“You mean because she slobbers all over Jerry and his family because they’ve been members of the country club for generations? Yeah, I know. So?”

“Do you remember Pete’s last name?”

“Dansky? What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing as far as I’m concerned. But his father came over from Eastern Europe when Pete was a little boy. He’s a U.S. citizen now, but he wasn’t born here.”

“I don’t care.”

“But Mom would. I just wanted to point that out. Anyway, is Pete interested in you?”

“I don’t know. I hope so. I thought you and I could go out and celebrate my new job and... and you could ask Pete to come.”

“Were you going to ask Mom?”

“No, I just meant you and me and maybe Alex.”

“Alex would probably have a date with that cop.” David wasn’t happy about that.

“I don’t think so,” Susan said.

That got David’s attention. But Susan didn’t elaborate, and he wasn’t about to ask. Alex’s love life was none of his business, was it?

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