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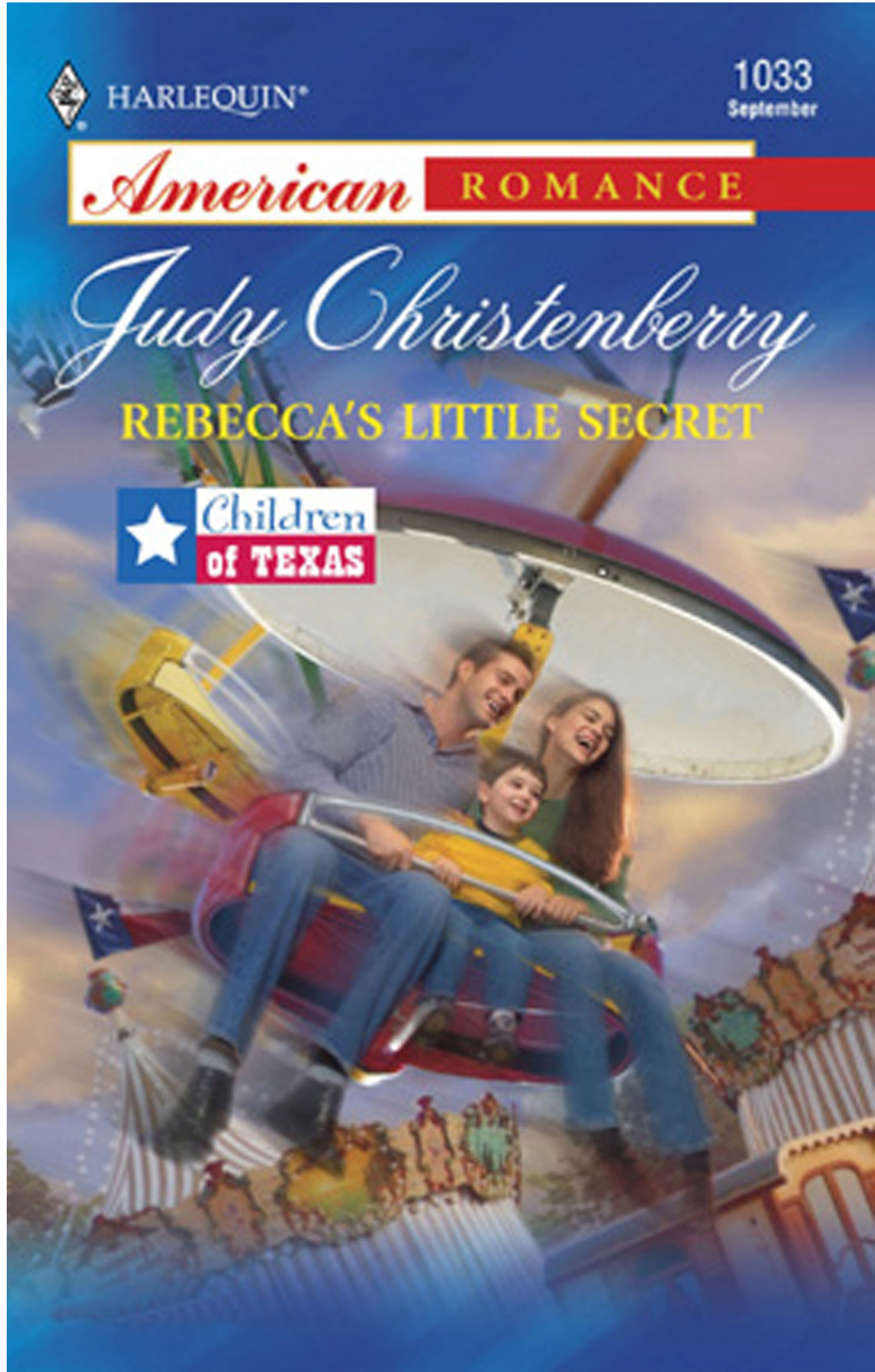
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American ROMANCE

Judy Christenberry

REBECCA'S LITTLE SECRET

★ Children
of TEXAS



Mills & Boon American Romance

Judy Christenberry
Rebecca's Little Secret

«HarperCollins»

Christenberry J.

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From the moment Rebecca Barlow starts her job at a law firm, she knows she's in for a lot of surprises. Especially when her new boss unexpectedly turns out to be her first love—her son's father. Now she not only has to reveal the five-year-old secret she's been keeping from Jeff Jacobs, but also face her unresolved feelings. And spend day after day with him and his fiancée coaching them about parenthood... Jeff is as delighted as he is shocked to see Rebecca, but her little secret isn't the only one in his life. Because although he's committed to another woman now, he's still in love with Rebecca. Not until she's about to leave with her son does the truth finally come out!

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Rebecca's Little Secret
Judy Christenberry



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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

“Rebecca, I found a job for you!” Vivian Greenfield exclaimed as Rebecca Barlow entered the house. Her fall semester had begun this morning at the university, but she was looking for a part-time job to bring in some money to help pay her tuition.

“You have, Vivian? What kind of job?” Rebecca had worked at the nearby mall all summer selling clothes, and she was hoping for something with a more flexible schedule now that she was back in school again. She hadn’t taken classes since her life had been turned upside down when she’d discovered she was pregnant almost five years ago.

“You would be working in the law office of Murphy and Jenkins. They’ve been my legal representatives for a long time, and Harriet, the office manager, said she could use some help.”

Rebecca didn’t much like lawyers, especially since her son’s biological father was one, but Vivian made it impossible to do anything but thank her. “Is it a large firm?” Rebecca asked after hugging and thanking Vivian.

“Heavens, no. That’s what I like about it. Harriet said you could come in tomorrow for your first day.”

Rebecca went upstairs to her bedroom. She’d moved into Vivian’s Dallas house in May, after Vivian’s husband, Will, had found her and her son, Joey, and insisted they leave Arkansas with him.

Rebecca had been so happy to have family at last. She not only found her blood sister, Vanessa, but she gained Vanessa’s mother and stepfather. They were such warm, loving people. They’d made a major difference in Joey’s life. So Rebecca felt sure that she could handle any kind of job, if only to please Vivian.

The next afternoon, when Rebecca arrived at her new job, there were no lawyers in sight.

“It’s vacation time,” Harriet Graham reported. “Next week we’ll be back hard at work. That gives you four days to learn as much as you possibly can.”

Everything quickly fell into place for Rebecca. She went to classes every morning and worked with Harriet in the afternoons. Then she hurried to Vivian’s home and spent her evenings with her beloved son. Joey would be four in October. He was already attending preschool and enjoying being with other children his age. He seemed happy and settled.... Unlike Rebecca’s own childhood.

She and her siblings had been separated from one another. Some had been adopted, and some went into the foster-care system. Both Rebecca and her twin, Rachel, almost three years old at the time, had been adopted by different parents. Her brother David, five at the time, had been adopted by another family. Vivian and her first husband had adopted Vanessa, who was about three months old then. But Walter, seven, and James, eight, had been put in foster homes.

Will, Vivian’s new husband, was the private investigator she’d hired to find Vanessa’s siblings. Rebecca was the first they’d found. Vivian had taken her in as if she were a long-lost daughter. It was a welcome change in Rebecca’s life after her adoptive parents had thrown her out when she discovered she was pregnant. She was thrilled to live in the house with Vivian, Will and Vanessa. She loved having a family to surround her son with.

Joey wasn’t the only one to benefit from family. Rebecca did as well. She had talked to her adoptive mother a few times after Joey’s birth, but the woman was too afraid of her husband to actually have a relationship with Rebecca. Having stood alone through her pregnancy and Joey’s young life, it meant a lot to Rebecca to have family to rely on.

And the prospect of having even more family was just so exciting. Will was looking for her and Vanessa’s siblings. He’d actually found James, but he was serving in the Middle East in his capacity as a marine. Rebecca’s twin, Rachel, and their brother David had not yet been discovered. Their brother Walter, sadly, had lost his life in combat years ago.

So everything seemed to be moving along smoothly until Friday afternoon.

“Jeff just called. He and his fiancée will drop by this afternoon,” Harriet announced with some pride.

“Who is Jeff?” Rebecca asked cautiously.

“He’s our boss. Didn’t I tell you?”

“Is he Murphy or Jenkins?” Rebecca held her breath, praying that Harriet would choose one of those two names.

“Neither one,” Harriet said with a laugh. “Jeff was Mr. Jenkins’s nephew, but his name is Jacobs. He worked with his uncle, Mr. Jenkins, for several years, until he died. Mr. Murphy died five years ago. Jeff’s wonderful. You’ll enjoy working for him.”

Harriet was sorting through a file as she talked and didn’t see Rebecca’s face turn white. Rebecca abruptly sat down in a chair before she fell over. She couldn’t believe it. Jeff Jacobs. She hadn’t seen Jeff in five years, and now she’d ended up working for him? Impossible.

“His fiancée is very nice, too. You’ll like her. She’s the perfect wife for Jeff. She has great contacts in the area. She was a debutante, of course, and her family has lived here for four generations.”

“How...nice.” Jeff was engaged. Well, that explained a lot. She should’ve expected it. He was handsome, charming and now a lawyer. He was sure to be chased by women.

“Oh, here they come now. He must’ve called on his cell phone. I didn’t expect them this soon,” Harriet said, all smiles. Obviously she adored Jeff.

Rebecca had hoped she could make up an excuse and leave before Jeff came in, but it was too late.

Jeff Jacobs entered the office with a smile on his face, holding his fiancée’s hand. He bent over and kissed Harriet’s cheek. “Did you miss me, Harriet?”

“Never,” Harriet said with a cheeky grin. “Hello, Chelsea. You look very nice.”

Rebecca didn’t move, hoping Harriet would forget about her. She couldn’t take her eyes off Jeff. After all, it had been five years since she’d last seen him. He hadn’t changed much. His shoulders had broadened a little. Maybe he had a few new laugh lines, but they didn’t detract from his looks.

“Where’s our newest employee?” Jeff asked.

Rebecca rose from the chair she’d fallen into that had partially blocked her from their view. She had to. She wasn’t a child. She wouldn’t run and hide.

“Oh, here she is. Rebecca Barlow, and she’s a good worker.” Harriet beamed at Rebecca, sharing her good will.

Rebecca looked at Jeff, saying nothing.

“Well, Rebecca Bar—Becca? Becca, is that you? Where did you come from? Where have you been?” He crossed the room and wrapped his arms around her for a tight embrace.

He held her closely against him. Rebecca couldn’t have moved if she’d wanted to. But she didn’t. She’d forgotten how wonderful it was to feel his arms around her. She wished this feeling would never end...even though she knew it was about to.

Jeff swayed back and forth. “I looked for you everywhere. I even went back to Arkansas to find you. You’d disappeared. I kept waiting for you to contact me. Where did you go? What happened between you and your parents?” he demanded, backing away but not letting go of her.

Before she could even begin to compose an answer, his fiancée, Chelsea, took charge. “Perhaps you should introduce me, Jeff?”

“Oh, yeah, sure. This is Rebecca...Barlow, was it? We were in school together in Arkansas. After I moved, I lost track of her. Though that wasn’t her name at the time. You married?”

“No. I found out my real name from Mom. I was adopted.”

“What? They weren’t your real parents? That must’ve been a shock! How did you—” he began, but Chelsea interrupted.

“Jeff, I hate to rush you, but we did tell Mother we’d be there early for dinner.”

“Yes, of course. Is there anything I need to deal with immediately, Harriet?” Jeff asked, but his gaze remained fixed on Rebecca.

“No, there’s nothing urgent,” Harriet assured him, frowning.

“Okay, I’ll see you Monday. Rebecca, will you be here Monday afternoon? I’d like to hear more about what happened to you.”

Rebecca said yes, but she wasn’t sure about her returning to her newly found job. She had a major decision to make that would affect her life greatly.

Whether or not to tell Jeff Jacobs that he was the father to her almost-four-year-old Joey.

“MOMMY! DIDN’T YOU HEAR ME?”

“What, honey? Oh, I’m sorry, Joey. I had something on my mind. What did you ask?”

“Will you play ball with me? Grandpa Will showed me how to throw it.”

The sun was shining outside, and Rebecca couldn’t think of any reason not to grant her son’s wish, so she nodded and followed an enthusiastic Joey outside. He had benefited from Will’s masculine influence.

But he would benefit even more from his biological father’s influence.

That thought had played in Rebecca’s head all weekend. And she still hadn’t made up her mind. If she told Jeff and he wanted to be a part of Joey’s life, it might affect his engagement. Was it fair to do that to Jeff? But was it fair not to tell him about Joey at all?

“Mommy! You didn’t catch it!”

Rebecca looked up to see the white ball rolling past her. “Oh, sorry, honey.” She picked up the ball and rolled it back to Joey.

“You’re supposed to throw it back. Grandpa Will said.”

“But I’m afraid it might hit you. I think you need to grow more before I throw it to you.”

“I’m big enough. Come on, Mommy.”

Rebecca complied, gently tossing the ball to her son, holding her breath that he wouldn’t get hurt. After half an hour, she told him it was his naptime.

“Mommy, I’m too old to take naps!” he complained.

“Well, it’s quiet time, really. You can lie on your bed and read one of your books, if you want.”

“Can I watch television?” he pleaded.

“No. I want you to read.” Not that he really could read, but he knew most of his books by memory. He could look at the pictures and remember the story.

He wasn’t happy with her decision, but she didn’t mind. Being a parent meant you had to disappoint your child every once in a while.

What if Jeff didn’t know anything about parenting? What if he gave in to every demand Joey made? That would undo everything she had already set up with Joey and that would be terrible. Maybe that was another reason not to tell him.

Rebecca was going crazy trying to make the decision. In her heart of hearts, she knew she should tell Jeff the truth. But this was a life-altering decision, one that couldn’t be taken lightly. For whatever she decided, it would affect not only her and Jeff, but most important, Joey. She just wanted to do right by him.

After she got Joey settled in his room, she knocked on the door of Vanessa’s room. Having a sister to discuss things with was one of the newfound joys of family life.

“Rebecca, come on in,” Vanessa said, swinging open her door.

“I need someone to talk to,” Rebecca said apologetically.

“Sit down,” Vanessa said, waving her sister to the only chair in the room while she sprawled on her bed. “Is something wrong?”

“Sort of. You know your mom found me a job at that law firm?”

“Yes. Isn’t it going well?”

“It was going well until today. The only lawyer in the office came back from vacation today.”

“Is he awful? Did he make a pass at you?”

“No, not that. Vanessa, he’s—he’s Joey’s father.”

Vanessa stared at her. “How can that be? You got pregnant in Arkansas and had Joey there, didn’t you?”

“Yes. But Joey’s father was a prelaw student then. He left because his parents died and he moved in with his aunt and uncle here in Dallas.”

“Oh, my. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been trying to decide if I should tell him about Joey.”

“He doesn’t know? Well, of course you should tell him. He has a right to know.”

“Are you sure? He’s engaged to another woman. What if she doesn’t want a stepson and it breaks up his engagement? Would that be fair?”

“Hmm. I think you should talk to Mom and Will about it. They’re wiser than I am.”

“Will they mind?”

“Of course not. Mom will be pleased. Come on. I think they’re in the library. Will was going to do some paperwork while Mom read a book.”

When the two young ladies entered the library, they discovered Will working at the desk, but Vivian was dozing in a big chair.

Will greeted them quietly. “Do you need something?”

Vanessa stepped closer. “Rebecca has a pretty big problem and wanted to ask you and Mom what you think she should do, but Mom’s asleep and—”

“I am not,” Vivian protested, having awakened while Vanessa talked. “What’s the problem?”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Rebecca asked hesitantly.

“Of course not, child. I don’t know why I fell asleep. I just seem to be tired lately.”

Will smiled at his wife. “I think maybe you need a checkup, Vivian. You may be low in iron or something.”

She made a face at him but promised to make an appointment next week. “Now, what’s the problem? Do you not like one of your classes?”

“No. I—I’ve found Joey’s father.”

Will looked at her sharply. After all, it was his business to find people who were lost. “I could’ve helped you if I’d known you were looking.”

“I—I wasn’t looking. It turns out he’s the lawyer I’m working for.”

Vivian stared at her. “Jeff Jacobs is Joey’s father? Well, I would’ve thought better of him!”

“It’s not his fault, Vivian. I never told him. I know I should have, but he left just before I found out I was pregnant. His aunt and uncle took him back to Texas. They weren’t very friendly, kind of looking down their noses at me. Then when Mom and Dad threw me out, I decided it was just me and my baby on our own. I didn’t make any attempt to find Jeff.”

“I see. It must’ve been a big shock.”

“Yes. And to add to the dilemma he’s engaged.” Rebecca didn’t say anything else.

“Yes, I’d heard that. Chelsea Wexham, isn’t it? Her family has been here for many years.”

“Yes. My problem is, I know I need to tell Jeff about Joey. But what if I do and it breaks up his engagement?” Rebecca couldn’t confess that she secretly hoped it would and that’s why she couldn’t make the decision. She didn’t trust herself enough to do the right thing.

Will frowned. “I don’t think you can let that stop you, Rebecca. I think Jeff deserves to know he’s a father. You understand that he may not choose to be involved in Joey’s life? I think that would be a bad decision, but he may choose it. Of course, you could sue for child support then.”

“No! I wouldn’t do that. But I feel guilty for not having told him before now.”

“Will’s right, dear. Better late than never. I’m sure he’ll understand when you explain.”

Rebecca wasn’t sure Jeff would understand. She felt sure he would acknowledge Joey as his son, but he might never speak to her again.

“Are you sure?” she asked faintly, giving them one last chance to tell her she should run away and hide. Joey had been her only family for so long. She was a little worried about sharing him, even with Jeff. Jeff and his wife.

“If you want to do the right thing, Rebecca,” Will said slowly, “then, yes, you have to tell Jeff about Joey.”

“I know. I just dread facing him.”

“I’ll go with you when you tell him if you want me to,” Will offered.

Rebecca actually smiled at his gesture. “Thank you, Will, but I think I’d better face the music alone. Though I guess I’ll be looking for a new job after Monday.”

“We’ll help you find one, dear,” Vivian assured her. “There has to be another job available.”

All Rebecca could do was smile gratefully. Already she was struggling with how she would face Jeff and tell him about his son.

JEFF JACOBS WAS DISTRACTED all weekend long. He tried to hide it, but he felt sure Chelsea realized it. And the reason for his distraction. He’d tried to explain the surprise of seeing Rebecca there in his own office after having looked for her five years ago. But he hadn’t succeeded.

He needed time to absorb Rebecca’s return to his life. And he needed the answers to a lot of questions. Like why had her parents kicked her out of their house. Her father had been difficult, but he hadn’t threatened to disown her before. But when Jeff had called the house, her father had told him she didn’t live there anymore. Then he’d hung up.

Jeff had called back the next day when he knew her mother would be the only one at home. She had said the same thing, only in a nicer tone of voice. But she’d added that she couldn’t say anything else.

He’d flown up the next weekend and visited their old haunts. He’d already discovered that Rebecca was no longer attending classes at university. He checked with Information, too, but she wasn’t listed. He even went so far as to check with the police.

He’d come back to Dallas distraught. His uncle had just lost his wife to cancer, after their trip to Arkansas. That was the reason Jeff hadn’t managed to call Rebecca right away. He’d done what he could for his aunt and uncle. After all, they had taken him in and raised him.

So he and his uncle mourned together. After a year or so, his uncle began to push him to date. Jeff did so, because he understood his uncle’s reasoning. He met several nice women, but still, he kept Rebecca in his heart. Gradually his memories dulled.

After a while, he began to think about his future. After his uncle’s death, he realized how important family was. When he met Chelsea, he didn’t “fall in love” with her, as he had with Rebecca, but she was a nice woman and they became friends.

When she pushed for something more than friendship, he agreed and proposed marriage. Now he wondered why he’d done such a thing.

When he got to work Monday morning, he questioned Harriet about Rebecca.

“I only know she’s Vivian’s daughter’s sister. And she’s living with them. She’s a lovely girl.”

“Yes, she is. When does she come in to work?”

“At one, after her classes.”

“Fine, I want to talk to her when she comes in.”

“Yes, sir.” Harriet didn’t make any comment, but Jeff avoided her knowing gaze and escaped to his office. He didn’t need anyone to remind him about Chelsea.

He settled into his office, trying to concentrate on business while he waited to see Rebecca again.

AFTER REBECCA’S LAST CLASS, she darted into the ladies’ room and combed her hair and powdered her nose. It was going to be hard enough to face Jeff without knowing her nose was shining. When she’d done all she could to improve her appearance, she reluctantly gathered her books and walked the two blocks to her job.

As she entered the office, she immediately said to Harriet, “I need to speak to Jeff as soon as I can.”

“Really? Well, he wants to talk to you, too. Just a minute.” She picked up the phone and said, “Jeff, Rebecca is here and would like to meet with you as soon as possible.”

After she hung up the phone, she said, “Go right in, Rebecca.”

Rebecca had expected questions from Harriet, and she hadn’t been sure how she would answer them. But there were no questions. Oh, well, she would face questions when she talked to Jeff.

He stood and came across the room to greet her. “Come in, Becca.” He reached for her, as if he were about to hug her again.

Rebecca drew back. She couldn’t bear such close contact with what she had to tell him. “I—I need to talk to you.”

Jeff frowned. “Of course, I want to talk to you, too.”

Without waiting to be asked, Rebecca sat down in one of the big leather chairs in front of his desk. She didn’t think her legs would continue to hold her up.

To her surprise, Jeff sat down in the other chair, close to her. “Aren’t—aren’t you going to sit in your chair behind the desk?”

He laughed. “This isn’t a legal matter, is it? We’re just friends talking, aren’t we?”

Rebecca didn’t smile. And she couldn’t answer his question. Looking away from him, she said, “Look, Jeff. I’m sure you have many questions for me, but I need to tell you the truth about why my parents disowned me.”

“Okay, but whatever it was that you did, I doubt that I’ll agree with their decision. That’s not how parents should behave.”

“It’s not something I did,” she protested indignantly. “It’s something we did.”

He stared at her.

Without waiting for him to ask a question, she stumbled on, hoping their conversation would soon be over. “After you left, I discovered I was pregnant.”

Jeff continued to stare at her, horror dawning in his eyes. “That’s why your parents—damn! I’m sorry. I should have been there for you. I guess you had no choice about what to do. Why didn’t you call me?”

“Because it was obvious your aunt and uncle considered me unsuitable. If my own parents thought me white trash, I figured your relatives would, too.”

“Surely you didn’t think I would think you below me?”

“I don’t know. I was in shock. I had a little savings, and my mother slipped me some money. It was difficult at first.”

He reached over to take her hand, but she wouldn’t let him touch her.

“I’m sorry, Becca. I wish I’d known and we wouldn’t have lost our baby.”

She stared at him. “You think I had an abortion? You think I killed our baby?” Her voice rose in horror.

“I understand. You were all alone. You didn’t have many options.”

“I came to tell you that my son will be four on October 2. I don’t know if you have any interest in him at all, only learning about him now. That’s fine. I thought I owed it to you to tell you that you are a father.” She got up out of her chair and headed for the door.

He grabbed her arm, stopping her. “I have a son? You’re telling me you had the baby and all this time you neglected to tell me that I had a son?”

Chapter Two

“Yes,” Rebecca said succinctly, a mixture of guilt and irritation affecting her.

“And you think I might not care? Do you think I’ve changed that much, Rebecca? Do you not know me at all? Do you think I don’t miss having family, someone of my own blood? Yes, I want a part in my son’s life.

“In fact, I think you owe me the next four years, since you managed to take the first four years without me.”

“Have you finished ranting?” she asked coldly.

“No, I haven’t!” he snapped back. “I have four years’ worth of ranting stored up. How dare you not tell me that I had a child! You know me better than to think I wouldn’t care!”

“I knew you five years ago, Jeff. I don’t know you at all now. Your fiancée may not be prepared to be a stepmom, even if you want to be involved in Joey’s life. You need to take that into consideration.”

“Hell! I haven’t had time to consider anything. And that’s your fault!” He was almost shouting now.

The office door opened. “Jeff, is everything all right?” Harriet asked hesitantly.

“No, Harriet, it’s not. Come in here.”

“Jeff, I don’t think—” Rebecca began.

“Do you think I’m going to keep my son a secret, Rebecca? That I’m ashamed of him? Well, I’m not. And I’m going to be involved in his life, so Harriet might as well know.”

“And do you need to yell when you tell Harriet?” Rebecca asked, her features cold.

“I can yell if I want to. It’s my office!”

“Jeff, I’ve never seen you like this. What’s wrong?” Harriet demanded, giving him a motherly look.

“Rebecca gave birth to my son nearly four years ago and she’s just getting around to telling me.” Harriet looked shocked.

Rebecca wanted to walk out of the office and never see either of them again. Jeff wasn’t even trying to understand. Okay, he had a right to be angry, but he was throwing a temper tantrum in Rebecca’s opinion.

“And she gave him up for adoption?” Harriet asked, obviously following her own line of thought.

“No, she didn’t do that.”

Harriet turned to Rebecca. “You kept your baby and raised him by yourself? That must’ve been hard.”

Unwanted tears filled Rebecca’s eyes at Harriet’s sympathy. She quickly looked down so no one would see such weakness. “Yes, it was, Harriet. Thank you for saying that.”

“Is the boy here in Dallas with you now? Vivian didn’t mention him to me. Does he look like Jeff?” Harriet moved closer to Rebecca.

“I’m not sure. Do you want to see a picture of him?” Rebecca only made the offer to Harriet, but when she opened her billfold to show Harriet, Jeff came to look, too.

“Look, Jeff. He looks just like you. What a fine boy!” Harriet turned to Rebecca. “You’ve done a good job raising him.”

“I hope so. I’ve tried.”

Jeff turned his back to both women and rubbed his neck. Then he turned around. “Becca, I owe you an apology for my reaction. I’m still angry that I’ve been robbed of the first four years of my son’s life, but I’m grateful to you for giving him life and for taking good care of him.”

“And I apologize for not contacting you. But you hadn’t called and I thought you’d move on to a—a better life. I convinced myself you wouldn’t be interested. I developed a mentality of me and Joey against the world.”

“His name is Joey?” Jeff asked urgently.

She nodded.

“My dad’s name was Joe.”

“I know.”

“You named him after my dad?” Jeff asked, his eyes filling with tears.

“His full name is Joseph Lee Barlow.”

Jeff had been named Jefferson Lee by his father. Rebecca wanted Joey to have some part of his father in his name. Jeff turned away again. After he composed himself, he said, “I want to see him.”

Harriet said, “You don’t have anything on your schedule except for Mrs. Yancy wanting to change her will again. I can reschedule her.”

“Thanks, Harriet. Ready, Rebecca?”

Rebecca felt like she’d lost track of what was happening. “Ready for what?”

“I want to see Joey. Now. Will you introduce me to my son?”

“Yes, but—but I haven’t told him. I haven’t prepared him—”

“Good. Let’s go.”

“IF YOU’LL WAIT HERE,” Rebecca said, having led Jeff to the library, “I’ll go find Joey.”

“You don’t know exactly where he is?”

“No. Betty will know.” She left him alone and headed for the kitchen. “Betty, where’s Joey?”

“What are you doing home now? Are you sick?” the housekeeper asked, moving toward her to touch her forehead.

“No, I’m not sick. I’ve brought Joey’s daddy home to meet him.”

Betty’s eyes widened, but she didn’t ask any questions. “Joey is helping Peter wash Miz Vivian’s car.”

“Thank you.”

“Peter said he wouldn’t let him get wet,” Betty called after her as Rebecca headed for the driveway, where Peter, Betty’s husband, was washing a car.

“Mommy!” Joey squealed in excitement. “I’m helping Peter!”

“I can see that, but I need you to come inside and meet someone.”

Her son pouted and protested that Peter needed him, but Peter assured him there would be other car washes he could help with.

A disgruntled Joey followed his mother into the house. Once they were inside, Rebecca stopped. “Did you get wet?”

“Not much,” Joey said, looking at his mother from under his lashes.

“I think we’d better go change. Joey,” she said in what she hoped was a casual voice, “do you remember asking about your daddy?”

That question got Joey’s attention. “Yeah. Why?”

“Because he’s here. He didn’t know about you until today, and he’s come at once to meet you.”

“My real daddy?” the little boy asked skeptically.

“Of course your real daddy. I wouldn’t lie about that.”

Her intention of changing Joey’s clothes so he would impress his father went down the drain. Suddenly Joey darted toward the library. “Is he in here?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Yes, but—”

Joey was already through the door.

Rebecca hurriedly followed him in time to hear him say, “You’re not my real daddy!”

“Joey, don’t be rude, please. Let me introduce you to Jeff Jacobs. Jeff, this is Joey.” She tightened her hands on her son’s shoulders before she added, “And, yes, Jeff is your real daddy.”

“But you told me he was strong like Superman! He doesn’t even have a cape!”

Much to Rebecca’s relief, Jeff laughed. “I’m a lot stronger than your mom. Maybe that’s why she said that.”

“Yeah. We was scared and she said if you was there, you’d protect us.”

“We were scared, Joey,” Rebecca corrected.

Joey gave her one of his disgusted looks. He didn’t count grammar among the important things in life.

Jeff had been standing. Before the awkward silence got too long, he said, “May we sit down and talk a little? I’ve missed four years of your life. I’d like to know what you like to do. Your favorite foods, those kinds of things.”

Joey looked at Jeff and then his mother.

Rebecca braced herself for what was coming.

“When we have something to celebrate, Mommy takes me to McDonald’s!”

“Joey, you just had lunch. And it’s not nice to ask to be invited.” Rebecca felt her cheeks turning red.

“But, Mommy, he asked what I like. And I like to go there.”

“Fair enough,” Jeff said. “How about I take you there for dinner this evening?”

“That would be great. Me and Mommy will like that.”

Rebecca hurriedly said, “I won’t be going, honey. It’s a chance for you to get to know your daddy.”

Joey looked at Jeff and frowned. “I don’t want to go without you, Mommy.”

Before she could begin to persuade him, Jeff said, “That’s fine if Mommy comes. I’ll invite my fiancée, too, so you can meet her.”

“What’s a fiancée?” Joey asked.

“She’s the lady I’m going to marry.”

Joey backed up to lean against his mother’s legs. “Uh-uh, I’m not changing mommies. I’m keeping my mommy.”

Rebecca bent down and kissed her son’s cheek. “I’m glad you want to keep me, sweetie, but that’s not what your daddy meant. Chelsea would be your stepmother and I would be your mommy.”

“Stepmother? Like the one in Cinderella? That would be bad! I don’t want a stepmother!”

“Joey, mind your manners. I’ll explain later.”

Jeff looked at the little boy with his stubborn chin. “Maybe that’s a good idea. You’ll have time to explain everything and we can talk at McDonald’s. Okay, squirt?”

“What’s a squirt?” Joey asked.

“Your mom will explain that, too.” Jeff moved toward the door. “About seven?”

“Actually,” Rebecca said, “little boys like to eat around six, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind. You don’t need to go back to work today. I’ll explain to Harriet that you’ve got today off and that you’ll be there tomorrow.”

Rebecca froze. “You’re not going to fire me?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Maybe because you’re mad at me?”

“I’m not. Besides, my new partner comes in the morning. You’ll be able to help out until he hires a full-time secretary.”

JEFF SAT IN HIS CAR for several minutes, trying to take in all he’d learned this afternoon. He had a son. He’d always wanted children some day but this wasn’t exactly how he’d expected to form his family. Still, he wanted to hold him, to hug him, to be there for him. But Jeff knew he was a stranger to Joey, and it would take him time to warm up to him and show his love.

He remembered the photo Rebecca pulled out. Joey looked like he did as a boy, but he did have Rebecca's stubborn chin. Jeff laughed. That was no surprise, but it probably explained how she managed to raise Joey alone.

Now he had to face Chelsea and explain how his life had changed in one afternoon. He was supposed to take her to dinner, and McDonald's wasn't what she would be expecting.

When he reached the Wexham home, he paused. Suddenly he realized that he didn't like the Wexhams' home. It wasn't a home. It was a house with expensive things in it. He couldn't see bringing Joey there.

Then he thought about Vivian Greenfield's house. Jeff had always liked her house. He'd first visited it almost five years ago with his uncle. Vivian's house was a home, warm and inviting. He wanted that kind of house for his son.

With a sigh, he got out of the car and went to the door, ringing the doorbell. The housekeeper answered the door. She wasn't part of the family, like Betty and Peter. Mrs. Wexham never let her forget her place.

"Is Chelsea in?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I'll tell her you're here." She led him to the parlor and left the room. He stood there, looking at the brocade antique sofa and the accompanying chairs. He decided that he would ask Chelsea to go for a ride. He certainly didn't want their conversation interrupted.

"Jeff! This is a surprise. How nice," Chelsea said with a beautiful smile.

"I know. I should've called but, well—you'll understand when I tell you what's happened. Can we go for a ride?"

She was wearing slacks and a shirt. "I'm not dressed to go out, Jeff. I could change—"

"No, Chelsea, we won't get out of the car. But this is important. Please."

She gave him a curious look. "All right. Let me tell Mother."

She came back several minutes later. "Sorry. She had to lecture me about going out like this," she said with a smile.

For the first time, Jeff considered what kind of parent Chelsea would be. He could picture Joey in a proper suit, standing rigidly at attention. And being seriously unhappy.

He shoved that thought away and led Chelsea to his BMW. He drove to a nearby park, pulled into a free space, then rolled down the windows and turned off the motor. It was a mild fall day, not too hot as long as there was a breeze.

"Okay, what happened today? Is it good? Did you get a new client?" Chelsea asked.

"It's more personal than that. It's rather complicated as well. Rebecca—Rebecca told me that she was pregnant when I left Arkansas. She has been raising my son alone since his birth."

"And she didn't tell you? Well, I think you've got a good case to get out of paying child support." Chelsea was looking at her nails, as if trying to decide if she liked the color.

"I have no intention of avoiding child support payments. He's my son."

"Are you sure? I think you should have a paternity test done. She could've gotten knocked up by some jerk who ran off and she sees an opportunity to get some money."

"Chelsea, how could you be so cold? Rebecca's not like that!" Jeff snapped.

"Jeff, you haven't seen her in five years. She may have changed." She looked up at him. "Right?"

"It's possible, I guess."

"So get the test."

"When you meet him, you'll understand why that isn't necessary."

She gave him a droll look. "We'll see."

"Yes, you will. Tonight. I invited Joey and Rebecca to join us for dinner tonight."

Before he could continue, Chelsea protested. "Jeff, I'm not sure that a five-star French restaurant allows children. And even if they do, a little boy won't like it."

"I know. So we're going to McDonald's."

“You must be kidding. No one goes to McDonald’s.”

“People with children go to McDonald’s. And I now have a child. I’m trying to be as honest as I can be, Chelsea. Joey is going to be a part of my life. I want him to be a part of your life, too.”

“A little boy? How old is he?”

“He’s almost four. He’s in preschool.”

“So we’re talking visitation for an occasional weekend?”

Jeff sank his teeth into his bottom lip. “Maybe more than that. I’m not sure right now. Let’s just take it one step at a time. We’ll go to McDonald’s and—”

“I don’t want to go to McDonald’s. I’ll eat at home.” She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at him.

“It’s your choice. But Rebecca is coming with us, and you know how the gossips are.” He shrugged his shoulders. “If you’re with me, nobody will think anything of it.”

He let his words settle into her head. Then he said, “But it’s up to you, Chelsea. I don’t want to force you to do something you don’t want to do.”

She glared at him. “I’ll go, but you’re going to owe me big time, Jeff Jacobs.”

They drove to Chelsea’s home in silence. It was wrong to compare Rebecca and Chelsea. They were two completely different people. And Rebecca had had time to get used to having a child. He couldn’t imagine Chelsea pregnant or even having children, now that he thought about it. In fact, he couldn’t believe the subject never came up before. And he needed to change that. Just before she got out of the car, he asked, “How many children do you want us to have?”

“I haven’t really thought about it. But certainly none anytime soon. I want us to travel and to have fun together, just the two of us. Maybe we could have one child when I’m in my mid-thirties. That’s still safe. But I don’t think I’d want more than one.”

She leaned over and kissed him before she got out of the car and went into the house.

Jeff couldn’t believe how many momentous revelations had been brought to his attention today. How could he have proposed to Chelsea without ever asking her about children? He wanted children. More than one child. He’d been an only child and he’d hated it. It was lonely, and there was too much responsibility and burden to carry for one person, so much pressure and nobody to share it with.

Chelsea was one of two children. It had occurred to Jeff that her brother had been an accident, since there were seven years between them. But he hadn’t asked. Maybe he didn’t want to know... or maybe he was afraid of Chelsea’s response.

REBECCA HAD SPENT THE afternoon talking to Joey about stepmothers and the advantage of having a father. By dinnertime, she’d made some progress, but not much.

Rebecca dressed in jeans and a cotton sweater, along with athletic shoes, then made sure her son was in clean clothes. She’d combed his hair, but it didn’t behave very well. To her he looked adorable. She hoped Chelsea would think so.

She’d called Jeff and told him they would meet him at the fast-food restaurant since he had to pick up Chelsea. He reluctantly agreed. Rebecca and Joey arrived five minutes early. She ordered and paid for their food, so there would be no awkward confrontation later. They found a table for four and settled in on one side of the table. Joey wanted to open his meal at once, but Rebecca insisted he wait for the others to arrive and order their food.

When Jeff and Chelsea came in, Rebecca waved to them. Either she was severely underdressed or Chelsea was overdressed with her pink sleeveless top that didn’t quite reach her waist and a skirt that flared around her thighs. Rebecca guessed that the top was made of cashmere, which made it very expensive, and out of place for this type of restaurant.

Jeff frowned when he saw they already had their food. Chelsea sat down at the table, and he asked her what she wanted. She asked for the kids’ meal.

“Goody!” Joey exclaimed. “Can I have your toy if you don’t want it?”

“Chelsea, I should introduce you to Joey, my son, who has already asked for your toy. If you want to keep it, please do so.” Rebecca gave her son a reproving look.

“Mommy! She wouldn’t want a toy soldier!”

“She might, Joey, and I’ve told you it’s not nice to ask for something.”

Joey ducked his head and muttered, “Okay.”

Jeff promised to be right back and went to purchase their food. Rebecca tried to make conversation with Chelsea, but it was forced and awkward. They were all relieved when Jeff returned.

“Here’s your meal,” he told Chelsea as he sat the box in front of her. He had gotten a cheeseburger and fries for himself.

Rebecca told Joey he finally could open his box and begin eating.

He opened his box, but his interest was fixed on what toy he’d received. “Oh. I got the green soldier.” Disappointment filled his voice.

“What’s wrong with the green soldier?” Jeff asked.

“I already have three green soldiers, but I wanted a blue soldier.”

Chelsea looked up after opening her box. “I have a blue soldier.” Her voice was offhand.

Joey looked at his mother, but she shook her head no.

After a minute, when Chelsea had begun eating her hamburger, Joey said politely, “I’ll trade soldiers with you, if you want.”

Chelsea looked at Jeff, who nodded yes. She still hesitated a minute. Then she said, “You can have it.”

Joey was thrilled. “Thank you!” he exclaimed.

Joey immediately began playing with the two soldiers. Rebecca had to remind him to eat his dinner, and the boy reluctantly took a bite of his hamburger. Jeff began asking him questions about what he liked to do, which also kept Joey busy.

Rebecca continued to try to make conversation with Chelsea while they ate, since she showed no interest in Jeff’s conversation with Joey. “Did you attend Southern Methodist University?” Rebecca asked.

“No. I went to Stanford,” Chelsea said, naming a highly ranked college in California.

“Oh. I’ve heard it’s hard to get into Stanford.”

“Not when my father went there and has contributed a lot of money to their building funds.”

“How nice,” Rebecca said. She couldn’t think of any other comment.

“I majored in French Literature,” Chelsea added.

“What kind of job can you get with that major?” Rebecca asked, truly curious about the practical application of her major.

Chelsea, however, appeared affronted. “A job? You think I’ll be looking for a job? I’m marrying Jeff.”

“Oh, of course,” Rebecca agreed.

“Mommy! Look, there’s Derek!” Joey squealed, jumping to his feet in his chair and knocking over his soda, splashing it all over Chelsea.

Chapter Three

“Oh, Joey, no!” Rebecca said, but it was too late to undo what Joey’s excitement had done. “I’m so sorry, Chelsea,” she hurriedly said, and began handing her all the napkins she had. “Joey, you need to apologize to Chelsea.”

“I’m sorry. Mommy, can I go play with Derek?”

“No. Go get some more napkins for Chelsea,” Rebecca ordered.

“More napkins won’t help!” Chelsea snapped. “Look what he’s done! My outfit is ruined and this is the first time I’ve worn it!”

“I’ll pay to have it cleaned, Chelsea. Perhaps the cleaners can repair the damage,” Rebecca said, hoping to satisfy Chelsea.

“I’m not sure they can do any good.”

Joey returned with more napkins. “Here, Chelsea. I’m sorry I spilled my drink,” Joey said, showing true contrition.

“You need to be more careful,” she said, standing and backing away from him.

Jeff spoke for the first time. “I’d better take Chelsea home.”

Rebecca nodded, biting her bottom lip to keep herself from responding to Chelsea’s lack of understanding, and noting that Jeff didn’t really stand up for his son or acknowledge that it was an accident.

Jeff rubbed Joey’s hair and said, “I’ll see you soon, Joey, okay?”

Joey nodded, but his gaze went to his mother, as if he wasn’t sure that was a good idea.

Rebecca could understand her son’s hesitation if seeing Jeff again meant seeing Chelsea. But she knew the woman wasn’t used to being around children. She smiled encouragement to Joey. To Jeff, she said, “We’re sorry. Please let me know how much the dry cleaning costs. We’ll be glad to pay for it.”

Jeff nodded and smiled, but Chelsea was standing by the door, her toe tapping out the seconds he kept her waiting. After Jeff reached her and held open the door, both Rebecca and Joey gave a sigh of relief.

“Now can I go play with Derek?”

“First you have to eat your hamburger. I’ll get you some water to drink.”

“But I want another soda.”

“I think we’ll stick with water.”

His face took on a stubborn look. “I want a soda.”

“You’re not going to get a soda. If you’re nice, you can play with Derek. If not, we’ll just go home.” Rebecca kept her voice calm, leaving the choice up to him.

“I’d like some water, please, Mommy.” Joey even managed to smile, determined he was going to play with his friend.

“Very nice. I’ll be right back.”

She brought him water, and he finished his hamburger in rapid fashion. Then he politely asked if he could go play with his friend.

Rebecca agreed, warning him they would have to leave in twenty minutes. After he ran to join his friend, she wished Jeff had been there to see his good behavior. And Chelsea, too. If she was going to be his stepmother, Rebecca wanted her to know that he could behave properly. He’d just gotten excited about seeing his friend.

REBECCA WASN’T EAGER TO GO to her job the next day. She was afraid Jeff would make remarks about Joey’s behavior. It was important for Jeff to like Joey. Joey’s self-image was at stake. She admitted to herself that his acceptance of Joey mattered to her, too. She wanted Jeff to believe she’d done a good job of raising their son.

Which also forced her to admit that Jeff's opinion about everything mattered to her, even if he was marrying another woman. All these years, even though she hadn't told Jeff about his son, she'd held him in her heart. She might not be able to have Jeff for her own, but she at least wanted her son to have him in his life.

She warily entered the law office that afternoon. When she barely avoided running into a tall, handsome man—not Jeff—she abruptly forgot her problems. “Oh, excuse me!” she exclaimed.

“I'm sure it was my fault. I was in too much of a hurry.”

She smiled and stepped back, assuming he was on his way out of the office.

“Are you here about a legal problem?” he asked, not moving.

“No,” Rebecca said, still smiling, “I work here.”

“So do I.” He gave her a curious look.

“Oh, you must be Jeff's new partner!” Rebecca exclaimed just as Harriet came out of Jeff's office.

“Oh, good, I see you two have met,” Harriet said with a smile.

“Well, not exactly,” the man said. “She's figured out I'm Jeff's new partner, but neither of us knows the other's name.”

“Well, then, let me introduce you. Rebecca, this is Bill Wallace, Jeff's new partner, as you suspected. Bill, this is Rebecca Barlow, our part-time help.”

“Hello, Rebecca,” Bill immediately said. He extended his hand, and Rebecca placed hers in it, assuming he wanted to shake hands.

Bill, however, just held her hand, smiling at her. “I must say Jeff has shown great taste in hiring you.”

Embarrassed, Rebecca tugged on her hand. “Actually, Harriet hired me.”

“Then Harriet has shown good taste,” he said, a teasing smile on his face as he continued to hold on to her hand.

Jeff walked out of his office. “What's going on?”

“I'm just making Rebecca's acquaintance,” Bill assured him, his smile growing.

Jeff frowned. “I need to see you in my office, Bill.”

Slowly Bill released Rebecca's hand. “I'll see you later, Rebecca,” he promised before he turned and followed Jeff into his office.

“Close the door,” Jeff snapped.

Bill did so, but his expression showed concern.

“What's wrong? Did I commit a faux pas?”

“I just wanted to warn you about flirting with Rebecca.” Jeff sat down behind his desk. “I don't think it's a good idea to mix business and personal interests.”

“So she means nothing to you? Personally, I mean.”

Jeff glared at him. “She's the mother of my son.”

“Your son? I didn't know you had a son.” Bill stared at him.

“I didn't know, either, until yesterday,” Jeff admitted. “Rebecca and I had a—a relationship five years ago. I left rather suddenly and moved to Texas to be with my aunt and uncle. Because my aunt was dying of cancer, I didn't call Rebecca as soon as I'd wanted. By the time I tried to get hold of her, I couldn't find her.”

“And she didn't contact you at all?”

“No.”

“Must've been a real shock. How did Chelsea take it?”

“As well as could be expected. It will take Chelsea time to adjust to the change.” He wasn't sure Bill would believe him since he'd met Chelsea several times when they were talking about being partners.

“Yeah, I can imagine. Chelsea's used to getting her own way. You've spoiled her rotten.”

“I have? Her family has certainly spoiled her, but I don’t think I’m guilty of it,” Jeff unhappily asserted.

“Well, Chelsea is the kind of lady you have to take a hard line with, to counterbalance her behavior.”

“When I want your advice on how to handle my fiancée, I’ll ask for it, Bill. Until then, mind your own business and keep away from Rebecca.”

“Wait a minute! You’ve got Chelsea. Where does Rebecca fit in?”

“I told you. She’s the mother of my son.”

“So she has to take a vow of chastity?”

“I don’t think she’d be interested right now.”

“But if she indicates that she is, then there’s no reason I can’t get to know her better?”

“I told you I don’t like mixing our personal lives with our business.” Jeff frowned at his partner to emphasize his point.

“Jeff, she’s a part-time worker, not another lawyer, or even my secretary. I’ll be careful.” With a triumphant smile, he left the office.

Jeff sat there, staring at a painting on the wall without even seeing it. He hated to admit it, but Bill was right. He didn’t have the right to warn Bill away from Rebecca. Not when he was engaged to Chelsea.

And he was committed to Chelsea, of course. But when faced with Rebecca, living and breathing right there in front of him when he’d thought she was gone from him forever, he was growing more and more confused by the minute. He wasn’t sure what he was feeling.

Still, Jeff tried to put aside his emotions and get to work. But he made sure Rebecca was kept busy. Too busy to be available for any flirting with Bill.

EVERYTHING WAS GOING SMOOTHLY. Rebecca was working diligently at the sudden increase of duties she’d received since Jeff returned to work.

He’d offered to take them to the zoo on Saturday. Again Rebecca had tried to convince her son that her presence wasn’t necessary, but Joey had disagreed with her and so had Jeff.

Rebecca worried that she wasn’t fighting hard enough. She knew she wanted to be with Jeff, but she had to realize he was engaged to Chelsea. Her son had a role in Jeff’s life, but Rebecca didn’t, and she tried to remind herself of that fact at every turn.

Then Thursday afternoon came and all hell broke loose....

“Rebecca, you have a call...and the woman sounds upset,” Harriet warned as she held out the phone for Rebecca.

“Hello?”

“Hi, it’s Betty. Peter was playing ball with Joey and—and it was an accident, but the ball hit him in the mouth. Oh, Rebecca, it knocked his tooth out! We didn’t know what to do. I wrapped the tooth in a cold wet cloth, but who do we take him to?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll be right there,” she promised, and hung up the phone. “Sorry, Harriet, but Joey’s been hurt. I have to leave.”

“Jeff will drive you.”

“No, that’s not necessary,” she protested, grabbing her purse and hurrying to the door.

Jeff came out of his office. “Did you call me, Harriet? Where’s Rebecca going?”

“Joey’s been hurt. She’s going home.”

“Does she have her car here?”

“No, she walked, as usual. I said you would drive her but she said it wasn’t necessary.”

“Take care of things,” Jeff ordered over his shoulder as he hurried after Rebecca.

AN HOUR LATER, CHELSEA arrived at the office. Jeff had said he would take her to the French restaurant they’d skipped Monday evening.

She was not happy to discover that her fiancé had left with Rebecca because Joey had gotten hurt. When she expressed her displeasure, Harriet asked, “Shall I call Rebecca’s house and see if they can tell me when Jeff will return?”

“Of course I want you to do that!” Chelsea snapped. She paced the office as Harriet made the call.

“I see,” Harriet said into the phone. “Will you have him call the office as soon as you hear from him? Yes, thank you.”

Chelsea stared at her. “Well?”

“He and Rebecca took Joey to Jeff’s dentist, but they have to wait until he’s dealt with his other patients. They’re not sure when he’ll be back.”

“And I’m supposed to hang around waiting for him?”

Bill stepped out of his office. “What’s wrong?”

Harriet explained the problem while Chelsea frowned at him.

“That’s too bad. How about I take you to the coffee shop until Jeff can get back? Give your cell phone number to Harriet and she’ll call as soon as she gets some news. Isn’t that right, Harriet?”

“Yes, of course,” Harriet agreed readily.

“Good. Come along, Chelsea, my girl. We could both use a cup of coffee today.”

And with that, Chelsea found herself swept out the door, much to Harriet’s relief.

JEFF AND REBECCA SAT with Joey between them. He leaned against his mother most of the time, but Jeff kept a hand on his shoulder. “Are you hanging in there, Joey?” he asked.

As Betty had said, Joey’s tooth was wrapped in ice, and Joey held a bag of ice on his mouth, too. He lowered the ice. “Sure. It doesn’t hurt much.”

“Keep the ice on your mouth, sweetie,” Rebecca said, squeezing Joey’s hand. “It shouldn’t be much longer.”

“No, it shouldn’t since Dr. John’s last patient went in half an hour ago. Then we’ll find out what can be done for your tooth, Joey.”

“I’m sure it was a baby tooth,” Rebecca said again, as she had several times earlier. “His adult teeth won’t come in for a couple of years.”

“We’ll wait and let Dr. John decide that.” Jeff stretched out his legs, trying to ease the tension he felt. He’d found it more difficult to withstand Joey’s pain than anything he’d ever suffered himself, including a broken bone when he was playing football in high school.

The nurse returned to the waiting room to call Joey in. Both Rebecca and Jeff got up and accompanied him to the door.

“Hello, Jeff,” the man in a white coat said in greeting. “Why don’t you introduce us?”

“Sure. This is my son, Joey, and his mother, Rebecca Barlow.”

“Hello. I’m Dr. John Ballard. Now, let’s see what happened, Joey. Can you smile for me?”

Joey took down the ice pack and bravely tried to smile.

The dentist patted Joey’s back. “Good try. Now I’m going to lift your lip, okay?”

Joey nodded.

The doctor looked at Joey’s gums. Then he asked if the tooth had been saved.

Rebecca handed him the tooth wrapped in a clean cloth and buried in a bag of ice.

Dr. Ballard set the bag of ice down on a nearby table, withdrew the cloth and unwrapped the tooth. “This is a baby tooth. There doesn’t appear to be any damage to his gums or any future teeth. His replacement tooth might not come as soon as we’d like, but it will come in.”

“Is there anything we should do?” Rebecca asked anxiously.

“You might give him some children’s Tylenol to ease the pain, and use ice until the swelling of his lips goes down. If he continues to have pain, call me.”

“Thank you for seeing us today,” Rebecca said with a genuine smile.

“Yeah, John, we appreciate it,” Jeff added.

“You might want to get his teeth cleaned in six months or so. Give my nurse a call.”

After they left the dentist’s office, Rebecca said, “I like him. I may start going to see him, too.”

“He’s married.” Jeff was trying to eliminate the dentist from any potential flirting with Rebecca, just as he had Bill.

Rebecca gasped. “Should that make a difference?”

“I just wanted you to know,” he said, shrugging his shoulders, hoping she wouldn’t guess his reasoning.

“All right.”

They got into Jeff’s car and rode silently back to Vivian’s home. Jeff got out of the car with them and came in. As soon as everyone knew they were back, they crowded around Joey as if he were returning from war.

Betty offered Joey a bowl of ice cream. Peter offered to do anything Joey wanted. Vivian was sure he needed to go to bed at once. Will promised to teach him how to avoid such pain in the future, and Vanessa was giving him kisses.

“I feel totally useless,” Jeff muttered.

“You weren’t useless at the doctor’s office,” Rebecca told him. “That’s the first time I’ve had someone to rely on when we had an emergency. I appreciate it.”

“Have you had a lot of emergencies?”

“Once, when he was eighteen months, he swallowed a penny. Another night, he ran a very high fever, and I had to take him to the emergency room because I was afraid he had some horrible disease. The waiting is painful when you’re the only adult, and you’re not sure if you’re doing the right thing.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there with you.”

“Well, we both know that’s my fault.” She moved away to stop the conversation. “I think Joey needs to go to bed, and I’ll bring him up a tray of food. Maybe a grilled cheese sandwich and some tomato soup, Betty, if that’s possible?”

“Course it is. I’ll have it ready in fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you so much. Tell everyone good-night, sweetie.”

“But, Mommy, I think I should get to watch television,” Joey informed her.

Rebecca didn’t get angry. She just smiled and said, “And I think you should do as I said. Up the stairs and into your jammies.”

He gave in easily, which showed her how tired he really was. Trauma always wears out a person.

“May I help you put on your pajamas and get ready for bed?” Jeff asked.

“Hey, yeah, ’cause we’re both boys,” Joey agreed, intrigued with that idea. “Mommy, can he help me?”

“Of course. That would be nice. I’ll go find your pajamas while you wash your face and hands.”

The three of them left the family and climbed the stairs. “I can see why Joey might be spoiled a little. They’re very loving,” Jeff said.

“I don’t think you can have too much loving. When we lived in Arkansas, there was only me and Joey, and Mrs. Button, who baby-sat him. We’ve really enjoyed having family here.”

“I know what you mean. I haven’t had any family since my uncle died. At least none that I knew of.”

Rebecca refused to say anything else about their situation. Joey and his dad took a long time in the bathroom. Rebecca handed in the clean pajamas. Then she told them she was going down to get Joey’s dinner.

When she came back up with the tray, Joey was in bed and Jeff was reading him one of his favorite books. She waited until Jeff finished the book. Then she asked him to pile up the pillows so Joey could eat. They both teased him into eating most of his dinner.

Rebecca gave him two children's Tylenol tablets and watched his eyelids grow heavy. She kissed him good-night and encouraged him to hug his daddy's neck. Then she told him she would leave the light on in the bathroom and he should call her if he needed her.

"Maybe I should stay. I could sleep in the other bed in his room so he won't bother you."

"He won't bother me. I said that so he'd know he wasn't alone, but he's going to sleep well tonight."

"I feel like I'm not being very helpful."

"I told you I appreciated your going with us to the dentist. That helped a lot."

As they came down the stairs, Betty came running down the hall. "Mr. Jacobs! I forgot to tell you to call your office when you got back. Your fiancée was there waiting for you."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Jeff. You shouldn't have gone with us. I didn't know you had a date with Chelsea." Rebecca felt terribly guilty.

"Damn! May I use your phone?" he asked Betty.

"Of course you can. And Miz Vivian said to ask you to stay for dinner. It will be ready in five minutes."

"Let me see how things stand with Chelsea. Then I'll let you know."

Rebecca was going to excuse herself, but Jeff caught her hand and stopped her from leaving the library. "Chelsea? I hope Harriet told you about the emergency." He stood listening for several minutes. Rebecca looked away. "I see. Well, then, I'll see you Saturday morning. I'll pick you up at nine, okay?"

After a brief moment, he hung up the phone. "That's interesting," he said.

That remark got her attention. "What was interesting?"

"It appears Bill took Chelsea out to dinner and then took her home. Her only complaint is that he refused to kiss her good-night."

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