



The Manny

By Sara Bell

Chapter One

The process server came to let Tate know the Michaelsons were suing him -- again -- exactly ten minutes after he got the disconnect notices for the gas and electric at his shop. Since it was Tate's experience that bad news came in threes, he couldn't help wonder what fresh hell was in store for him next.

His answer came an hour after the process server left, when A.J. Boyd, his landlord and all-around pain in Tate's ass, strolled into the shop with a triumphant smile on his too-handsome-not-to-have-had-some-work-done face.

"You're late on the rent." A.J. was practically bouncing on the balls of his Italian-leather clad feet.

Tate swallowed. He had exactly forty dollars in his checking account, his credit cards were maxed out, and he had yet to notify his lawyer of this newest development with the Michaelsons. "I'm not even a month behind yet." Close enough. Twenty-eight days, but still... "Look, I'm good for it. I've got three bikes as good as sold and another guy who's waiting on financing. As soon as the money comes in--"

"I'm filing ejection proceedings first thing tomorrow," A.J. said cheerfully. "No hard feelings."

Tate felt like he was drifting in the middle of the Atlantic in a leaky washtub. No matter the bad shit that had happened to him in the past two years, he'd always had his shop to fall back on. His former landlord, Red Hanks, had been a mentor to Tate, teaching him the ins-and-outs of the bike building trade, selling him the business, and renting him the building. They'd been more than business associates; they'd been friends up until a year and a half ago when Red had a massive heart attack walking through his own living room on his way to the Sunday dinner table. Red's wife hadn't wanted the responsibility of paying taxes, keeping up codes, etc., and so she'd decided to sell the building Road Hog Custom Cycles was housed in. She'd offered it to Tate first, of course, but thanks to the Michaelsons, he couldn't finance a stick a Juicy Fruit, much less a commercial property in Chicago. Enter A.J., who'd snagged the building from Red's widow for a song and had proceeded to make Tate's life hell ever since.

"You can't do this," Tate said. "I have rights."

"You and Red didn't have a lease, which means you and I don't have a lease." A.J. looked at him with something akin to pity in those emotionless blue eyes of his. "You're month to month, buddy. I don't have to have a reason to want you out. I--" From the pocket of A.J.'s black suit coat, his cell

phone chirped. He held up one slender finger as he answered. "Hold that thought."

A.J. walked to the far corner of the main garage space to take his call. With his white-blond hair and sun-kissed skin, A.J. looked more like a California surfer god than a real estate mogul, but Tate supposed everybody had their talents. Too bad one of A.J.'s chief accomplishments was adding to Tate's mile-long list of woes.

"Yes. No, I understand," A.J. was saying into the phone Tate couldn't help but notice he was holding in a death grip. "No, I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Right. Goodbye." He killed the connection and looked at Tate, all the color gone from his cheeks. "I have to go. Remember what I said." All the warmth had drained from him along with the color. "I want you out."

Tate watched him go, wondering which of them was the more miserable bastard.

A.J. wasn't sure how he made it from Tate's ratty-ass shop to the Loop. He drove on autopilot, the same two words thumping over and over through his brain like the chorus of a gruesome song he had stuck in his head but couldn't stop singing.

Cindy's dead. Cindy's dead. Cindy's dead.

Somehow he arrived at Madison Street in one piece. Long before he was ready, he was twelve floors up, standing in the posh law offices of Story, Stone, and Turner and being shown into a cushy conference room by a grandmotherly receptionist who gave him a sympathetic smile and a hot cup of coffee.

The coffee he took. The smile she could keep.

Lon Story, Cindy's lawyer, joined A.J. in the conference room five minutes and forty-three seconds -- according to A.J.'s watch -- after the receptionist left him there. Story was a walking broomstick, reminding A.J. of Ichabod Crane from *Sleepy Hollow*. He was kind as he informed A.J. Cindy had been dead for nearly a week, which only made A.J. angrier.

"You didn't know," Story said with a perception that probably made him deadly in a courtroom.

A.J shook his head. "We lost touch after..." What could he say? *After she dumped my ass for no good reason, shattered my heart into goo, and left me as so much road kill on the highway of life.* He sipped his coffee, hoping the bitter liquid would wet his mouth. "How did she die?" The last word burned coming out.

"Breast cancer." Story sat down at the head of the conference table. "A particularly virulent form. From what

I understand the doctors believe she probably had a family history of it."

A.J. shrugged. Cindy was a foster child, put into the system at birth when her crack whore mother walked out of the hospital the night Cindy was born without Cindy in tow. God only knew who her daddy was.

If Story knew about Cindy's past, he didn't comment on it. Instead, he said, "I'm sure you know Cynthia was a wealthy woman."

A.J. came close to laughing. *Know?* His bank account was still bleeding from the seven figure divorce settlement Cindy had wrung out of him. He blinked as Story's meaning became clear. "You couldn't possibly have brought me here to talk about my ex-wife's will. No way would she leave me anything."

"I'm afraid that's where you're wrong," Story said. For the first time, A.J. realized how uncomfortable the man looked. Story cracked his knuckles, the sound sharp and rusty in the quiet room. "Are you aware Cynthia recently gave birth?"

"No." A.J. surprised himself by squeezing the word past the vise clamping his throat. He and Cindy had tried for years to have children -- fertility drugs, artificial insemination, in vitro -- but nothing they did worked. She'd gotten pregnant a couple of times, but both pregnancies had ended in miscarriages. Cindy had gone into deep, spiraling

depressions A.J. feared she'd never come out of. He finally called a halt to the endless parade of pregnancy schemes when the toll on their marriage -- and Cindy's mental health -- seemed too high a price even for his wife's happiness. A.J. had tried his best to get Cindy to consider adoption but she wouldn't hear of it. As far as she was concerned, not giving birth made her less of a woman somehow.

He wasn't sure whether to be happy that Cindy had finally achieved her dream of becoming a mother or weep for the sadness of not being a part of it all when ultimately that dream had probably been what cost him his wife, Cindy's weak-ass excuse for ending their marriage be damned.

"A little girl, barely six weeks old," Story said. "Cynthia's doctor discovered the cancer during a routine examination just after the start of her second trimester, or so she told me. Cynthia, of course, refused any treatments that would have harmed the baby."

"Of course." A.J. had no doubt his expression was as bitter as his words. "Not to be an ass, but you still haven't told me why I'm here." A.J. wanted to get out of this place, to go somewhere and do something -- scream, run, puke -- anything but sit here discussing a woman who'd been dead to him for three years, already.

"Right. Cynthia came to see me as soon as she found out she was terminal. Asked me to write up a will leaving you everything." Story looked down at his hands for a quick

second before locking eyes with A.J. "I do mean *everything*."

A.J.'s heart started to do an odd, sideways thump, like maybe it was no longer comfortable staying inside his chest. "You can't be talking about the kid."

"Her name is Madeline," Story said in the same calm, inflectionless voice. "She's been staying with a friend of Cynthia's since Cynthia passed." He stretched a sympathetic hand across the table, stopping short of actually touching A.J. "I know this must be a shock, but--"

"Look, I--" A.J. wondered if this was Cindy's idea of a sick joke, if she was hiding behind a fake wall somewhere in the office, waiting to jump out and tell him he was on one of those hidden camera shows. "I haven't had so much as a phone call from Cindy since the day she kicked me out of my own house." A house he'd paid for. "Expecting me to take care of her kid is out there, even for Cindy." A.J. felt like he should be humming the theme song from the *Twilight Zone* or something. "My ex-wife obviously didn't have this kid by herself. The guy who knocked her up should be the one watching out for the...the baby. Who the hell is he, anyway?"

"Therein lies the sticky part." Story tugged at his collar. "You are."

Chapter Two

"How could something like this happen?" Nana pressed a cookie into one of A.J.'s hands and a cup of hot chocolate into the other. If he hadn't been shaking like a San Francisco after-shock, he might've smiled. Comfort food. His grandmother's cure-all.

A.J. set down his cup and held his cookie in a grip that threatened to crumble it. He looked around his grandparents' old farmhouse table at the faces of his family: his mom, Emily; his grandparents, Nana and Papa; his sister, Jessica; his brother-in-law, Eli; and his seven-year-old nephew, Max.

"You know those treatments Cindy and I went through?" A.J. chose his words carefully in deference to Max. "During the divorce depositions Cindy swore all the embryos had been used up during IVF." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Apparently, she lied."

A.J.'s mother looked at him with wide, slightly unfocused eyes. "Surely that's some sort of crime."

"Cindy didn't care about that. All she wanted was a baby." A.J. let out a breath that did nothing to loosen the tightness in his chest. "My baby, apparently."

"What are you going to do?" Papa's voice was deep, rich, and soothing, a grandpa voice that reminded A.J. of

Saturday trips to Navy Pier, piggyback rides, and bedtime stories.

"I--" He glanced across the table at Max who was soaking in his every word like a sponge. "Hey, Superman, come here for a minute."

Max hopped out of the chair and was around the table in two flat seconds. He scrambled into A.J.'s lap for a hug.

A.J. held him tight. He'd always figured Max was the closest he'd ever come to having a kid of his own, and he couldn't love the little rugrat any more than if Max were his son. A.J. kissed the top of his head and set Max on his feet. "Why don't you go into the den and play with that firehouse set I got you? We're talking boring old grown up talk in here." When Max started to protest A.J. said, "I'll make it worth your while. Say, a new truck to add to your set?"

"Deal." Max took off like a bat out of heck for the den.

"You're spoiling him," Eli said with a grin.

"I know exactly how to handle your kid," A.J. said. "It's my own I don't know what to do with." This couldn't be happening. Even the words sounded wrong. He couldn't be somebody's father.

"What happens if you refuse to take her?" Nana said. "I'm assuming you can do that, since Cindy lied to you and all."

"Sure." Story had mentioned the possibility himself. Because of Cindy's actions, A.J. had no legal obligation to this child. But as for the baby... "The little girl, Madeline, she wouldn't be eligible for adoption until all the legal mess is cleared up. She'd go into foster care."

The minute he said the word, everyone around the table shuddered. Then they all looked at him with pity. Everyone except Jessica. She was looking at him with stone cold rage.

A.J. was taken aback. "What? What did I say?"

"Adoption?" Jessica's voice rose. "Foster care? Are you out of your ever-loving mind?"

"Jessie." Eli put his hand on her arm but it didn't slow her down for a second.

"How could you even consider doing that to your own flesh and blood, especially after what Dad put you through?"

Having her mention his private shame out loud, even if they were probably all thinking it, was like a slap to A.J.'s face. "I'm the victim here."

"You're *a* victim, maybe, but you're not *the* victim. *The* victim is a six-week-old baby whose mother was a selfish bitch and whose father is a spineless weenie who refuses to

man up and do the right thing." Jessica pointed her finger in his face. "If you need help, you got it, but you turn your back on this kid, so help me Aaron Joseph, you'll no longer have a sister or a nephew." She snatched her husband's arm and yanked him out of his chair. "Eli, get Max. We're leaving."

After his sister was gone, A.J. stared at her chair with open amazement. "I didn't say I was going to do it. Nana asked me what my options were and I...my God, am I that big a bastard?"

Papa got up, came around to A.J.'s chair, and clapped a beefy hand on his shoulder. "Since Cindy left you, yes."

"Gee, Papa, don't sugarcoat it."

"Part of loving someone is telling them when they're being an ass, honey." His mother reached across the table and took his hand. "You're not alone in this. Jessica was right when she said we would help. No pressure, but we're counting on you to do the right thing here."

If that was his mother's idea of no pressure, A.J. was even more screwed than before.

"I'm scared to ask, but how goes it?" Naomi straddled the bike Tate had just pulled into the garage, her hands

stretched up on the ape hangers like she was ready to take it for a test run.

"You know those four nibbles I told you about last week?" When she nodded, Tate said, "Three of those turned into full-blown bites. With those three sales I made enough to pay up the gas and electric, pay the past due rent at my apartment, and get my lawyer started on the Michaelsons' latest 'Destroy Tate Fuller' campaign."

Naomi tapped her fingers across the bike's cherry-red gas tank. "What about the rent on this place?" When Tate didn't answer right away, she said, "You know the family can--"

"Hell, no." To soften his words he walked across the garage and kissed the top of her head. "I'm not going to let you guys bail me out. This is my mess and I'll fix it." He mussed her hair, the way he'd done when she was a pesky kid, following her big brother around, bugging the piss out of him. He walked back across the shop, to the neat display of tools above his workbench. "I actually have enough to pay this month's rent, but I don't think it's going to matter to my landlord, Dickhead Supreme. I can't even get the bastard on the phone. Been trying for a week." His fingers knotted around a crescent wrench. "I think he's screening his calls."

"You know...even if the SOB does evict you, your customers will follow you," Naomi said softly. "This is just

a building, honey. You can find another one, probably in better shape."

Tate turned back to face her. "It won't be the same." He sighed. "If I lose this wrongful death suit..." His heart lurched, the word "death" damned hard to say, even after two years. "If I lose, I won't have anything left to open a shop with."

"No jury in the world would side with those people, not after--"

Tate cut her off with a slash of his hand, unable to hear it. Some wounds never closed, they just lay open and oozed.

"I'm sorry." Naomi climbed off the bike and came to stand beside him, leaning against his side, the two of them fitting together like puzzle pieces even though he was the oldest, she was the youngest, and he was nearly a foot taller. "On a brighter note, Thanksgiving."

Tate laughed, the sound dusty from disuse. "How is that a brighter note?"

"Mom wants to know if you're bringing a date."

"And unleash The Brood on some poor guy?" Tate shivered. He was the oldest of nine kids. Add in various spouses, nieces, nephews, uncles, aunts, cousins and the

like, and the Fuller family was hell on wheels. "Tell Mom I'll be attending solo if I can."

Naomi pulled back to give him The Eye. "What do you mean, 'If you can?'"

Tate shrugged. "Even if by some miracle Boyd doesn't throw me out of here, my legal bills will be astronomical. I've got to get a second job."

"You work twelve hours a day as it is."

"Guess it'll have to be a night job."

Naomi's big brown eyes threatened to overflow. "Oh, Tate."

"Don't you dare." He tweaked her nose. "I'll make this work." Tate pulled her in for a hug. "Now get out of here before Brad sends out a search party for his better half."

Naomi left but not before making him promise to call her if he needed anything. He promised, even though they both knew it was a promise he wouldn't cash in. Tate had brought his troubles on himself. He wasn't going to funnel them onto his family.

He walked to his office, sank into his battered, duct-tape covered chair, and picked up today's copy of the *Sun-Times*. Going straight for the classifieds, he skimmed the

employment section. He circled a couple of ads -- one for an evening dishwasher at a Chinese restaurant, another for a night watchman at a factory complex that would guarantee him no sleep whatsoever -- and was about to call the first number when another add caught his eye.

Evening nanny needed for newborn. Competitive pay. Weekends may apply. Call 555-1437 to schedule an appointment.

Nanny. Now there's a job Tate knew. He'd practically raised his younger brothers and sisters, not to mention all the time he'd put in with his nieces and nephews. Granted, his long haired, six-foot, tattooed, gay-as-a-day-in-May self probably wasn't what the poster of the ad had in mind, but it never hurt to try. Before he could second, third, and fourth guess himself, Tate picked up the phone.

"She hates me," A.J. said into the phone over Madeline's wailing.

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm sure that's not true."

"Five days, Mom. She's cried for five days." Madeline had started crying the minute A.J. picked her up from the sitter's house and except for the brief, blessed moments when she slept, she'd cried ever since. A.J. hadn't been able to go to the office, hadn't been able to leave the house,

hadn't been able to do anything except go slowly and completely out of his mind.

"Honey, I can try to come if you need me," his mother said. "I would've been there already but you know your grandmother--"

"No. Don't leave Nana." The day he'd picked Madeline up, his grandmother had fallen and broken her left elbow. The doctors assured them she'd be okay, but at her age she needed rest and care. As bad as A.J. hated to admit it, Nana needed Emily more than he did. "Just take care of Nana. I...I put an ad in the paper for an evening nanny, somebody who can help me out at night so at least maybe I can get some sleep. My assistant's fielding the calls for me. She's supposed to be sending somebody over in a few minutes."

"What are you going to do with Madeline during working hours?"

A.J. settled Madeline into what he hoped would be a more comfortable position as she let out a particularly ear-splitting wail. "I'd planned to convert one of the empty offices into a nursery and take her with me, at least for a while. Sounds stupid, but I was hoping the two of us could bond."

"I think that's a lovely idea." His mother's voice went soft. "Why would you think it's stupid?"

"I don't know," A.J. said. *Because I took one look at this kid and fell head over heels while she can't even stand for me to hold her.* He was saved from having to say as much by a knock on the door. "That must be the nanny, Mom. I told my assistant to send her straight here." He rolled his eyes. "Hope this one's better than the last six I've interviewed. I wouldn't leave a dog with some of those people." Another knock, and Madeline screamed louder. "Hang on," A.J. yelled over his daughter. "Gotta go, Mom."

"Bye, honey. Let me know how it goes."

A.J. cut the call and shifted Madeline so she was on his shoulder. It did nothing to halt her crying but it made walking to the door easier. His condo -- which he'd considered spacious when he'd bought it -- was so cluttered with baby paraphernalia he was forced to navigate a delicate obstacle course to the door. He reached the knob just as the third knock sounded, making Madeline even angrier.

"For the love of God, I said I was coming." He flung the door open and directed an evil glare in Tate Fuller's arrogant face.

Chapter Three

"Fuck." A.J. said it but Tate thought that summed up his feelings rather nicely. So much for a second job as a nanny. If it weren't for the screaming baby on A.J.'s shoulder, Tate would've sworn the guy incapable of thawing out long enough to reproduce.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" A.J. said, moving the red-faced baby to his other shoulder.

"Unless you want 'fuck' to be that kid's first word, I suggest you stop saying it." Tate crossed his arms, his leather jacket too warm in the heat blasting from Tate's apartment despite the fact that it was November in Chicago. "I came here about the nanny job, but I can see that isn't going to happen." He watched the baby flail his arms and legs like he was in pain. "How long has he had colic?"

"She, and what the hell are you talking about?" A.J. narrowed his bloodshot eyes. "My daughter is perfect."

"Does *she* cry for more than three hours at a time for no reason that you can see?"

A.J. nodded like a Bobble head.

"Colic." Without waiting for an invite, Tate plucked the baby out of A.J.'s hands and strolled into the apartment. He

had fuck-all chance of a job, but this was about a baby's health and happiness. He couldn't turn his back on that.

"Now wait just a damn minute--" A.J. tried to grab the baby back but Tate wasn't budging.

"Her stomach hurts. She's crying because she's in pain. My baby sister went through it, and so did two of my nieces and one of my nephews." Tate put her on his shoulder and soothed her back. "I know, gorgeous," he crooned. "I know it hurts but we're going to fix it." He shrugged, one arm at a time, out of his jacket.

His words brought A.J. up short. "Madeline's sick?" He looked like he was about to dissolve into a full-on panic. "Should I get the car, take her to the hospital?"

Tate was halfway to feeling sorry for the guy until he remembered what a prick A.J. was. He shook his head. "We can fix this here. Go throw a towel in the dryer, and when you're done, fix Miss Madeline a warm bath. While you're at it, turn the heat down. It's like a blast furnace in here. She's probably roasting, poor kid."

A.J. started to go, then turned back to Tate with suspicious eyes. "How do I know I can trust you?"

Tate raised one brow. "You want your baby to quit crying or not?"

This time, A.J. went.

A.J. wasn't sure he still believed in miracles, but the quiet baby draped over Tate's corded forearm getting her back rubbed had to be a product of divine intervention. After A.J. bathed her, fastened her into a fresh diaper and a pair of pink jammies, Tate had taken the towel from the dryer, pressed it against Madeline's belly, eased her into her present position, and proceeded to massage her back until she was limp and happy.

A.J. wasn't sure whether to hug the man or throw hundred dollar bills at his feet.

"How did you do that?"

Tate smiled, his hand rubbing tiny circles on Madeline's back. "I told you, I'm an old hand at this." Once Madeline was totally soothed, he said, "Hand me a blanket, would you?"

A.J. fetched the man a blanket so fast he was surprised he didn't trip over his own shoes.

"You ever swaddled a baby before?"

"No," A.J. said. "Does it hurt?"

Tate's lips twitched. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"I guess so."

"Where's Madeline's mother?"

It was a reasonable question, but not one A.J. could answer without feeling like someone had plunged a sword into his stomach. "I'm a single parent."

"Gotcha." Tate pointed to the empty half of the couch. "Spread the blanket out like a diamond, okay?"

A.J. nodded and started spreading. Once the blanket was prepared to Tate's satisfaction, Tate said, "This is your second lesson in Baby 101: swaddling." A.J. watched with rapt fascination as Tate lay Madeline in the center of the blanket and then snugged it over her in a complicated series of folds until she resembled a pink-cheeked baby burrito.

"Won't she be uncomfortable, all unable to move her arms and legs like that?"

"Nope." Tate scooped Madeline into his arms. "Just the opposite. Swaddling reminds babies of being in the womb. Gives them a feeling of security, especially when they're fussy. See?"

A.J. watched with naked astonishment as Madeline's eyes got heavy and she drifted toward sleep.

Tate passed the bundle o' baby into A.J.'s arms. "Don't keep it so hot in here from now on. Tomorrow you might want to see about getting Madeline some pro-biotic drops to mix in with her formula. Works wonders for some colicky babies." Tate snatched his jacket off the couch. "Well, take care."

"Wait." Fear not unlike what he imagined one would feel when dropped into a nest of hissing rattlers wound its way through A.J.'s system. "You're leaving?"

"Why not?" Tate shrugged. "I've been trying to reach you for a week to tell you I have your rent money but you wouldn't take my calls. I figure that means you're going through with the eviction, right?"

"Yes, but it's not what you think." A.J. couldn't explain why he wanted Tate's building, not in a way Tate would understand or care about.

"Right. Don't worry, Chief, I've got your number." Tate headed for the door.

"You can't just leave me like this." The baby fretted in her sleep, escalating A.J.'s terror tenfold. "Please. I'll... I'll give you three months."

Tate turned back to study him, jacket slung over his shoulder like a motorcycle god. It wasn't that A.J. had never noticed how drop-dead studly the guy was before,

with all that long, wavy black hair and those piercing brown eyes. It was more that he'd tried not to.

"Give me a one year lease on the shop and we'll talk about it." Tate crossed his arms, a posture that showed every muscle from his stomach up to perfection.

"Six months," A.J. said, proud that his voice didn't give away the fact that he was lusting after a guy he could hardly stand in his own freaking living room. "I'll give you a six-month written lease and we'll talk about renewal when the time is up." Surely six months would be enough time for him to convince Tate that piece of shit garage of his should be razed to ground.

"Deal." Tate eyed him with caution. "And in return you want..."

"To hire you as Madeline's nanny." Just the prospect of not having to go it alone anymore filled A.J. with relief, but he'd learned a long time ago to live by the old axiom *trust but verify*. "Providing you pass a background check, of course."

One corner of Tate's mouth lifted. "Of course."

"It's a live-in position, nights and some weekends," A.J. said. "Will that be a problem?"

"The live-in part's fine by me," Tate's stare was intense and unwavering, "but if you're serious about the background check, there's something you need to know before I waste either of our time."

A.J.'s heart sank. Here it came, that dropping other shoe, the reason his one shot at bonding with the daughter he was rapidly coming to adore was about to go up in flames.

"I'm gay," Tate said with all the finesse of a sumo wrestler.

A.J. blinked. "That's it. You're gay?"

"Yep. Got my membership card in my pocket if you need to see it."

A.J. was so relieved he jostled Madeline. She let out an outraged howl.

"Sorry. Sorry." A.J. rocked and petted her until she was soothed. Once she settled back down he looked at Tate. "I could care less about who you sleep with as long as you aren't fooling around in front of the baby."

Tate snorted. "That won't be a problem, trust me."

A.J. told himself it was nothing more than polite curiosity that made him ask, "So, you don't have some jealous boyfriend who's going to be pounding on my door, wondering why you're living with another guy?"

"Is this a standard part of the interview or a bad game of Twenty Q?" Tate uncrossed his arms and started to put on his jacket.

A.J. eased Madeline into the cradle of his right arm and held up his left hand. "Sorry. Didn't mean to hit a nerve. Look...I need you, and damned if I'm too proud to admit it." Pride required more than two hours worth of sleep per day. "I'm willing to pay top dollar, and I'll double your first week's salary if you'll crash on the couch tonight so I at least have a shot at sleeping more than fifteen minutes at a stretch."

Tate hesitated. "What's your idea of top dollar?"

"Nine-fifty a week plus paid holidays and full insurance benefits." A.J. hadn't even thought about insurance up until then but it wasn't like he couldn't afford it. At this point he'd trade Tate his car for a good night's sleep.

After a long, tense minute, Tate's answer was, "Show me where to hang my jacket."

A.J.'s first thought when he woke up the next morning was *the sun is shining*. His next thought was *Oh my God, the sun is shining; what's happened to my baby?* He raced out of the bedroom in nothing but his boxers. Madeline hadn't

slept more than two hours at a time since she'd been with him. All sorts of terrible scenarios winged through his head, his thoughts racing as fast as his heart.

A.J. stopped dead in the kitchen, trying to catch his breath as he took in a bare-chested Tate sitting at the breakfast bar, giving Madeline her bottle. A slender brunette A.J. had never seen before stood by Tate's side, admiring the baby.

"Morning," Tate said with a grin. "You sleep well?"

"Madeline didn't wake me up." A.J. understood he was standing in nothing but his underwear in front of a total stranger, but he just couldn't get past that fact.

Tate rolled his eyes. "I thought that was the whole idea of hiring me."

The brunette smacked Tate's bare arm. "Don't be insensitive." She smiled at A.J. "The first time my oldest slept through the night it scared me out of my wits. All I could think is that he'd stopped breathing or something. I'm Deanna, by the way. Tate's sister. I stopped by to bring this big goober a clean shirt."

"A.J. Boyd. Nice to meet you." Really feeling naked now, A.J. said, "If you'll excuse me..." He backed as gracefully down the hall as he could for a guy who was wearing silk SpongeBob boxer shorts.

When he came back after throwing on a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved button down, Deanna was gone. "Your sister didn't have to leave on my account." A.J. sniffed the air. "Is that coffee I smell?"

"Hope you don't mind." Tate said. "I started breakfast. There's eggs warming on the back of the stove and muffins in the oven."

Mind? A.J.'s stomach wanted to throw the man a party.

"No. I want you to make yourself at home."

"Thanks, but I don't want to be pushy. I wouldn't have invited Deanna without asking like that but Madeline spit up all over my shirt, and I need to open the garage soon. I was afraid I wouldn't have time to run home and change." Tate smiled as Madeline finished the last of her formula with a soft sigh. He set the bottle on the counter, threw a dishtowel over his shoulder, put Madeline into position, and burped her like a champ.

A.J. was impressed. "I have a heck of a time getting her to burp."

"Probably because you're afraid you're going to hurt her so you don't pat her hard enough." Tate kissed the downy white fuzz covering the baby's head. "I hope it's okay that I had Deanna stop and get some of those pro-biotic drops I told you about. I put some in Madeline's morning formula."

"No. I mean. That's great. Thank you." A.J. barely got the words out before Tate was handing Madeline over to him. Once again, panic set in. "Wait. You're leaving?"

"You said you'd pay me nineteen hundred my first week if I'd crash on your couch last night." Tate walked into the living room, where a clean T-shirt lay across the back of one of A.J.'s ultra-modern side chairs. "I did it. That post-modernist, whatever-you-want-to-call-it, high design piece of crap creation you call a sofa about killed my back, but I did it." He pulled the shirt over his head, giving A.J. no choice but to notice the way Tate's stomach muscles rippled with every move he made. "Your daughter is clean, fed, and happy as far as I can see." He came back across the room to let Madeline wrap her tiny fingers around his. "Now unless you give me a really good reason why I can't, I'm going to work."

A.J. felt like a total tool. Here he was, a guy who'd decimated corporate boards and owned a decent-sized piece of the grand city of Chicago. The same guy with a reputation as a real estate shark was completely and totally undone by his own baby.

Well, so be it.

"What if she starts crying again?"

At first he thought Tate was going to laugh at him. God knows he'd treated the man badly enough that Tate was due

his revenge. Instead, Tate whipped out his wallet and removed a battered business card for Road Hog Custom Cycles.

"I figure you already have the garage's number, but my cell's on here, too, in case I'm with a customer." He pressed the card into A.J.'s free hand, his touch a warm comfort. "You remember how I showed you to swaddle her?"

A.J. thought back through the process. "I remember."

"Good. Try that if she's fussy and nothing else works. After I close the garage, I'll swing by my place, pick up some clothes and be back here, say around seven?"

"Okay." A.J. watched Tate go, praying seven came really, really fast.

Tate's morning went well considering he'd spent the night on the couch from hell. Madeline was a sweet little thing, and once her stomach had settled, she'd slept in three hour increments, only waking twice during the night for her feedings. Tate came to work in a good mood, and he and Gordy Brown -- the part-timer he'd just barely managed to hang onto -- were well into the assembly of the frame for Tate's latest creation when Tate's day took a giant right turn into Crapsville.

Marv and Francis Michaelson came into his garage,
wearing the same look they wore every time they made
ready to rip his life apart.

Chapter Four

Tate gave the Michaelsons the same once-over he gave them every time he saw them, searching for some glimpse of the laughing, big-hearted man he'd loved so much in the sterile, emotionless androids who'd raised him.

Not for the first time, Tate wondered if maybe Christian had been switched at birth with the Michaelsons' real kid.

Tate wiped his grimy hands on a shop rag. "What are you doing here?" *Besides fucking up what's left of my life.*

"We came to congratulate you on your new job," Francis said in a voice that could shatter glass. "Ironically you should be taking care of another man's child after you killed ours."

Tate's blood ran cold. He didn't know how they'd found out about A.J., but it was obvious by their smug expressions they'd already talked to him.

"Don't worry," Marv said with eyes the same color as Christian's but lacking all the warmth. "We told him all about you."

Francis put a skeletal hand on her husband's elbow. "I wouldn't bother going back there tonight, if I were you."

Gordy came up behind Tate. "Want me to call the police?"

Tate shook his head. He'd learned a long time ago nobody could help him where these two were concerned. He looked at the banes of his existence. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"You know why." Francis took a step toward him, a wild light in her eyes. "If I can make you feel even a fraction of my pain, everything we're doing now is worth it."

Pain? She wanted pain? Tate would've laughed if it hadn't been so fucking sad. Now he felt pain. Two years ago, when he'd held Christian's hand while the heart monitor went from a steady beep to a shrill whistle, that hadn't been pain.

That was agony.

Tate wet his lips. "Serving me with legal papers is one thing. Harassing me at work is another."

"You beat the justice system once already." Marv stepped in beside his wife, his thick jowls reminding Tate of an English bulldog. "We've decided to hedge our bets."

Tate was about to tell him where he could stick those bets when the shop door burst open and A.J. rushed in. At least, he tried to. He seemed to be having a hard time juggling both the door and the baby carrier he was holding like he was terrified of dropping it.

Gordy rushed across the shop to help A.J. with the door. Tate would've been the one to help A.J., but he'd learned a long time ago never to take his eyes off the Michaelsons.

"Thanks," A.J. said to Gordy. He and Madeline -- at least, Tate figured Madeline had to be under that pile of blankets -- made their way to Tate's side. "Is there a problem here?" A.J. said.

"No." Tate kept a steady gaze on Marv and Francis. "Madeline okay?"

"Yeah. Or she was until these two barged into my house and woke her up from her nap." A.J. shoved the car seat into Tate's hands. "Why don't you check on her for me?"

"A.J.--"

"Go ahead, Tate." This was the A.J. Boyd Tate knew best: A.J. the A-Hole, the business tycoon who'd instilled fear in the hearts of far better creatures than the Michaelsons.

Tate took Madeline's carrier over to his shop sink, washing his hands thoroughly before unwrapping the carrier and lifting her out. It might've been his imagination -- or gas -- but it looked like she smiled at him.

"I thought," A.J. said in a bored tone, "I told the two of you to stay off my property."

"We left your house," Francis sniffed. "Tate's garage is a public building."

"Which I own." A.J. glanced back at Tate, who was settling Madeline into the crook of his arm. "Do you want them here?"

"Fu--" Tate glanced down at the baby. "Um, no."

"I can get a protective order if I need to," A.J. told the Michaelsons in what Tate figured was his boardroom voice.

"No. We're going." Marv pointed a finger at Tate. "We aren't finished."

"We never are." Tate watched them go, wondering if this was how Atlas had felt, holding up the heavens with his bare hands. Some days he felt like his burdens would eventually get so heavy he'd collapse in on himself.

"You okay?" A.J. took Madeline out of Tate's arms, then did a visual inspection for damages. Of Tate, not Madeline.

"Yeah." Tate pushed his hair out of his eyes, a few of the long strands having escaped the nape-of-the-neck ponytail he wore when he was working. "Guess they gave you an earful, huh?"

Instead of answering directly, A.J. turned to Gordy. "Can you run this place, close up this afternoon?"

Gordy hitched his shoulder. "Done it before."

Tate shook his head. "I've got work to do." He already knew A.J. was going to fire him. Might as well happen here. "Look, I know you don't want me around your kid anymore. I get it. I--"

"You don't know Jack," A.J. said with an even mixture of acid and solid steel. "Now shut up and follow me to my place."

A.J. had a short list of people he'd felt protective of in his lifetime. His mother, his sister and Max, his grandparents -- Joey Smithson, his first boyfriend and Shelly Hendrix, his first girlfriend -- Cindy, and now Madeline. The fact that Tate Fuller was quickly earning himself a spot on A.J.'s "People You Fuck with at Your Own Peril" list probably should've worried him, but right now he had bigger things to worry about, like erasing the abject misery from Tate's face.

Madeline had fallen asleep during the ride back home, so A.J. left her in the carrier but parked her at his feet where he could see her.

Tate gave his first smile since they walked through the door. It was a weak one, but A.J. would take it. "You know

she's not going to disappear if you quit looking at her, right?"

"I know. I mean, I have a seven-year-old nephew who I'm crazy about it, but it's different, you know?" He had a feeling Tate got it.

Tate nodded. "Nieces and nephews you have a blast with, but at the end of the day you send them home."

"Right." A.J. looked down at what had to be the most beautiful face he'd ever seen. "She's mine to keep. To protect." He'd never realized how terrifying a place the world was until he held Madeline that first time and realized he was all that stood between her and all the bad stuff he saw on the news. Forcing himself not to have a total OCD moment, A.J. looked at Tate. "Tell me about the Michaelsons."

"Why?" Tate sat down with force enough to rattle the chair's frame. "I'm sure they told you plenty."

"I didn't get where I am without learning to look at all sides of a deal." A.J. rose from the couch, went to the kitchen, and came back with a beer, which he pressed into Tate's hand. "Now, tell me."

Tate twisted off the cap and took three swallows before he said, "I dated their son, he died, and they hate me."

"Christian, the Michaelsons' only child."

Tate had another swig. "Guess they did give you a talking to."

"I think you know what they told me." And A.J. was pretty sure ninety-percent of what he'd heard was bullshit. "Now are you going to tell me or am I going to have to ask the guy who's doing your background check to dig a little deeper? It'll come out of your first week's pay if I do," he added cheerfully.

"Bastard," Tate said without malice. He sighed, his only real sign of surrender. "Christian and I met four years ago. He and some of his rich kid friends came into my shop, looking at bikes."

"He was younger than you?"

"Six years. Twenty-three to my twenty-nine." Tate circled the rim of the beer bottle with his index finger. "The minute I saw him..." Tate shook his head. "The chemistry between us, it was crazy."

A.J. got it. It was the same with him when he was into somebody, be they male or female. Had been since he was a teenager. It was how he'd finally realized he was bi and not simply gay or straight. Hadn't made it any easier to accept himself, but at least he was at a good place with it now. And if he was feeling some of those same chemically

induced sparks whenever he was within twenty feet of Tate Fuller... well, he'd deal with that later.

Like never.

"I'll spare you the details," Tate continued, "but things got hot and heavy between me and Christian pretty fast." His lips circled in distaste. "The Michaelsons were not amused."

"They didn't like that Christian was gay?" A.J. thanked God he had a good mom. Almost made up for having the father from hell.

"On the contrary: they liked it too much." Tate leaned forward, beer bottle cradled in his hands. "The Michaelson are big in the society/charity/anything-that-gets-them-attention scene. Having a gay son was like a gift from the tree-hugging gods."

"Ah," A.J. said. "Lots of PFLAG meetings on Francis Michaelson's agenda."

"Oh yeah." Tate shuddered. "You should've seen her marching at her first Pride parade. You haven't lived until you've seen a society matron hugging a man wearing a dog collar and assless chaps."

"I'll pass." A.J. figured it would be a while before he got that picture out of his head as it was. "So, if they were okay with Christian being gay, what was the problem?"

"Me. The Michaelsons might be the poster children for championing the disenfranchised, but that didn't mean they wanted their only child dating one of the blue-collared masses." Tate leaned back in his chair, eyes heavy, but whether with pain or remembrance, A.J. couldn't tell. "The Michaelsons saw Christian settling down with a nice doctor or lawyer, somebody who could wipe out AIDS or free the impoverished from adversity," Tate said with theatrical flair. He shook his head. "When he moved in with a motorcycle mechanic from a working-class family, it was one hell of a blow."

"Bike builder," A.J. corrected. When Tate looked at him, he said, "You're more than a mechanic, and you know it."

"To the Michaelsons, that's semantics. They wanted nothing to do with me, and very little to do with Christian in the two years we were together." Tate's lips lifted into a tight smile. "Not that it mattered to him. He and I were happy together. That's all Christian cared about."

Christian sounded like a good man. Unfortunately, A.J. had heard enough from the Michaelsons to know this story didn't have a happy ending. "Tell me the rest of it, Tate."

"Christian never did get around to buying that bike from me, the one he and his friends had come in looking for that first day we met. Instead, I decided to build him one as a gift. It was hell keeping it a secret, but I pulled it off. Gave it to him on our second anniversary." Tate's words were uneven and raw. "Worst mistake of my life. He was... he was riding on a rain slick road. Lost control and--" He didn't finish, but A.J. didn't need him to.

He'd gotten that part from the Michaelsons.

"Tell me about the lawsuit." A.J. knew he was poking an open wound but he had to know what he was dealing with.

"Lawsuits, you mean." Tate sounded more tired than angry, now. "The first time the Michaelsons sued me was right after Christian died. They claimed a flaw in the design of the bike caused the accident."

A.J. could only imagine how an accusation like that -- much less a trial -- would've decimated Tate. "What happened?"

"The jury found in my favor, but the cost of defending myself..." Tate made a rolling motion with the hand holding the beer bottle. "The Michaelsons set out to ruin me, and they did, win or lose. They didn't have to pay my legal costs after I won because the judge felt they'd suffered enough."

A.J. usually had a fair amount of respect for the American justice system. Today, not so much. "And the other lawsuit?"

"They filed that one last week." Tate killed the rest of his beer. "Wrongful death."

"Come again?"

"Christian--" Tate choked and it was a minute before he could speak. "Christian didn't die at the scene. He had massive head injuries, but he was alive when the ambulance arrived. He... he was in a coma for six days. I had power of attorney -- we both did, for each other -- so when the doctors told me he was brain dead..."

"You made the decision to take him off life support." A.J. felt like he was being tortured by degrees, watching Tate relive his private Hades.

Tate managed a stiff nod. "Christian and I talked about it the day we signed our partnership papers. I knew he didn't want to spend the rest of his life, hooked to a machine with no hope of recovery." He let out his breath. "The Michaelsons didn't see it that way. They fought me, tried to say I was after Christian's life insurance policy."

A hot ball of anger stirred in A.J.'s gut. "Is that what this latest lawsuit is about?"

"Part of it. They're claiming I pulled the plug to get my hands on Christian's burial plan." Tate looked A.J. in the eye. "All five thousand dollars of it."

"Jesus Christ."

"Nice people, the Michaelsons." Tate pushed himself out of the chair. "Look... I should've told you about this before you hired me. If you want to let me go, I understa--"

"Madeline's mother left me, then used frozen embryos she'd told me had been destroyed to get pregnant with my baby, and never told me." A.J. figured it wasn't much as segues went, but at least it shut Tate up.

Tate sank back into his chair. "Shit."

"It gets better," A.J. said. "I made the mistake of telling Cindy I was bisexual. I figured we were married, so there shouldn't be anything I couldn't trust her with, right?"

Tate nodded woodenly.

"I was one hundred percent faithful to my wife. Never so much as held hands with another person -- male or female - - from the day I met Cindy until the day she threw me out of her life." A.J. remembered the all consuming need he'd had for Cindy, how she'd been the only one in his orbit, how he'd known it would be that way the rest of his life. "I thought it would be just me and her for the long haul." He

couldn't stop the bitterness that crept into his voice. "When she left me, she said it was because she figured eventually a woman wouldn't be enough to keep me satisfied. Said she was leaving me before I had the chance to cheat on her with some man." He hated that it still hurt him after all this time.

"That is so much bullsh--" Tate glanced at Madeline's sleeping face. "Just bull."

"I agree, but Cindy stuck to her guns." A.J. couldn't believe how easy it was to tell Tate these things. He'd hardly talked about Cindy with his family. "I never heard from her again, not after she ended our marriage. The divorce was handled through our lawyers. Then last week, I got a phone call telling me Cindy was dead, oh, and congratulations, I'm a father."

A.J. watched as Tate got it. "The phone call you took while you were at my garage."

"Yeah, only I didn't know all of it then or I probably would've killed myself trying to make it downtown." A.J. reached down to straighten Madeline's blanket. "You aren't the only one with a messed up story to tell."

"If this is a contest to see which of us has been more traumatized," Tate leaned back in the chair, "I'm afraid you'll have to bring in an independent judge. I'm a little biased at the moment."

"No contest necessary," A.J. said. "I'm willing to let you take the lead for a while. Look, I know you've had one hell of a day and it's not even noon yet, but I think you realize by now I have no intention of firing you."

Tate eyed him warily. "And?"

"And, since this is a live-in position and you hate my couch, we'll need to get you moved into the guest room, which means furniture shopping."

"You have a guestroom with no furniture in it?" Tate might as well have said, *What planet are you from?*

"I was planning on having you start next week, if you must know." A.J. gave him his best sheepish smile. "What can I say? Desperate times call for desperate measures." He chose his next words carefully. "Now that you've already started and I'm reacquainting myself with the joys of a full night's sleep, why don't we take the rest of the day and go furniture shopping? You, me, and Madeline. I'll even spring for lunch." When it looked like Tate would argue, A.J. said, "It's either that or another night on the couch."

The threat got Tate moving as nothing else could. "Let me clean up a little first."

A.J. nodded. He waited until Tate left the room, then pulled his cell phone from his pocket and keyed up his address book. Finding the number he wanted, he waited until his

party came on the line and said, "Ralph? Yeah, it's A.J. Got a job for you. I need you to find out everything you can on a Marv -- probably Marvin -- and Francis Michaelson."

Chapter Five

The next two weeks surprised even Tate's vivid imaginings. Not only did he and A.J. get along, he was actually starting to like the guy. And Madeline... Tate was wild about that kid. She had to be the smartest two-month-old God had ever created, his nieces and nephews aside. The three of them were falling into a routine. A.J. took Madeline to the office with him during the day, and Tate came straight to A.J.'s place when he closed the shop. They'd eat supper together, take care of the baby, watch television: it was downright domestic.

Tate had to keep reminding himself it was just a job to keep from liking it too much. His growing attraction to A.J. Boyd wasn't helping matters, either. Neither did the fact that A.J. came out to breakfast each morning in a pair of ridiculous, cartoon-character boxer shorts.

Today's featured Scooby and the Gang.

"You know..." Tate burped Madeline, kissed her sweet cheek, and then settled her into her baby seat. "I try not to judge a man by what he wears, but I find it hard to take you seriously when you have an animated dog on your ass."

"You just wish your ass was as toned as mine." A.J., poured himself a cup of coffee. "Max buys me these for Christmas and birthdays. I don't have the heart not to wear them."

Trying not to think about A.J.'s ass, Tate seized on the topic of family. "Your sister talking to you yet?"

"Very little, but it's something, at least." A.J. lifted his cup to his mouth and blew on it. "I never would've given Madeline up. My God, can't Jessica see the stress I was under?"

"At least you're communicating again." A.J. had told him about the falling out with his sister. Tate knew it had to be rough, but he had the gut feeling they'd work through it. He glanced at his watch. "Shi -- I mean shoot. I've got to go." Tate leaned down for a Madeline kiss. "See you guys tonight." He left with the oddest feeling he should've kissed A.J. goodbye, too.

At first A.J. had worried about his decision to take Madeline to the office with him, but after just two weeks, he couldn't remember how he'd ever gotten any work done without her. The employees at Boyd Real Estate and Development had adopted Madeline as their unofficial mascot, and if A.J. was ever busy when the baby needed him, there was always somebody there, eager to pitch in.

A.J. was so grateful he was looking into starting an on-site company daycare for the rest of his staff.

A.J.'s biggest supporter was his P.A., Leticia Pippen. A British ex-patriot and the grandmother of four, Leticia had been with A.J. for nine years -- since he was a hotshot twenty-seven-year-old stocks trader leaving the wonders of Wall Street for the catch-as-catch-can world of real estate -- and she seemed delighted by the changes in him.

"Young miss has a fresh nappy, a full tummy, and is down for what I dare say will be a long nap," Leticia said as she came into A.J.'s office from the spare room they'd converted into a nursery for Madeline.

"Thanks, Lettie. Sorry you had to fill in." He made a face. "Those investors on the south side rehab deal were on a three-way conference call. I didn't think they'd take 'My baby has a dirty diaper' as a good excuse to keep them waiting."

"They're a pushy lot, you ask me." Leticia sniffed. "Speaking of waiting, there's a gentleman waiting in the reception area for you. A Mr. Story."

A.J.'s palms went clammy, but he reined himself in before he had the chance to panic. Story had promised to contact him once Cindy's will was probated, and he'd also promised to rush it through. A.J. told himself that's all this visit was about, just Story following up on a promise.

Too bad A.J.'s pounding heart didn't quite believe him.

Leticia showed Story into A.J.'s office and then discreetly excused herself. A.J. knew he was in trouble when he offered Story a cup of coffee and a seat, and Story declined both.

"I didn't think lawyers worked the day before Thanksgiving." A.J.'s joke fell as flat as Story's face.

"You have to believe I didn't know about this," Story said. He pulled an envelope from the inside pocket of the overcoat he'd yet to remove. "I pushed the probate through like I promised. Soon as I was done, up pops Cynthia's friend, in my office with this. Corrine. You remember her, I'm sure. She's the one--"

"Who kept Madeline right after Cindy died." A.J. searched his memory for a picture of Corrine but the best he came up with was a bland recollection of brown hair and a blue shirt. He eyed the envelope in Story's hand the same way one would eye an irritated cobra. "Are you going to tell me what's in there or is this the part where I guess?"

Story laid the envelope flat on A.J.'s desk. "I never would've agreed to represent Cynthia if I'd known what she..." He shook his head. "Contrary to the reputations of lawyers, I'm not in the business of playing games with people's lives." He gave A.J. a deep, penetrating stare so thick with pity A.J. almost choked on it, and then Story walked out.

A.J.'s hands were shaking so badly by the time Story left he could barely open the envelope. He recognized Cindy's handwriting the minute he unfolded the page. Halfway into the first paragraph, the shaking had given way to violent tremors, and by paragraph number two A.J. stopped reading, picked up the phone, and called the only person whose voice he wanted to hear.

"Jesus H. Christ." It was the fourth time Tate had said it, but this time A.J. smiled.

"I've always wondered what the H. stands for."

"Henry, according to my Uncle Pete, but he's a drunk so I wouldn't take his word for it." Tate eased onto the stool next to A.J.'s. They were in the kitchen at the breakfast bar. Madeline had been asleep for a while now, but here they still sat, still talking, still no closer to a solution.

Tate placed his hands, palms down on the granite. "Tell me what the letter said."

"Tate..." They'd been over this.

"One more time, A.J. We need to make sure we haven't missed anything if we're going to come up with a solution."

We. Not *you*, but *we*. And that, in a nutshell, was why A.J. had called Tate over anyone else. Because in the short time he'd known him, A.J. had come to accept that Tate was the kind of guy who stepped up to help the people he considered friends, to make their problems his problems, to shoulder burdens that weren't expected of him.

God help him, A.J. was coming to count on that. He sighed. "According to the letter, Cindy bribed a doctor to implant some other woman's eggs with my sperm without my consent." He shivered, the thought of it like something out of a bad sci-fi flick. "All those times I thought I was going to a reputable clinic and giving my, um...donations so Cindy and I could conceive...Cindy already knew her eggs weren't viable." He didn't bother hiding his anguish from Tate. "She planned this, Tate. The breakup, the pregnancy, everything."

Tate tapped his fingers against the stone counter. "I don't get all the secrecy. Why not just tell you her eggs were shot, then go through the treatments with you, have a baby, and live happily ever after?"

"It's the reason why her eggs were shot." A reason that cut A.J. to the marrow even though Cindy had been lost to him long ago. "There for a while, I was working long hours, trying to make it in the big leagues. I was never home and..." He hadn't told Tate this part, and he couldn't make himself say the words.

Tate was no dummy. "She had an affair."

A.J. nodded. "Her boyfriend -- boyfriends, God...I don't even know how many she had -- gave her a venereal disease. The letter didn't say which one, but apparently it left her infertile."

Tate's eyes went huge. "Are you--"

"I'm clean," A.J. said softly. "I get checked twice a year, for everything from HIV to hangnails."

"Thank God." Tate reached across the counter and squeezed A.J.'s wrist. Just a fleeting touch, but warm, real, and exactly what A.J. needed.

"So, your options are what?" Tate said as he retracted his hand. "Hunt down the guy Cindy bribed and prosecute his ass?"

"I wish it was that simple." A.J. thought of Madeline, of that sweet, innocent face he wouldn't be able to see every day if it hadn't been for Cindy's duplicity. "Cindy got an ungodly amount of money out of our divorce settlement, a good chunk of which she used to pay this man to do her dirty work. I'm sure the good doctor's put that money to work disappearing from the face of the earth. And that's not the worst of it." All the fight went out of him, and A.J. was suddenly so tired he wasn't sure how he was still remaining upright.

Tate moved closer, like he was ready to hold him up, if necessary. "I'm ready."

"Cindy knew me, Tate. She knew once I laid eyes on Madeline I was going to love her more than my own life." A.J. rested his head on his arms. "That's why she took the remaining embryos and had them moved to a reputable cyro storage facility."

"Remaining?" Tate moved back. "You didn't tell me--"

"Yeah, I'm having a hard part dealing with that one." A.J. felt as blindsided now, seven hours later, as he had when he'd first read Cindy's letter. "According to my ex-wife, I have seven embryos out there, waiting for me to decide whether they live or die."

Chapter Six

Tate woke up around five, threw on a pair of sweats, and crept into the nursery to check on Madeline. He found A.J. sitting in the rocking chair, giving her the remains of a bottle. "Morning."

A.J. made a face.

"Did you sleep at all?"

"I think I caught thirty or forty minutes here and there."

A.J. pulled the nipple from Madeline's sleeping lips. Tate reached for the baby, his hands brushing A.J.'s bare chest as he lifted her into his arms. A.J. shivered.

Tate pretended not to notice. He laid Madeline in her crib, then held the door wide as A.J. followed him out of the room. He smiled over A.J.'s choice of boxers: the Flintstones.

A.J. made for the kitchen, heading straight for the coffee pot. "I guess you have big plans with your family today, huh?"

Shit. *Thanksgiving*. Tate had barely thought about it. "My mom usually has a big to-do, but with nine kids, how could it be anything else?" He grabbed some cinnamon rolls out of the freezer and heated the oven. "How about you? Your family have anything planned?"

"Not this year, not with my grandmother in the shape she's in." A.J. dumped coffee grounds into the filter basket.

"Good thing I'm not up for a celebration, huh?"

Tate paused, his fingers still on the cookie sheet he'd been reaching for. He turned to look at A.J. "You have options here. Just because your ex-wife was a selfish--"

"Did I tell you Cindy was a foster kid?" A.J. dumped water into the coffee maker. "I think she'd planned to have all seven of those embryos implanted eventually -- would have if the cancer hadn't stopped her -- and I never would've known my children were out there, growing up without me."

"Yet another reason why your ex was a bitch of epic proportions, but what does that have to..." Tate let the cookie sheet fall onto the granite counter with a metallic *thump*. "A.J., please tell me you aren't thinking about what I think you're thinking about."

A.J. neither confirmed nor denied. He just kept working the damned coffee maker.

"Look, you're in shock right now. I get that." Tate tried again. "But to even entertain the possibility of having eight kids because your loony wife hired some mad scientist to--"

"IVF doesn't work that way. Not all the embryos may be viable, and not all of them may implant. But so what if they do?" A.J. whirled on him with flashing eyes. "They're my kids."

"They're clumps of frozen cells you can't even see without a microscope." Tate had been raised Catholic as a child, until his parents had learned the truth about him when he was a teenager and switched the whole family to the more accepting Episcopal church (Catholic-lite, his Grandpa said with much scorn). Tate knew all these arguments. He'd heard more than one sermon on the evils of assisted reproduction, but that didn't mean he bought into the whole "life starts at conception" thing.

Hell, Tate hadn't been to church in so long, he even wasn't sure they still held it on Sundays.

Red splotches marked A.J.'s tanned cheeks. "Go into the nursery, take a long, hard look at Madeline, and then come back in here and tell me again how you believe those embryos are just a bunch of random molecules." He curled his fingers like he wanted to hit something. "Better yet, wait a few years and tell my daughter she'd have been better off if her daddy'd left her frozen in a cylinder somewhere." Now A.J. was shaking. He turned his back on Tate, attention once again on the coffee maker.

"Okay. Okay, easy. I get what you're saying." Tate approached him slowly, hands coming out to grasp A.J.'s

heaving shoulders. "But there are other things you can do here. Aren't there places you can donate those embryos? Childless couples who can't--"

Head still down, A.J. snorted. "Great. And we're back to me having kids out there who don't know a damned thing about their real father." Another snort. "Wish my sister could see this. She'd be so proud."

Tate stroked A.J.'s bare skin. "My point is, you have options besides hiring some surrogate and trying to raise eight kids by yourself."

A.J. turned so quick he almost knocked Tate over. "I'm not by myself. I have you."

Tate hadn't been struck speechless many times in his life, but this was one of them. Here he was, standing bare chest to bare chest with A.J., who was looking up at him with an expression Tate had never seen on A.J.'s face before, and Tate had no idea what to say.

After an awkward moment, A.J. filled the silence. "Think of all the money you'd make, not to mention your shop." The odd way he said the last word set off Tate's radar. A.J. curled his lip. "Hell, you could probably milk a fifteen-year lease deal out of me if you signed on to be manny to eight of my offspring."

"Don't do that." Tate wanted so badly to stroke A.J.'s cheek, to take away that awful red color, but he just couldn't let himself do it. "Don't hide behind sarcasm. I know you're hurting."

"Yeah. Well." A.J. moved away from him. "There's fuck-all I can do about it."

"Wrong." Tate made up his mind, and he made it up quick. "Get dressed."

"Tate--"

"Look, if you're even thinking of doing..." Tate made a hand motion, "*That*, then you should at least see what life in a huge family's like. I'll take you and Madeline to my folks' place, let you see the real deal."

At first Tate thought A.J. would refuse, but finally he said, "Okay."

A.J. turned to go, but Tate stopped him with, "Manny, huh?"

"You're built like a linebacker for the Bears and you look like the spokes model for *Badass Weekly*." A.J. turned back with a grin. "Somehow 'nanny' just doesn't quite fit."

Tate watched A.J. go with a small smile of his own. *Manny*. God help him, he liked it.

"I thought you said this guy was a royal asshat," Tate's father said after lunch. The two of them were standing on the back porch, watching while Tate's brothers, brothers-in-law, and nephews played football in the backyard. His dad perched his hefty frame on the railing. "Seems like a standup guy to me. Taking care of his kid, making good on his contract with you."

"Only 'cause I bailed him out of a jam." Tate looked through the double windows into the kitchen where A.J. was surrounded by women, all of them fussing over Madeline.

"Sell that load of shit to someone who needs the fertilizer, son." Big Jim Fuller never let his kids get away with anything. "I got eyes. There's a hell of a lot more involved here than a paycheck."

Tate gripped the railing. He was cold, and it had little to do with the late autumn chill. "For me, maybe." He'd give his dad that much.

"For him, too," Big Jim said. "I'd put money on it, and you know me well enough to know I only bet on sure things."

"Would it matter if he does feel something for me? Not that I'm convinced he does." Tate blew out a hard breath. "I'm damaged goods."

Big Jim raised a shaggy brow. "Do tell."

"This thing with the Michaelsons is ugly and bound to get uglier still. No guy in his right mind wants a piece of that."

Big Jim crossed his arms, tucking his fingers into the bend of each elbow. "You remember when you told me and your mother you were gay?"

Tate rolled his eyes. "Not something a guy forgets, Dad."

"You weren't gonna tell us, wouldn't have if that little weasel Todd Perkins hadn't seen you smooching Bill Pereti behind the bleachers at school and threatened to rat you out." Big Jim snickered. "You were so scared you almost pissed yourself."

"And you've decided to take me on this trip down the Humiliation Super Highway, why?"

"Relax, son. You and your mother, always with your hearts on your sleeves." Big Jim patted his shoulder. "My point is, you were all of what, sixteen? And you'd convinced yourself we were gonna throw your ass out on the street, maybe beat the hell out of you on your way out the door."

The pat turned into a squeeze. "Do you remember what happened?"

Tate nodded. "I was crying like a snot-nosed kid. I said, 'Mom, Dad, don't hate me. I'm queer.'" He remembered how his chest had hurt when he'd sobbed out those words. "You just nodded and that's when Mom said, 'Okay, sweetheart. Now go wash your face. We're having pot roast for dinner.'"

Big Jim smiled. "Your mom's always known how to turn a phrase."

Not for the first time, Tate took a hard look at the miracle he'd been given that day. "It couldn't have been that easy for you and Mom to hear. To accept."

"See, that's what you never got. We'd *already* accepted it. Your mom and me, we had you figured out a long time before you told us." At Tate's look of abject astonishment, his dad let loose a rolling belly laugh. "Why do you think I'm telling you this now? You've always been your own worst enemy, son. You got problems, some big ones. So what? So does rest of the fucking world." He looked Tate in the eye. "Don't you think it's time you got out of your own way? Time you stop ending things before they start, time you stopped imagining the worst-case scenario, and giving in without a fight?" He cuffed Tate's neck. "Your mother and me, we had a hard time with you being gay in

the beginning. But we weren't stupid enough to throw away our own son over some stupid reason like that."

Tate pushed away from the porch rail. "And if things turn out as bad as I imagine they might?"

"Then you chalk it up to shit happening and get on with your life." Big Jim looked out on the makeshift football squad. "Doesn't getting into the game -- even if you get the living shit kicked out of you -- beat the hell out of watching all the action from the bench?"

Tate didn't give his father an answer. At the moment, he wasn't sure he had one.

"I had no idea pie came in so many different flavors." A.J. fell back on the couch with a groan. "I don't think I'm going to eat again for a month."

Tate laughed at Madeline, who was in his arms. "Your daddy's so silly." She made her sweet face, the one that always worked him over but good. He glanced at A.J. "The only reason everybody was stuffing you full of food is because, according to my mother, 'That boy looks like he hasn't had a decent meal in his life.'"

"I like your mom." A.J. said. "Your whole family, really. They're great." He smiled, and Tate felt some relief. He'd

been right to take A.J. to his folk's place. A.J. was more relaxed, his mouth not so pinched at the corners.

Against his chest, Madeline yawned. Tate laughed. "Okay, gorgeous, I can take a hint. Let's give you a bath and get you ready for bed."

Bath time for Madeline was almost as much for Tate as it was for her. He loved watching her learning to splash in her blue baby tub. She usually got as much water on the bathroom counter as she did on herself, but Tate didn't care. It was special, something he'd cherish long after...well, he couldn't bear to think about the after, when Madeline didn't need him anymore.

When A.J. didn't need him anymore.

Those dark thoughts were still chasing Tate while he dressed Madeline. A.J. came into the nursery with a bottle just as Tate got the baby into her pajamas. A.J. handed Tate the bottle and said, "Why don't you take the rest of the week off?"

Tate turned to stone, inside and out. "Huh?"

"It's a holiday weekend. I'm closing the office, anyway." A.J. said in a detached sort of way. "You still have your apartment, right?"

"Yeah." Tate had kept the place, a one-bedroom efficiency, just in case the job didn't work out. He wondered now if that was what A.J. was trying to tell him, that things weren't working out.

"Then you should go home, maybe spend some more time with your family." A.J. nodded like he'd come to some kind of decision. "Yeah. That's a good idea." He walked out of the room.

Tate gave Madeline the rest of her bottle in a cold sweat. His emotions were switching tracks faster than the L: fear, frustration, confusion, and finally, as he put Madeline down for the count, anger.

It was the anger leading him as he barged into A.J.'s room without knocking. He was so mad he barely registered that A.J. was wearing nothing but a tight pair of boxer briefs. Tate had the fleeting thought that maybe the cartoon boxers didn't cut it for daily wear before he let A.J. have it.

"You know, if you're firing me, the least you can do is have the balls to come out and say it."

"Firing you?" A.J. stared at him like he was nuts. He was holding his jeans in one hand, his belt in the other. "What are you talking about?"

"Take the rest of the week off? Spend some time with your family?" The more he said, the madder Tate got. "What the fuck was that about if you aren't trying to get rid of me?"

"I promised you paid holidays. Jesus." A.J. tossed his pants on the floor. "You're the one who made it clear this morning you thought I was crazy for wanting more kids, that I was on my own if I went through with it."

Tate came up short. "I never said anything like that."

A.J. tossed his shirt on top of his pants. "Then you take me to your family's place so I can see how crazy I am for even thinking about having a big, noisy brood." He jabbed a finger in the direction of Tate's chest. "Well, I've got news for you, buddy: it backfired. I thought your family was great."

"That's not why I took you there. Well, maybe I wanted you to see how hectic it can be with so many. I was honest about that from the get-go," Tate said. "But mostly I couldn't stand the thought of you and Madeline alone on Thanksgiving." *Without me.*

"I never said anything about firing you," A.J. went on as if he hadn't spoken, "but that you're even thinking along those lines tells me maybe you're the one who's unhappy with our little arrangement."

Tate's scattered emotions see-sawed back to fear. "No. I didn't--"

"I'm not the one who doesn't know what he wants, buddy." A.J. closed the distance between them, his lips twisted and his eyes hard. "You are."

"That's not true." Just like that, Tate was back to anger. He poked A.J.'s breastbone. "And stop calling me buddy."

"All right," A.J. said like he was daring Tate to bungee jump off a bridge. "So, what do you want?"

Tate wasn't real sure he could talk right then so he decided to show him. He stole whatever smartass remark A.J. had been about to make next with a kiss.

Chapter Seven

It was a gamble. Some guys didn't like to kiss. Tate had been with more than one who thought it was too girly, almost beneath their dignity or something. Luckily for him, A.J. didn't seem to be in that category. Another great thing about A.J., he seemed fully capable of licking Tate's tonsils and stripping him naked at the same time.

"Do you have any idea how many times I've fantasized about doing this to you?" A.J. said as he divested Tate of his shirt. He nibbled on Tate's ear, teeth tugging on Tate's earring. "Watching you walk around here without a shirt. Drove me fucking crazy."

"Yeah, like you didn't do your morning boxer shorts fashion show on purpose." Tate ripped open his own fly when A.J. fumbled with the zipper. "You have any idea how many times I've gone to work with a hard on?"

"Glad it's not just me," A.J. said. He pulled Tate's pants down, and then A.J. was done talking because Tate's cock was in his mouth.

Tate almost went to his knees. For a guy who'd spent a large number of years married to a woman, A.J. Boyd knew how to suck cock. Not only that, but he played with Tate's balls, something that flipped Tate's switch in a major way. A.J. had him on the edge in five short minutes. Tate

growled out a warning, thinking A.J. was going to pull off. A.J. kept at him, sucking him like soda through a straw.

Tate came in A.J.'s mouth. A.J. swallowed like a champ.

"Oh, God." Tate fell onto the bed. "I think I'm dying."

"I hope not." A.J. came down beside him with a grin. "I'm not done with you yet, and I'm not into necrophilia."

Tate pulled him in for a kiss. "Glad to hear it, on both counts." He could feel A.J.'s dick against his thigh. "I want you to fuck me." It wasn't an offer he made to many people. Blow jobs were one thing, but there weren't many people Tate trusted with his ass.

"You sure?" A.J. played with the soft hairs covering Tate's chest. "I had you figured for a top."

"Sometimes." Tate reached between A.J.'s thighs, stroking him to a fever pitch. "Tonight I'm yours."

It took A.J. a long time to find condoms and lube. "I bought these right after I moved in, just in case I decided to bring somebody home." The box was unopened. A.J. laughed. "We'd better check the expiration dates."

Knowing A.J. was as selective as he was only made Tate want him more. He pulled A.J. down for a long, slow

make-out session that ended with A.J.'s fingers buried in Tate's ass.

"I'm ready," Tate said when he'd been fingered to heaven and back. He was hard again, his second boner in twenty minutes, something that hadn't happened to Tate since he was a teenager. "Now."

"You want it like this?" A.J. came between Tate's parted legs, urging them wider.

"God, yes. I want to see you." Tate let all the air out of his lungs when A.J. lined up his cock and began the slow slide inside him.

A.J. was a considerate lover. He didn't take for granted that because Tate was a big, muscled-up guy he'd want the sex to be rough. A.J. took his time, let Tate get used to the sensation of being filled before he started moving. He was gentle, thorough, and drove Tate wild.

"Harder," Tate said, clenching A.J.'s trembling biceps.
"Fuck me harder."

A.J. did what he asked, changing his angle to hit Tate's special spot with each stroke. "God," A.J. groaned out like he was close, but it didn't matter because Tate was coming again, and after that everything was lost in a warm, sweet tangle Tate was only too happy to fall into.

"This is going to change things," Tate said in the early hours of the morning.

A.J. laughed. He couldn't help himself. He was warm, sexed-out, and satisfied all the way through. "I should hope so. We've spent the last six hours fucking each other sideways. My feelings would be hurt if you forgot my name tomorrow." He glanced at the clock. "Make that today."

"I'm serious," Tate said.

"I know. You're always serious." A.J. kissed the side of his head and then pulled Tate so that Tate's head was on A.J.'s chest. The two of them were nestled in A.J.'s bed, and damned if A.J. planned on sleeping any other way from there on in. "I know what you're worried about it."

Tate pulled back, propping up on one elbow to look down at him. "You think so?"

"Yep. You're thinking, 'So is A.J. still my boss? What happens if things don't work out between us? What about my shop? What about the Michaelsons? What about the baby? What about those other embryos?'" A.J. leaned up to nip his chin. "Did I leave anything out?"

Tate sighed. "I think you covered it."

"I can't give you easy answers." A.J. stroked Tate's neck. "I don't have any." Tate started to turn his head, but A.J. stopped him, hands gentle but firm on his face. "What I can tell you is that I like being with you. I *want* to be with you." He willed Tate to hear the truth behind the words. "Can't we figure out the rest as we go along?"

Tate kept him waiting for a nerve-wracking instant before he said, "Yeah. Yeah, we can."

The next three weeks were incredible. A.J. had never imagined this much happiness could be in his grasp. Even when he and Cindy had been at their best, Cindy's love had always been tinged with desperation, some type of neediness A.J. could never satisfy. A.J. was able to simply be with Tate, to enjoy him, and be enjoyed without feeling like he was being graded on some kind of crazy curve.

Since Thanksgiving, they'd spent every night in A.J.'s king-sized bed together. They took turns getting up with the baby, took turns cooking breakfast and dinner. Tate was closing the shop earlier than he had been so he'd have more time with A.J. and Madeline.

"Morning, beautiful," Tate said as he came into the kitchen where A.J. was making eggs and Madeline was swinging in her baby swing.

"Morning yourself, hot stuff." A.J. blew him a kiss.

"I was talking to the baby," Tate grabbed A.J. from behind and nibbled on his neck, "but you're the second prettiest person in this kitchen."

A.J. squirmed, pieces of egg dripping off his spatula and onto the stove. "I have no problem coming in second to o--my daughter." He moved back and frowned at Tate's jeans, work shirt, and boots. "You're dressed."

"Yep. Meeting with a customer." Tate's eyes twinkled. "Believe it or not, the guy's a small scale manufacturer interested in maybe buying a couple of my designs for mass production."

"Why didn't you tell me?" A.J. gave him a little shove and then a kiss. "We'd be having champagne instead of scrambled eggs."

"A, it's a big maybe, and B, six o'clock is a little early for alcohol, even for a hometown boy like me." Tate reached around him to cut the burner off. "Look, whether this deal pans out or not, there's something we need to talk about."

A.J. wasn't sure he liked the sound of that. "Okay."

"Money." Tate cut right to it. "I don't feel comfortable about you paying me to take care of Madeline. Not now that we're...you know."

A.J. had been afraid of something like this, but he'd been hoping to hold Tate off at least until Ralph completed his research on the Michaelsons. "You take care of her as much as I do. Why shouldn't you get paid for it?"

Tate shook his head. "You know what I mean. I don't have time to hash it out now. The manufacturer guy's only going to be in the city for a short while, which is why I have to meet him at the ass-crack of dawn." He kissed A.J. quick. "We *are* going to talk about this, though. It's not the same and you know it."

A.J. didn't say anything, precisely because he did know what Tate was talking about. A.J. had almost referred to Madeline as *their* daughter instead of only his. The slip didn't bother A.J. at all, but he wondered if Tate could say the same.

Real estate, the way A.J. played it anyway, was hit or miss. Some days he was on top of the world, making deals that would bring a Rockefeller to tears. And some days -- days like today -- everything A.J. touched turned to lead. He was about ready to pack up Madeline and head home early

when Lettie buzzed him to say, "Ralph Waldo's here to see you, sir."

A.J.'s pulse started to hum. "Send him in, please."

A.J.' had known Ralph Waldo for years. He was an old school P.I. whom A.J. usually used to research business deals that didn't feel kosher. Ralph greeted him with a craggy grin, and that's when A.J. knew. "You got something on the Michaelsons?"

"You wanted dirt?" Ralph's leathery face lit like Macy's Christmas window. "Pal, you just tell me how dirty you wanna go."

Tate spent most of his day in a state of shock. The guy he'd met with -- Leonard Peale from Indiana -- wanted to mass produce three of Tate's designs. He'd offered Tate a contract and the assurance that once Tate had that contract looked over by a lawyer, a check with many shiny little zeros would follow.

Tate hadn't been this high since his weed smoking days back in high school.

He was in his office, looking at the contract like it might fly off his desk, when Gordy stuck his head in the door. "Boss,

there's some guy looking around the place. Says he knows A.J."

Tate stepped into the main garage to find a tall guy with a measuring tape and a notepad. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Jeff Lesterman." He held out his hand, realized he was still holding the tape measure, and did some quick shifting so he could shake with Tate. "A.J. hired me."

"Okay." When Jeff didn't volunteer any more information, Tate said, "Hired you to do what, exactly?"

"Oh jeez. I'm such a doofus sometimes." Jeff laughed at himself. "I'm a contractor." Taking in Tate's blank expression, he said, "You know." Seeing that Tate still didn't get it, Jeff motioned with his hands as he talked. "I'm the guy A.J. hired to tear this place down."

Chapter Eight

A.J. drove home as fast as he could safely drive with Madeline in the car. He couldn't wait to get there, to see the relief on Tate's face when he learned the truth. A.J. found Tate in the bedroom, packing. Thank God Madeline was on the floor in her baby seat and not in A.J.'s arms.

A.J. felt dizzy, like he might pass out.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting the fuck out of here." Tate threw a handful of shirts into his bag, then went back to his dresser and cleaned out a row of briefs.

"Why?" A.J. had to make himself ask. He'd played this scene before, the night Cindy kicked him out. Funny, he didn't remember it hurting this bad.

"You really have to ask?" Tate laughed, a sound caustic as acid.

"Yeah, I think I do." A.J. put his hand on Tate's arm. "Just stop for a minute." Tate stopped, his muscles like concrete under A.J.'s hand. "Will you tell me what I did so I can fix it?"

"Jeff Lesterman stopped by to get a feel for my shop." Tate jerked away from him. "You know, the place he's going to tear down."

"Oh, God." A.J. felt something inside him starting to rip. "Look, I can explain that if you'll let me." Pulsating torrents of fear made A.J.'s voice thready and weak. "I called Jeff weeks ago, before you started taking care of Madeline. Hell, before I ever knew about her. He's been backed up and I...I forgot to tell him not to come."

For a minute A.J. thought he'd gotten through to him, but then Tate said, "You're still going to tear the place down. That's why you'd only give me a six month lease."

A.J. wanted to lie. He wanted with everything in him to tell Tate the building was his, that this was all a mistake, something they could just go to bed and laugh together about. Instead, he said, "Yes. I'm going to tear it down."

"Yeah. That's what I thought." Tate shoved the rest of his things into the bag, zipped it, and slung it over his shoulder. "You're a nasty piece of work, A.J. I feel so damned sorry for Madeline I can hardly stand it. God only knows how many ways you'll fuck up her life." He stormed out without looking back.

A.J. was proud of himself. He made it into the bathroom before he threw up.

Tate didn't remember the first two days after he left A.J.'s place, Saturday and Sunday. He spent them locked in his apartment, mean and drunk. He seriously thought about continuing the pattern come Monday, but a call early Monday morning from his lawyer letting him know the Michaelsons were pushing for a January court date convinced him he'd better get his ass up and open the shop.

Tate had to make as much money as he could before the son-of-a-bitch he'd been stupid enough to fall in love with tore the place out from under him.

Gordy was sitting in his truck outside the shop when Tate pulled up. Gordy said nothing about the fact that Tate was two hours late, nor did he comment on the fact that Tate smelled like a cheap bottle of gin. Gordy just got his tools and went to work.

Tate reminded himself to give the man a raise as soon as the manufacturing deal went through.

The day was long, tedious, and painful as hell. Clanking metal and a blinding hangover didn't mix. Tate was about to send Gordy on an aspirin run when a petite blonde with a smattering of freckles and A.J.'s eyes walked into the shop.

She walked right up to Tate. "I'm Jessica Martin, A.J.'s sister." She got closer to him and wrinkled her nose. "I

came here with full intentions of slapping your face but from the smell of you, I bet you're hurting enough."

"Lady, you have no idea." Tate wanted one thing: to get rid of her. "Let's go into my office so you can give me your spiel and go home."

Jessica didn't flinch at his rudeness, and she didn't hesitate to plop down in the dirty chair he offered her. Tate took his own chair, thinking that if he were straight, he could go for a girl like A.J.'s sister.

Jessica didn't waste any time getting to the point of her visit. "A.J. called me Friday night. He told me everything." She pinned Tate with an iron glare. "My brother's a wreck and it's your fault."

"Oh, so you're speaking to him this week, are you?" It was a low blow, but Tate went with it. "Nice of you."

It didn't surprise him much that Jessica laughed. "A.J. told me you're the oldest of nine kids. I don't have to tell you how it works with brothers and sisters. When we're pissed at each other, that's one thing. Let somebody else hurt one of us and--"

"You'll rip their guts outs." Tate was the same way. Unfortunately for Jessica, she was sister to the enemy, which cancelled out any kinship he might've felt with her. "You're too late to rip my guts out. Your brother beat you

to it." And if Tate was slowly bleeding to death inside, so be it.

"Did A.J. tell you what he planned to do with this property once he tore it down?" Jessica crossed her legs and made herself comfortable, like she was at a ladies luncheon instead of in a garage.

"No." Thinking about A.J. and Madeline was the mental equivalent of being hit over the head with a two by four. Tate had been trying like hell not to do it. "I figure he's got himself a hot development deal going. God knows Chitown needs another outlet mall."

"A park," Jessica said casually. "My brother owns all the buildings on this row. He's razing the whole shebang to build a recreational center and fitness park for disadvantaged kids."

Tate thought maybe the alcohol had screwed with his hearing. "That doesn't make any sense. This property's got to be worth--"

"Three point six million, according to the last appraisal." Jessica adjusted the strap on her shoe. "My mother and I have both tried to talk him out of it, but you know how stubborn he is when he wants something."

"Yeah." Tate's stomach burned. "Well, what he wants is to put me out of business." He leaned back in his chair. "All I

have is your word he's going to turn this place into a park. For all I know he sent you here to make him look good." He waved her off like she was a fly. "You're wasting your time. Even if you're on the up and up, A.J. still lied to me. I can't be with a two-faced--"

"A.J. doesn't know I'm here, but if you call my brother what I think you're about to, he will. My name will be all over the news when I put your butt in the hospital." She said it sweetly, with a smile. "Did A.J. tell you why he wanted this building so much? Did you give him that chance?" Before Tate could answer, Jessica continued with, "This place used to belong to his dad."

"His dad?" Whatever Tate had expected, it wasn't that. He leaned up. "His dad, not yours?"

"No, thank God." There was no missing her shudder. "A.J.'s my half brother. My mother married Palmer Boyd when I was three. A.J. was born a year later." She never broke eye contact with him. "I called Palmer 'Dad' because he was the only father I knew, but I'm proud to say he and I shared no blood."

"Called?" Tate searched his memory. He couldn't remember A.J. ever mentioning his dad. "The guy's dead?"

Jessica nodded. "Been gone seven years now, may he rot." She looked like she wanted to spit. "Before the mean old

bastard went, he made sure to do as much damage as possible."

"Tell me." It didn't matter anymore that A.J. had kept secrets or that he'd lied. The thought of A.J. being in pain washed all that out of Tate's mind.

"Palmer was an asshole from the beginning of the marriage, but after nine years of his emotional abuse, my mother had enough. She decided to divorce the SOB." Jessica was calm, like this was something she'd long ago made peace with. "My mother's parents are good people, but they're working class. Palmer, he had money out the wazoo. When Mom dared leave him, he decided to make her pay for it." She shifted in her seat. "The only real way he could do that was by taking A.J. away from her."

"Oh, God." Tate felt ill.

"Palmer convinced a judge to give him full custody of A.J. Mom was granted visitation." She snorted. "What a joke. Palmer made it so Mom was lucky if she got to see A.J. once every six months."

Tate knew from the way A.J. talked how close he was to his mother. "He must've been in hell."

"Oh, you can't imagine. None of us can, not really." Jessica's voice grew soft. "A.J. still won't talk about the years he spent with Palmer. Not much." She squared her

shoulders. "Like any little boy who'd been ripped away from his Mom and his sister -- who was in that kind of pain -- A.J. started acting out."

"Of course he did." Hell, Tate and his brothers had been heck on wheels sometimes, and they'd had a home most kids would kill for.

"It wasn't like A.J. was a delinquent or anything. Most of what he did was normal kid stuff. He ditched school a few times, got into a couple of fights." Jessica tapped her fingers against her knee. "But in Palmer's eyes, what A.J. was doing amounted to cardinal sins."

"Because he couldn't control him." Tate couldn't remember ever wanting to hurt somebody so bad in his life, dead or not.

"Exactly. The final straw came when A.J. and a buddy snuck out one night, took the L downtown, and then walked the rest of the way to this building, which Palmer had just bought as an investment property. They broke in. The place was vacant at that time. Their big plan was to smoke a pack of cigarettes they'd snatched from the buddy's dad." Jessica's eyes were big and sad. "A patrol officer caught them sneaking in and called their parents."

"How old were they?"

"Twelve. The officer thought he was helping. Chicago's a dangerous place for two kids out alone at night." Jessica hugged herself. "He had no idea what was waiting for A.J. at home was almost as bad as the stuff hiding in the dark."

"Tell me he didn't--"

"Beat him? No," Jessica said, "that would've been kinder. Bruises heal." She took a deep, heaving breath. "Palmer had A.J. placed in foster care. Signed him over to the state as an incorrigible child."

Tate had fallen off his motorcycle once, when he'd gone over a pothole that was a hell of a lot deeper than it looked. He'd landed flat on his back and had all the wind knocked out of him. He felt like that now, like he was starving for breath. When he was able to speak, he said, "Can someone actually do that?"

"Normally it's done in extreme cases, like when a child is violent. Making threats against the parents, maiming animals, starting fires, those kinds of things." Jessica pushed her hair over her shoulder, her hand shaking. "The types of behaviors you hear about in baby serial killers. Not something you'd associate with A.J."

"Of course not." A picture formed in Tate's mind of A.J. wearing a pair of Fairly Odd Parents boxers, singing *There She Goes* by the Las to Madeline while he danced across

the nursery with her. Any man capable of the kind of love he showed that little girl could never hurt anybody.

"Like I said, Palmer used his connections. Said he wanted to teach A.J. a lesson he'd never forget." Whether she'd made peace with her mother's divorce or not, Jessica obviously hadn't made peace with what had happened to her brother. A tear trickled down her cheek. "He was in a group home for six weeks before my mother finally found him. She..." Jessica took a tissue from her purse and swabbed her cheek. "Mom had been saving for years to get A.J. back. That, plus the second mortgage my grandparents took out on their house was enough to hire a damned good lawyer who was able not only to win Mom back custody of A.J. but to undo most of the damage Palmer had done."

Tate gripped the lip of his desk until the chipped Formica edge bit into his palms. "The legal damage, maybe. The collateral damage...there's no measuring that."

"No. Mom, she had A.J. in therapy for a while, but I'm not sure it did much good." Jessica dropped the tissue back into her purse. "He was such an open, easy-going kid before Palmer won custody. Afterwards...it was like the difference between daylight and darkness."

"And he what, thinks tearing this place down and turning it into a kid's park will exorcise his demons?" If that would really bring A.J. peace, Tate would level the damned garage himself.

Jessica nodded. "I think that was his plan. At least it was until you came along." She tilted her head to the side like Tate was a puzzle she was trying to solve. "My brother's never been in love before. He's terrified."

Tate was shaking his head before she finished her sentence. "That's not true. Cindy--"

"There's a big difference between being in love and being led around by the nose. Cindy..." Jessica's expression told Tate all he needed to know about her feelings on that subject. "...may have had A.J. fooled -- hell, even my grandparents liked her -- but both my mother and I saw what Cindy was doing." Jessica picked at her thumbnail with her index finger, a short, agitated motion. "She used the fact that she was a foster kid to make a connection with A.J., and once she'd made him feel sorry for her, Cindy knew she had him."

Tate understood. "She played that card any time she wanted her way."

"You got it." Jessica stood up. "That's not love. That's captivity." Again, she gave Tate the once over. "Now what you and A.J. have, I'm thinking that could be the real deal if one or both of you stops being a stubborn ass long enough to give in to it." She shouldered her purse. "Okay. That's my spiel. The rest is up to you."

Tate waited until five minutes after Jessica left, and then he was out the door.

A.J. had dealt with all types during his time in the business world. From corporate sharks, to arrogant traders, to timid clerks, to some downright shady characters he wouldn't deal with until Ralph gave the okay. It took a lot these days to make A.J.'s skin crawl.

Francis and Marv Michaelson gave him cold chills.

They were sitting in A.J.'s conference room, sans lawyer, just as A.J. had requested. A.J. was sitting across from them, Ralph at his side. Lettie had Madeline in the outer office, and though A.J. hated to leave her for even a minute -- seemed she'd been as miserable as A.J. these past two and a half days without Tate -- A.J. was counting on this meeting with the Michaelsons not taking long. He knew how to handle people like these.

Cut their legs out from under them.

"You want to tell us why we're here?" Francis whined.

"And why we couldn't bring our lawyer?" She looked down her nose. "If you're asking us to drop the lawsuit against that piece of--"

"I'm not much of an asker." A.J. slid the manila folder in front of him across the rosewood conference table and into Francis' fist with the sincere wish she get a nasty paper cut. "Generally I tell people how it's going to be, and they say, 'Yes, sir.' Especially when those people are looking at a prison sentence."

"Prison?" Marv's tone was bored, but the bead of sweat on his upper lip gave him away. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Fraud. Embezzlement, falsifying documents." A.J. looked at Ralph. "Wouldn't you say those things would land a body in prison, Ralph?"

Ralph stretched his hands inside out and cracked his knuckles. "I imagine so."

Francis stood up. "We don't have to listen to--"

"I know about Christian's trust fund, and about his will," A.J. said calmly. "I also know where the money went. Unless you want me to go straight to the Cook County DA, I'd sit back down."

Francis sat.

Marv reached for the folder. "This is..."

"My evidence." A.J. folded his hands on the table. "I hope you won't think me rude, but four different lawyers have copies with instructions that should anything... unspeakable happen to me, my family, or Tate--" it hurt like hell to say the name, but A.J. managed a good show. "--said evidence is to go straight to the proper authorities." He smiled. "If I were you, I'd pray for my continued good health."

"Unspeakable?" Francis was outraged. "We're not some kind of criminals."

"On his twenty-first birthday, your son was supposed to inherit the trust left to him by his grandparents. A trust you never told Christian about." A.J. fought to keep his cool, but it was damned hard. Parents like the Michaelsons reminded him too much of his own worthless father. "A trust you bled dry to support your high society lifestyle." He kept his breathing slow and even. "You knew Christian had a will, that he'd left Tate everything he owned." A.J. didn't bother to disguise his contempt for the couple seated across from them. "Legally, you owe Tate every dime that you were supposed to turn over to your son six years ago, plus interest."

Francis opened her mouth, but Marv stopped her. "Shut up, Fran." He looked at A.J. "If you're expecting us to pay the money back, we can't. There's nothing left."

"Oh, I know. I've had the two of you checked over from asshole to appetite."

"Then what do you want from us?" Wet circles blossomed at Marv's armpits.

"It's not what I want. It's what's going to happen." A.J. stared Marv down. "You're going to get out of Tate's life and stay out of it for good."

Francis teared up. She was probably hoping for sympathy, but all she did was turn A.J.'s stomach. "I loved my son."

"Then act like it. Honor Christian's memory and show the man he loved some sliver of decency and respect." A.J. pointed to the file. "You can keep that one. My lawyers and I have many, many copies. And if Tate's attorney doesn't get a call from yours by tomorrow at the latest, the DA's going to have a copy, too."

Marv gave a clipped nod. "He'll get the call."

"Glad we're all on the same page," A.J. said. "I'm sure the two of you can show yourselves out."

As soon as the Michaelsons left the conference room, Ralph said, "I've dealt with some slimy characters in my time, but those two...Jesus. I feel like I need a shower."

"Amen." A.J. got up. "All I want is to grab Madeline and get the heck out of here." He rubbed his grainy eyes. "I feel like hell."

"No offense, but it shows."

"Thanks, Ralph. You're a peach."

Ralph cocked his chair back on two legs. "Any chance you and Fuller can work things out?"

A.J. shook his head. "You know me. I don't do anything halfway. Apparently that includes fucking up the best thing that ever happened to me."

"You gonna tell him how you went to bat for him just now?"

Before A.J. could answer Ralph's question, the door opened and a voice said, "There's no need. *He* was listening at the door."

A.J. whipped his head around to see Tate standing in the doorway, holding Madeline. "I came to talk to you," Tate said. "When your assistant clued me in to what was going down in here, I had to hear it for myself." Tate offered up a smile that wasn't the least apologetic. "Good thing the door's nice and thin."

Ralph set his chair back on four legs. "I think I should let the two of you talk."

A.J. remembered his manners. "Let me introduce you, at least."

Ralph smiled. "Another time." He patted A.J.'s arm as he went by. "Good luck, bud."

With only Madeline as a buffer, A.J. had no idea what to say. He just stood there like a moron, watching Tate hold his daughter, heart splintering more by the second.

"Madeline was fussy when I got here," Tate said, like he had to explain why he was holding her. He smoothed his large hand up and down her back. "Mrs. Pippen was having a time with her."

"Neither of us has had a very good weekend." A.J. didn't add the *without you* part, but he figured Tate got the message.

Madeline whimpered, and Tate started walking the floor with her. "What you did for me with the Michaelsons... 'thank you' is way too weak for something like that."

"No it's not." A.J. looked down at the floor. "Not after what I put you through."

"Yeah, about that..." Tate stopped walking. "Your sister came to see me."

A.J. cursed under his breath. He should've known. Looking up at Tate he said, "I swear I didn't send her. She was just worried about me and--"

"I like her. She's a spunky one. Said the two of us could be the real deal if we'd get our heads out of our asses long enough to realize it." Tate grinned. "I'm paraphrasing, but that's what she meant."

A.J.'s heart rhythm went wonky. "What are you saying?"

"That I missed you and Madeline so bad I thought I was gonna die from it." Tate closed the space between them.

"That two days away from you two is too damned long." He pressed their foreheads together, the baby in between them. "That I love you and I want this to work."

A.J. wrapped his arms around him, pulling Tate in as tight as he could without squishing Madeline. A.J. wanted to tell Tate so many things, but the words kept getting stuck in his throat. At that point the most he could manage was, "Let's go home."

Christmas day came at four-thirty, with Madeline up extra early. A.J. swore it was because she wanted to see what

Santa had brought her. Tate laughed and said it was because she was hungry. After she was changed and fed, the three of them made their way to the small Christmas tree A.J. insisted they put up Monday night.

The night Tate came home for good.

Since they had plans to swing by both Tate's parents' house and A.J.'s mother's place later that day, they decided to open their presents from each other after breakfast. "You do know," Tate said over coffee, "that Madeline has twenty-four presents under that tree."

"Yep." A.J. put Madeline in her bouncy seat. "I also know half of those are from you."

They carried Madeline, bouncy seat and all, into the living room. It took A.J. and Tate nearly an hour to unwrap and show Madeline all of her presents.

She fell asleep halfway through.

Tate laughed. "I think she was more fascinated with the Christmas lights than the presents."

"We'll get some mileage out of some of this stuff down the road." A.J. pushed a pile of wrapping paper out of his way. They were still on the floor in front of the Christmas tree. He reached underneath and grabbed a flat, rectangular box

about the size of a hardback book. Handing it to Tate, A.J. said, "Merry Christmas."

Tate turned it over, pleased to see A.J. wasn't one of those over-tapers. He flipped it right-side up and removed the box top to find a yellowed piece of paper on top with several other papers underneath. "What is this?"

"The deed to your garage." A.J. took the box out of Tate's hand, took out the pages and flipped through them. "I included the other buildings in that row, too. I figured now that you've got that manufacturing contract you can afford to expand."

Fifteen minutes ago, Tate would've said there was no way he could've ever loved A.J. Boyd more than he already did, but having him do such an unselfish thing made Tate's heart swell. He took the papers out of A.J.'s hands, feeling whole in a way he'd never thought to ever feel again.

"My mother always said it's impolite to refuse a gift, but in this case I'm afraid I'm gonna have to go against Mom's advice." At A.J.'s blank stare, Tate said, "I hear a swanky new park's moving into the area. I think my place would stick out."

"But I--"

Tate silenced him with a kiss. When he pulled back, Tate said, "Thanks to you getting the Michaelsons off my ass, I

can afford to relocate." He picked up A.J.'s hand. "I've been holding onto that building because of Red and all my memories. Maybe it's time we both let go."

A.J. leaned against him. "How'd you get so smart?"

"I think you rubbed off on me." Tate kissed the top of his head. "I have something for you, too, but it's not a present-present."

A.J. sat back so that he was looking at Tate. "In English, please."

"Well, I mean, I got you a present-present too -- I bought you a bottle of that snooty single malt you like so much -- but your real present is something I just have to...damn." Tate pushed his hand through his hair. "I'm so bad at this stuff."

A.J.'s eyes reflected the sparkling Christmas tree lights. "You're doing okay so far."

"Okay. So here it is." Tate screwed up every ounce of courage he had. "You know I love you."

"I love you, too." A.J. had told him a dozen times already, but Tate's heartbeat still stuttered every time he heard it.

"I know, and that's why I want us to be a family, A.J. As real a family as the state of Illinois will let us be. Me, you,

Madeline..." Tate willed A.J. to see how much he meant what he was saying. "And as many other children as you want us to have."

"You sure you don't want some time to think about that?" A.J. played with Tate's fingers. "A month ago, you thought I was nuts."

"Oh, I still think you're nuts." Tate pulled A.J. over his legs and into his lap. "But I'm thinking we should go crazy together. Me, you, Madeline, and whoever else comes along."

A.J. looped his arms around Tate's neck. "If this is a proposal, my answer's yes."

The Manny

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