



## Chapter One

Of all the things Cody thought he might see when he stepped off the Greyhound in Baraunchs, Georgia, the last of all possible expectations was that he'd see nothing at all.

Seriously, nothing -- well, nothing outside of the normal bus station kind of setup. Scuffed plastic seats in faded primary colors, a mostly-empty snack machine and a couple of shady-looking types snoring with their heads pillowed on grubby knapsacks. No camera crew, no one waiting with a big "Cody Browning" sign, and no one who looked like they knew him from Adam.

Cody didn't think he was the kind of guy who expected the star treatment and got pissed off when he was shorted out of it, but this was a weird reception for someone who'd ridden three straight days in a bus to take part in filming a reality TV series focused on "the life and times of today's gay youth".

Where was everyone? This couldn't be a great big joke, could it? Nah. He'd signed a contract, one his momma's cousin the lawyer had read through and told them was on the level. There had been banner ads for the series on MySpace and he'd even seen a quickie segment on the evening news.

No way was this was a hoax.

No way was this right, either.

Cody scooted out of the way of a grizzled, middle-aged man waiting grouchy behind him, ten kinds of rumped in a suit that had seen better days. "Sorry about that."

The man gave him an odd look.

Cody shrugged, more concerned with what was going on, or more accurately not going on. Seriously weird. Maybe it's not the big band striking up when someone arrives and pretty models throwing ticker tape and confetti, but I kinda expected someone to pick me up, at least.

Or maybe this was how reality TV worked. What did he know?

Half an hour later, Cody had figured out the coffeemaker, found the

complimentary sachets of grounds and creamer and sugar, and sat himself down with a Styrofoam cup. To kill the time, he flipped through a bunch of assorted crap he'd brought with him from home, good-bye gifts and such from his family. It'd been his baby sister's idea to have them all write him "bon voyage" postcards -- no idea why, but it made her happy -- and so he had several of them to read through.

The card from his momma showed a picture of a cat in star-shaped sunglasses.

Dear Son,

Don't you shame us in front of TV and God and who-all knows what else. You act right and make us proud. Oh, and remember to say hi to your granny. She loves all that reality stuff. You think you could get the Survivor guy's autograph for her? I know you said you wouldn't meet him, but still.

Your Mother

Cody rolled his eyes. Lord love her, but the woman was nuts. He tucked that card away and went next for what wasn't a postcard at all, but a yellow index card with his name scribbled on the back in blue ink pen.

Hey, assface,

Get laid this summer. For real. And have fun. And drink some beer on camera. Bet you twenty bucks you don't have the balls.

"Balls" had been scribbled out, and his brother had added in black ink "Momma made me do that."

Party good,

Joey

Man, the arguments they'd had over what his brother suggested he do on camera every time a nutty idea came into Joey's head.

"This documentary isn't about sex," he'd argued for the eleventy-millionth time, shoving socks in his duffel once they passed the sniff test. He didn't dare assume anything was actually clean after it'd been Joey's turn to do laundry.

"That's what you say," Joey had drawled, flopping down on Cody's bed. He acted more like he was twelve than twenty most days. "They're gathering fifteen-odd gay dudes fresh out of high school and sticking you in a house out in the middle of butt-end nowhere, where they're gonna film everything you do. You honestly think they don't wanna catch you guys getting naughty?"

"Shut up, Joey."

Joey had sneered at him. "Thought so. Consider those your walking orders, kid."

Cody figured that was Joey's way of wishing him a good summer, and that worked fine by him.

Maya's postcard, bright pink and Hello Kitty decorated, was his favorite. It said, simply:

I'll miss you this summer. Don't forget me.

Love you.

Cody tapped the cards together to straighten the edges and tucked them back in the side pocket of his duffel. Probably not a good idea to let anyone else see them, but he'd keep 'em around.

He hooked one ankle behind the leg of the chair he sat in -- the seat wobbled -- and started drumming out a rhythm on the floor with the heel of his sneaker.

Seriously and no fooling, now. Where was everyone?

Just like most people these days, Cody guessed, he watched some reality TV. Not a lot, and not as a rule, but when he happened to be clicking through the channels at night, sometimes they'd catch his eye. He'd never figured he'd ever be a contestant on one or ever really wanted to. So he'd almost missed the call for participants in the GLBT-teen edition of City/Country.

Even then, he'd laughed himself nearly sick at the thought of trying out. He never would have, and said as much when his momma had asked him if he was thinking about it.

Nope, his brother Joey had done it for him, e-mailing in the form plus Cody's senior yearbook photo, the one where his smile looked more like he was about ready to sneeze and he had a huge zit on his chin. Cody hated that picture, which was probably exactly why Joey had chosen it.

All the same, the production team for the summer season of City/Country had called him up one freezing March morning and, over the crackles of static on their bad cell connection, told him he'd been chosen for their GLBT-teen edition being produced in conjunction with a Cultural Studies research project.

If it had been any other reality show? No way. City/Country, though, Cody had watched them a time or three. Or ten. They did the quirky stuff, hauling people out from big cities and plunking them down in rural areas to see how they did away from civilization. Weren't any challenges like eating chicken embryos or so forth; in fact, there weren't any specific contest-type challenges at all. Hang in there for the full eight weeks of filming, smile pretty for the camera and get a decently fat check for your time and trouble after they wrapped. Kind of like The Real World met Big Brother, without the annoying hosts.

Truth to tell, City/Country's host Geordie was pretty hot; also, Cody liked his sense of humor. From what Cody had seen of Geordie on TV, the guy truly didn't give a crap about what the world thought of him. He did his thing the way he wanted and if you didn't like it, tough.

After thinking it over, Cody had decided he might as well. Wasn't like he had much of anything else planned for the summer after high school except wishing he could go to college and trying to find a job.

He fidgeted in his hard Greyhound station chair, rummaging through the pockets of his cargo pants looking for loose change he might have missed at other stations earlier.

Man, I hope someone shows up soon!

"Hi?" Something sharp and insistent prodded Cody's shoulder. "Hi. Are you awake? Please tell me you're here for City/Country."

"Mmph?" Cody shifted position in the Greyhound chairs he'd dragged together and tried to lie down across. Not what he'd call a comfortable bed, but it was the best he could do. Traveling for several days took it out of you,

he'd discovered.

He yawned, blinked, and scratched his chin. Standing above him was a small, dark woman Cody thought he recognized, though he wasn't sure from where. Small, smooth-skinned and curvy, she was what his brother would call "hot" even if you couldn't prove that by Cody, who hadn't ever really wanted to do more with girls than look. Give him a choice and he'd ogle the football players over the cheerleaders any day.

"Morning," he said, sitting up and wincing. "Ow."

"Yeah, napping on those probably wasn't the best idea." The woman frowned at him. "You've got, um--" She waved at her own cheek. "Imprints." She shook her head. "They'll fade. Never mind. Okay."

Lord, she looked nervous enough for three cats in a room full of automated rockers. "Are you okay?" he asked, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. His brain caught up with him. "Hang on. You said City/Country, right?"

"Oh, thank God." She pulled out a handheld and spun the scroll bar. When she stopped and turned it around so he could see the screen, his yearbook photo stared back at him. "Cody. So glad you made it. I'm Janie, and I'm the group coordinator for this season."

"I knew I'd seen you from somewhere."

She made a face. "The sneak preview on the evening news, right? I'm not with City/Country. Not technically. They did tell you the GLBT-teen edition was being filmed in conjunction with a research project on American cultural attitudes, right? Good. Okay, that's me." She sped up as she talked until each word ran into the next. If Cody hadn't had practice listening to his mother and his sister when they got wound up, there was no way he'd ever have understood Janie.

What had her so freaked out?

Before he could ask, Janie rattled on. "See, about six of us are working toward our Ph.D.'s in different fields -- cultural studies, media/film, that kind of thing -- and City/Country was kind enough to let us work with them on this particular season. Which is great."

Cody sensed a "but" coming.

"But..." Janie trailed off, eyeing him nervously. "There was a schism. That's when--"

"I know what a schism is, thanks." Cody tried to laugh, to hide how he was getting tied up in knots on the inside. Once he'd come around to the idea, he'd realized how much he needed this summer away. Some time to think, to try and figure out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. He couldn't follow Joey's example and bum around from dead-end job to dead-end job, flitting on whenever he got bored. All anyone was ever given was one life, and it drove him nuts to think about wasting it.

Trouble was, he had no idea what he wanted besides a place of his own, a decent car, some money in the bank, and a hot boyfriend. A chance to get to college, and if he was really in the mood to dream big, med school -- that would be all he could ever ask from his craziest dreams about life.

In the real world, he was more than glad to get the City/Country money to help keep his family afloat. So if Janie was about to tell him they'd canceled this special season of City/Country, he thought he might have to run to the Greyhound bathroom and throw up.

"You look like you're going to be sick." Janie drew back, lips pulled over her teeth. "Oh, God, tell me the coffee isn't rancid."

Cody noticed a half-full cup at her feet. "Naw." He managed a grin. "Tastes terrible, but I don't think it'll repeat on you. I might still be woozy from the ride. Go on. What were you saying about schisms?"

"Right! Okay, yeah, we sort of split." She illustrated her meaning with a hand gesture. "Half of us decided this wasn't scholarly enough, and the other half of us, me included, thought it was about time to move dissertations into the twenty-first century."

"Wait. City/Country isn't canceled?"

"What?" She giggled nervously. "No, don't worry about that. I mean, now that you're here, we're fine. Five people is enough to work with."

"Five people?" Cody's mind churned. "What happened to the other ten?"

She grimaced. "Schism. Or they flaked. I'm not sure which."

From her demeanor, Cody figured Janie was on good speaking terms with flaking out. "So it's just the five of us now and half the production team. Am I getting that right?"

"Mmhmm." Janie made a dive for her coffee and sucked down a huge gulp. It seemed to help. When she came up for air, she had some color in her cheeks and her smile wasn't quite as forced. "We had to make a few changes to how the season will play out, but we're good to go. If you have all your bags, we'll get you out to the Baraunchswood Farm, your new home for the next eight weeks."

Cody breathed easy again. Changes, those he could deal with. How bad could they be? "Got everything right here," he said, indicating his duffel. "Lead the way."

Janie beamed at him, her smile suddenly dazzling. Oh yeah, Joey would have his tongue hanging out by now. As for himself, Cody thought Janie would be a trip to work with and, whatever this summer turned out to be like, it wouldn't be boring.

She stood up, slapping her hands together. "Fantastic. Follow me, and welcome to the world of reality TV. Let's go."

## **Chapter Two**

Loping along behind Janie, who took tiny steps but moved fast all the same, Cody made his way out of the Greyhound station -- thank God; another minute staring at those walls and I'd have lost my mind -- and into the weak, watery light of an overcast Georgia afternoon. He squinted at the thin streak of sun above him. Maybe three o'clock? He'd forgotten his watch and hadn't thought to take a look at the clock.



You'd lose your head if it wasn't stapled on, his brother liked to scoff at him.

"Over here." Janie's small, warm hand latched around Cody's wrist, directing him to go with her. "You're the last one we hoped would show up. Three flew in and one got dropped off."

"No one else is coming, for sure?" Cody tried to ward off another flutter of discomfort in his belly. Stop that, he scolded himself. You're gonna make this work, so quit whining. You do what you gotta do, 'cause no way you're turning tail now. He wasn't a quitter.

"Uh-uh. You and only you were our last hope." Janie tucked strands of loose hair behind her ears. "The others all confirmed cancellations." She waved at a shiny, giant-sized Ford pickup. "Geordie?"

The driver's side door on the truck rattled as its tinted window rolled down. Geordie MacPherson's familiar face peeked out, curly dark hair and easy-going spaniel's face and all. Cody had always liked how Geordie wasn't what you'd call typically handsome. He had some character to him.

"Janie," he hollered back. "Tell me he's lucky number five." Without waiting for Janie to respond, Geordie opened his truck door and jumped out, striding toward them with his hand out for a shake. "Cody, right? I recognize your picture."

He was... short. Cody fought not to blink and stare. Wow. He must wear boots with heels or something when he was on camera.

If Joey'd been here, he would have busted out laughing and started making jokes about the truck being overcompensation. Thinking about that, Cody's lips twitched. He coughed to keep from laughing and took Geordie's hand. He was fast revising "hot" to "cute", thinking Geordie now to be more of a puppy than a hound. How old was he? Late twenties?

"Pleasure to meet you," Geordie enthused. "Got all your stuff? Great. Ready to meet your new housemates?"

Cody tried to get a look through the darkened windows of the truck, to no avail. "Um, sure, I guess? Where are they?"

Geordie twisted his head around to glance behind him. He chuckled.

"Asleep, probably. Hey, guys!" He banged his fist on the tailgate of the truck. "Rise and shine, fellas. Gang's all here."

A tousled head of multi-colored hair weaved up from the truck bed, attached to a small, skinny body. The boy they both belonged to shook a heavy fringe of bangs out of his eyes. "Geordie, you jerk. I was having a good dream."

"Plenty of time for sleeping later, Paki. Poke the others, would you?"

"I thought you said we were supposed to behave ourselves."

"Paki thinks he's a comedian," Geordie explained in a stage whisper, mugging at Cody. "Paki, wake 'em up. I want you all to meet Cody."

Cody shifted his weight from foot to foot, uncomfortable at the attention. "Seriously, it's okay. If they're napping, let them nap. I could use a rest myself."

"He was sleeping on a row of chairs all lined up together," Janie chipped in. "I think we should let them all get a couple hours' rest when we get back to Baraunchswood. Kendra can wait."

"Kendra?" Cody asked.

Janie and Geordie shared a quick look, over too fast for Cody to do more than notice their hasty consult, giving him no time to try and interpret the meaning. "Kendra is the other representative of the scholarly team who'll be liaising on this season of City/Country," Geordie said dismissively.

"Kendra can be a little... high strung," Janie added. "Don't worry about it, okay?"

Nothing, in Cody's opinion, was more worrisome than someone telling him not to worry.

Paki cackled. "Welcome to the summer of your life, Cody." He saluted, then started stomping his feet, shod in steel-toed, unlaced boots. His oversized T-shirt with its Burger Barn logo billowed around him as he danced, probably kicking the other occupants of the truck bed every time he put a foot down. "Rise and shine, dorks!"

A deep tenor that sounded like it wanted to be a bass growled. "I will

kick your--"

"Language," Geordie warned.

"We ain't on camera yet." The owner of the tenor poked his head up, lips twisted in a sour scowl. "Least, that's not what I was told."

Geordie cleared his throat. "No. Not yet."

That struck Cody as odder still. Not all reality shows or docudramas or even documentaries did this, of course, but he thought for sure he'd seen arrival segments on a few City/Country season openers he'd caught. Huh. Well, maybe they'd stage that later.

Behind the tenor, two other guys around Cody's age appeared, yawning and stretching their arms above their heads. Neither spoke to him. Considering his options, Cody didn't say anything either.

"Sorry about this, but if you agree--" Janie started.

"--and sign a waiver--" Geordie continued.

"--the minivan got a flat and this is the best we can do."

Comprehension dawned. They'd be riding to Baraunchswood Farm in the back of that pickup truck. No wonder they were asking for him to sign a "if I get killed, it's not your fault" form.

More and more, he was wondering about what he'd gotten himself into. What Joey had tangled him up in, rather. He knew reality shows couldn't be this disorganized and make it out of the starting gate, and City/Country had run for several seasons so far. Was it the schism, or was it something else?

Still, what else could he do? Wasn't like he even had cash enough for a return ticket, and he wouldn't get his compensation until the season was over. No way he'd call home and ask for money, either. Joey brought home the only bread these days, and while he'd send the funds, it'd take away from other things his family needed more.

Cody summoned up a big grin and nodded. "Sure thing. Got a pen?"

The road beneath them bumped and rumbled as the truck crossed over

it, deviating from the main roads just outside of the small town of Baraunchs. Cody craned his neck, mentally and wistfully waving goodbye to what might have looked like Mayberry, but was his last chance for eight weeks at fast-food hamburgers, DVD stores and wireless 'net access.

Once they'd left the last white-board store behind, civilization vanished fast, with nothing ahead of them that Cody could see beyond farmer's fields and a hilly horizon.

"Didn't think it'd be this rural," he said to Paki, sitting beside him, who made a face, yawned and shrugged.

"I've decided to be philosophical about it," Paki said on the tail-end of his yawn. "Otherwise I'll spend the next eight weeks flipping out over one thing or another. You know? If I expect the weird, then it'll be easy riding. Right?"

Cody could see his point. Paki, he could tell, knew from weird, with his huge clothes and his unlaced boots and what Cody thought was a hole through his lower lip where a piercing had once been. Feathers of pink and green hair amongst a tangled natural red looked like the leftovers of a crazy party and some of that bizarre wash-out dye to him.

Paki elbowed him, grinning. "So c'mon, they probably want us to make nice. Cody, right?"

"In the flesh." Cody elbowed him back the way he would with Joey. "Philosophical. Okay."

"That's the spirit. So where are you from?"

The tenor-voiced dude who'd been complaining earlier snorted now. "Aww, how sweet. You two gonna be BFF 4-eva now?"

"Screw you, Frank," Paki replied without a bit of hostility. "Ignore Frank. He's a dick, and he's being all pissy because the cousin who drove him in tried to pass out church flyers."

"He did not, and you shut your mouth, punk." Frank's meaty hands bunched into fists.

"Now you've gone and hurt my feelings." Paki wagged his tongue at Frank.

Cody had to laugh. With the amusement, his worries lightened. Not all the way, but some. "Frank. Good to meet you."

Frank hawked up a gob of spit, grumped something under his breath, and turned to watch the rural scenery pass them by.

Geordie tooted the horn and turned down a road Cody might not have thought was a road at first glance, more of a dirt track leading into thick woods.

"Wow," Cody said, ducking so he wouldn't get clobbered by overhanging branches. "They weren't kidding about being out in the boonies, were they?" He tried to remember back over past seasons of City/Country. As he recalled, the locations themselves hadn't looked like they belonged in Deliverance.

"Nope," one of the two who hadn't spoken yet said softly. He adjusted his frameless glasses, tugging at the earpiece. Dark brown curls ruffled over his forehead, blown about by the wind scrolling over them as the truck picked up speed. Cody could barely hear his quiet voice over the crunching of gravel beneath the truck's wheels. "I think maybe they wanted extra privacy in case anyone... you know." His cheeks colored. "Made a fuss about..."

"About five queer boys shacking up for the summer?"

"Shut up, Frank," Paki said.

"You think that's the truth?" Cody asked.

"If it is, who cares? Honest to God, though, Frank, have you ever gotten laid?"

Frank swung back around to face them, eyes bulging. "What did you say?"

"Hey, hey, guys." Cody shifted up, not liking the change in tension. Frank didn't look like the type it was wise to bait, and from what he'd seen of Paki, Paki lived to yank people's chains. "Chill."

Frank scoffed at him. "Nobody asked you. This is between me and the runt."

"Nuh-uh." Cody refused to look away from Frank. "Eight weeks, guys. We're gonna spend them in each other's pockets, and I'm not spending my time patching you two up."

"Excuse me, doc." Frank glared at him. "Where do you get off acting like you're the boss of me, anyway? You want to go when we get out of this truck?"

"I could mop the floor with you but naw, I don't." Hair blew in Cody's mouth. By the time he'd finished spitting, Paki was in stitches and even Frank's death stare had faded into a smirk. "Y'all, all I'm saying is I've got a brother and a sister of my own, which is to say one of the things I came out here largely for was to get away from scraps. The last thing I plan to do with my summer is listen to the two of you bitch. So play nice, or I'll knock your heads together."

"You think you could?" Frank demanded, not bothering to hide it as he sized Cody up. "What are you, a tough guy or something?"

"I can be if I have to be. And yeah, already told you, you don't scare me. So siddown and shuddup and let's get along." Cody let his grin slide into total cheesiness, hoping for the exact reaction he got, which was Frank barking out a laugh and relaxing.

"Gonna have to keep an eye on you," Frank said. "Okay, whatever. But if short-stack over there starts hounding me, I'll squash him flat. Understood?"

Cody shoved Paki. "Deal?"

Paki rolled his eyes. "Yes, Ma."

Cody glanced at the other two passengers in the truck bed for confirmation. For real, he didn't want to spend his summer breaking up fights.

The dark-haired boy in glasses mumbled something Cody couldn't hear and crossed his arms over his knees. Next to him, the guy who hadn't yet spoken and at whom Cody hadn't taken a good look yet, didn't turn around to meet his questioning gaze, but instead applauded so slowly and deliberately that the noise smacked of layers-deep sarcasm.

Cody prickled, annoyed. He could deal with out-and-out jerks mugging for attention. What was this guy's problem?

Above them, the canopy of pine branches thinned and opened unexpectedly to the sky above them, gone from gray to blue while they rode through the forest, the formerly pitiful sun now blazing down bright and hot. Just ahead, a white clapboard farmhouse trimmed in green appeared at the end of a dirt-and-gravel road.

Baraunchswood Farm, read a trim sign planted by the driveway. On the wrap-around porch railing, someone had hung a vinyl sign saying Welcome City/Country!

Geordie slowed down their approach and rolled down his window. "Here we are, boys," he called out. "Home away from home, front door service!"

### **Chapter Three**

Check it out!" The truck's engine had barely stopped rumbling before Paki scrambled through the tangle of long legs in his way, clambering over the tailgate and jumping down to earth. He laced his hands together and ran them over his head from right above his eyes to the nape of his neck and whistled. "It's Green freakin' Acres out here."

From his position in the truck bed, Cody would have to say he agreed. Even from a distance, the farmhouse's white paint job looked bubbled and cracked in places, while the green had peeled clean off in more than a few spots. One of the boards on the wooden steps leading up to the verandah had split down its middle.

Janie, hopping clumsily out of the passenger side of the truck, slid on a pair of oversized sunglasses, bringing them in mid-rant on her cell phone. "What do you mean, the repairmen said 'next week'? We're here now!" She tugged at her hair. "My God, this is ridiculous."

Geordie came around to meet her. "Janie, we've talked about this. The house is 'charming', and a little rough paint never hurt anyone."

She dealt him a sour look. "This is important," she said, almost too quietly for Cody to hear. "Either this goes off as smoothly as possible, or I can kiss my Ph.D. goodbye."

Geordie hunched, lowering his tone. Cody kept on listening, feeling slightly guilty about it, but hey, he had a right to know how the land lay, didn't he?

"You're not the only one under the gun," he told Janie, leaning into her space. "City/Country is on its last legs. You think I'd bother with a stunt like this season if we didn't need some shock value ratings? Please. I have much more than you invested in making this work."

"It's not your career on the line."

"You wanna bet? I really don't want to go down in history as the host of the kind of catastrophe this could turn out to be. This season tanks, so does my cred with the networks."

Janie shook her cell phone at him. "Then use some of your almighty pull to get local contractors out here and fix the place up!"

"If you want to pay for them, you can be my guest. I --" Geordie cut his speech off in the middle, finally having noticed Cody sitting quiet as a mouse in the back of the truck bed. "Hey, buddy. What's up?"

Cody wondered why he had never before seen how plastic Geordie's grin was. "Nothing much, man. Just tired, I guess."

"Naps for you guys," Janie said, plastering on her own, much brighter, if equally fake, beam.

"We're not toddlers."

"Shut up, Frank." Paki had to stretch up on tip-toes to do it, but he



popped Frank on the back of the head and, hooting, sped ahead out of arm's reach.

"Paki!" Cody stood up, careful of his balance. "Behave."

Paki blew a kiss at him.

"Oh, yeah, this is going to be fantastic," Geoff grumbled, Cody's sharp ears catching what he wasn't meant to hear. "Okay, pal, out of the truck. We've got some introductory interviews to film, and then we'll get you five settled in."

Interviews. Okay, finally something that tracked with what Cody had come in expecting. Though now he kind of wondered if they wouldn't be filmed with a camcorder from Target.

"No problem." He carefully worked his way out of the truck, catching his balance on the glasses-wearing guy's shoulder. "Oops. Sorry, man."

The guy mumbled something, his tone unreadable, and turned faint pink. Cute. He put Cody in mind of his sister when she was embarrassed. "Hey, what's your name?" He turned to the one who hadn't yet said a single word, deciding to indulge his curiosity. "You, too."

"Alan," the glasses-wearing guy said, glancing sideways at Cody. The corner of his lips turned up a couple of degrees. "Alan Lancaster."

Mr. Silent stood up, popping kinks out of his back. He didn't look at Cody. "Shay. Sagittarius under Mercury rising. I like long walks on the beach and romantic candlelight dinners, and my turn-offs are nosy jerks. That about cover it for you?"

Cody counted to ten and let himself imagine how good it would feel to pop this guy in the nose.

"That'll do it, thanks." He turned to Alan, determined not to let Shay get to him any more than he already had. "You need a hand down?"

Shay made an unreadable noise low in his throat. He shoved his hands in his pockets and shook his head at Paki, running away from Frank. "One big happy family," he said flatly.

And for the life of him, Cody couldn't tell whether Shay was amused

or annoyed.

Given what he knew of Shay, he thought he'd have to go with annoyed as an understatement.

I can do this, he thought, tightening his jaw. "C'mon, Alan. I gotta stop Frank from slaughtering Paki in cold blood."

EXT. BARAUNCHSWOOD FARM: DAY

HOMECOMING INTERVIEW: FRANK

PAN IN on FRANK, a nineteen-year-old rancher's son from PANNICLE, TEXAS.

GEORDIE

(narrating)

Standing six-foot-three, Frank is a former fullback for his high school team, undefeated until his knee injury in the third quarter of the championship game. The last and only son of a proud ranching family, he's got a heavy weight on his shoulders. Frank's tough and Frank's bold, but does he have what it takes to last a full season of City/Country? Stay tuned and find out.

(to Frank)

Good morning, Frank.

FRANK

It's three-thirty in the afternoon.

JANIE

(off-screen)

Frank, just talk nice for the camera. We're putting together some sound bites for the City/Country interactive fan site and we could really use something that 'pops', that gives us an idea of who you are and why you're here. Can you do that for us?

GEORDIE

(forced laugh)

Janie, you took the words right out of my mouth. Frank, what we're hoping for here is a little bit of candid insight. Tell us about yourself.

FRANK

(shrugs)

What do you want me to say?

GEORDIE

Well, how about we start with the basic question our viewers will want to hear. Why did you decide to apply to participate in a season of City/Country?

FRANK

You ever spend a Texas summer on a dried-up ranch whose only working well left has an algae problem?

GEORDIE

Um... no, I can't say that I have.

FRANK

Try it, and you'll understand why I figured anything else was better.

GEORDIE

(forced laugh)

All right. So you'd like to get out there and see the world for yourself.

FRANK

Long's I don't have to wear nose plugs twenty-four/seven.

GEORDIE

Frank, tell me this. What would you do if you had a chance to really get away?

FRANK

(suspicious)

Huh?

GEORDIE

Frank, what would you say if I told you this season of City/Country has a special reward for those who stick it out the full eight weeks?

FRANK

(silence)

GEORDIE

Frank, had you ever thought you might like to go to college? On, say, a free ride?

FRANK

(censored)

GEORDIE

Say that again?

FRANK

I'd ask what the catch is.

EXT. BARAUNCHSWOOD FARM: DAY

HOMECOMING INTERVIEW: ALAN

PAN IN on ALAN

GEORDIE

(narrating)

Alan Lancaster, who hails from Whitewater, Michigan, has been emancipated from his parents since he was sixteen years old. Alan's a remarkable young man in this day and age, supporting himself by working in

a used bookstore and at the Youth Hostel he calls home for room and board. Although his independence has cost him good grades and good scores on his SAT's, Alan's the kind of bright young man who's got a stellar future ahead of him -- or he would, if he could afford to go to college. Although he doesn't know it, he might just have the chance at the end of this unusual, uniquely oriented season of City/Country. Stay tuned to see what happens!

GEORDIE

Alan, tell us a little bit about yourself.

ALAN

(mumble)

JANIE

Can you speak up so we can hear you?

ALAN

(mumble)

GEORDIE

Alan, if we told you that after this season of City/Country you might just be able to afford college, what would you say?

ALAN

(censored)

GEORDIE

Tell us about yourself, Cody. I have to say, I've looked forward to meeting you in particular from the moment I read your application letter. You're a fascinating young man.

CODY

(blinks)

Who, me?

GEORDIE

Absolutely.

CODY

Um. Okay.

(pause)

Why?

GEORDIE

Well, for one thing, because you're humble!

(laughs)

All kidding aside, you've impressed us, Cody. Friends, family and neighbors can't stop singing your praises.

CODY

They can't?

GEORDIE

Nope. You're a remarkable young man, Cody, and we're looking forward to getting to know you here on City/Country.

CODY

Um... is this a joke?

(fidgets, laughs uncertainly)

What are you talking about, man?

GEORDIE

Son, you have it within you to be the next John F. Kennedy.

CODY

Are you high on something? No, seriously. What's that supposed to

mean?

GEORDIE

Take the compliment, son. There are a lot of fine upstanding leadership qualities in you that I don't think you know you possess. Take, for example, the way you handled Frank and Paki. That could've been one heck of a scrap but you waded right in and made the peace.

CODY

It's not a big deal.

GEORDIE

I think it is. Not many boys your age that I know of would take a stand like that.

CODY

(silence)

GEORDIE

We think you'll go a long way in this game, Cody. Now! Let me ask you a question.

CODY

You're the boss-man.

GEORDIE

Calm down, huh? You look nervous.

CODY

(laugh)

No, I'm fine. I'm just not used to being on camera. Okay. Question. Bring it.

GEORDIE

Good boy. Okay. Now, the way we understand it, Cody, you've

dreamed of having the chance to go to college.

CODY

Well, yeah. I mean, who doesn't?

GEORDIE

And are you headed off to a university this fall?

CODY

No, I'm not.

(shrugs)

The money isn't there. I'm not complaining. That's just the way it is.

GEORDIE

What would you have liked to study? Politics?

CODY

(laughs)

What? No, no way. Medicine, probably. Definitely. Medicine. I'd love to be a doctor.

GEORDIE

Med school's expensive as education goes.

CODY

Yeah. I've made my peace with it, though. Who knows? Maybe it'll still happen someday.

GEORDIE

You like to look on the bright side of life, don't you?

CODY

That makes me sound like Pollyanna, man. It's not like that. I just...



(scratches nose)

I don't like getting bogged down. If I'm up against something I can change, great. I'll do my best. Otherwise, why let it worry me to death? It's not a big deal.

GEORDIE

Cody, I think what I have to say next will come as a pleasant surprise to you. How would you feel about the chance to win a full ride to the college of your choice?

CODY

(censored)

"There you are." Janie turned off the camera and shook her cell phone at a blonde woman who'd emerged from the house. "Where have you been?"

The blonde didn't look disturbed in the least by Janie's nervousness or her shrill temper. She smiled, an expression Cody didn't care for at all. He'd seen that kind of look on nature programs, usually right before the parts they had to slap on "some content may not be suitable for younger viewers" for. "I've been here all along, gathering my impressions and editing the fan site. I decided we'd stream the introductory interviews." Over Janie's horrified gasp, she went on to say, "The number of hits we've already gotten are quite impressive."

Geordie stood very still. Cody thought he saw a muscle twitching in the man's cheek. "Your contract states you have to clear things like that with us before you act."

"Do I?" the blonde asked, her dismay transparent as a sheet of glass and fake as a ring from a bubblegum machine. "I'm so sorry. I think the sponsors will be pleased with the online buzz, however. And we know how important their funding is, don't we?"

"Impressions, you said." Janie jittered with temper. "Subtitles and everything, I bet."

"You know how important protagonist branding is."

"Branding?" Frank blurted.

"Not like on a ranch, idiot." Paki kicked Frank in the ankle. Cody suspected Frank would have bloodied Paki's nose for him if the blonde hadn't gone on, ignoring them.

"Oh, yes. Viewers will need something to remember you by. A defining characteristic, if you like."

"Uh-huh." Cody shifted his weight. "So who's who?"

"It wasn't a hard differentiation." She nodded at Frank. "The pugilist." To Paki. "The clown." To Alan. "The genius." To Shay. "The enigma."

The blonde stopped, eyeing Cody and looking so smug she made his stomach hurt. "And you," she said, drawing the single-syllable words out. "The unwilling hero."

"The what now?" he demanded, startled.

"I'm Kendra." She hummed, completely pleased with herself. "I think you boys will like what we've got in store for you."

## **Chapter Four**

"Yes. This would be our Kendra." From the way Janie bit off the words, as if they were quick, nasty bites of something rotten, Cody could tell Kendra wasn't about to win any popularity contests. Not that he wouldn't have figured as much from both what they said earlier and the way that Kendra looked at them now. Cat and mouse. Cody knew her type.

He didn't figure she'd end up becoming his favorite person in the

whole wide world, either.

"Kendra Ross, all-around-self-appointed producer of this season of City/Country," Geordie said flatly. "Ms. Ross, at the ripe old age of twenty-six, a Ph.D. candidate in public relations theory and application, with a specialization in virtual arenas, friends with some very wealthy men and women, has offered to share her expertise with us and assist in making this our best run ever. Please say hello to your new host."

"Huh?" Paki blurted. He rounded on Geordie. "For real? You're the host. My grandma's watched this crap since Season One and you've never not been the host."

Cody thought if he listened closely enough, he'd be able to hear Geordie's teeth grinding.

"Oh, everyone can use a break every now and again," Geordie said after swallowing, his Adam's apple jerking under the skin. His eyes were narrowed and dark, at odds with his jovial tone. "Kendra here shows great potential."

"Consider me an apprentice." Kendra minced down the porch stairs. Cody took an automatic step back, then swore at himself. Lord, he was acting like she was a Ninja threat or something.

Just, he didn't like her. More than an ordinary bitch who laughed at them behind their backs and got off on power trips and playing pranks, he had the instant and unshakeable feeling that Kendra's being here spelled trouble with a capital "look out".

Kendra lifted her chin, pixie-cut hay-colored hair swinging around her cheeks. "While you're here at Baraunchswood Farm, I'll be your leader in everything that matters. On camera, I'll appear to be the host. Off camera, while I am still in charge, I want you to rest assured that you can come to me for anything you need. Even if all you want to do is talk, I'm here for you."

Uh-huh. And you'll get every second of it on film. Cody hoped to God the others in their group knew better.

Janie cleared her throat, to which Kendra rolled her eyes. "I'm getting around to it, Janie darling."

"Oh, God," Paki muttered, sidling closer to Cody as if for protection. "You ever hear a woman call another woman 'darling'? That means the claws are about to come out."

"You two pansies scared of girls half your size?" Frank grunted, scornful.

"Damn right I am. You've never seen a cat fight?"

"Humph." Frank shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Your funeral, man." Paki ducked partially behind Cody. Cody got the feeling it was only half-mugging for the amusement of the other contestants. "Enjoy the show."

Kendra regarded them with faux patient indulgence. "You do realize I'm not deaf," she said silkily. "Let's all be honest with one another, why don't we? If you see me as a threat, then please, let me know. I'm only looking out for your best interests and open communication is key to making a success out of this season of City/Country. Do you have any questions?"

Silence.

"All right, then." Kendra rubbed her hands together. Honest to God rubbed her hands, skinny little hands that made Cody think of chicken bones. She probably meant for the gesture to indicate how she was all about getting down to business. For his part, he got an uncomfortable sensation that reminded him of Mr. Burns on The Simpsons.

Maybe he did need some sleep, if he was thinking this crazy.

Janie cleared her throat again, louder and less polite this time. Cody wondered why she didn't just speak up with what she had on her mind.

"Yes, Janie." Kendra rested her hand on the small of Janie's back. Janie stiffened. "Janie here is my second in command. If I'm not available, you go to her. She'll also be our liaison with the town in case we need anything, or in case of emergencies."

"So she's a glorified gofer," Paki piped up.

Kendra didn't deny that.

"I thought she was a Ph.D. student in Cultural Studies," Alan said, barely above a whisper. "Shouldn't she --"

"We all have to work together," Kendra said, overriding him. "Normally, yes, Janie would serve on a different level. However, as she might have told you, we're working under highly unusual conditions. I'll be frank with you boys. City/Country is on its last legs as the wave of reality TV's popularity has started cresting out. This may well be the last run of the show, unless we turn it upside down and inside out. Now, who's with me?"

Cody shuffled uncomfortably. Frank rumbled something unintelligible, Alan looked at a poplar tree planted beside the driveway, Paki snorted, and Shay did absolutely nothing.

"Wonderful," Kendra said, as pleased as if they'd all jumped up and down and shouted "hooray". Oh, Lord. "If you would, please, follow me. I'll take you on a tour of Baraunchswood Farm. We'll only hit the high spots, mind you. Part of the fun will be your own explorations."

"Wait a second," Paki said. Cody suspected Paki had a lot of trouble with impulse control. That could make for problems later, even more so than what'd likely happen if he kept baiting Frank. "You said upside down and inside out. So what's that mean?"

Huh. Good question. Cody looked directly at Kendra, making it clear that he was waiting to hear her answer. Frank looked along with he and Paki, though Alan was still absorbed in studying the poplar tree and Shay appeared to be bored out of his mind.

"It means that we have to make this season a little more... 'commercial'." Geordie made the quote marks with his fingers, plastering on a blatantly fake grin. "Nothing serious, of course. A few competitions. Something to get the viewing audience fired up. A couple of challenges."

"No eliminations or anything like that," Janie added firmly, staring at Kendra. "And nothing that'll get us in trouble with the censors."

That didn't comfort Cody. He'd seen "Real World" enough times to know that on the cable network on which City/Country usually aired, there wasn't much they wouldn't be able to do. He guessed, now, that was why no one was under eighteen.

Kendra splayed her hand over her heart. "I would never do such a thing. A touch of edginess, that's all I'm asking for."

Frank made a rude noise. Cody agreed with the sentiment, even if he kept quiet about it.

"Challenges and competitions." Paki rolled the words thoughtfully. "Like what, sack races and stuff? Shut up," he snapped at Frank, who'd snickered. "You know what I mean."

"More or less," Kendra confirmed.

"So how about you tell us what's 'more' and what's 'less'?" Frank demanded.

"And is there anything else?" Paki took a step closer to Frank. "Seriously, I think we have a right to know if we're going to do this."

Janie smirked at Kendra. "Please, be my guest."

"Cat fight," Paki stage-whispered.

Kendra ignored him. She was good at that, hearing what she wanted to and nothing else. "You make it sound like we're going to push you in an oven." She sounded like she wanted to pat Paki on the head. "Nothing of the sort. Think of shows like 'Big Brother', if you will. The cameras we've set up --"

"Hidden," Janie coughed.

"Inconspicuously-placed cameras," Kendra continued, "will run twenty-four seven with a live feed streamed to our official home on the network's main site. The viewers will really get a feel for who you are why you're here, and how well -- or not -- you get along."

"That's invasion of privacy," Paki protested. "That wasn't in my contract."

"Actually, it was. You agreed to being filmed for any and all purposes required during this season."

"Yeah, but that's not what I--"

"She's right," Alan spoke up quietly. He crouched to pick up one of the small chunks of gravel from the driveway. "I remember."

"Good boy, Alan. All right, then. I'll tell you what." A devilish smile lit Kendra's face. "Let's start off with a Q & A right here to get us going with a bang. Let's hear from all of you. Tell us and the viewers what your first impressions are of your new housemates."

Cody and his four compatriots glanced simultaneously and uneasily at one another.

"Oh, now, this isn't hard," Kendra scolded. She sat on the edge of the steps. "We'll start with you, Cody."

"Me?"

"Yes, you." She tilted her head. "Do you realize, Cody, that everyone's looking to you for leadership?"

"Not that crap again, come on," he protested. "What do you even mean by it?"

"I ain't lookin' to him for anything," Frank said rudely.

"I don't think--"

Kendra waved her hand, cutting Cody off. "Leaders never do see the seeds of greatness in themselves."

Cody kind of wished the driveway would open up and swallow him whole. Honest to God, he was a good-natured kind of guy, and he preferred to live and let live, but that all depended on being allowed to let live in the first place, himself. "I think I'll pass," he said firmly.

"You don't have anything to say about your housemates?" Kendra pushed. "Nothing at all?" Sunlight glinted off her sharp smile. "Do you like them? Dislike them? Do you think any of them are cute?"

"Excuse me?" Cody's eyes went wide. "What's that got to do with anything?"

Kendra leaned back on the steps. "Come on now, Cody. You're young. I remember what boys are like at your age. There's no harm in 'fessing up to

a tiny crush or four."

No. No way. Even if he did -- which he didn't -- it'd be none of her business. "I'll pass," he repeated, meeting her mocking gaze. "Send me home if you want, but I'm not gonna answer that kind of question."

"Are you shy?"

"Shy hasn't got a thing to do with it."

"You realize you don't really have a choice under the rules of the game, don't you?"

"That's in the contract, too?"

"In a manner of speaking. You do remember the section that spoke of basic agreement to obey the rules set by the host, don't you?"

"You're kidding me." Paki grabbed his head and tugged at the tangles. "So no matter what crazy stuff you want to know, we have to tell you? Jesus. If I get a wet dream over an Olympic skater, I've got to face the nation and talk about it? Shut up, Frank."

"Olympic skater." Frank hooted. "Man, you're a freak."

Paki snarled at Frank, who batted his eyes at Paki. "Bring it, little guy."

"Bigger they are, harder they fall." Paki shoved up the sleeves of his T-shirt, which looked good as a gesture of defiance but didn't mean much in the practical sense, as they fell down immediately, almost to his wrists. "I'm tougher than I look."

Oh, hell no. Cody shoved Paki, not with all his strength, just enough to get his attention, and shook his head at Frank. "If you two start scrapping, I'll put myself in the middle. I meant what I said. Fight each other and I'll end it."

"Interesting," Kendra murmured. "You seem uncomfortable with disagreements, Cody. Yet you don't have any problem objecting to the rules of the game."

"Maybe because these changes are all bullshit," Shay offered,



surprising Cody enough to turn and look at him. He waited to see what Shay might have to add but nope, it sounded like he was done.

Kendra continued. "Let's hear it from you, then. Alan, why don't you start?"

Alan's blush deepened. "No."

"No?" Kendra queried, slyly pleased. "Why don't you feel comfortable talking about this, Alan?"

"You're skirting the line of sexual harassment, if not actually crossing it," Alan said, intensely studying the pebble in his hand. He bounced it up and down and rolled it over his knuckles, fascinating Cody, though not enough to distract him from Kendra's manipulations and their effects on the group.

"He's right," Geordie put in his two cents.

Kendra didn't seem to be a bit bothered. "They're all over eighteen, Geordie. They're legally considered adults. Besides, where's the harm in a little sizzle? You know sizzle sells."

"Sizzle's for steaks," Frank said bluntly. "And I'm from a ranch. I should know."

"Yes, but your ranch hasn't had a herd of beef cattle in oh, five years?" Kendra replied, smooth as cream.

Frank refused to back down. Good for him, Cody thought. "That'll change. S'not what we're talking about."

"Why, Frank, don't tell me you're shy."

Frank bristled up. "I'm not. Just don't like being played."

"But that's what you're here for, isn't it? To play the game?"

Frank grunted. "Matter of fact, no, I ain't. I signed on for a documentary kind of thing, the way I've always seen on City/Country." He scowled at Cody and the others. "What? My sisters like this crap."

Cody raised his hands. I didn't say a word, man.

"Of course you did. However, let me remind you that as I said earlier, a few things have changed due to extenuating circumstances."

Alan popped the pebble off his forefinger and balanced it on the knuckle of his pinky. "Maybe you should tell us exactly what's different."

"And then what? We can make up our minds as to whether or not we stay or go?" Frank curled his lip. "You gonna stop us if we decide we want out?"

"Sounds to me like you need us," Paki added, visibly gathering his 'tude. "So if we don't like some of the changes, we can at least debate them and maybe compromise, right?"

Kendra raised one shoulder in a graceful shrug. "You could, of course. Far be it from me to get in the way of good democracy. Let me remind you, though, that I really don't think any of you want to leave."

A chance to go to college. Those words sank into Cody and grabbed on tight. Oh, she was a clever one. Had them right where she wanted them and she knew it, too. She had Janie over a barrel with the threat to her Ph.D., and she probably had Geordie by the short hairs because if she threw the game or walked out, she'd likely take all kinds of sponsorship dollars with her, the season and the show would be canceled, and so much for his career as a host.

Cody's stomach twisted. Kendra wouldn't be stopped in anything she wanted to do, so long as she kept it just this side of legal.

She could do whatever she wanted to them, dangling the college scholarship over their heads, and they'd have no choice but to go along.

They were all, Cody decided, in deep, deep trouble here.

## Chapter Five

"I understand that this is a lot to take in," Kendra soothed, saccharine as fast-food iced tea. "Janie and Geordie and I need to confer on a few matters, so why don't the five of you go have a chat? If things are bothering you, get them out in the open now. Cody, you're in charge."

He didn't bother to protest. She'd made up her mind good and proper, and whether or not it ate at him, he couldn't change the way she wanted to play this.

He could, however, enjoy some passive aggression. So he stood still, blank-faced and waiting for someone else to take the lead.

"Is that a suggestion or an order?" Paki finally asked.

"A friendly suggestion," Kendra replied. Her eyes were cold and Cody got the message: it's an order.

Paki seemed to understand, too. "Fine. C'mon, let's do this." He stomped out of the driveway, unlaced boots flapping with each heavy step. "Over here by these weird bushes with the funky blue flowers."

"Snowball bushes," Alan said quietly, following Paki after one uncertain glance at Cody, who hadn't yet moved. "Also known as graveyard bushes."

"Graveyard? Jeez, that's morbid. Why?"

"I don't know."

Frank shook his head, following the two. Cody decided he wouldn't wait to see what Shay did and walked in Frank's wake, only the soft scuff of sneakers on gravel telling him Shay had apparently decided to play along.

By the time they'd gathered together at the corner of the green-and-white farmhouse, Cody finding a comfortable spot to lean against the outer wall, Paki had plucked one of the huge, multi-blossomed Cadillac-blue flowers off the bush and sniffed it, making a face. "Yeah, I see why they're 'graveyard'. They stink."

Cody cuffed him like he would his kid sister when she was being a brat, knuckle-rubbing his scalp for good measure. He cleared his throat. "Okay. So... what's the plan?"

"We need a plan? You mean outside of figuring whether or not to pour a bucket of water on Kendra to see if she melts?"

"You want more of this?" Cody held up his fist, knuckles out, grinning when Paki over-dramatically dodged. "I'm not saying that whole bucket of water thing isn't tempting, but I guess we do have to figure out what our strategy is. Sounds to me like they've changed the entire game that we signed up for on us."

"Are you asking if we stay or if we go?" Frank snapped off a twig on the snowball bush. "Not much of a choice, if you ask me. At least for me. Janie made you all the same offer she made me, right?"

"The free, full ride to college? Yeah, Janie said that was on the line."

"It's better than the usual cash compensation," Alan said. "Comparatively speaking. We'd only be paid for our time if this was their usual game--"

"Not much more than a summer working construction," Frank said. "Or branding calves."

"Better than flipping burgers," Paki said, grimacing.

Cody nodded. "I'm not disagreeing. Thing is, I didn't only come out here for the money. I wanted some time to think where there's no family to tell me what I should think. You know?"

"So what's stopping you?" Shay asked abruptly.

"Isn't it obvious? It's not about working hard and getting along --"

Shay's snort was eloquent.

"Okay, so that was cheesy. Give me a break." Cody tugged at his earlobe. "The way Kendra puts it, it's more like 'Survivor: The Boonies'."

"She said no eliminations."

"Same difference."

"What does that mean, anyway?" Paki wondered. "If it's the same, how can it be different?"

"You are one sorry ADD freak, aren't you?"

"Frank," Cody warned absently. "Y'all know what I mean. It's not what City/Country always has been. And you've seen the way they're fighting, right? Going behind each other's backs. Filming us when we didn't know. They'll make our lives hell, or at least Kendra will."

"If you let her," Shay said, wandering off to examine the shutters like they'd done something to him. He picked off a flake of peeling green paint. "That's what she wants."

"That's my point." Cody tried to be clear. "What I'm saying is, she's changed everything and she's got that contract saying we have to play along. And that's not what I signed up for."

"So go home, if you're that offended."

"I'm not offended."

"Me neither, and I ain't going anywhere." Frank dropped his handful of snowball flowers, now shredded into a handful of blue fragments. "I didn't figure I'd get to go to college. I mean, ever. The compensation I got from this summer, that was to put aside for emergencies." He looked embarrassed. "I take care of my family."

"Me too." Cody gazed thoughtfully at Frank. "Good to know."

Frank snorted. "Whatever."

Cody rolled his eyes, annoyed all over again, and moved on. "Paki, what about you? What kind of family do you have? Alan?" He left Shay out accidentally-on-purpose.

Alan shook his head. "I don't have any family left to speak to."

"All I've got is my mom, and she's pretty independent. I haven't ever met my dad. Only know what he looks like from one picture I stole out of her photo album. She runs this hole-in-the-wall New Age store full of

crystals and Tarot cards." Paki shuffled his weight from foot to foot. "The store barely turns a profit beyond what we need to get by, plus my grades sucked. So I wasn't going to get to go to college either. Until now."

"Exactly. It's the perfect bait. We're all gonna stay." Cody crossed his legs at the ankle. "So how do we turn this to our advantage? Roll with the punches or see if we can stay ahead?"

"Huh." Frank pursed his lips. "You're saying we should, what, try and take over?"

"Uh-uh. I --"

"He's saying we should get one step ahead of her and keep it that way," Paki butted in. "And that's not a bad idea. We listen to whatever her rules are whenever she hands 'em out, we play her games, and we don't turn into her puppets."

"Mutually exclusive," Shay mumbled.

Paki flipped him off. "We smile, we nod, and then we do our own thing, that's what it sounds like to me. Take her rules and kind of twist them in ways she can't object to. And if she doesn't like it, tough. She can't hold a gun to our heads and make us dance. Then, after we're back home, we write tell-all books and laugh our way to the bank." Paki socked Frank's arm, for no reason Cody could figure except that maybe it was fun. Frank swatted at him. "Sound good to all of you?"

"It's eight weeks," Alan said quietly. "Do you really want to live like that for two months?"

"I've done worse." Paki pouted his lips Elvis-style. "Gotta do what you gotta do, shy guy."

What Elvis had to do with this, Cody didn't know. All the same, his lips tugged up in a reluctant smile. You either had to love Paki or beat his head in with a shovel, and he was starting to get fond of the guy.

Not in the way Kendra wanted him to, of course. That just seemed... wrong. Like cruising for a hooker or something. Cody ran the analogy through his head a few times and decided that sounded about right. She wanted to play pimp for ratings and to hell with what her marionettes went

through.

"We do what we have to, sure," he said, glancing from guy to guy. "But like Paki said, that doesn't mean dancing to her tune on everything she tells us."

"We've at least got to pretend--" Paki started.

"Listen to me, man." The attention made Cody uncomfortable, so he hurried through the rest of what he had to say. "All I'm saying is, we don't bend over for her."

"I ain't into pegging," Frank said dryly, startling Cody into a snort of laughter.

"You have potential," Paki said, sizing Frank up as if with new eyes.

"I can still pound you into a greasy spot on the grass."

"Name the time, name the place."

"Shut up, idiots." Cody said it with a grin, feinting at Frank, who shadow-boxed right back. "Let me finish." A little more at ease with himself, he went on. "Doing what you gotta do... yeah, I get that. Thing is, that means we gotta do for ourselves as much as her. I'm not gonna do crap I'll hate myself for. So we keep that in mind as we pick and choose, throw her a few bones to keep her happy, and get out of here with what we came for plus our pride."

Shay made a small "humph" noise, but didn't look over or say anything more.

Frank nodded slowly, chewing on the inside of his cheek. "That's only gonna work if we all stick to it. Anyone decides they're gonna be her pet, we're all screwed."

"So we all shake on it or something?" Paki asked. "All for one, one for all?"

"There were only three Musketeers," Cody remembered.

"Four, if you count d'Artagnan," Alan murmured.

"That's beside the point. We all agree and we stick to it. Okay?" Paki stuck out his fist.

Cody thumped it with his own fist. "Done."

"So what happens if someone does break loose? 'Cause you know they're gonna." Despite his nay-saying, Frank thumped both their fists.

Cody had no idea. "We deal with it when it happens. Alan, are you in?"

Alan stood still for a moment, then sighed and flicked his pebble off to a side. He brushed knuckles with Frank, then Paki, and finally Cody, only looking up once, shyly, at Cody. "Okay. I'm in."

"You can be d'Artagnan," Cody teased, wanting suddenly to see Alan blush again.

"I'd rather be Porthos."

"Whatever floats your boat, four-eyes."

Paki jabbed Frank in the ribs. "Behave."

"What?"

Alan half-smiled. "It's okay. I've been called worse."

"It's not okay." Lord, they were already starting. "Frank, unless you want us all to start calling you an orangutan or something, shut it up with the names."

Frank rolled his eyes. "Yeah, whatever."

It'd do. Only one loose cannon left to take care of. Cody was almost giddy with what they'd accomplished so far, and he hoped like heck Shay would throw in alongside. They'd best Kendra yet and walk away proud winners.

Shay rolled his shoulders. "Quit looking at me."

"Glad to, as soon as you let us know what you plan to do," said Frank. "In, out, indifferent?"



Shay exhaled a long breath. "You know it's not going to make a difference, don't you? She'll get to you in the end."

"Not if we hang tough. Shut up, Frank. I have a right to like bad 80's music if I want."

"I bet you liked those pretty boys."

Cody laughed. Now that they'd gotten used to each other, the sharp edges were gone from Frank and Paki's bickering, and they reminded him of brothers. "C'mon, man. At least we can try."

"Anyone ever tell you you're a friggin' Pollyanna?"

"I've heard it a few times."

"Come out of your shell all sunshine and puppies," Shay muttered. "I'm 'indifferent' and before you start? I'm not here to make friends. Y'all leave me alone and I'll do the same."

The bluntness stung. "Screw you, man," Cody retorted more sharply than he might otherwise have intended. "I'm not asking for anything but a united front."

"United as long as we do what you want?" Shay turned just far enough toward Cody to display his cocked eyebrow. "You sound like you're playing Kendra's game already."

Cody frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

Shay turned more fully, facing Cody. "I mean, you're buying her crap because it tastes good. She's playing you. You get that, right? All that crap about you being 'our leader' and the next friggin' JFK. It's a smokescreen. She wants it to go to your head so you'll start believing her, and then acting like you're our lord and master. Makes for good TV, great ratings, whatever. Way I see it, you've got a choice. Give her what she wants and turn into an ass, or let her go screw herself." Shay shrugged. "Your call."

It was a longer speech than Cody had come to think he'd ever hear out of Shay. He had a hard time not gaping at the guy, who'd already gone off into whatever solitary world he lived in the rest of the time.

After a long, uneasy silence, Paki rubbed the back of his neck.

"Look... we do need a representative, don't we? Someone to go to Janie or Geordie or face Kendra down and tell her to go screw herself."

"You mean a tattletale."

Paki didn't deny it.

"Without a leader, groups crumble," Alan whispered. "I'm okay with Cody speaking for us. As long as he listens to what we have to say and doesn't try to make up our minds."

Cody licked his lips. "That's not what I asked for, you guys."

"Nope, but it sounds like that's what you're getting." Shay pushed off from the shutters and turned his back on them, ambling toward the waiting production team. "Looks like it's showtime, kids. Moment of truth. What's it gonna be, Cody?"

Shay glanced over his shoulder, a dark light in his eye. "Chicken?"

## **Chapter Six**

"So, have you ever done anything like this before?" Paki adjusted the hang of his duffel over his shoulder. The bag was at once both the ugliest and the most fascinating example of its type Cody thought he'd ever seen. Probably dark blue at one point, faded mostly gray, with big red splotches like the world's worst tie-dye. Paki had fastened at least a dozen buttons and just as many appliques -- was that what they called those funky little patches? -- telling the world that he was "gay by birth, fabulous by choice" and that they'd better "smile when you say that".

"Done what, reality TV?" Cody rolled his shoulder, aching under the weight of his own bag. Funny how it hadn't bothered him until now, when it seemed to have packed on an extra twenty pounds somewhere along the way.

Maybe I'm more tired than I thought, he figured, yawning.

"Course I have," he said, wanting to see if he could get a rise out of Paki. "You're saying you don't recognize me from Brisco Springs 41403?"

Paki made a face. "That's not what I meant. I'm more talking about..." He waved his hands like he was trying to catch confetti. "The situation, man. Toeing the line and doing the whole 'thank you, ma'am, may I have another' shtick."

"You haven't?" Cody stopped at the foot of the farmhouse's main staircase, which they'd been told led to the bedrooms upstairs. Frank, Alan and Shay had all made it up there ahead of him and Paki. Frank moved fast when he wanted to.

"No, actually." Paki hoisted his duffel higher and trudged laboriously up the stairs, Cody following behind him. "I told you about my mom. She's the only one to blame for my upbringing, and trust me, 'rules' aren't her *raison d'etre*."

"She let you run wild, huh?" Cody flicked one multicolored spike in Paki's hair. The tangles, he'd decided were probably more the result of several nights' crappy sleep than an intentional effect; still, the look kinda worked for him.

"Hey, hey, hey, leave the 'do alone." Paki batted his eyelashes at Cody, so campy and over-the-top that Cody cracked up. "Wild? I dunno if that's the right word. More like she's a believer in everyone living their own life. For example, when I was six I decided I didn't want to have a regular bedtime. So when I told her, she said 'go to bed when you feel like it'."

"So what happened?" Cody asked as they topped the stairs and found themselves facing down a long, narrow hallway peppered with closed wooden doors that didn't quite hang level in their frames. Each door's knob had been painted in a bright hue that made his eyes want to water.

"A couple of weeks of being too tired to stay awake through school

and I learned my lesson."

"Huh." Cody tried one doorknob and found it locked. He rattled it a couple of times to make sure, shrugged, and moved on. From somewhere inside the rooms, he heard Frank hollering and assorted bumps and thumps of guys getting noisily settled. "You know, I wonder if this is what moving into dorms is like."

"Probably. You're not gonna ask me what kind of lesson I learned?"

Cody eyed Paki, who almost bobbed up and down with eagerness. "Okay..." he said slowly. "Tell me."

"I learned to nap as soon as I got home, and then I could stay up all night playing video games and be great in school the next day. Also, I learned how to make coffee."

"Coffee? Jesus, you just said you were six."

Paki cackled. "God didn't make me this wired. We can thank Juan Valdez for my sunny good spirits."

"Dork." Cody elbowed him and reached for another of the doorknobs. This one turned in his palm. No one yelled at him about this room already being taken, so he figured it'd be what he called home for the next eight weeks. "My stop. See you at dinner?"

"Actually, mind if I come with you?"

Cody didn't care, no, but why would Paki want to? Paki must have read his confusion, as he shrugged with what Cody could tell was exaggerated casualness. "I'm not in any rush to tuck myself away. I'm used to a lot of commotion and big bangs and everything."

"In your mother's New Age shop?"

"Ever been to a prayer circle? Those drums are loud." Without asking again, Paki trailed after Cody like a love-struck puppy, chattering on about invocations to Mother Earth and other crazy stuff. Cody only halfway paid attention to him, and stopped listening completely when he got his first look at the bedroom.

"Good God, would you look at this?" What Cody had found wasn't the

small, poky bedroom he'd expected, your basic four walls, a rickety dresser and a creaky bed.

Nope. This door opened into a room that stretched the length of the entire upstairs. Five beds with iron frames were lined up against one wall, each made with plain blankets in those god-awful color-blind nightmare shades. Cody cringed at the thought of sleeping under something neon yellow. God Almighty, it probably glowed in the dark.

Behind him, Paki stilled. "Okay, unexpected."

"You're telling me." Frank looked disgruntled, for which Cody couldn't blame him. "Wonder whose idea this was?"

Alan stood at a random space around the middle, running his hand over a line of what Cody would at first have called molding and realized now was the spot where a dividing wall had come down recently.

"Funny how they don't have the funds to fix some peeling paint, but they can knock down rooms just fine, ain't it?" Frank sat heavily down on one of the beds, which squeaked loudly in protest. He boggled at it, bouncing gently to test the noise. It squeaked like a mouse in a trap.

Paki guffawed. "What do you wanna bet they made extra sure to get the creakiest frames they could? God knows Kendra would freakin' love it if she could follow the screek, screek, screek and catch us in flagrante delicto."

"In what?" Frank wanted to know.

"She'd love to capture a couple or more of us amping up the ratings." Shay dug through his own duffel, hunting for something.

"Huh?"

Shay dealt Cody a long, level look. "I know you're not that stupid. You can't be. Think about it real hard and then tell me what I mean."

Cody's jaw dropped. "No way. Isn't that illegal?"

"Pfft. You think that'd stop Kendra?"

"We are all eighteen or older," Alan pointed out, frowning as he traced the line of demarcation where walls had recently been.

"Hmm." Shay's hum was laced with cynical weight. "Interesting. Want to bet they made really, really sure we were all old enough to give informed consent once Kendra came on board?"

"Jesus wept!" Paki flopped down full-length on an as yet unclaimed bed. The springs shrieked in protest despite his slight weight. "Can we not talk about Kendra? It's bad enough we have to face her every time we leave this room."

"We might as well be prepared." Alan fiddled with the earpiece of his glasses. He raised them to rest on the top of his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. Looked like he had a headache; Cody wouldn't be surprised.

"I think I have some Tylenol," he offered.

Alan blinked at him, seeming startled. "That'd be great. Thanks."

"Not a problem." Cody tossed his duffel on the single bed remaining and tugged open the zipper to dig through. Where was it, where was it... hey, cool, tucked inside a pair of tube socks. He held the socks up, dangling from his hand. "Gotcha."

Alan's eyes went wide. He backed up a step, bumping the footboard of his bed. "Okay?"

"What? Oh." Cody shook the bottle of Tylenol out of his socks. "They're clean."

Alan smiled, shaking his head. "Wouldn't matter anyway. Beggars can't be choosers." He held out his hand for the pain pills. "Thank you."

"It's cool." Cody shook out two red-and-white caplets and reached to Alan to drop them in the guy's palm.

Their fingers brushed. A jolt of heat startled Cody, bursting open in his gut. Alan faltered, flinching, but he didn't move. His huge eyes focused on Cody's, amazed and a little scared at the same time.

Just when Cody was about to get embarrassed -- despite not wanting to move -- Frank let one rip.

"Oh, God!" Paki screeched, snagging the socks from Cody and hurling them at Frank. "Could you be any more disgusting?"

"Dunno, sweetheart." Frank smirked. "Could you be any more of a fairy?"

"Hey." Cody pointed at Frank. "We had this talk about name-calling."

Frank shot him a disbelieving sneer. "You ain't the boss of me."

"No, I'm not. But I can and will stand firm on this."

"Why's it bother you?" Paki wanted to know. "Seriously, did the guys in high school call you... call you... huh." He sat up on his elbows, studying Cody. "What would they have called a guy like you?"

Cody busied himself unpacking his duffel, focusing intently on its contents. "Nothing," he replied.

Shay made another "humph" noise. Cody kind of wanted to pop him one for it, even though he knew how stupid that'd be, picking a fight over not having been harassed in school, as if he wished he had been.

No one had ever even tried. Cody was... well, he knew he wasn't anything but "ordinary". Brown hair, hazel eyes, boy-next-door face, average height, average weight, didn't wear glasses and hadn't needed braces. No earrings, no quirks, pretty much nothing. He figured he could probably become a professional assassin and get away with whatever he wanted because no one would ever notice or remember someone so incredibly average.

"Nothing?" Paki stared at Cody as if his plainness made him fascinating. "Why?"

"Bet they had all kinds of names for you," Cody said shortly.

"Bet I can think of a few of them," Frank drawled.

"Shut up, Frank." Paki, ever on the move, sat up fully and crossed his legs. "Okay, so this is something everyone should have to suffer through."

Cody grinned. "You're actually going to put some effort into thinking of a slur against me?"

"Gotta do something to pass the time."

"You could unpack," Frank said, hurling Cody's socks back at Paki. "Man, this is gonna be like rooming with my cousins for the summer, only less fun."

Cody could just tell a smart-ass comment about "keeping it in the family" was forming on Paki's tongue, so he spoke up fast before the shit could really hit the fan. "Fine. Nickname me. If I don't like it, I get to pick one for you."

Paki was easily distracted as ever. "Rock on. Okay." He tented his fingers beneath his chin and studied Cody, who soon found himself wanting to fidget under Paki's rapt attention. Not only Paki's, either. Frank and Alan had stilled, watching with interest.

Shay alone didn't seem to care, methodically emptying his duffel and tucking crap away in the drawers of a dresser as rickety as Cody would have expected.

He found himself watching Shay, every move the guy made economical, like he knew exactly what kind of effort he'd need to put in and streamlined it down to the bare but totally efficient minimum. Cody studied Shay's concentration, baffled by how deeply he sunk into what he was doing -- yet knew, at the same time, he didn't miss a syllable of the conversations around him.

Paki scratched his head. "Actually, I'm coming up kind of dry, here. Shut up, Frank."

"You know you love me." Frank flipped him off.

Alan blushed. "Um. Cody's got a good smile."

"I do?" Cody asked, confused both by what Alan had just said and what that had to do with anything. Nicknames, at least the kind they'd been talking about, didn't focus on a guy's good points.

"Yeah." The red flush spreading over Alan's cheeks didn't stop him. He plunked his glasses back on his nose and cleared his throat. "You have a good smile, and you're good-natured as far as I can tell. And smart."

Frank cooed at them. "Aww. Young love. You wanna put on a little show for the cameras? Bet Kendra would cream herself over the ratings



that'd get her."

"Even if he had, I think you'd have just cursed any boner in the world to go flat." Paki held up one hand in the 'shut up and hang on' gesture. "Okay... so I think I know what Alan means. You're a fool."

"Screw you, too," Cody retorted, stung.

"No, no, no. Not like a moron kind of fool. You don't know Tarot? The Major Arcana?"

"Yep, he does, and he likes listening to Pure Moods, too. What?" Frank protested under the weight of Paki's quizzical stare. "You try staying up all night with a sick calf and see if you don't wanna raid a music store for anything that'll calm you down."

"Maybe you could try Tchaikovsky," Alan suggested. He sat carefully on his bed, almost managing to keep the frame from screeching, ducked his head and studied his hands intently. "Or Chopin."

To Cody's surprise, Frank grunted as if thoughtful. "How do you spell Chai-koff-ski?"

"I'll write it down for you." Coming from anyone else, the retort would have been snarky and full of mockery. Not from Alan. Cody could sense the quiet offer of help. He thought Frank did, too.

"Um. Thanks." Frank looked away.

Cody impulsively sat on the bed next to Alan, throwing an arm around his shoulders as he would with his little sister, relieved when the bump and roll of horny interest didn't pop up and throw him again. He jostled Alan. So far, so good, everyone either getting along or at least not actively trying to kill anyone else.

Might not be such a bad summer after all, he decided.

"I'm gonna call you Mr. Sunshine," Paki announced, bursting his buttons with pride.

Cody groaned and covered his eyes with his hand. Okay, maybe he'd spoken a moment too soon.

## Chapter Seven

Despite his lingering misgivings, Cody found he didn't mind at all hanging out with Frank, Alan, Paki and maybe not even Shay until growls from four stomachs, his own included, made them start wondering about what kind of food they'd get around here.

"Probably vegetables and stuff," Paki said, wrinkling his nose.

"I figured you'd be a vegan or some such crap." Frank sounded genuinely surprised rather than scornful. "You know, with all that New Age mess your momma raised you in."

"Not me, man. Give me a steak any day." Paki's sharp face softened as his stomach roared. "Steak. I could so eat a steak right now."

"On the grill?" Frank, who'd been lying stretched out full-length on his bed, flipped over to his stomach and leaned on his crossed arms. "You like barbecue or just plain meat?"

"As long as it used to have a face, I'll eat it."

"What if it still does?" Frank asked, wiggling his tongue.

Paki blew him a kiss. "Especially then, and double-especially if it's hot."

"I'm a vegetarian," Alan said, too quietly for anyone to notice except Cody. Alan had drawn Paki aside a while back and spoken to him in a series of low whispers, their discussion ending up with Paki giggling and switching

beds with Alan. Which put Alan's bed right next to Cody's.

Cody wasn't any too sure how he felt about that. More and more, he disliked the idea of playing into any twisted games Kendra might have had in mind for the sake of shock ratings as well as their being an insult. Screw a duck, man, he wasn't gonna play into that whole big stereotype about gays. So he liked men instead of women. Didn't make him a horndog sleazeball ready to hump anything that moved and wouldn't punch him in the nose.

Still, what could he do? It'd make a whole big mess if he raised a fuss about it. And he didn't think Alan was the type at all to try anything more than whispering to him after lights-out.

He should be okay. Should be.

Lord, though, what on earth did Alan see in him?

He dragged his attention back to Frank and Paki, wrangling over the best ways to marinate and whether T-bones were superior to London broil or not. He listened to a couple minutes' worth of lustful moaning over dead cow and decided he'd had enough. His stomach was flapping against his ribs already.

"Let's all of us go see what's to eat instead of talking about it," he suggested, already heading for the tricky bedroom door. He could see now that all the other doors had been painted shut from the inside. Wasn't that a fire hazard?

With his hand on the knob, he paused, realizing he'd just given them an order and he'd acted like he expected to be obeyed. He'd turned around to laugh it off and maybe even apologize, but rather than scornful disdain, he saw Frank and Alan and Paki heaving themselves off their beds with nods and mumbles of agreement.

Shay alone stayed where he'd started, folding his empty duffel into a tidy square.

Cody squirmed. "You wanna come with us?" he offered, knowing how lame he sounded.

"I'll be there when I'm done," Shay said, sounding as uninterested as he could possibly be. "Don't get your hopes up about steak."

"You," Paki informed him, "are an unbelievable spoilsport."

"MRE's are what you're going to get, wait and see." Shay's lips thinned out as he tucked his folded duffel away. "Spam."

Paki shuddered. "If all we've got is potted meat food product that you have to wash the slime off before chowing down, then maybe I'll turn vegan after all." He shouldered past Cody, thundering out into the hallway. "Last one down there gets last pick of the steaks!"

Shay's snort was eloquent. Cody's hands curled into fists. He wasn't a violent guy. Honest, he wasn't. Shay just got to him somehow.

He wondered if that wasn't what Kendra had intended by picking this antisocial jerk and sticking him in the middle to harsh everyone's mellow.

Shaking his head, Cody muttered, "Whatever," and followed Paki, with Alan right behind him and Frank in the rear.

His stomach creaked with hunger. Steaks? Yeah, he kinda doubted they'd have any tenderloin any time soon. God, though, please let it not be Spam.

To Cody's disappointment, if not his surprise, no dinner awaited them at the kitchen to the left of the stairs. To his disgust, he found Kendra instead, sipping on a huge Starbucks cup while Janie toyed with a speckled-blue tin mug and Geordie glared at the empty percolator.

"It's not going to brew itself," Janie muttered as the five of them clomped in. "Just make another -- oh, guys." Her fake smile gleamed at Cody; he wondered if anyone else could see behind the caps to her complete and total terror. "Hi! We were wondering when you'd join us."

"Everything fine with your sleeping quarters?" Kendra asked as she took a sip, sounding oh-so-innocent that Cody knew she'd been behind the dormitory-style set-up. "If you have any problems, please do let us know now."

Paki plastered on a huge, equally fake grin, and waved exaggeratedly at the upper corner of the kitchen. "Gosh, no! I love my new bedroom! It's so spacious and airy and I think I might just put on a pair of Grandma's pearls and wax the floor until I orgasm!"

Janie spit out a mouthful of coffee. Geordie boggled at Paki.

Kendra sipped her coffee and looked annoyingly pleased.

Cody nudged Paki hard in the ribs. "Quit it, would you? She's gonna eat that kind up crap up with a spoon."

Paki shrugged him off. "What? I might as well enjoy myself."

"Do you think you'll enjoy your stay here, Paki?" Kendra inquired. She nodded at the opposite corner of the room. "By the way, the camera's up there. See the red LED dot next to the copper jelly mold?"

Alan angled to peer over his shoulder, his customary worried frown turning his lips down at the corners. "Why are you telling us this? You know now we'll avoid the kitchen like the plague."

"Consider it a gift." Kendra tidily licked a dab of whipped cream off her lips.

"More like you have to know where a few of the cameras are," Janie cut in, shooting Kendra a pissed-off glare. "In case of emergencies. If something should happen, our asses are grass if you can't get in touch with help. Any red LED you see, that's your point of contact."

Alan was the one to figure it out first. "You're saying none of you are staying here?"

"Not all the time," Janie tried to explain, hasty, darn sure knowing how messed up this was. "It's Kendra's idea."

Kendra preened.

"Also, it's just plain the way it all turned out." Geordie spread his hands and shrugged. "We'll be here during the days, and someone will stay here every third night."

"The rest of the time, we thought you'd enjoy some privacy." Kendra tilted back her Starbucks cup and finished off the last drop.

"You're not filming on those nights, then?" Cody asked, just wanting to see what she'd say even if he already knew the answer. No way Kendra would miss a single minute.

She smirked at him and said nothing.

Cody chewed that one over and then, because he didn't figure there was anything else he could do, nodded. "So, we were wondering about food."

"A man who doesn't waste time on arguing moot points. I like that about you, Cody."

No compliment so innocent-sounding had ever made Cody feel as if he'd just been dunked in a mud bath before. "Um. Thanks?"

"You're welcome." Lord, nothing could get under her skin. "Let's talk about meals and chores." She stood, making for the rows of plain wood cabinets, drawing Cody's attention to them for the first time. He studied the big ceramic sinks, the double fridge/freezer in a nasty shade of green, and an open hutch full of thick plates and more of the tin mugs. Looked like nothing fancy here, and he suspected food would follow the trend.

Not a problem. Wasn't like he was accustomed to fattened lambs or anything.

Paki, on the other hand, looked disappointed.

"Food," Kendra said, opening one of the cabinets to reveal rows of tin cans. Beans, fruit in syrup, tuna in oil. No Spam. Cartons of powdered milk. "More food." She strode to the refrigerator and opened the door for them. Vegetables, more of them than even five guys his age could eat before they went bad. No meat that he could discern. One carton of chocolate ice cream in the freezer. "And beverages." She tugged open the bottom of the hutch to display an array of glass bottles the likes of which Cody had never seen. Had to be soda, he figured, orange and purple and red and freakin' blue and friggin' green.

"Damn," Frank muttered behind him. "You guys gonna pay our dentist bills?"

"We'll trust in you to be grown up enough to brush your teeth," Janie said dryly. "The idea here is simplicity. You have everything you need for balanced meals, and the soda is for treats."

"And the ice cream."

"Yes, Kendra. And the ice cream. All sixteen ounces of it."

Geordie jumped in fast. "One of your basic challenges is to prepare your meals yourselves and to figure out a kitchen hierarchy. Who plans out what you'll eat, who actually prepares it, who serves, who washes up --"

"Who figures out what to do with sixty-seven cans of pintos?" Frank commented, staring past Kendra at the still-open cabinet. "I grew up around cowboys and I never saw anything like this."

"Interesting." Kendra plucked Janie's coffee cup, still half full, out of her hand and emptied it at the sink. "I think you'll recall that one of the basic components of City/Country is expanding your horizons."

"Expand a line to the damn john after all those beans..."

No one told Frank to shut up.

"I'm assuming none of you, not even you, Frank, has ever had to do without something as basic in our American society as a microwave," Kendra went on. "Now you will. Janie thinks it'll be a fascinating study of cultural adaptation, and I have to say I agree."

Paki's jaw dropped. "No microwave?"

Cody had read between the lines and figured out what she was leading up to. "We cook tonight's dinner ourselves, don't we?"

Kendra's cat's eyes glittered. "Will that be a problem?"

"Nope." Cody rolled up his sleeves, figuratively speaking, and pretended he was back home with his sister hungry and Momma out at church or whatever. "Who wants to be the chef?"

"I know how to cook a few things," Alan volunteered, quiet as a mouse.

"I'm not eating vegetarian." It was Paki who protested, earning a quizzical look from Janie who, no doubt, knew all about his mother. "What? I don't like green food."

Kendra hmm'd. "Cody, why don't you lead the group in preparing tonight's meal? I think that'll make an excellent segment in the

documentary."

Frank smirked at him. "Yeah, Cody, go on. Make me enjoy these beans."

"Dump 'em over your head," Cody threatened, only half serious. He was getting excited about this despite himself and despite Kendra. "Okay, sure. I saw some potatoes in there. Butter?" he asked of Janie, who nodded. "Cheese? Sour cream? Cool. So we have baked potatoes from the oven. That's not green. Work for you, Paki?"

Paki had perked up at the mention of butter and sour cream. "Sure. You want me to light the stove? It's gas, right? Shut up about the beans, Frank."

"I didn't say nothin'!"

"Yeah, but you were about to." Paki was already hunkering down, peering at the stove. "So what else do we eat?"

"Not Spam," Cody and the others chorused as one. They looked at each other for half a second, blinking, then cracked up.

Shay chose that moment, of course, to stroll into the kitchen as if he hadn't a care in the world. He looked from guy to guy without a flicker of expression of his own, and finally settled on Cody.

"So how are you liking things, Boss?" he asked, flat and emotionless.

Cody drew up short. "Boss?"

"What, Kendra didn't tell you?" Shay leaned against the frame where a kitchen door had once hung. "She left a note on just outside. Guess you didn't see it." He shook a blue Post-It at Cody and read off the other side: "Head of Household: Cody."

He eyed Cody as Cody gaped. "So. I guess you really are the boss of us, now. Hail to the Chief."



## Chapter Eight

"What did you say?" Cody blurted, knowing he must have looked like a dying fish but unable to stop gaping at Shay as if he was the Second Coming, the Archangel Gabriel telling him he was on the wrong list. "Come again?"

"You're not deaf." Shay wadded the Post-It into a ball and winged it at Cody, who although his hands had almost gone slack at his sides, caught it out of reflex. "See for yourself."

Cody uncrumpled the Post-It and scanned the curls and loops of what he had to assume was Kendra's handwriting. Sure enough, it said exactly what Shay claimed.

He said something he'd have gotten his mouth washed out for at home and turned to Geordie and Janie, the saner of the leaders in that room, silently demanding an explanation.

"Don't you think you can handle the responsibility, Cody?" Kendra asked, sitting back down at the kitchen table. She propped her pointed chin on the back of her hand. "We've been so pleased with the demonstration of your skills so far. We think you're the natural choice for Head of Household."

"We're -- we're not on Big Brother," Cody got it together enough to say. He paused. "Unless that's what this really is turning into."

"Minus the eliminations and the total lack of contact with the outside world, so no, you're not on that program."

"Great. Hand over your cell so I can call home."

Kendra clicked her tongue at him. "Cody, Cody, Cody. Phone calls to outsiders are to be kept to a minimum and emergencies only. We'd prefer it

if you, the players in our game, focused on your purpose here, which is to help us film a truly outstanding documentary on the lives of five young gay men and your social interactions."

Cody couldn't think of a comeback to that one. He couldn't deny the logic to what she said. If they dragged their families into this, what made it different from everyday life?

He knew the others -- or Frank, Alan and Paki, at least -- were looking to him for direction. Kendra had already gotten exactly what she wanted on this matter, and he wasn't able to do a thing to stop it.

All right, fine, he decided on the spur of the moment. She wants me to step up and take charge? I will, then. But she might not like what-all I choose to do when her back's turned, and be damned if I'll respect her until she shows us some on her own terms.

"I can shoulder this just fine," he said shortly. "You three gonna eat here with us tonight?"

"We hadn't planned --" Geordie started.

"Great." Cody jerked his chin toward the door. "Get out."

Janie boggled at him. "What did you say?"

"Leave. What, was I whispering?" Cody kept his expression blank as fresh snow, working hard not to react to his housemates behind him. "You want us to divide up responsibilities, make our own choices, figure out how to get along. Great. I can't see as we need you for any of that, so you don't need to be here for it. Go on, now."

Geordie was slowly turning red. "Listen here, you ungrateful little--"

"No, no." Kendra stood, rippling like a sleek, pleased cat. "Cody's right. It's far better if they start off on the right foot. We'll leave you to it, gentlemen. Just remember--" she pointed at the LED light over the door-- "if you do need us, one of us will be watching. Good night."

She minced out of the kitchen, not waiting to see if Janie or Geordie would follow along behind. Janie wavered, plainly torn between confusion, indignation and the need to giggle, and finally followed. Geordie had already stalked out ahead of her, angry smoke dang near pouring from his ears.

Cody waited until the front door had slammed behind the production team, grimacing slightly as he heard the lock tumble -- no doubt they wouldn't be able to open it from the inside -- and then made his way to the table. Rather than plunk down heavily in a chair as he'd wanted to, he swung up to sit on the table itself. There, he waited for the guys to barrage him, and he didn't have to wait long.

"Man, did you see her face --"

"I'd have paid good money to let her have it like you --"

"She didn't seem too bothered."

"Who cares? Cody, that was awesome."

"Good for you, but we still gotta--"

"Yeah, how are we gonna--"

"Cody, what do we--"

"Shut up!" Cody bellowed, making all of them -- even Frank -- flinch, and surprising himself. From his position by the door, Shay, who'd not said a word since before Kendra and company left, arched an eyebrow at Cody. The others settled right down and paid attention, waiting on him.

Cody was already exhausted. But you know what? He was done fighting this and God knew if he didn't, then someone would, maybe Paki, and wouldn't that be a disaster? Fine. He dragged his hand through his hair and sighed. "One step at a time, guys. They're out, great, it's done, no need to talk it to death."

"So what do you propose we do instead?"

"Dinner, for one. Don't know about you guys, but I'm still starving." Cody started assessing everyone's strengths as he knew them thus far, and handed out assignments as he would with his family when they were in the middle of one of their more chaotic evenings. "Paki, get the stove going. Frank, open a few cans of beans, and if I hear one word out of your mouth I'll cram it full of pintos until you fart for a week. Alan, you wash the potatoes and peel off any eyes."

"And what are you going to do?" Shay drawled.

Cody hopped off the table. "Take care of a few things I think need doing."

"Such as?"

His fists itched. They'd get into it, no use denying that inevitable truth, either. "This, for one." He stalked past Paki and Alan and Frank, jerking open the freezer and pulling out the ice cream.

"You're going to chow down on choc-o-cream? You'll ruin your appetite, man."

Cody ignored the way Frank's eyes focused hungrily on the frozen dessert, determined to be strong. It was just like having one cookie left in the jar and four people eager to get at it first. "Isn't ice cream," he explained shortly. "It's a head trip."

Shay called it by another name, daring Cody to react.

"Keep on cussin'. I don't care how many times they have to fuzz out your lips on the final film." Cody opened lower cabinet doors until he found what he wanted: a trash can, empty except for a used coffee filter, wet grounds splattered up and down the insides. "By any other name, this is a cheap trick. They want us to scrap over it. Screw 'em. I'm dumping it out." He held up his hand to stem Paki's protests. "Hate me if you want. I'm not playing that game."

And without waiting for them to kick up a fuss, Cody turned the carton upside down, shaking it until the block of cheap chocolate ice cream slid free to land on top of the coffee grounds with a messy splort noise.

When he turned around, Frank looked mutinous but was holding his tongue. Paki looked grim. Alan looked nervous.

Shay looked ever so slightly amused. However, instead of commenting on what Cody had done either for good or ill, he asked, "So while you're all busy with dinner, what am I supposed to do?"

Cody blinked. "I didn't expect you'd do anything at all."

"He gets to take it easy while we cook? Weak," Paki complained.

"That's not it. I didn't figure that sorry cynic would listen to a word I

said, so I--"

"You don't give me enough credit, man." Shay stood up straight. "Do you worst, Cody. Make me sing for my supper."

Something about his tone made Cody's throat go tight, though he didn't understand why. "Fine." He cast about for something, anything -- and an idea came to him. He ran it over hurriedly, wondering how much trouble he'd get in, then decided he didn't rightly care. "Go find the back door. See if it's locked."

"And if it is?"

Cody looked Shay dead in the eyes, daring him. "Find us a way to unlock it."

Shay's flat affect flickered briefly to something between surprise and approval. "Do my best. Watch out, Cody, or you might change my mind about you."

Cody's mouth hung open.

Shay eyed him. "Might really change my mind," he murmured, and without a word of explanation went to do as he'd been told.

Cody watched him go, his pulse beating faster than usual underneath his jaw, wondering what on earth until Shay was out of sight. He couldn't help but observe Shay's backside as he ambled away, not sure at all anymore if what he wanted to do was punch the guy.

And where in high heaven had that come from?

"Awright, y'all, hush it up," he ordered instead of staring after Shay like a moon-eyed calf. "I'll hunt down something to go with the potatoes and beans."

"See if you can find a few quarts of Maalox," Frank grunted, already cranking open the first of the cans.

"Or a gas mask," Paki chipped in.

Alan glanced sideways at Cody, juggling potatoes to keep them from falling, and smiled bashfully.

Cody resisted the urge to take one last look after Shay and focused on what he'd set in motion that he could handle. "Let's get to work."

## **Chapter Nine**

As it turned out, the potatoes weren't too bad.

"Of course they're not," Paki scoffed, going for a third tablespoon-sized glob of butter to dump in the nearly-empty skin of the huge potato he'd eviscerated. "I like the outsides when they're all crispy like this, but not dry. Quit staring. Told you that you were worrying too much. How can anyone screw up a baked potato?"

"Burn 'em all the way through," Frank said, laconic, licking melted cheese off his fork. "Don't bake 'em long enough so they're still cold and wet in the middle. Dry 'em out 'till they're like sawdust --"

"Okay, okay, I get the point. Who cares? We rocked dinner, we're full, and it's all flavored by sweet victory." Paki batted his eyelashes at Cody, who rolled his eyes and burped. "Oh, that's beautiful."

Cody leaned back in his chair, far too full on mealy potatoes and beans rich with bacon fat to give a care about Paki's motor mouth. "What can I say? I'm too sexy for my shirt."

Shay's snort sounded suspiciously like a laugh; he didn't say anything, though. Paki did it for him, mouth falling open -- sad to say, full of potato skins at the time. "Right Said Fred? Are you kidding me? That's like... ancient."

"You're a sad, sad child of the 2K's," Frank opined. He flicked a stray chive at Paki.

Paki brushed the bit of green off his sleeve, looking more amused than annoyed. "What do you know about it, Boot Scoot Boogie?"

"Do I look like I'm wearing a mullet?"

Paki brought his thumbs and forefingers up to put Frank "in frame", photographer style. "Mmm. Not your best look. So you had to have worn one at least once in your life. Maybe for your kindergarten photo?"

"Screw you." Frank shoved him. Playfully, Cody could tell, like an overgrown bulldog batting at a yappy little puppy. He eyed them warily, wondering if he should step in -- if they played too rough, it could mean trouble -- but then let it be. For now, anyway.

Next to him, Alan, who'd focused on nothing but neat, quick bites of potato all through the meal, cleared his throat and stood, heavy, empty plate in hand. "I'll do the dishes."

Cody was getting used to Alan's usual quietness, better now at interpreting the near-whispers. Lord have mercy, he'd never seen anyone quite so... was shy the word? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe he was more determined to fade into the background than he was afraid to put himself forward.

Huh. He'd have to talk to Alan later and see if he could get the guy feeling more comfortable with all of them. Eight weeks was a long time to hang out with all these walls built up between them.

Speaking of which, there was Shay. He'd finished his meal same as the rest of them, and gotten up from the table already to wander over to the window over the kitchen sink. Cody watched him as he stood with his back to the rest of them, elbows resting on the sink itself and one ankle crossed behind the other. His jaw worked rhythmically, chewing on a toothpick.

Cody considered asking him to come back to the table for what they had to do next, but realized just as quick that'd never work. Surest way to get Shay's back up was to give him an order.

If you made it seem like some kind of mischief, though... He

wondered.

"All right, y'all," he said, standing, carrying his own plate with him. "Drop those in the sink. I'll wash up later. Alan, if you want to help, that'd be fine. In the meantime, you want to go see if Shay actually got the locks on the back door jimmied the way he bragged he did?"

Shay turned just far enough to glance over his shoulder at Cody, a glint of irritation in his eye. "I don't brag. I accomplish."

Cody shrugged and grinned as broadly and easily as he could to tweak Shay's nerves. "So put your money where your mouth is and lead us to the great outdoors."

Shay's lips quirked up at one corner, aggravated and amused all at once. "Follow me, then." He pushed off the sink, giving Frank and Alan and Paki room to plunk their plates in, and headed out the kitchen and down the hall.

They stopped at a simple plank door painted pale yellow. Shay didn't make a big show out of it, just turning the knob and pushing it open. The hinges didn't creak once; when he took a closer look Cody saw they'd been soaked with what smelled like WD-40, possibly not too long ago.

He nodded a question at Shay as he ambled past. Shay grinned at him, a quick twitch of the lips, and gestured out into the yard. "Go on, if you're going."

Cody considered that grin as he moved forward. Maybe Shay wasn't a complete asshole.

Well, like many other things, that remained to be seen, he guessed.

Right now, he'd deal with other issues.

"Sit down, guys," he directed, gesturing to a smooth-ish patch of grass just beyond the back door, under the meager shade of a chinaberry tree.

"These things are like marbles," Frank complained, plunking himself down nonetheless. He cast Cody a dubious look. "Is this where we have Tribal Council or something?"

Paki plastered on a beatific smile and drew his fingers across his lips,



"zipping" them. He folded his hands before him as in prayer, shouting "I'm innocent and pure and holy and not going to respond to that at all" with every ounce of his spirit.

Cody cracked up. He sat, pointedly brushing the fallen chinaberries away from where he parked his ass before he hit the ground, crossing his legs before him and resting his knees on his ankles.

Frank started to laugh, almost wheezing.

"What?" Cody asked, honestly perplexed.

"You," Frank giggled -- honest to God giggled. "You know how skinny you are? Swear, you look like a praying mantis or something."

Cody bristled. So he hadn't filled out all his height yet. Least he wasn't a no-neck like Frank.

For all that, he kept his mouth shut. Wouldn't do any good to rise to Frank's bait. He'd get on with business as planned. Still didn't want to "rule" this group, no way, but someone had to, didn't they? He kept silent until even Paki looked embarrassed and nudged Frank in the ribs to get him to shut up.

When they were all quiet, looking at him with varying degrees of attention, Cody spoke. "Call it tribal council if you want. I guess it's pretty much the same idea."

"Except no eliminations," Alan murmured, already busy rolling a chinaberry from his palm over the tips of his fingers onto the back of his hand and back again. Cody fought to keep from getting distracted. He seriously had to get Alan to teach him how to do that.

"And we don't have tiki torches," Paki pointed out. "I could go pull down some thin branches and we could light them."

"Fire. In this guy's hands. Oh yeah, great idea," Frank muttered.

Shay, as might have been predicted, said nothing and looked bored.

Cody took a moment to breathe in the heady green smells of Baraunchswood Farm in the gathering twilight, the air cooling and the last of the sun warming his skin.

He began again. "I'll be straight up with you guys. We all know this ain't what we signed up for when we agreed to do City/Country, no matter what Kendra or Janie or Geordie say. From what I remember of the contract, they're twisting all that legal double-talk around. What worried me is, I've got to thinking that no matter what we try 'n do, it looks as if Geordie might bail," Cody said baldly, having made up his mind about this between the potato and the beans. "He's not gonna want to go along with a total train wreck. Right now he's figuring Kendra's tricks might save his reputation, but if we don't play her way at least some of the time, give her some of what she wants, she'll get bored, take her sponsors, and go. And if she goes, he'll split. He doesn't care about the Ph.D. angle. And if Janie's got nothing, she'll ditch us, too."

"Gosh, you make it sound like Mommy and Daddy don't love us anymore," Shay drawled.

Cody refused to be baited. "Am I wrong?"

A moment of silence fell as the four others chewed that over. Frank was the first to nod, displeasure clear on his face. "And if all that goes down, don't any of us get that college money."

"I have to hand it to them," Paki said, grudgingly impressed. "Whoever's idea that was, it was the one thing that'd get us all dancing to their tune. I mean... I never thought I'd get the chance. You know?" He rocked forward. "I could do something with my life besides bus tables at comedy clubs or grow mold in my mom's weird shop."

"A degree in agriculture, that'd probably help me get the ranch running again," Frank put in.

Alan said nothing, but Cody heard the way his breath had quickened at the mention of losing the scholarship money, and he knew how much it all meant to Alan. He'd no idea what Shay thought of it -- for all he was aware, Shay might come from old money and been brought up like a little prince. As for himself, Cody thought of the college funds and saw himself with a stethoscope around his neck someday, of people calling him "Doctor" and finally being somebody. Coming up with cures and fixing up the sick.

He waited until they'd all finished chiming in, then went on. "So we've all got to handle ourselves carefully."

Paki tilted his head at Cody. "How? You're the boss, boss. Tell us what to do?"

Cody didn't have to look to know Shay was listening especially intently for what he'd say in response.

"Give Kendra what she wants, but not what she wants," he said.

"Come again?" Paki queried, frowning.

Cody went for the most clear-cut example he could think of. "Okay, like this. From what Kendra said, trying to get me to play 'who's hot and who's not', it's clear to me at least that she wants us to get all tangled up in boyfriend-boyfriend messes."

"Sex sells," Paki replied, though he looked thoughtful. "And we are all over eighteen. And I doubt any one of us here is a virgin."

Cody noted that Alan, who he might have suspected of being more or less innocent, didn't blush. Huh.

"So... what, we institute a six-inch rule or something?"

Frank snickered.

Paki made a face at him. "You know what I mean. Six inches between us at all times -- shut up, Frank -- no touching, no gossiping behind each other's backs, and if anyone drops the soap --"

"That's not what I meant!" Cody protested amidst the laughter, chuckling himself. He waved at them. "Look. I'm not stupid. You're not stupid. We're young, we're most of us hung, probably, and we're all alone out here for eight weeks. There's gonna be some stuff going on. That's just facts; it'd be stupid to say we'll all live like monks until the summer's over. Besides, I for one don't plan to last out eight weeks without jerking off, and as you've noticed they've got us in a dormitory."

Alan's cheeks had finally flushed faint pink. "I think we should have some kind of privacy rule about that," he said firmly, if quietly. "Please."

Despite his jokes, Cody understood. "We'll work something out. Sorry, man."

Alan nodded, flashing a small smile at Cody. Neither Paki nor Frank looked too upset by that and Shay looked like he was off in another world altogether, so Cody filed that one away for later discussion and went on to finish his thoughts for now. "Here's what I'm asking. Don't play to the cameras. Don't let them see us getting stupid enough to prance around talking about it twenty-four/seven, 'cause you know they'll edit the world out of this until it's nothing but tacky trash."

Thoughtful nods all around, except for Shay.

"Do what you've gotta do, but act like grownups about it," Cody concluded. "That goes for everything. We smile at Kendra, we say 'yes, ma'am' and 'no, ma'am', we do what we're told as long as it's legal and not immoral, and we shove it all right up her nose by not acting like media queers who're out to cat fight from the moment we meet. Show those watching we can rise above." He sat back. "That's all I've got to say for now. Anyone disagree with me? Speak up now, or forever hold it."

Paki nibbled his lip, slowly grinning. "Fight back in a way she can't possibly argue with. That's evil. I like it. Okay, I'm in."

Frank grunted and nodded. Alan cupped his chinaberry and curled his fingers around it, inclining his head once.

Cody looked up at Shay, who near about made him flinch when he found Shay staring back at him, eyes dark and unreadable. "Well?"

"Yeah," Shay said without giving anything away. "All for one, like we said. It'll be interesting to see how long this lasts."

Cody counted to ten. Slowly. Just when he was about to decide it might be worth it to go ahead and have it out with Shay, Shay went and turned the tables on him again by looking away and offering, "Wanna see what else I can get unlocked in this place?"

"How'd you do that, anyway?" Paki asked.

Shay grinned for sure this time. "Trade secret. So." He stood, brushing off his jeans. "Wanna see what they don't want us to get into?"

## Chapter Ten

Cody carefully pulled his leg the rest of the way through one of the windows Shay had unlocked earlier, the highest one available in the house that wasn't long-since painted shut with multiple coats over the years. He wouldn't let anyone watch what he did while he worked his magic, shielding his hands and the locks until he grunted, satisfied, and pushed open the doors or slid the windows up.

The way Cody figured, Shay had gone and won friends for life out of Paki and Frank, though he wasn't sure about Alan. On consideration, he wondered if messing around like this bothered Alan rather than leave him simply unimpressed. It was hard to get a read on him sometimes, when the shyness disappeared and there was only a quiet guy with too-old mannerisms left behind.

He'd have to talk to Alan in the morning, maybe. Right now? Lord have mercy, right now he just wanted to kick back and breathe some fresh air without four other guys all up in his space and in his face. The roof, he figured, was the best place for that.

Besides, he wanted to enjoy it while he could. Come tomorrow, he was sure Janie or Geordie, if probably not Kendra, would pitch a fit about insurance adjusters and legal ramifications and put unpickable new locks on everything.

Until then, the night was all his. With everyone else asleep -- Lord, they were going to have to see about fitting Frank with a muffler, the way he snored -- and some peace and quiet, he'd finally have a chance to relax by himself.

Cody took a moment to adjust to the darkness and sense of empty

space on the roof before chancing to move. Last thing he wanted was to take a tumble and end up face-first in a snowball bush. That'd be a nasty way to go: GLBT-teen Meets Untimely End, Death By Flowers. While he waited, he shoved his hands in his pockets and gazed up at the sky.

He could see so many more stars out here than he could in the city, maybe not as many as you'd get a view of out in the Midwest, but still they were like a map of diamonds stretched out above him. Almost took his breath away. Dizzied him, momentarily. Never before had he understood what people meant by the stars making a guy feel small. Now, he did.

Hopefully, it'd help him get some perspective on things.

Figuring his eyesight was as adjusted as it was going to get, Cody returned his thoughts to the roof and began, carefully, to pick his way across the surface. From the look he'd gotten at it earlier, in the last shreds of dusk, appeared to him that no one had been up here in ages. Paki's guess was that, like so much of the farmhouse, this one section of flat roof out behind the main house had been incidental and not planned, just a basic surface that was needed to cover what lay beneath. Old shingles under a few years' worth of dead leaves, leftover bricks from some project or another, a round iron pipe that was once probably a vent for a cook stove, now capped off.

It was still hard to tell what was what, especially with the shapes of the bricks and such as yet unfamiliar to Cody, so when one of the stacks shifted and turned to him, he near about lost his balance, threatening to fall on his rump.

"Cody?" he heard someone whisper.

Recognition and realization kicked in at the same time. "Alan?" Cody tried to peer at the shape in the darkness. When the figure ducked its head, moonlight glinted off a pair of eyeglasses and he knew he'd been right. Of all the guys to try this, who'd have guessed Alan?

Tickled, Cody shrugged off a slight sense of annoyance at having his planned privacy pre-invaded. "Mind if I join you?"

"It's a free roof." Did he imagine it, or was Alan teasing him? Dead leaves crunched as Alan shuffled his weight. "And I don't bite."

"Biting's not something I'd have figured you for." Cody took careful,

sliding steps over the roof, testing each step to make sure it'd hold his weight before he tried the next. Alan was both shorter and lighter than he, and he figured he'd rather be safe than sorry.

"You don't have to worry about my bark, either." Cody was close enough to make out the sight of Alan's smile, warmer and wider than he'd seen from the guy before. "I don't talk much."

Cody chose not to fire back something like no, really? Instead, he sat within what he hoped was a reasonable 'buddy' distance, close enough to see, but not crowding Alan's personal space.

When he'd gotten settled, Alan drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, turning his face up to the stars. Cody followed suit, letting the moments pass in silence. Alan was about the best company up here that he could have hoped for, he decided. He liked that about Alan, how if you didn't feel like talking you didn't have to. Alan was... comfortable.

"I thought you were asleep," Cody remarked after a while, off-handed, hoping Alan didn't think he was obligated to answer.

Alan raised one shoulder. "People don't notice me, sometimes."

Cody nodded, hearing the unspoken they don't notice me if I don't want them to, his earlier guess confirmed.

He was prepared to let that go and to hang out in continued silence until his eyelids grew too heavy to keep open any longer, and would have if Alan hadn't chosen that moment to speak up, albeit still in a near-whisper.

"I haven't spoken to my parents in years," he said, apropos of nothing. "They don't know I'm here. I'm legally emancipated, and now that I'm over eighteen I don't have to answer to a guardian of any kind."

Huh. "I didn't know that. Is that how it usually works?"

"Sometimes. That's how I wanted it, anyway. Guess I got lucky." Alan rested his hands on his knees, legs crossed before him, still watching the stars. "I kind of do things my way. I'm not good at playing with others. Usually."

"I've never really been off by my own," Cody admitted, sharing in turn. "It's always been me and my friends, or me and my family. Lord,

they're loud. Crazy brother, crazy mom, crazy kid sister, the whole nine yards. Everyone's always shouting and acting like they don't have any sense."

Alan laughed quietly. "So this is really a home away from home for you, isn't it?"

"Kind of." Cody jostled him companionably. "Sometimes I've wondered what it'd be like to have all the wide open space and time I needed to just really think, you know? To have it so quiet all around me that I can hear what's going on inside my head for once."

Alan didn't seem to think that was strange at all. He nodded silently, which encouraged Cody to go on.

Cody rifled through the dead leaves, sifting the crumbles through his fingers. "The trade-off's worth it, if they really do come through with college funding."

He felt, rather than saw, Alan's sharp look, laced with equal cynicism. "Do you think they might not?"

"I think anything's possible with someone like Kendra in charge."

"I think it's likely she'll pare it down to one scholarship and make us compete for it," Alan said baldly.

The thought hadn't occurred to Cody before. "No way, man. You really--"

"Would you put it past her?" Alan reached for his own handful of leaves, sorting through them. Cody would bet money he was hunting for an acorn, an old bolt, anything he could juggle and roll. "I wouldn't."

Cody knew he was right. The thought left a bad taste in his mouth.

"So." Alan discarded his leaves and brushed his palms together to clear them of the old dirt. "Is it just your family you left behind to do this, or...?"

"Huh?" Cody didn't understand at first what Alan was really asking. When he clued it, he almost laughed out loud. "You mean, do I have a guy waiting on me back home? Nah. There's no one right now."



Alan made a "hmm" noise. "Me either. Although there was someone a few months back."

Cody wasn't totally sure they should be talking about this. Maybe, he thought, he was being hyper-sensitive, too worried about Kendra and her games. Yeah, he decided after a few seconds' worth of thought. We can still talk. It's not like that hurts anything.

"I haven't gotten serious with anyone," he offered in return. "More just... you know..."

Alan chuckled. "Yeah. There aren't many chances at true love in school."

"Not many chances at that period, gay or straight," Cody returned. He winced and changed position, straightening his legs out in front of him. Oof. Better. Man, he'd be sore in the morning after all those days of travel finally caught up to him. "I mean, I think it can happen. Finding someone you want to be with for good."

"It doesn't happen often."

"No. That's why they still write stories about it." Cody decided to go for broke and stretched out full-length, wrinkling his nose at the musty smell of the leaves and hissing as his tense muscles reacted to finally being at ease. A thought occurred to him. "Were you thinking about long-term with that one guy you mentioned?"

"Not really. We were friends, mostly. With benefits."

Cody laughed, appreciative of Alan's quiet sense of humor he was starting to understand. "Benefits is mostly what I got. Friendship might or might not have been involved."

"A lot of...?"

"I had my share, I guess. Never really thought about it before."

Alan hesitated. "Didn't anyone give you a hard time for...?"

"Not often. If they wanted to mouth off, I didn't usually let it get to me."

Alan huffed, not quite a laugh but sort of the same general idea. "You are such a Pollyanna."

Cody came up from the leaves to prop himself on his elbows, surprised that Alan of all people would say that to him. "What, now?"

"I don't mean that like an insult."

"Didn't take it that way. I'm just curious. Why do people keep calling me that?"

"Isn't it better than JFK, the sequel?"

Cody hooted. "Okay, maybe. But honestly, why?"

Alan took his time before answering. "I think because it's like... it's like... you're not real. Wait, that sounded wrong. You come across like being gay doesn't make a bit of difference in your life outside of not going for girls. That seems kind of far removed from reality. The way things are supposed to be."

"Shoot." Cody thumped back down. "It's not like I don't care. I've got lots of things that worry me. But I do something about my problems, that's all. Someone wants to take a shot at me, I take a shot right back. No sense in being a doormat."

"And you don't think that not turning around and walking out of this City/Country mess is letting Kendra wipe her boots on you?"

Cody bristled. Still, he knew Alan was only being honest with him. "Kind of," he admitted after a minute. "It's college. A chance."

Alan shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't mean --"

"Yeah, you did."

Both Cody and Alan jumped, twisting around to stare back at the direction the third, new voice had come from. "Shay?" Cody demanded. "Crap, man, what are you trying to do, give us a heart attack?"

"Nah. Just thought I'd come up here and toss a bucket of water on you two if you needed it." The windowsill groaned and scuffling noises told Cody that Shay was climbing through, coming up to join them.

Cody's ears burned. "Not funny, man. We were talking, that's all."

"That's what they all say." Shay, probably just to irritate them, didn't take any time to adjust to the outside air and starry sky, but walked toward them like he didn't have a care in the world. He settled a few inches away from Cody, leaves scrunching underfoot. "Frank snores worse than an old hound out in the sun."

"He is pretty loud," Alan agreed, back to his own old barely-audible register now. Cody hadn't noticed before how Alan had started talking at a normal human volume, or how he'd eased up until now, with the return of the whisper and the way he tensed in Shay's presence. "You couldn't sleep either?"

"Not with him buzzing away, and with listening to you two."

"No way you could hear us," Cody protested. "We're not even over the dormitory."

"I have good ears. Besides, I'm not dumb. The two of you gone missing and staying gone for a while? Told you, I wanted to see if I needed to take the hose to you."

Irritated, Cody turned away from him. "It's not something you need to worry about. Period. I'm not here to get all tangled up in boyfriend-this and hump-that."

"Yeah?" Shay's quiet amusement couldn't be mistaken for anything else. "You want to tell me why Alan over there's got the problem he has right now?"

Cody's mouth flew open. He looked quickly to Alan, who looked away fast enough to loosen the bolts on his neck, head held high but shoulders tight. He looked back to Shay, unreadable as ever, especially in the near total darkness.

He sputtered a few times before coming up with, "What is your issue, man?"

"None of yours." Shay settled back on his elbows. "I've got a world of my own, and absolutely none of yours."

And what he was supposed to come back to and say to that, Cody had

zero idea.

## **Chapter Eleven**

NARRATOR

(VO)

This week on City/Country...

EXT. BARAUNCHSWOOD FARM: DAY

(FRANK chases PAKI off the front porch into the yard, FRANK threatening PAKI with a shoe.)

JANIE

(VO)

Hey, hey, what's going on here, guys? Whoa!

FRANK

Little (censored) filled my (censored) sneakers with motor oil. Used motor oil!

PAKI

I (censored) did not, you (censored)!

(PAKI dodges FRANK'S attempt to strike him.)

PAKI

Give me some credit, would you? That's not motor oil. Where would I get motor oil? That's syrup.

NARRATOR

(VO)

Day Two, and life on Baraunchswood Farm doesn't look like it's getting any easier. While Paki, the self-proclaimed joker of the quintet, continues his already considerable reign of terror--

(QUICK-CUT to scenes of PAKI as he drops potato peels down FRANK's neck, decorates ALAN'S bed with snowball flowers, and lowers a hand-painted "flag" [lettering fuzzed out for the camera] to dangle outside a window.)

NARRATOR

(VO)

-- FRANK continues to try and let his fists do the talking for him --

(QUICK-CUT to Frank facing down with CODY, who stands between FRANK and PAKI)

FRANK

(angry)

"You ain't doing any of us any favors by letting him get away with this."

CODY

"Maybe not."

FRANK

"Maybe not?"

CODY

"Frank, I'm not letting you whale on Paki and that's that. Go cool off."

FRANK

"But Cody --"

CODY

"Frank!"

(FRANK glares at Cody, then turns angrily and walks away. CODY collars PAKI.)

CODY

"If you bait him like that once more time, I will turn a blind eye and let what happens happen. Understood?"

(PAKI gestures at CODY [hand motion fuzzed out] PAKI exits, leaving CODY by himself. CODY hesitates, clearly trying to decide whether or not he should go after PAKI.

NARRATOR

(VO)

CODY, the self-appointed leader of the quintet, apparently finds he's bitten off more than he can chew. Will he be tough enough to last all eight weeks, or will his kingship be challenged?

(ZOOM IN: SHAY, standing alone under an apple tree, watching CODY.)

NARRATOR

(VO)

And our residential Mr. Mysterious might have a few ideas of his own about how Baraunchswood Farm should be run.

EXT. BARAUNCHSWOOD FARM PORCH STEPS, DAY

NARRATOR

(VO)

Alan Lancaster, boy wonder, is having a little trouble settling in.

ALAN

It's not what I'd expected here. City/Country is... well, I guess I knew it'd be different. Nothing's ever exactly like you imagine, right?

(shrugs)

(QUICK-CUT to CODY, FRANK, and PAKI horsing around in the yard.)

ALAN

(VO)

I'm not sure how well this is going to work out. We've got hardly anything in common.

NARRATOR

(VO)

Or don't they? We decided to investigate this further.

INT. BARAUNCHSWOOD FARM KITCHEN, DAY

NARRATOR

(VO)

Tell us, in your own words: what would you say you have most in common and least in common with your teammates?

CODY

Teammates, huh?

(thinks)

Least in common? Wow, take your pick.

(laughs)

I don't know. I haven't really thought about it so far. Huh. It's funny, but I haven't even though about asking the "where are you from" questions, things like that. Maybe I should. Most in common, I guess I'd have to say that they're already like my brothers. Frank and Paki and Alan, anyway.

NARRATOR

(VO)

Or are they?

(TIGHT ZOOM ON ALAN, PREPARING COFFEE.)

NARRATOR

(VO)

Last night, it seems that Cody and his shy pal couldn't sleep.

EXT. BARAUNCHSWOOD FARM ROOF, NIGHT.

(silhouettes on roof engage in quiet conversation, mostly unintelligible.)

CODY

(muffled)

... about you...?

ALAN

(muffled)

... no one for me... what about you...?

CODY

(laughter)

...gonna enjoy getting to know you, Alan.

INT. BARAUNCHSWOOD FARM KITCHEN, DAY

ALAN



(fidgets)

Cody? He's a nice guy. That's all.

(zoom to Shay, drinking coffee, watching Alan intently.)

NARRATOR

(VO)

Is there trouble in Paradise... already? Is Shay jealous of the developing friendship between Alan and Cody?

(Shay turns away from the camera, looking out the window.)

SHAY

(quietly)

Morons.

NARRATOR

(VO)

And what do these four think about their resident enigma, Shay?

(tight zoom to Cody)

CODY

(hesitates, laughs)

Shay is... another story altogether.

NARRATOR

(VO)

And are they all still determined to do whatever it takes to get their hands on those free rides to college?

(quick succession of close-ups)

FRANK

Yeah.

PAKI

I'm good for it.

ALAN

Yes.

SHAY

(smirks, shrugs)

CODY

(faces the camera directly)

Yes. Whatever it takes.

NARRATOR

(VO)

Welcome -- to this special edition of City/Country, where all the rules are about to change.

(theme music plays to fade)

"Is there any truth to that old 'red sky at night' thing?" Paki asked, leaning forward on the kitchen windowsill, pressing his nose to the glass.

"Maybe," Alan offered. "Atmospheric conditions."

Frank groaned. "It's too early for that. Hold up on the geek stuff until I'm awake, would you?"

"Cody, he just called your boyfriend a geek." Paki poked Cody in the sides. "Are you gonna let him get away with that?"

Cody pulled back, glaring at Paki. It hurt, his eyes dry and irritated from not enough sleep. His head ached from too much to think about already that morning. "Alan's not my boyfriend."

Frank made an "ooooohhhh" noise.

Cody didn't have the energy to call him on it. He crossed his arms on the kitchen table in front of him and pillowed his cheek on them. Alan, now in his line of sight, didn't look back, but did blush.

"Hey," he said, nudging Alan's ankle with the toe of his shoe. "Don't let 'em get to you. Okay?"

Alan flashed Cody a hesitant smile. "No. They don't bother me. Sticks and stones, right?"

"Sticks and stones." Cody grinned at Alan. Honest to God, compared to all the others, dealing with Alan was like a breath of fresh air. At least there'd be one other voice of sanity around for the next eight weeks, someone to commiserate with over the idiotic crap Paki and Frank pulled.

And who he could focus on instead of letting Shay needle his way under his skin.

"You two look so cozy," the devil himself informed Cody, sitting down opposite with a thick ceramic bowl full of corn flakes. Dark circles ringed his eyes and he stifled a yawn before digging a spoon into his cereal. "Are you our new mommy, Alan?"

Cody found he had the strength to get pissed off after all. "Shut up and mind your own business."

Shay shrugged as if he wasn't bothered in the least. He munched a mouthful of corn flakes and said, off-handedly, "I just figure if we're going to have to a line of kingship, better know who's heir to the throne."

"Shut up," Alan said quietly, but viciously. "We're friends." He glanced at Cody. "We are friends, right?"

"Of course we are."

Shay snorted softly into his cereal and stuffed in another bite of milk-sodden flakes.

Before Cody could react, clunking and thunking noises drew his attention. He sat up, head tilted, puzzled until he recognized the screeching of the front door of the Baraunchswood Farm house coming open. They'd already been descended upon that morning, Janie and Kendra strolling in together. Janie had only stayed as long as necessary to drop off the three jugs

of cold whole milk she'd brought with her as a "treat", whispering to them that she knew the powdered stuff was nasty, and apologizing for having to lock them back in after she went to pick up Geordie.

Apologizing, with rolls of her eyes and grimaces behind Kendra's back, for leaving them with the Wicked Witch of the West and her pet Velociraptor camcorder.

As best as Cody could tell, Kendra hadn't wasted a second of her time, collaring first one and then the other of them until she'd cornered each and every one, up to and including Shay, asking a lot of weird questions he wasn't sure how to answer, and one that he did: he still wanted the college funds, and he'd work for them. When she didn't have any of the guys individually pinned, she'd stalked the halls with her camera at the ready, stopping every now and then to murmur in what Cody figured was a microphone attached to her collar.

As she, Janie and Geordie entered the kitchen, Cody noticed that she still had the camera, but it was turned off and held casually by her side. Huh.

"Good morning, gentlemen." Kendra pulled out a kitchen table chair for herself and sat primly, crossing her legs at the knee. "How did you sleep? You look tired."

Cody flinched guiltily, and cursed himself for it right away. Way to act guilty, he fussed inside. Man, I'm glad no one could have seen us last night on the roof.

Not that they'd done anything besides talk, because they really hadn't. If it had been another time and another place then yeah, he might have tried for something more than chatting to Alan. Alan might be shy but he was hot in that quiet, intellectual way, and he seemed like a decent guy besides.

Cody fidgeted in his chair, discomfited by the nagging truth that followed fast on the heels of that thought. It'd been Alan who he'd hung out with and whose company he'd enjoyed, but it'd been Shay who he dreamed about when he finally got to bed. Shay and his freakin' annoying silences and never doing anything that made sense.

His skin itched, tight and hot as if he'd spent too much time out in the sun and gotten burned. Scratching at his wrists, Cody sat up and faced Kendra down. No one else had answered her yet, so he knew they were all

looking to him to take the hit.

"We all slept like babies," he lied through his teeth, giving her his biggest, brightest, best good ol' boy smile. "No matter how hard Frank tried to keep us awake snoring. He sounds like a backed-up drain."

"I do not!" The roar of laughter drowned out Frank's howl of indignation.

"You so do," Paki told him, smirking, shoving a bite of cereal in his mouth and chewing noisily.

Frank dealt him a sour glare and sat back, sulking.

"Now, now, boys." Kendra had to know how fake she sounded; actually, that was probably what she had in mind, playing the role of the wise-to-your-game indulgent leader. "We've got a few orders of business to take care of, and then we can get started with the day's activities."

Cody reached for his mug of the coffee Alan had fixed. He thought he remembered hearing Alan say he'd worked in a cafe before; he was inclined to believe that after tasting for himself what Alan could do with stale Maxwell House, making it good enough that even he, who wasn't much of a coffee fan, thought the brew was terrific. Strong, dark, rich. Taking a sip, he weighed Kendra's words.

Activities. Huh. Okay. He hadn't expected they'd be allowed to just run around and do whatever. During the older seasons of City/Country, all the participants had had specific jobs on location. In a place like Baraunchswood Farm, he'd have expected them to be assigned stuff such as "in charge of repairs" and "responsible for the cleaning" and maybe even gardening.

With Kendra being the way she was and from the odd glint in her eyes this morning, Cody had a feeling she didn't have anything like what could be expected from City/Country that he'd ever seen on her mind.

He knew she wanted him to ask. After some thought, and some waiting to see if she'd crack first -- as if -- he did, though he took the bait she'd probably hoped he'd skip over. "What do we need to talk about?"

Kendra narrowed her eyes briefly. He couldn't tell if she approved or

if he'd irritated her. Either way, whatever reaction she'd had was smoothed over in an instant, leaving nothing behind but catlike complacency. "First of all, and best of all, I'd like to tell you boys that you're now celebrities."

The table went silent except for the sound of Paki hastily chewing and swallowing down his last huge bite of cereal.

"Say what?" Cody asked carefully. Streaming to the Internet. Live feeds. People are actually watching this crap?

Kendra opened her mouth to reply, but to Cody's surprise and delight, Janie beat her to the punch and, this time, wouldn't be overrun. "Geordie, get the camera," she directed, tossing the curly-haired host a dishtowel Alan had left by the coffeemaker. He hadn't yet said a word, looking worse for wear than Cody or any of the others and yawning jaw-crackingly huge at least three times, but he wasn't too tired to snap to it when Janie stole a moment's control. He had the dishtowel draped over the red light of the kitchen camera in two shakes of a lamb's tail, and stood in front of it with his arms crossed, staring flatly at Kendra.

"What's this, Geordie? Janie?" Kendra didn't ruffle her feathers, leaning back instead, mouth curving up wickedly. "Insurrection amongst the ranks?"

"Trust me, no, that's not what we're up to," Janie snorted, taking her place at Geordie's side. "We decided we wanted to get this out in the open so they'll know what's going on before this gets any further."

"You sound as if you don't think I was going to tell them," Kendra purred.

Janie made a rude noise. "Guys, here's the thing." She glanced at Geordie. "Last night, after we left, we got the news that the network had heard about how many guys skipped out on City/Country, and they, um... they canceled the show."

Cody's heart lodged in his throat. No. No way. Not just the college money gone -- as if that wasn't enough -- but his chance at this summer on his own gone too, just as easily as that?

Paki wailed out a curse that could have singed ear hairs. "You're kidding me! What do we do now?"

Janie and Geordie exchanged uneasy looks; Kendra propped her chin on her hand and beamed at them. Eating up their nerves, as it appeared to Cody.

"It's not over," Janie finally allowed. "Not if you don't want it to be, but I want you to know your contract does give you an out for these circumstances."

"May I finish? Thank you," Kendra said, seizing the reins with ease, flaunting to them how she'd been the one in charge all along. "Network cancellation isn't the disaster it sounds like. I think you've heard us discussing the online presence we've built for this season. A little coffee, a late night, and I think I've come up with a solution we'll all like. If you agree to this, you'll still get your college funds and you'll be stars." She leaned forward, weight on her arms, and fixed Cody with a cruel feline challenge in her eyes. "The choice is up to you, Cody. Everything rides on your answer to this question. Do you want to hear about it... or not?"

## **Chapter Twelve**

Cody thought that when he was an old, old man and looked back at this moment, he'd probably be proud of himself for staying calm. He swirled the dregs of his coffee around in its tin mug, drank it down, took a breath, and faced Kendra unblinkingly. "Why me?"

"Cody, you know very well 'why you'," Kendra chided, still smiling in the special way that curdled his blood. He could hear the you silly thing tacked on to her reproval, even if she hadn't said it out loud. "You're the elected Leader here. Didn't you realize responsibilities were part of taking

charge?"

"I don't remember asking to be made leader."

She arched her eyebrow. "You didn't say no."

"That's not the--"

Kendra waved her hand at him. "Let's not get off on the wrong foot, Cody. If you don't want to be the head of the household -- really don't want to be head of the household -- then all you have to do is say so."

Frank made a rude noise.

Kendra didn't waver. "You will need to make up your mind right now, of course. We don't have all day and a lot rides on your decision. Either or both of them." She fixed him with her gaze, playful and cruel. "What's it going to be?"

Cody tried to stall. "Can I talk with the--"

"I'm sorry, but no. This is all on you." Kendra exaggerated a look at her watch. "You have sixty seconds."

"And what happens if I pass the buck?"

"Well, then the big decision goes to the next natural leader of the pack. Are you familiar with wolf pack dynamics, Cody? No? Right now, you're the alpha wolf. The big dog. That's why you were chosen, because we thought you could get the job done."

Geordie coughed, the bark sounding suspiciously like, "Not my choice."

Cody had to fight back a snicker.

Kendra didn't let any of it stop her. "As in any wolf pack, there are lesser lupines who have the potential to step up and replace the alpha, should he become... unable to lead." She tapped the face of her watch. "In this case, I think we all know who the next natural choice would be for head of the household."

Silence. Cody looked from guy to guy, heart sinking at the mix of



hope and irritation and jealousy he already saw cropping up in every single one of them, even Alan... but not in Shay. Shay, from what he could tell, might not have actually been listening to a single word Kendra said, lost in his still nearly-full mug of coffee, taking tiny sips and staring out the window.

And just when he thought it couldn't get any worse, it did. Kendra laid her hand over Cody's wrist and squeezed like they were best buddies or something. "Cody, why don't you tell us who you think is the next up-and-coming alpha wolf?"

Frank threw his head back and howled. Cody laughed, but he figured it probably wasn't as Frank might have hoped he would. A sour, heavy lump sat at the bottom of his gut.

This wasn't some game, the way Kendra liked it make it out to be. This was college money on the line. This was his future and all of theirs at the same time. And Alan's.

"Fine. I'll answer your first question," he said, facing Kendra head-on.

To his dismay, she dimpled and shook her head. "Not yet, Cody. I think we'll all want to hear who your choice is for second-in-command."

"Why?" he demanded. "I'm not stepping down."

"Oh now, answer the question. What'll it hurt?"

I don't know yet, but I'm betting it'll be a lot, Cody thought, eyeing her. He thought fast, prayed he was making the right decision, and spoke up with as little intonation behind his words as he could muster. "The next natural leader would be Shay."

In the silence that followed, Cody had to fight to keep from giggling like a loon when the spluttering he heard told him Shay had not only been listening the whole time, but had just near about choked on his coffee.

Kendra looked pleased as punch to hear that. "Interesting. I would have thought you'd choose Alan. Or if not Alan, then Frank. Why did you decide on Shay?"

Cody's ears heated. He cleared his throat, deliberately not looking at anyone else. "Because Shay doesn't give a damn."

Paki hooted. "Of course. Elect the non-partisan, right?"

"Sort of." In for a penny... "I mean, from what I've seen Shay over there really couldn't care less about anyone here besides himself. He does what he wants to do when he wants to do it. If it helps anyone out, that's more or less incidental."

"Hmm. Why do you think that would make him a good leader?"

Cody fidgeted, wishing he was anywhere else. He had an itchy sensation between his shoulder blades telling him that while Janie and Geordie might have covered up one camera, there had to be at least one more, and that it was likely trained right on him. No way Kendra would let a moment like this pass without getting it all on film.

"We're waiting, Cody."

"All right." He rubbed his chin. "Shay's not emotionally involved. He'd have a clear enough head to make the hard decisions. Probably a lot better than I could do right now, so if you do want to pass the reins over..." Cody sat back, hands spread wide. Your choice, Kendra.

"Kendra, maybe we should talk about this," Janie started.

Kendra waved her off without bothering to look at her. "I think you're something of a philosopher, Cody," she murmured. "Shay, how do you feel about all of this?"

"I think he's crazy," Shay responded right away. Cody heard a soft slurping noise as Shay took a swig of coffee. "Then again, that's not a big surprise."

"Would you want the position as head of household?"

"Nope." Slurp.

"How about you get back to the original topic of conversation?" Cody asked, itchier than ever. They were all watching him too closely. "Please," he added, hoping that'd sweeten Kendra up enough to get her to move it along.

Lord have mercy, but he thought it might have worked. "All right, then. It's so much better when we're all on the same page, don't you think?"

Kendra stood, then moved quickly to the covered camera and whipped the dish towel off. She pulled it through her hands as she spoke. "City/Country has officially canceled this season, yes, but the show can go on. My sponsors, who've seen the streaming internet video feeds, are so impressed by your stage presence and the group dynamics already forming here that they're willing to purchase your contracts and offer you a chance to keep playing."

Sounded to Cody as if the key word there was playing. His spine prickled a warning at him. All the same, he kept his mouth shut and nodded for her to go on.

"We'd like to use the footage we've already gathered and keep going, creating the first almost entirely virtually-produced reality show of its kind. Oh, don't worry. Not much will change on this end." Kendra gestured around the kitchen with her purloined dish towel. "A little, of course. We'll focus more on challenges and competitions."

"No eliminations," Janie said through gritted teeth. "I've spoken to the doctoral dissertation committees and they're willing to consider this project as a candidate for a thesis, at least. As long as we keep this professional."

"I wouldn't dream of attempting anything less than perfectly professional, Janie dear."

"What about Geordie?" Cody asked, nodding behind Kendra at the sour guy he couldn't now believe he'd ever once thought to be hot and confident. "I'm sorry about City/Country. I really am. But if that's all over, why are you still here?"

"It's an admirable quality to speak your mind," Kendra praised him. "Our sponsors have decided they'd like to keep Geordie on as a male consultant. After all, sometimes I'm sure you'd rather have a man to talk to rather than a woman."

Ouch. Cody cringed for him on the inside. Reduced from host to co-host to network reject, subject to Kendra's pats on the head. That had to suck so hard.

Before he could say anything, Kendra went on. "You see? There won't be much of a difference at all. All you'll need to do is sign some new forms and waivers -- I have those with me -- and we'll go on as originally

planned."

"And we'll be broadcast twenty-four-seven on a live feed," Cody said, looking for a confirmation despite not needing one.

Kendra nodded, looking so satisfied with herself Cody knew she already known what he'd say. "As I said, Cody, it's all on you."

"Wait," Alan interrupted. "How can he decide for us whether or not we make the choice to stay?"

"He can't. The choice he's making is whether or not this option will be made available to you at all. You can sign, or not sign, just as you like, but do remember that you're playing for significant stakes." She lowered her voice, speaking as if she addressed them confidentially. "Would you really want to say no to the chance of a lifetime?"

"Why do you even care?" Cody burst out. "What does all this matter to you?"

Kendra remained cool as ice. "I've got my reasons."

"Reckon I know," Frank spoke up, tipping his chair back and thumping his heavy sneakers on the table. "If she pulls this off and gets the world watching, for whatever reasons, she and her public relations know-how are gonna be what everyone wants. She makes this work, she's set for life."

"Is that true?" Cody demanded.

Kendra smiled sweetly. "Can you blame me for wanting to make this a success for all of us? Time's up, Cody. Your choice, and please remember what an important decision this is. Yes or no?"

Cody ground his teeth. This kind of choice was no choice at all. "All right," he said. "I'm in."

"Wonderful!" Kendra enthused. "Now, I have one more question for you while Janie runs out to the truck to get my portfolio. I trust you're all going to agree to continue playing, aren't you? You'll have until Janie gets back to think it over, but I do hope you'll care enough about your future to give this a shot."

"While Janie what?" Janie demanded, open-mouthed, as Shay laughed

softly, Frank spat, Alan glowered and Paki giggled. For his part, Cody tried to keep it together.

"It's a small favor," Kendra replied mildly.

"I'm not your secretary."

Kendra ignored her. "Let's keep moving forward. My question for you is this, Cody: what do you think about the chance at winning steak dinners for the entire household?"

Cody sat heavily back, gaping at her. What on earth?

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Taken aback as he was, Cody responded in the first vein he could think of, handling her the way he'd deal with one of his mom's pushy friends. Maybe that crazy hairdresser of hers, the one who was always moaning and kvetching about her get-rich-quick schemes

Actually, that wasn't a bad thought. Kendra probably had bigger stakes on her mind, but it helped. He had a handle on her, finally.

Feeling better about himself, Cody rocked back on his heels and grinned at her. "I love steak. Tell me what I have to do to bring home the beef."

To his amusement, the smile threw her, as he'd hoped it would. He had to hand it to Kendra, though; "thrown", for her, equaled only a few seconds before her own sleek mask fell neatly back into place. "Come

outside with me," she invited, already heading out of the kitchen.

Secure now that he didn't feel so lost, Cody didn't bother waffling around to see who was okay with this and who wasn't. "Move it out, guys."

"You think she's up to something?" Frank asked bluntly.

Cody laughed. "Kendra? You know she is. We should still check it out."

"Besides? Steak." Paki sounded so excited he might start jumping up and down -- for Paki, not a big stretch. Lord, that kid was hyper. "Red meat, men. Quick, march!"

"You sound like you've been away from McDonald's for a month, not a night," Frank grumbled. Cody heard the sound of a scuffle behind him and guessed it'd be Frank and Paki scrapping again, trading smacks to the head and punches to the arm.

If Kendra was a schemer like one of his mom's friends, then Frank and Paki were like the younger brothers of the casual buddies he'd had in high school. Everything flowed so much more smoothly in Cody's head now he'd had his moment of clarity.

He flinched, briefly, at the added understanding that he was pigeonholing these guys something shameful. That, he put quickly aside. No way he'd survive the next eight weeks forevermore guessing. Sucked, sure, and wasn't fair to them. But what else could he do and stay sane? He'd just have to soothe his conscience otherwise by being the best leader they could ask for, if their leader he had to be.

Done and done. Satisfied, Cody stepped aside for Frank and Paki to pass, warning them incidentally to behave. Frank flipped him off and Paki muttered "Yes, Ma".

"I'm not rising to the bait," he shouted after them, pleased when Paki chortled back at him. Yeah. Kid brothers. See? It worked.

Alan slipped up beside him, glancing shyly up. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself." Cody shoulder-bumped him. "Are you okay?" He was already labeling Alan, albeit with more fondness than the others. He'd have been one of the high school brains, the kind of guy who ate his lunches

in the library and had a lot under the surface if you made the effort to convince him you were on his side.

And, if he was gonna be honest with himself, pretty hot. Cody admitted, deep down inside, that yeah, he had a thing for glasses. Especially when they didn't hide Alan's wide blue eyes and gave him something to fidget with, which was ten kinds of cute.

"I'm good." Alan regarded him, his gaze a mix of affection and curiosity. "You seem different all of a sudden."

"Do I?" Cody returned the direct observation, taking in the sexy way Alan's hair curled over his forehead. He wanted to wrap one of those waves around his finger and see if they were as soft as they looked.

Of course, he stopped himself before he could get there. Still wasn't a good idea to get involved with anyone, even more so now that he knew a lot of practices and standards they'd have had to work around on TV wouldn't apply.

He did have to admit, though, that it wouldn't be easy to resist.

In fact, the temptation really did threaten to overtake his better sense...

Cody shook his head to snap himself out of his reverie, forcing a laugh and popping Alan harder on his upper arm, all jokes and good times and no sappy stuff. "C'mon, you. Go on, and I'll bring up the rear of the pack."

Alan nodded. Then, he surprised Cody, catching him by the wrist and looking him straight in the eye, honest and affectionate in a way Cody had never seen from a guy before, least of all from the casual 'doing a favor for a friend' guys he'd done more than platonically hang out with. Almost took his breath away.

"Alan?" he asked, uncertain again.

Alan's smile lit up his face. "It's good to see you cheered up," he said. And before Cody had a clue what he was planning, Alan pressed his lips to Cody's, light and fast, more of a brush than a kiss.

Regardless, when Alan blushed and hurried past him, despite knowing he should have stopped him to ask what inarnation he thought he was

doing, Cody was too stunned to move.

He only snapped out of it when he registered the strange sixth sense that told him someone else was observing him, and blinked at Shay. Truth be told, he'd forgotten Shay was there.

Shay looked like he hadn't missed a thing. As ever, Cody had no idea what he was thinking. Rocked back on his heels, hands stuffed in his pockets, his head tipped to one side, he studied Cody and didn't try to hide it.

"What?" Cody asked, defensive.

Shay hummed under his breath. "Just wondered how long it'd take you to crack, that's all."

"I didn't --"

"Sure looks like you did from where I'm standing."

"He's a nice guy."

"Totally nice. A natural-born Romeo."

Cody bristled in indignation. "Shay, don't make this into more than what it is. He kissed me. That's all. It goes no farther."

Shay arched one eyebrow. "That's what they all say."

"Shay, I--"

Cody might have ripped into him -- who was Shay to judge him? Wasn't like he planned on backtracking on their group decision not to play it up for the cameras.

Then, he saw the challenging light in Shay's eyes and knew he'd almost been had. The jerk had been trying to get him to smash both boundaries at once, the ban on serious fights as well as admitting he was hot enough for Alan to decide rules didn't apply to him.

Shay smirked at Cody. "Almost had you."

Cody didn't trust himself to respond, lest he really tear Shay a new one. He pressed his lips tightly together and shouldered out of the kitchen, intent on his goal.



Screw Shay, anyway. Let him take care of himself.

Now that Kendra had gotten her way, she seemed more at ease, herself. Maybe a little suspicious, still, but from the way she sat casually on the steps, Cody had hopes for less stress in their immediate futures.

To show good faith, he crouched beside her rather than loom above, wrists propped on his knees, hands dangling open and careless.

She regarded him with one of her sly, feline looks. "Leadership becomes you, Cody. I'm so glad to see you finally accepting your role."

Okay, there'd still be some stress. Cody decided he'd make the effort to rise above it. "You said something about steak?" he prompted.

Kendra knew exactly what he was doing he could tell. She winked at him. "Cooperative. I do like that in a team player."

"You want a straw so you can suck up harder?" Frank asked, disgust saturating the question.

Cody's hands curled into fists. "Just trying to make this smoother for everybody, Frank. You want to help or you want to hinder?"

"Ooh, ooh," Frank drawled. "Teacher's pet's getting pissed off."

"Frank, I will come back there."

"Am I supposed to be scared now?" Frank sounded honestly irritated. "What's got into you?"

"Maybe it's not a what, but a who."

Cody took a deep breath. Now was not the time to go losing his temper at Shay, who'd picked this time of all times to start getting mouthy. He had his life back under control again after what felt like far too long with it spinning around, driving him nuts.

Shay could go screw himself. He was only doing what he had to do.

Right?

Kendra watched the whole thing, indulgently smiling. Cody centered himself, stubbornly focusing until he calmed down, and returned her

undivided attention. "So. What do we have to do?"

"How about telling us why, while you're at it?" Frank boomed.

"I can do that." Kendra stood, dusting off her jeans. To be polite, Cody joined her. She pointed past him, at the other guys, he guessed. "Let's not forget good manners," she chided.

Paki made the one of the rudest noises Cody had ever heard. To tell the truth, he kind of wanted to echo the expression of pure disgust. Where did Kendra get off lecturing him about behaving, especially when he was trying his best?

For all that, Cody did as he'd been told, joining the ranks of his fellow residents. As he did, he caught a glimpse of first Janie and Geordie; Geordie still looked hung-over and surly, but Janie stared at him as if he'd suddenly sprouted horns. Instinctively, he checked out the other guys. What he saw in them troubled him. Frank disdainful, Paki dubious, Alan frowning, and Shay, damn him, tickled. He scowled at the whole sorry bunch and took his place at their head.

Kendra waited until they'd settled before she started. "I'll go ahead and tell you that there are cameras out here. There are, as I'm sure you've guessed, cameras everywhere, at least one in each room. Standard reality show procedure, nothing more, which I'm sure you already know."

"So why are you making the extra effort to remind us?" Frank grumbled.

"I'm glad you asked, Frank," Kendra purred. "Something you might not have known is that there are also cameras outside. Not as many, of course, and we'll move these around. Today, we've got them set up for your first challenge."

A rush of nerves made Cody's fingers tingle. "Challenge?" he blurted, forgetting for a moment the equilibrium he'd found.

From Kendra's amused tilt of the head, he knew she'd noticed. "Of course." She reached in her pocket and pulled out a small black remote. When she clicked it, it didn't do anything as far as Cody could tell. She looked pleased with herself all the same. "This throws a momentary monkey wrench in the sound system -- a feedback loop -- so I can explain what's

what. It wouldn't do for any sloppy moments to stream uninterrupted, and besides which it'll drive any viewers crazy trying to figure out what we're saying and up the buzz."

That was pretty evil. Cody wasn't sure if he thought it was cool or kind of disturbing. "Okay. Why are you doing it now?"

Kendra shrugged, totally unconcerned. "We need a time delay while you all sign your new waivers."

"Hey, I never said I'd --"

Cody cut Frank's protests off right in the middle. "You want to go home empty-handed?" he asked.

Frank's silence gave them all their answer.

Kendra's beam could have lit up the yard by night. "Wonderful. Janie, dear, did you get the folder with those forms yet? No? Please do go ahead, and bring some pens back, too."

"Yes, ma'am," Janie muttered, turning to stalk across the driveway, making for the truck they'd driven out in yesterday.

Kendra rose above her, as per her usual. "I've also paused the sound for another reason, and that's to explain what's what about these challenges. Rest assured there won't be eliminations. Really, the steak dinner would be yours whether or not any of you pass or fail the challenge -- we've already bought the food --- and it's not much of a big deal anyway. By calling it a contest, we get people excited, and we'll also get some great footage to use in promo." Her tone was smooth as silk. "All you have to do is play along, and everybody wins."

Cody wanted to squirm for some reason, though he wasn't at all sure why. Something just sounded... off... about her whole speech.

He wondered, suddenly, if labeling Kendra as a harmless money-grubber had been a good idea after all. More, as he realized none of the guys, not even Alan, had his back, he got a sick, sinking feeling in his gut that she'd known, somehow, and played him.

Taking a step closer to the guys, away from Kendra, he squared his shoulders. Damage control would have to wait, at least for the moment,

whatever it took.

First, they'd knock this one out of the park and then, when they were full of steaks, he'd see about building some bridges.

Or he could try raising a small one now. Deciding on the spur of the moment, Cody glanced from one to the other, drawing their attention. "Y'all good for this?"

Paki wrinkled his nose. "Are you on crack today? What's gotten into you?"

Well. He guessed he deserved that. Later, he mouthed.

Shay laughed silently, gloating.

Cody couldn't take it anymore. He jabbed a finger at Shay, snarling and silently saying, You and me. First chance I get.

Shay blew him a kiss. Any time, he said, shaping the words without giving them any volume. Any time.

All right, then.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

By the time they'd all signed their waivers and Janie had subsided, watching them warily as if she thought they might bite, Cody thought he'd calmed down enough to get in on the teamwork.

He still planned to get Shay alone and have a talk later. Maybe with

his fists, yeah, if Shay tried to pull the same crap a second or third or however many-th time.

They'd see.

In the meantime, he schooled himself to listen carefully to what Kendra had to say. Which, as it turned out, wasn't much.

"You'll find bushel baskets under the trees in the orchard," she started.

"Orchard?" Frank demanded, scowling. "This place don't have any orchard that I've seen."

"Well, you haven't been over the entire Baraunchswood Farm, have you?" Kendra replied, unruffled. She pointed. "Out back, just around this corner."

"Yeah, but last night I didn't --" Frank started. "Oof!"

Cody stifled a snicker. Dollars to doughnuts, that'd been Paki elbowing him hard in the gut.

Kendra didn't appear to have noticed, using her huge talents for zooming right over anything that didn't fall directly in with her goals for the moment. "Follow me," she directed, even though she was already walking, and, Cody noticed, they'd all fallen into line like baby ducks.

When they arrived, Cody took a good look at the back acreage of the farm, curious as to what he might see in proper daylight. The glass on the windows was the old, thick kind, and it didn't help that it was dulled from age. Also, he plain hadn't thought.

The realization bothered him, despite knowing he'd had a barrel load of other things on his mind.

He put that aside, making up for lost time now that he had the opportunity. It relieved him to notice that he hadn't missed much. Baraunchswood Farm? More like Baraunchswood ex-Farm. Old stables without a single horse or cow in sight, grown-over empty spaces that had likely once held crops, and yeah, a grove of trees he'd mistaken for random plantings that he could now see bore a stingy crop of peaches.

"No one's lived here in a long time, have they?" Paki asked for all of

them.

"No," Janie answered. "The last real farmers left this place to their daughter when they passed, and she's not much on the Farmer Jenny type of lifestyle. She was going to sell it to some bed and breakfast developers, but lucky us, she agreed to let us do our thing first."

"Who'd come all the way out here for a bed and breakfast whatever?" Frank asked, not in the least impressed.

Janie turned, shading her eyes, to grin at him. "You'd be surprised."

"Money makes the world go 'round," Kendra cut in. She didn't squint at the strong sunlight now flooding her. "As I said, there are bushel baskets under the trees. Your challenge is to fill at least three of them."

"With what, twigs?"

"Frank, shut up."

"Swear, next time someone tells me to--"

"Frank," Cody barked over his protest. "You wanna make a fuss all day or you wanna get this done?"

He might have known Frank wouldn't take kindly to that. If he'd have guessed, he'd have been right.

"I have had about all I can take of you. Paki, get out of my way." Frank wrestled past the others, coming up behind Cody. "You look at me when I'm talkin' to you."

Obliging, his temper simmering, Cody turned to face down the buzz-cut headed pug dog of a guy. "You have a problem with me?" he asked, pretending he didn't care. "Wanna tell me what it is?"

"I'll tell you, all right." Frank got up in Cody's space, not laying hands on him -- yet. He did lower his voice. "What the hell happened to you this morning, man? One minute you're okay, next minute you're lickin' Kendra's shoes. You up and decide you wanna be her favorite or something?"

"Frank, hush up talking about what you don't understand."

"You shut your mouth for a change."

"I'm not the one who can't keep my lips sealed."

Frank sneered at him. "Yeah, and that's another thing. Bet you didn't think anyone saw you, but I got a good look at you and Alan gettin' down inside."

Cody's eyes widened. "What?"

"Uh-huh. Don't you even try to lie to me." Frank looked wounded. "So what, all that about no one playin' to their expectations of queer boys like us was a line of bull?"

"Frank, I didn't--" Cody knew he was losing ground, fast.

"I ain't stupid. Maybe I don't talk like I went to Harvard--"

"You saying I do?"

Frank snarled. "That's not my point. Quit tryin' to distract me. I wanna know what's up first with you kissing Kendra's --"

"I'm not --"

"I ain't blind, either. You've turned on us, Cody. Startin' to believe all that crap she fed you about being a natural born leader or whatever. Thinkin' you're everything she wants you to think, puffin' up your head till you figure you're above all those rules you laid down and you still expect us to toe the line on!"

"Frank!" Cody snapped, making an effort to keep it quiet -- though, Lord have mercy, he was sure every bit of this was already flooding the internet. "No one forced you to sign anything. You don't like it? Tough. You could've been miles away by now."

"I'm not losin' the chance to go to college. You know what? Screw you, Cody. You do your own thing, but if you think I'm gonna listen to another word you say, you're dumber than I figure you are right now."

Cody crossed his arms tight over his chest to keep from taking a swing. "Have it your way, Frank. It's not my concern."

"Oh, I will. You think I'm trouble; I know you do. So maybe I'll quit behavin' as much as I have been. I can give the world a show, too." Frank glared at him before swinging away, fists clenched at his sides.

Cody realized what Frank planned too late to stop him. He tried to catch up, but even with his long legs didn't make it there in time to keep Frank from, as he passed Alan by, plucking Alan's glasses off and hurling them like a softball, the spectacles vanishing amongst the puny peach trees.

"You son of a bitch!" Cody bellowed, losing it for once and for all, ready to wallop Frank into next week.

Frank shot him the rod -- and, even as he locked eyes with Cody, shot out his arm and flat-palmed Alan in the chest, knocking him off his feet.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Janie shouted, already running to stop them. "Frank, what do you think you're doing?"

"I'm okay," Alan said, face red as fire. He clambered to his feet, looking anywhere but up at them.

Geordie put himself between Cody and Frank. "Not cool, men. Take five to calm down."

Oh, now everyone was coming together as a team? Wasn't that just great?

Kendra's eyes sparkled at Cody as she slid up behind Geordie and put on an expression that would have looked better on Yoda. "Cody, Cody, Cody. Maybe you're not the leader I thought you would be."

That, as far as Cody was concerned, was the absolute and total last straw. He'd already done enough to regret, so what did a little more matter?

Turning, he headed for the 'orchard' as fast as he could stalk.

"Cody..." Paki called after him. "What are you doing?"

"Going to find Alan's glasses," he snapped, pulling to a stop but not looking back. "Anyone have a problem with that?"

"Let him go," Janie said quietly. "How about everyone just scatters for now, and we'll meet back up when everyone's calmer?"



"I think that's a good idea," Geordie put in.

Kendra, when she spoke, couldn't have sounded more satisfied. "I think we've got enough footage to go on with for now. Take twenty, boys, and don't forget we've still got that challenge."

Like Cody wasn't well aware that they hadn't already faced her real challenge -- and either failed in the most spectacular of ways, or lived up to her every expectation, he wasn't sure which.

Lord, he'd been an idiot.

Cody snarled under his breath and struck out once more for the trees. How they were gonna come back from this, he had no idea.

Good job, he congratulated himself, disgusted. Well done.

He wasn't sure how long had passed before someone came looking for him, knowing what a crybaby he must look like sulking off by himself but too fired-up to go back... and that worried him.

Cody never figured himself as the kind of guy who'd fly off the handle the way he'd been doing almost since he got up that morning. A few minutes of thinking he was king of the world, and then he'd near about turned into the devil.

Oh, he wasn't dumb enough not to get what was going on. Exactly what happened on every reality show, or what producers hoped would happen. Exactly what Kendra had finagled for them, pushing all five until someone broke.

Deep down, despite all his attempts to avoid it, Cody understood he'd known it'd happen sooner or later. All the pressure and the crap Kendra dealt out and every last bit of disorganization plus so many changes to what they'd come here expecting... yeah, even though he'd tried to rise above all of that, someone losing their head had been inevitable.

He just hadn't thought it would be him who broke.

And for that reason, he couldn't go back. Didn't ever want to return. He'd have to, yeah, but... not yet.

Cody heaved a long, drawn-out sigh and shook his head. He reached

down to the scrawny grass at his side and pulled up a handful, sorting through the pale blades. Absently, he began tying them together in a long chain, vaguely hoping it'd work for him as it did for Alan when he juggled.

The thought made him grin faintly. "Really do have to ask him to teach me how to do... whatever that is."

"It's called contact juggling."

Cody swore, heart jumping into his throat. He laughed, more from the nerves that went hand-in-hand with surprise than any real amusement. "You near about made me piss myself."

Alan made a face as he sat down in front of Cody, neatly folding his legs beneath him. Looked like neither he nor anyone else had located his glasses yet, not surprising as Cody was pretty sure they'd landed in the orchard where no one else had dared to come pester him.

"That sounds more like Frank than like you," Alan said, propping his elbow on one knee and his chin on the back of his hand.

Cody squirmed and looked away. "Yeah, well. Maybe I'm more like him than I knew."

"Maybe." Alan didn't sound repulsed, though, and that wasn't nothing. "Both of you can be total asses when you want to."

"Lord. Thanks."

"Hey." Hesitantly -- Cody noticed the quick pause -- Alan shoved lightly at Cody's calf. "It's okay. I do understand. Stuff happens."

Cody's chest felt tight. "Not good enough, Alan. He hit you. I should have--"

"Should have what?" Alan laughed. "Defended my honor? Jeez, Cody, I'm used to that kind of crap."

"Doesn't mean you should have to take it."

"Get off your white horse. You're not my knight in shining armor."

Cody laughed despite himself. "Seriously. How do you not want to

punch my lights out right now? 'Cause he's right, you know? Not about hitting you, but about the rest of it, Frank was totally right. I let it all go to my head."

Alan was quiet for a moment. "Yes, you did. Now you aren't." He raised one shoulder and let it drop. "Maybe I do want to punch you."

Cody looked sideways at him. "But?"

Alan's cheeks pinked. Lord, he was adorable. Thing was... oh. Cody's heart sank and he swore loudly inside his head. He knew, out and out knew, that Alan wanted to kiss him again. Any other day, any other place? He'd have been more than happy. But here, not even taking all the stuff they'd decided on amongst the group into account, Cody understood with a sudden, awful clarity: Alan was adorable, like a gun-shy kitten he wanted to make friends with -- only friends. More, he knew that if Alan kissed him, Alan'd mean it as more than a means to get a thrill.

Alan, for whatever reason, wanted more from Cody than Cody now knew he could give.

And he had no one but himself to thank for digging himself this grave.

"Alan, I..." he started, having no idea what to say. And he'd thought this day couldn't get any worse.

"Hey." Alan jostled him. "It's okay. I understand."

"You do?"

"Yeah." He smiled, wistful this time. "Here's not the place and now's not the time. But I was hoping maybe... after we're gone, when we're out on our own. Maybe then."

Cody could have melted into the ground; he was so relieved. Later, that was good. Who knew? Could be he'd learn to look at Alan and see him in the way Alan wanted him to. Wasn't impossible.

He grinned at Alan, so much easier in his mind now. "Sounds like a deal to me."

Alan smiled back, happier than Cody had seen him yet. Looking at him, Cody made a firm promise to himself that he'd try his hardest.

Love at first sight, well, he'd never really believed in that anyway. Who ever looked at someone across a crowded room and made that kind of fairy tale connection, anyway?

"Hey," a voice cut in, a shadow falling atop them. "Found your glasses, Alan." Shay crouched, offering the folded pair of spectacles.

Surprised, impressed, grateful, Cody turned to Shay to thank him. Shay cocked his head toward Cody at the same time.

Hazel eyes met bright green, and Cody's heart thumped in his throat. Shay paled, flinching.

Oh. Comprehension hit hard and sank deep. Oh, damn. No, he wouldn't be learning to care about Alan the way Alan wanted, would he? Not when he understood now that he'd lost it to someone else, the last guy on earth he'd have chosen, to boot.

Shay.

Freakin' perfect.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

Topping surprise with surprise, Shay crouched and folded his hands between his knees. "Alan. You mind giving us a minute?"

Cody thought it'd be a toss-up as to who was more startled by the request -- him, Alan, or maybe even Shay himself. Alan darted glances back and forth between Cody and Shay, mouthing what's going on? when he

looked at Cody.

As for himself, Cody could only shrug helplessly.

"I'm not gonna bite him, you know." Shay fixed Alan in his attention. "Just want to talk to the guy about a couple of things."

Ah. Cody shut his eyes. He got it now. One ass-chewing, coming right up. Fine. He deserved it, and he appreciated Shay's tact in asking Alan to step aside.

Wait a second. He frowned as he opened his eyes. Tact? Shay is tactful? Since when?

Alan looked to Cody for confirmation. Cody shrugged and held his hands palms up. "I'll be inside soon," he said. "Can you tell the others we won't be long?"

Shay chuckled, waving Cody off when he made a questioning noise. Lord, he didn't feel like interpreting Shay right now. Get to the lecture and get it over with, he thought irritably, feeling less and less penitent by the second.

Thank God, Alan made up his mind. He stood, brushing grass off his knees and adjusting his glasses on his nose. When he reached out, probably to pat Cody's shoulder in a show of sympathy, Cody found himself catching Alan's hand and squeezing it. Alan blinked, then smiled.

"Go on," he repeated the request, fascinated by the quick flutter of Alan's pulse under his fingertips.

"I'll be waiting for you."

As Alan walked away, Cody waited for Shay to make some kind of comment about that, anything from an observation on puppy love to a locker-room joke about shy guys being tigers when it came to getting nasty.

Shay didn't say anything. This new side of his personality? It was seriously starting to freak Cody out.

After a minute or so of silence, Cody couldn't take it anymore. "What did you want to do out here, meditate?" he snapped, knowing he sounded shrewish. "If you've got something to say, then--"

Shay tipped gracefully forward onto his knees and leaned up, pressing his lips to Cody's.

Cody thought his heart might have stopped. Literally. He sat frozen stiff, eyes wide and lips still. Shay didn't push for any tongue action, keeping it light, almost chaste.

He thought he ought to have had a sick, sinking sensation in his gut. He didn't.

Shay rocked back, sitting on his heels. He gazed narrowly at Cody, more than likely waiting for him to react. Good luck, Cody thought, still far too stunned to come up with actual words.

"I wondered what it'd take to shut you up," Shay said. The upturn of his mouth looked far more like a smile than a smirk, and peeled years of cynicism off him. "Of course, that's not totally why I did it."

Cody didn't trust himself to say anything.

Didn't seem to bother Shay. He shifted position again, legs coming out from underneath him, butt in the grass, hands behind him. Tilting his face toward what they could see of the blue sky between the spindly branches of the peach trees, Shay seemed to bask in the sunlight and appeared to be happy just keeping quiet.

Cody tried to get his head back together and think of how to respond to what had just happened. Shay was right -- that had shut him up faster than a zipper with a padlock and a key.

Asking 'what was that?' would get him an eye-roll and the answer, "It was a kiss, stupid. What, did you think I lost my balance and hit your mouth with mine?"

Asking why didn't strike Cody as any more likely to get a satisfactory response. Why did anyone kiss anyone? Because they... they... oh. Oh, crap.

"Now you're getting it," Shay said softly, turning his face so that the sunlight could toast him evenly.

Why had more than one level. Why me? Why now? Oh, and here was a better one, which Cody gave voice. "What on God's green earth were you thinking?"

"Mmm. Thinking if I didn't make a move now, you'd end up getting all close and snuggly with Alan thanks to his puppy-love crush and your complete inability to 'just say no' to anything anyone asks of you."

Cody gaped. "I don't roll over like that."

Shay snorted softly. "Sure, you don't. Then why did you let me kiss you?"

"You'd rather I punched you in the nose?"

"Maybe." Shay raised one shoulder. A firm shoulder, Cody saw now, compact as the rest of Shay. He'd bet Shay worked out, maybe boxed or jogged or both. "Did you want to TKO me?" He returned his focus to Cody. "Give me an honest answer."

Cody fought against the urge to backpedal. "If you're trying to prove a point, then I should say 'screw you' and not say anything."

"Except you already have." Shay's lips curved in the ghost of a smile. "If you want, say 'back off' and I'll be proud of you."

"But?"

"But then you'll always wonder what you were missing out on. See, I think you liked it when I kissed you, Cody." Shay drew the tip of his tongue over his lower lip. "I think maybe you figured it out right then."

"What could I have possibly--"

"Figured that as much as Alan wants you to go for him, you don't. Not like that. And even though you can't turn anyone down, given the choice you'd pick me. This. I drive you crazy. I'm good at that. But I know what I see." Shay sat up straight. "So what's it gonna be?"

Cody's chest hurt. "I'm not this kind of guy," he said, desperate, before tipping forward and pressing his mouth to Shay's.

Shay shuddered, making an approving noise, and kissed back. He stroked Cody's hair, combing through the longer parts, and cupped his head in one hand. Cody found that he himself had pressed one palm to Shay's chest, fingers curling in his T-shirt. He shifted his weight, trying to get closer -- maybe even to slide his hand further down Shay's torso.

"Hey, hey, hey," Shay broke the kiss to warn him. "Not here. Later, maybe. Tonight."

Cody couldn't have said no if his life had depended on it. Maybe it did, or at least his future. He moistened his lips, tasting Shay. "Okay. Where?"

"I'll let you know." Shay kissed him a third time, fast, then scrambled away and stood. "We'd better get back. Play it cool. It's no one's business."

"No?" Cody asked bitterly, getting to his feet. "Not even Alan?"

Shay's expression darkened, then shuttered. "What you tell him is up to you. If you tell him anything. Just don't be the kind of bastard who'd let him hope when he doesn't have a shot." He walked away, pausing to glance over his shoulder. "I know you're not that kind of guy," he said. "I wouldn't have done this if I'd thought you'd only give in because you couldn't say no to me. You did that because you wanted to, Cody. And I wanted it, too. So. Think you're ready to get back in the game?"

## **Chapter Sixteen**

"So, Cody. I bet you've barbecued a lot, right?" Geordie frowned at the bag of charcoal briquettes Janie had passed over a little too cheerfully. He eyeballed the metal tin of lighter fluid with something more like alarm than anticipation.

Cody, himself, couldn't take his full and rapt attention off the steaks. To him, they looked amazing -- thick, red, juicy, the meat fresh and prime cut.



He'd thought Paki might cream his jeans when Janie had showed them what they were having for dinner. Either that, or cry. Frank had ended up having to dump a handful of ice down Paki's collar to distract him, after which they'd ended up chasing each other around the farmhouse, hollering death threats and pounding on one another every chance they got.

Steak. It'd been a long, long time. The only kind of dead cow Cody's family ever got on their budget was the kind of hamburger that came in a plastic tube, and not too much of that. Usually it was chicken wings -- those were cheap -- or peanut butter so they'd get enough protein.

Despite his mouth's watering, he recognized the importance of the situation here, plus all the ramifications:

1. They had an intense carnivore experience in front of them
2. Geordie had no idea how to operate a barbeque grill
3. If he didn't man up, these steaks would end up as dried cinders
4. If the steaks were ruined, Paki's heart would break

Therefore, Cody thought back fast to grilling holiday breakfast sausages on the funky tin rack his momma had owned since the seventies and nodded with a huge fake smile as he took the briquettes and flammable can from Geordie. "All the time. You want me to do this? Might look better in case they're filming this."

Geordie visibly relaxed. "Good idea. I'll supervise."

Cody hid his grin. "Deal."

Except... he had almost no idea where to start.

A warm hand landed on the small of Cody's back. He managed not to jump and squeak like a little girl, and from the smarmy grin Shay offered him as he came around the side of the grill, Shay knew how close a call it had been.

Cody made a face at him.

Shay made one right back, then looked down at the grill. "Looks like this hasn't been used in a while, but no cobwebs or bugs, so it should be

okay. Cody, man, you want to pour those briquettes in there or what?"

Mystified, Cody did as he'd been told, not sure if snapping back at Shay would be worth the momentary satisfaction or a really, really bad idea. He ripped the bag too open by accident, all of the briquettes clattering down in the basin of the grill.

"Mind if I do this part?" Shay asked, taking up the lighter fluid. "I love putting tinder to the flame."

Cody could have choked on his tongue. Or strangled Shay.

As a small mercy, Geordie looked to be oblivious. "The more the merrier. I'm sure Cody won't mind."

"Does Cody mind?" Shay asked with complete, fake innocence.

Cody backed down, hands raised in surrender. "Knock yourself out."

Shay winked at him. Winked. "Then stand back and let the master work."

Cody seethed while Shay made quick work of nudging the briquettes until they were evenly layered, dousing them with lighter fluid and applying a match. The fire caught on his first try, and while if the truth were to be told what Cody knew about grilling could be fit in a thimble, he recognized the miracle of getting a fire started without a lot of wasted matches and cussing.

"Good deal," Shay said, closing the lid of the grill and standing back. "Hope you're not too hungry. Charcoal takes a while."

"You burn it down until it's mostly white," Cody said, remembering what he'd seen on a cooking show once.

"White, yeah. Gray. Ashy. That's when you get the best heat. People talk about grilling over an open flame and you can do it that way, sure, but then you've got an outside that's charred black when the insides are still raw." Shay said it like toting around this kind of knowledge was no big deal. "I'm not wasting a bit of this."

"One meal of beans and potatoes and you kids are acting like you've just come back from a hunger strike," Geordie said wryly.

Cody turned to their once-upon-a-time host, the former face of City/Country, curious. "Was that a joke?"

"Depends on your interpretation." Geordie had changed, no doubt about it. Stripped of his power, he'd lost the rest of the glamour Cody had seen in his TV personality. All they were left with was a shortish guy with a hound-dog face and a quick temper.

Now, he appeared to be rueful. "I'm glad I've got a chance to talk to you two," he said, pausing to bite at the inside of his cheek. "Kendra's a pain in the ass, but she does know her stuff. You, Cody, and you, Shay, you're the ones here with leadership in your blood. I've hosted enough of this crap to know. You made a good call naming Shay as your second in command. I think I can trust you to hold this wacko team together for the rest of the eight weeks."

Cody frowned at him. "Thanks, I think."

Shay elbowed Cody.

"Quit it," Cody said, swatting at Shay. He'd heard a note in Geordie's voice that confused him. "You sound like you're saying goodbye."

"I am." Geordie scratched the back of his head. "This isn't my gig anymore. Maybe it never was. TV can be weird that way. I don't know... maybe even if it was still City/Country, I wouldn't stay to keep trading scratches with Kendra, good at her job or not."

"If it was City/Country proper, she wouldn't be here," Shay pointed out.

"True." Geordie sighed. "I know this makes me a coward, running away. If I was a stand-up kind of guy, I'd stay, stick it out. Thing is, this is my chance to get out. Like you keep saying, Cody -- you wanted to come here at least partially for a chance to think. That's what I need. Can you understand where I'm coming from?"

Cody thought that maybe it would be the proper thing to get pissed off at Geordie, agreeing with all his self-accusations and throwing in a few comments about rats and sinking ships, but he couldn't and he didn't. He understood.

"I'll miss you," he said, realizing it was true even as he stuck out his hand to shake Geordie's.

Geordie, blinking from the surprise, accepted the gesture and returned it. "Yeah. You too. I might even miss Frank."

"That's pushing it. Take care of yourself, Geordie." Cody hesitated. "You are staying for the steak dinner, right?"

"No way I'd miss it. I plan to take that one--" Geordie said, pointing to a petite filet with all the fat neatly trimmed off. "--because Kendra chose it for her very own when we were at the butcher's. So I'm petty, too." He grinned at them. "Sometimes revenge does taste pretty sweet."

Cody tipped his head back and laughed. Lord, what a crazy, mixed-up world they were all tumbling in and out of.

Shay nudged him in the side. When Cody looked, Shay wore a genuine smile, the kind he'd seen in the orchard. Cody was fast becoming addicted to that look on his face.

He grinned back, his chest warming.

Bring on the lunacy. So far, it seemed to be a lot more fun than trying to be normal.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

"So tell me how this worked out. I cooked--"

"You tossed meat on a fire," Janie corrected, passing Cody a soapy sponge. She attacked a greasy plate with a sudsy brush, scrubbing hard. "That's not cooking."

"Hey!" Cody protested. "I'll have you know grilling isn't half as easy as it looks." Which he knew for sure now, having had to step back most of the time and let Shay do all the work, mock-complaining the whole time about how lazy Cody and Geordie were being.

Geordie, who'd loosened up into almost another person after confessing his plans to leave, hadn't seemed to mind. In fact, he'd stood back and cracked jokes while he watched, a glass of bright orange soda dangling from his fingers.

Shay had asked him if he'd wished it was beer, to which Geordie snorted and asked what he thought.

Cody liked this new Geordie, not who he'd seen on TV or who he'd gotten to know, much more.

"Difficult or not, you're still stuck with me. Life's not fair. Suck it up." Janie's tip-tilted grin told Cody she was just yanking his chain.

He studied her. She, too, had brightened up. Maybe there was something to the whole red meat and iron and energy theory. Maybe she'd gotten as big of a jolly out of watching Kendra sputter over Geordie's eating her steak as the rest of them had. Or maybe something else was going down. Did she plan to leave, too? Jeezus, Cody hoped not. Might be selfish of him, sure, but if she went as well then they wouldn't have any line of defense against Kendra and the dollar signs in her eyes.

"Cody, what's wrong?"

Cody realized he'd drifted off into his own private world, hands stilling in the middle of the dishwater. He shook himself back to reality and tried to grin at her. "Me? Nothing's wrong. I'm tired, I guess," he improvised. It wasn't a lie. The stress of the day had worn him clean out.

"Mmhmm." Janie raised an eyebrow. "You know, Cody, I have brothers. Two of them. Younger than I am. When I'm on my game, I can detect BS and right now it stinks. 'Fess up."

Cody glanced uneasily at the red LED light of the camera. "Nothing. I swear."

Janie followed the direction of his look. "You're worried about the live feed? Pfft. Here, let me fix that." She drew a sopping dishcloth out of the water, wrung the water out, and winged it at the camera. It hit neatly as a basketball player's prize-winning shot, nothing but net.

Cody whistled, impressed.

"Thanks. And they won't be able to hear us over the running water, so c'mon." She seemed worried now. "You're an open guy, usually. If you don't want to talk, it's something big."

"Not really..."

"Cody. I will needle you until you cough it up."

Cody couldn't help but laugh. "Do you boss your brothers around like this?"

"Usually." She wrinkled her nose at him.

"You're in a good mood," Cody said, not intending to stall but glad of the opportunity as it presented itself. "I'll tell you what's on my mind if you tell me what's on yours."

Janie considered the offer. "I can compromise. Fine." She stopped scrubbing at dishes and faced him. "I've heard from the Ph.D. thesis committee. They've decided that this whole potential fiasco will work as a suitable topic for a dissertation on Comparative Cultures." She giggled. "Go figure how they changed their minds as soon as I brought up the modern American's obsession with materialism as depicted by Kendra versus individual ethics, namely the team here. And yours."

Cody winced on the inside. She thought he had good morals? Great. It made him feel even worse to know that only a couple of days ago, he'd have agreed.

Now here he was, nerves buzzing and breath short thinking about Shay and the way he'd said "tonight", heavy suggestion in the tone of his voice. Cody wasn't stupid. He'd had his share of friends with benefits, as Alan had put it. What guy his age hadn't?

He'd just never run into anyone like Shay. Shay got under his skin the way he'd never thought anyone could, and though Cody still didn't know whether he'd rather punch Shay or kiss him, he was certain which one he'd end up doing that night if everything worked out.

And while he was busy macking on Shay, maybe even getting partially lucky, he had an awful certainty that Alan would be curled up on his side in the uncomfortable dormitory bed, thinking about the "another time, another place" they'd sorta-kinda agreed on before.

Had that only been this morning? Cody's sense of time was shot all to hell and hadn't come back again.

His shoulders sagged. "Janie... I'm not a good guy. Okay?"

"Why would you say that?" Her forehead crinkled. "Cody, you're starting to worry me."

Cody could tell she was being honest. That she had it in her to care when she wasn't frantic -- that she already did care. It made him feel even guiltier. "Janie," he started impulsively, "What are you supposed to do when..."

He trailed off, knowing there was no way he could spin this that'd be halfway understandable, much less anywhere near what he was willing to confess if there was the slightest chance anyone but them would ever see or hear this.

What do you do when you don't want to break the nice guy's heart, but the bad boy's got you almost wrapped around his finger? And if you're not sure anymore than he's a bad boy? Or if you don't think you'd mind if he is, because he's just that hot? Because he makes you crazy?

Yeah. That'd go down really well.

"Cody," Janie prompted, touching his wrist. "Look. If you one hundred percent don't want to say, then don't. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pushed. I'm worried, that's all. No, let me finish," she said, shaking her head when he started to respond. "Why don't you try talking to Alan instead?"

"Alan." Cody's stomach flopped unhappily. "Why?"

Janie's cheeks pinked. "I'm not blind, Cody. I see the way he looks at

you." She smiled. "The way you've looked back. God knows the last thing I should do is encourage the kind of romance Kendra would give her eyeteeth to catch on film for the shock value, but I think you two would be so sweet together. You're the kind of guy he needs -- good, honest, steady, kind -- it'd be beneficial for both of you. And yeah, yeah, you're young, it's not a forever sort of deal. Still. For now, I'd say go with what your heart tells you. And that's from a pseudo big sister."

Cody thought he might throw up. "You think Alan's falling for me?"

"I think so, yeah. Maybe. Would that be a bad thing? Here." Janie scooped up the sponge Cody had let fall without noticing. "Get these dishes finished, and we adults will get out of your hair for the night. Then your time is your own." She raised on tiptoe and whispered in his ear, "Kendra will kill me if I tell you this, but there's one place with no cameras at all. The woodshed out behind the farmhouse. She wouldn't go in there after Geordie told her there might be snakes. So if any of you need a quiet place to talk..."

Cody pasted on a smile. He guessed he knew where he would take Shay.

No. He knew where he'd take Alan, first, to talk with him about all this. Be damned if he'd cheat.

"Thanks, Janie," he said, impulsively kissing her cheek.

Janie turned bright red and splashed him with soapy dishwater. Then, she brushed hair off her cheek and grinned, looking like the confident collegiate Cody figured she must have been before all this. "No," she said simply. "Thank you."



## Chapter Eighteen

"Hey. C'mere." Shay hissed at him from a shadowy corner, of all the things. Cody would have called him on the cheese if a wicked twinkle in Shay's eye hadn't tipped him off to how Shay knew exactly what he was doing.

Then again, he always did, didn't he?

"You've been playing me from the start, haven't you?" Cody accused, going to Shay nonetheless. He touched Shay's cheek, his low-level excitement growing at the way Shay hummed and turned into his palm. "If I ask you something, will you give me a straight answer?"

"You're asking the wrong kind of guy for anything straight."

Cody groaned. "Be serious."

"If you think for a second that I'm kidding around with this, you're either blind or crazy." Shay pulled Cody to him, coming so close that Cody could smell the last traces of illicitly sneaked coffee on his breath and shiver when the heat of it whispered over his lips. "I'm not playing you. At least not now. And not from the start. I really couldn't stand you when we first met."

"And that was so long ago. The years have brought you wisdom. Oh, no, wait. It's more like hours."

"Shut up." Shay regarded him narrowly, thoughtfully. "You still get on my nerves. Just so you know."

"Thanks."

"Don't get riled up. I know I irritate you seven ways to Sunday, too."

"That's not wrong," Cody admitted. He gathered up his courage, and although he was still jumbled up as a puzzle box, he went with what he wanted and wrapped his arms around Shay's waist. "So why is it that the thought I keep coming back to is how much I want to meet up with you tonight?"

Shay looked all too knowing. "Despite not being able to stop thinking

about Alan, too?"

"I'm an ass," Cody said, slumping. "I don't want to be this kind of guy."

"Then don't." Shay released him, stepping back. "Talk to Alan. Give him the 'let's just be friends' routine."

"You make it sound like worse than a kiss-off."

Shay shrugged, his former cold indifference slipping masklike back into place. "The truth is usually ugly."

"Cold, man."

"I never said I was warm and fuzzy. Maybe you are as much of a moron as I'd suspected."

"That's the way to win my heart, buddy. Talk snarky to me some more."

Shay huffed a quiet, approving laugh. "See? I like it when you stand up for yourself."

"You're the most confusing guy I've ever met," Cody said, exasperated.

"I'll take that as a compliment. And you're as messed up as they come. JFK Junior? Please. No. But even though it kills me to admit there might be some decent guys in this world, you could be one."

"I don't feel like one right now."

"No? You're kidding. Like that wasn't and isn't painfully obvious. Look." Shay pushed him. "Go talk to Alan. Get it done, and if you want to take the night to unload your guilt, then do that, too."

Cody hesitated. "You're offering me a rain check, or is this your way of brushing me off?"

"Either, or. Do you want me to walk away? It'd make your life a lot easier. Say the word, and I'm gone."

He recognized the challenge in that, and even though it tangled him

up inside even worse, Cody had to face the truth: no, he didn't want Shay to back down. He'd have given his arm to be able to be what Alan needed, but... it'd be a lie. Every time he looked at Alan, he'd know that he didn't mean anything his heart told him Alan wanted to hear.

It would be less than fair. It'd be cruel. Cody understood both levels of the challenge now.

"Okay," he agreed, straightening his shoulders. "After I talk to him, what then?"

"Then you give me a nod or a wink, or come up with some kind of code phrase like 'the pink elephant walks soft tonight' and I'll follow you wherever." Shay's expression slipped. "I give you a lot of flak, Cody, and part of me doesn't know why I want this the way I do, but... I need you. The level of insanity makes no difference. So come hang out with me tonight, and we'll see what happens. Okay?"

Cody swallowed, his mouth dry. "Okay," he agreed. "Okay."

Before he lost his nerve, he ducked down to kiss Shay. When their lips brushed together, Shay's parted slightly.

Cody broke the kiss and walked away fast, before this could turn into more than he wanted to be ready for before that dreaded conversation with Alan. He made tracks and didn't look back.

He could still feel Shay's presence behind him, heated and scary and powerful.

Shay was going to change his life, and he knew that for a fact.

What he didn't know was whether or not he'd ride the wave or get swept out on the riptide.

And he would have talked to Alan. Cody knew he would have.

Except he didn't.

He'd last seen Alan in the common area, standing in front of the bookcases. He traced the spines of the tattered old novels and Reader's Digest Condensed Versions with one finger, alternately chuckling or frowning, intrigued. When Cody came to the right angle to look through the

doors, he saw Alan exactly where he'd been left, an old book the size of an envelope open in his hands. Alan turned the pages, completely lost in them. Cody didn't think he saw him coming.

As he hesitated, trying to figure out how to start this conversation and what he should say, the sound of two guys talking softly filtered into his ears.

Eavesdropping was, in his opinion, a purely human response. Maybe it had something to do with survival, knowing what kind of secrets people were trying to keep.

He glanced sideways, catching a quick peripheral look at Frank and Paki sitting on the floor just inside the kitchen. Though they were whispering, through some trick of the acoustics he could still hear them.

When he figured out what they were talking about, he prayed for their sakes that Kendra's cameras and microphones weren't strong enough to catch this, too, because what a hornet's nest that would turn over.

"...doesn't make any sense," Paki said, sounding dejected. He'd hunched over as if miserable, the most subdued that Cody had ever seen him.

Frank was listening to Paki as if sympathetic, his expression slightly uncomfortable but his body language telling Cody that the ear he lent was willing. "Naw. When does it ever? There was this stuck-up rich kid back in Texas I thought maybe I'd go for, if I thought he'd look back at me."

"Did he?"

"Nope."

"See?" Paki crumpled. "Alan's only got eyes for Cody. Cody's a great guy, sure, but I can't help it. And he's so completely not my type! I mean... with the glasses, and the smarts, and... he's shy, Frank! I can barely understand what he's saying half the time."

Frank shrugged, not unsympathetically. "Opposites attract and all that," he pointed out. "Might as well have figured on it."

Paki snorted, shoving halfheartedly at Frank. "You know the others probably have a pool on when the two of us are going to start smooching."

"As if. Me and you? No way. We'd kill each other."

"Besides, I'm a top." Paki grinned when Frank guffawed. "What?"

Frank punched his shoulder. "Look, here's what I'd say to do. Cody don't see how Alan's crushing on him. I don't think he does."

Paki shook his head.

"There you go, then. Divert Alan's attention. Make nice to him, sweet-talk him some, and he'll start to see you different. All's a guy like him wants is someone to care about who'll treat him good, too. You can do that."

Paki tugged at his lower lip, thinking for a minute. "I'll try. What could it hurt?"

"Attaboy." Frank roughed up Paki's crazy mop of hair. "You think maybe there's anything sweet in all those cans? I'd just about kill for some dessert."

"Dunno, but we can go find out." Paki jumped up, hauling Frank along with him.

Cody stepped back just in time not to be noticed. His heart hammered in his throat, around the knot lodged halfway down. Relief and alarm warred for dominance in his head, tightening his muscles until he thought he might twang like a rubber band if someone tapped him on the arm.

Which, of course, they did. Shay came to stand beside him, something Cody was starting to recognize as his way of showing friendship and understanding. "Let it happen," he said quietly, catching Cody's hand. "They can be happy together, and so can we. Okay?"

Cody shivered. He breathed on a count of three, trying to work it all out. "Paki would be better for him than me," he said after he'd exhaled. "This is good. Isn't it?"

"I think so." Shay's thumb stroked the inside of Cody's wrist. "You're all right?"

"Yeah. I am." Cody bumped his head against Shay's. The emotions that had been tamped down while he listened in on Frank and Paki flared back up. Gratitude and relief flooded his veins, along with want. He

squeezed Shay's hand. "I know a place where we can go. Follow me?" he asked.

And Shay followed.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

"I've got to tell you -- the last trip I took to a woodshed wasn't half as much fun." Shay trailed his fingers along the splintery-looking horizontal planks that made up the walls. "Looking for cameras," he explained. "Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt myself."

"You say that now. When you've got four or five splinters in your palm, don't come running to me to get some tweezers and fix up your owies."

"Real gentlemanly of you, there." Shay flipped him off.

"Ooh, ladylike."

"Shut up." Shay turned, alight in a way Cody had never seen on him before. Every time his mood changed for the better, he looked more...

Shay fidgeted. "What? Quit staring at me."

"You don't like it when guys start grooving on your hotness?" Cody grinned at Shay, who cooed saccharinely at him and fluttered his eyelashes. "Okay, now that? Was over the top. Seriously. I can't appreciate the view?"

A hot pink stain began to creep up Shay's neck, rising above his

collar. "Let's just say I'm not used to it."

"Could you learn to like it?"

"From you? Maybe." Shay ducked his head briefly before turning his attention back to the walls of the woodshed.

Cody only paid a quarter of his attention to Shay's explorations, being otherwise delighted by his discovery. "You've got to be kidding me. You? You're shy? Since when did this happen?"

Shay's lips turned down at the corners. "I'm not shy. You, on the other hand -- you're crazy."

"Maybe. Probably. I'm here, aren't I?"

"Yeah," Shay said, almost too quietly to hear. "You are." He cleared his throat. "Kendra did some good work in here. I can't seem to find where she hid the cameras. No helpful LED lights, y'know?"

"I told you. This shed is camera-free."

Shay stilled. "Actually, no, you didn't tell me." When he looked back at Cody this time, he'd lost his bashfulness and gone right back to hostility. "Is this a joke?"

"What? No," Cody protested. He pushed his hair off his forehead. "That doesn't make any sense. What would be funny about this?"

"Making me hunt for cameras because I want to protect our privacy when you know there --"

"Oh, shut up." Cody groaned. "Way to kill the mood." Grouchy now, he stomped down a circle of sawdust in front of a stack of cut logs and sat gracelessly, legs sprawling. He crossed his arms and harrumphed.

Shay cracked up.

"What?" Cody snapped.

"Man, you look like you're three and I stole your pudding cup." Shay sank into a crouch in front of Cody. His eyes sparkled and his grin was genuinely amused.

"I'm never going to figure you out, am I?" Cody asked glumly.

"Doubtful. No one ever has so far." Shay shrugged. "Or if they have, they aren't telling me about it."

They stilled, Shay's hands dangling from his wrists between his knees, Cody's crossed arms slowly relaxing.

Shay licked his bottom lip. "So, how do you want to start this?"

"It turns me off when guys are this romantic," Cody drawled. "You're one of those instruction manual types, aren't you?"

"Huh?" Shay drew back an inch or three. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Like a light switch or a diagram of how to put a chair together. Clap on, clap off, tab A, slot B, done." Cody studied him. "It doesn't fit with the blushing. Oh. Wait." The clue bulb went off. "Oh."

Shay grumbled under his breath and looked aside, his lips thinning. "Not getting all kinds of... 'feelings'... involved just makes it easier, that's all." He snorted. "I'm not a virgin, if that's what you're thinking, and I know you are."

"Did I say that? Look, sit down or something." Cody patted the sawdust beside him. "I swear I won't bite."

"Not even if I ask nicely?" Shay joked half-heartedly. He swung around and sat heavily, resting his head on Cody's shoulder.

Cody let him do it. He was too stunned to protest. He'd thought only girls got into the whole display of affection thing. When he'd complained about romance and the lack thereof, he'd been joking. Not expecting anything more than what he usually got, which was a hand job and a gruff "See you around".

Looked like Shay had taken him seriously.

It was a moment in which Cody needed to say the right thing, he knew. The perfect expression of whatever would take the wrong kind of tension out of the guy. Problem with that was with Shay's warmth blanketing his side and the smell of Shay's shampoo fogging his senses, he could barely



think over his own rising tension of a completely different and much better but kind of inappropriate -- aw, screw it.

Cody grasped Shay by the chin and turned his head, tilting it up so that he could come down and --

Shay still tasted like the last traces of coffee, and also of mouthwash. Minty.

When they separated, Shay boggled at him. "Where did that come from?"

"Do you really care?"

"Not so much," Shay admitted. He took a deep breath, visibly steadying his nerves. "What was it like for you? You know, the first time you..." he trailed off.

Cody had a rising bad feeling about this. "You swear you're not a virgin? This is weird enough without--"

Shay socked him in the chest. "No. Just answer the question."

"Why?"

"Because I asked you nicely?"

"You call punching me 'nice'?"

"Want to see me get mean?" Shay threatened, drawing back his fist. "Look. I'm not asking because I need tender hand-holding or sweet nothings. I'm curious. Because if it was bad, I want to be better."

"I know I'm never gonna figure you out. Why would I go comparing --"

Shay sighed. Cody shut up.

"People do," Shay said after a moment of uncomfortable silence. "I don't like being second best. I'm not good at following the leader."

"No kidding? I might have noticed that." Cody blew hair out of his eyes. "You want to be really good for me?" It embarrassed him to say it, but he soldiered on. "Fine. Quit distracting me with questions when all I really

want to do is kiss you again. Would that work for you, Mr. Inferiority Complex?"

Shay made a face at him. He tipped back his head. "Let's see who's 'inferior', big guy. Bring it on."

So it wasn't hearts and flowers. Cody decided he didn't really care about those when he had a Shay to explore and an empty woodshed with no one around except them to take his time in.

And he was a guy who'd keep at a job until it was well done. His goal right now was driving Shay so nuts that he'd just shut up and go with this crazy thing he'd started. Cody decided that if he had to, he'd take all night making sure the job was done right.

He kind of hoped he would.

## **Chapter Twenty**

It never stopped being strange to Cody. Good -- great, even -- but still almost weird. Everything he'd ever done before finished with zipping up while not meeting the other guy's eyes. Maybe they'd clear their throats and mumble "thanks" before walking away in different directions as fast as possible.

Not now. Not with Shay.

He kept cracking jokes, and not the easy ones, either, the kind a guy might make to lighten the atmosphere after what they'd just done.

Not that it had been bad. God, had it not been bad.

Just... different.

Shay brushed Cody's cheek, not even making a face at how his skin was flushed and damp. "Hey, you. Quit thinking so hard. You'll give me a headache by proxy."

Cody shook his head, grinning to himself. "How do you do that?" he asked without thinking.

"Do what?"

"Make it... I dunno..." Cody gestured at the woodshed. "Easy, I guess?"

Shay took his question seriously, frowning while he stuffed his feet back in his sneakers and did up the laces. He buttoned his flannel shirt and flipped up the collar. "Because I'm that cool, I guess. Hey, watch the ribs." He deflected Cody's jab with ease before sobering. "I don't know. I think maybe it's that I know what I wanted. Still do want. You might not have noticed, but I had a good time, there." He fake-punched Cody's jaw, barely more than a tap. "We should do it again sometime."

"Sometime?" Cody raised his eyebrow, not worried despite Shay's getting dressed being a good sign that they were done for now, and not concerned about the verbal confirmation. Still, he was in a good enough mood to tease, so... "Sounds like a brush-off to me. Or do you need naptime first?"

"Pfft. I'm young, hung and I live healthy. That's not the point." Shay looked up at the door to the woodshed.

Cody followed his gaze. "I don't think you have to worry about anyone having heard us. You did good at keeping quiet."

"I don't make a lot of noise, not usually." Shay sighed. He rubbed over his collarbone. "Thanks, by the way. It'll be a lot of fun keeping this covered in Baraunchswood heat."

"My pleasure." Cody leered at him.

"Bah, humbug." Shay straightened his shoulders and made a move for

the door. "Hate to cut the pillow talk short, but we have to get moving. The guys will be heading to the dorm soon, and if we're not tucked up snug in our beds, they're gonna talk like mothers."

"True." Cody rolled to his knees and got to his feet. He tucked, zipped, and buttoned, still feeling the odd comfortable vibe, as if he and Shay were old pros at this.

Cody thought he liked it, and he knew he could get used to it. He stopped Shay the moment before Shay's hand touched the doorknob, yanking the guy to him the way he'd seen in those slushy old romance films his mom loved, laughing when he laughed, and kissing him when he started to scoff.

He didn't know if he'd ever been this good in his life, flying this high and having such an awesome time, so of course right then was when it all went to hell.

The doorknob turned under Shay's hand, independent of Shay, and the door jerked open behind them. Paki collided with Shay, knocking him into Cody and, thanks to velocity, caused Cody to stumble back with a hissed curse. Shay followed up close to him, automatically checking to make sure he was okay.

His hands weren't in any compromising locations. That wasn't the issue.

The issue was Paki's motor mouth. The brightly-colored kid waved his arms, flailing for balance. "Holy crap, man. Way to scare me half to death. What are you doing in here?" Cody thought he only saw Shay, and for a crazy moment thought about maybe hiding behind the woodpile.

Too late. As soon as he thought it, Paki registered his presence. "Cody? What's going on?"

It might have been okay, Cody thought, if Shay hadn't chosen that moment to don his prickly 'tude like a defensive wall, turning dark red and jamming his hands in his pockets. His lip curled when he sneered at Paki. "What do you think?"

At first, Paki frowned, glancing back and forth between them. Cody despaired of the guy's future hopes of ever getting laid if he was this

clueless, decided Shay was having a bad influence on him for him to even think such a thing, and coughed, trying to figure out what to say.

No matter what, this wasn't gonna end well.

Shay rolled his eyes and huffed. "What, you need a visual aid?" Cody would have stopped him if he'd had more than half a second to think. He didn't. Shay popped open the top two buttons of his shirt and pulled his collar open, displaying the darkening hickey he'd just been mock-complaining about.

Paki's eyes didn't pop comically open. He didn't gasp, shout, swear or stagger around. He sucked his lower lip between his teeth, nodded, and turned on his heel to go.

Cody snapped. He lunged past Shay and managed to grab Paki by the arm, hauling him back. "Wait. I can explain."

Shay snorted. Paki regarded Cody flatly. "I think I've got the picture, thanks."

"What do you care, anyway?" Shay demanded, getting really obnoxious now. Cody was back to thinking he might rather smack Shay around than do what they'd done again. "We talked about all this. So they find out, and then we don't have to hide." He smirked at their surroundings. "A woodshed isn't much different from a closet, is it?"

"If you don't shut up, I will shut you up and you won't like it."

"Ooh. Promise?"

Cody clamped his hand over Shay's mouth and pinned him with his other arm. As he'd threatened, Shay didn't like it, snorting and bucking, trying to get free. Cody hadn't wrestled with a bully of an older brother for years for nothing, though, and held him steady.

He'd had to let Paki go to do that, both relieved and terrified when Paki didn't move. "Hey, man, listen. It'll be okay," he started to say, even as he knew how stupid that sounded.

"Will it?" Paki cocked his head. "See, I don't know about that. In case you're blind, which I'm starting to wonder about, Alan's eating his heart out over you."

Cody looked away, grimacing.

"Yeah. I see you picked up on that." Paki sounded bitter and older at the same time. "Not to mention you kinda smashed everything we agreed on into the dirt. Don't play to the crowd," he mimicked. "Don't give Kendra what she wants; don't turn this into *Queer as Folk: The Teen Years*. Yeah, yeah, I know that isn't what you said, but it sums it up quicker." He took a step backward. "Here's a decent summary of the rest: you're a fake, Cody. You're a liar, you're a cheater, and you don't give a damn about anything except getting your own way."

"That's not true, I --"

"Save it." Paki walked out. This time, Cody couldn't catch him to stop him. "Screw you, Cody," he said over his shoulder.

Instantly, Shay was at Cody's side, hand on his shoulder. Rubbing his shoulder, for Christ's sake. Cody made an annoyed sound and twitched him off.

To his surprise, Shay backed up right away. Cody didn't have to look to know Shay was just as pissed off at him now as Paki.

In what universe was that fair?

"Don't start. If you hadn't been a total ass--"

"You thought I should lie?"

"You wanna add 'too' to that?" Cody squared off. He didn't like to fight, but man, right now he could use a brawl to clear his head. The other stuff had only messed him up further, seemed like.

Shay didn't oblige, regarding him coolly, almost coldly. "I think I'm about full up on you, too," he said. "Shit or get off the pot, Cody."

"You mean, your way or the highway?" Cody shot back. "I came here because you asked me to. I've screwed everything else up because you wanted me to. I--"

"So maybe you shouldn't listen to me like that," Shay said, unreadable. "Maybe you should think about that."

He brushed past Cody. The elbow to his ribs wasn't friendly at all. "Me? I think I'm going to bed. See you when you've grown a pair, Cody."

Cody snapped. Again. For the worse, this time, and not the better.

## **Chapter Twenty One**

If anyone had asked Cody before that night whether or not it was possible for a guy around his age to move as quietly as a cat, he'd have laughed. No way. His kid sister weighed maybe fifty pounds, and she sounded like a draft horse, especially in sock feet on bare floors.

All the same, he couldn't really say he was surprised when he almost didn't hear Alan approaching.

At least, he decided, it was now in the dorm -- bedroom --- whatever, rather than earlier when he'd gotten caught. He was starting to reconsider the whole negative connotations of a trip to the woodshed now. Small mercies, Alan hadn't missed him at all, only smiling shyly and pushing his glasses up his nose when Cody flopped down on a creaky chair near the bookshelf that had kept Alan's interest all evening.

Cody had grinned back, hoped to high heaven he wasn't blushing and didn't have interesting bruises starting to form in visible places, and swatted Alan's ass.

Which normally would have led to Paki whooping, popping Frank's butt as hard as he could, and then a whole chase scene would ensue during which Shay would stand by looking annoyed at their childishness.

Ah, the good old... day. Thinking about how relatively short a time they'd actually been at Baraunchswood made Cody's head hurt. He'd done more and seemed to have lived longer than his entire high school career.

Alan padded to the side of Cody's bed on quiet sock feet, sliding and taking tiny steps, dodging every creaky floorboard they'd discovered so far. Cody held his breath while Alan approached, knowing that to call out and ask what he thought he was doing and tell him to go back to bed would be the surest way to draw attention.

He wasn't sure if he wanted to stop Alan, anyway. He didn't know what he wanted anymore, except a do-over of the whole affair starting with shadowing Joey and locking him in a chokehold when he tried to sneak off an application for City/Country.

Since he didn't have a time machine handy, he waited for Alan to make it all the way to him. His tongue seemed too big for his dried-out mouth, his throat scratchy.

"Hey," Alan whispered, settling down in a crouch at the side of Cody's bed. "Cody? Are you awake?"

No point in lying. "Yeah," he whispered back, keeping it soft as a breath. He turned carefully, nowhere nearly as graceful as Alan, producing a few creaks that sounded earsplitting to him. He winced, scanning the others to see if they'd woken.

Didn't look like they had. Paki had tucked himself up in a tight ball, face smashed in his pillow and blanket drawn up around his head so that only a sprout of multi-colored hair proved it was him. Shay, well, who knew? He faced the wall and not them, but his breathing was even and deep. Frank lay sprawled out on his back, feet dangling off both sides of the bed that was too narrow for him, mouth open, snoring fit to make the dead wish for earplugs. No one could pick up anything over that racket, could they? So what did he have to worry about?

"Hey." Alan nudged his arm. "I'm not stupid. They're all out cold."

Cody grinned at him. Lord, he really was adorable with his blue eyes behind those glasses. Besides, you had to take an interest in a guy nimble enough to juggle pebbles and roll acorns over his fingertips and back again.



Didn't you?

"What's up?" he asked, carefully propping himself on one elbow, hand speared through the hair on the side of his head. He couldn't stop a yawn -- the day had worn him out, despite not being able to drift off to sleep yet. Too much to think about. "Are you... um, are you okay?"

Right now would not be the time to choose to pick a fight with him. Please God, don't let that be what's on his mind. If you're still speaking to me, that is. Amen.

"I'm fine." Alan ducked his head, then looked up timidly through the fringe of his bangs. "What about you?"

"Me?"

"Yes. You seemed... upset, when you came back in tonight."

So much for Alan not picking up on any cues. "I'm sleepy," Cody said with a one-shouldered shrug. "Wanna help me duct-tape Frank's mouth shut or put a pillow over his face so we can all get some rest?"

Alan laughed quietly. "Much as I'd like to, I don't think even Kendra would let us get away with literal murder."

"Dang." Cody shifted position, trying to get comfortable -- kind of an impossibility on those beds. "Is there anything I can do for you, Alan?" he asked, hoping he didn't sound snappish.

Why, he asked his contrary brain, don't you want to go for him? He's good-natured, a decent guy, and glasses or not he's hot. He needs someone to look after him, besides.

No answers came from on high. Next to his bed, Alan studied his hands as if they were the most interesting things ever. He bit at the inside of his cheek and tapped his fingers together in the here-is-the-church, here-is-the-steeple that Cody remembered from Sunday School when he was a kid. Felt paper-doll things on a felt board, store-bought chocolate-chip cookies and Hi-C.

"Alan?" he asked, leaning forward to rest his free hand on Alan's shoulder. "Is something wrong?"

Alan looked up, taking Cody aback with the sudden glitter of mischief in his blue, blue eyes. "Nothing that I know of," he whispered. He caught Cody's wrist and used it as leverage to push himself up, pressing his lips to Cody's.

Instinct took over, closing Cody's eyes and returning the kiss. Contrariness egged him on further, telling him it would be a great idea to cup the back of Alan's head and pull him close.

Alan pulled away and blinked at Cody. He licked his lips. "Is this okay?" he queried softly. "I know there isn't anywhere or any time for anything more than this, but I couldn't... I didn't want to wait eight weeks to really kiss you."

Cody was starting to think that maybe he could use his body to overrule his brain. Come on, he was eighteen. And people really didn't -- always -- fall in love right away, did they? It took time.

So maybe it would take time to shove Shay out of his head, too.

He'd just gotten the whispered permission and encouragement all set to spill off his tongue when a small gleam behind Alan caught his attention. He looked before he could stop himself.

Shay had turned over as quietly as Alan had walked, lying facing Cody. The gleam had been the moonlight reflecting off his eyes as he watched them. His mouth twitched in the strangest smile, one Cody couldn't interpret.

Despite himself, Cody shivered. What was he, crazy? Genuinely nuts?

Cody gritted his teeth, making himself look away. He returned his attention to Alan, who he tugged closer. "Yeah," he whispered over Alan's lips. "Kissing is good, as long as we're quiet."

Alan's smile nearly blinded him before he closed his eyes again and let this whatever-it-was happen, too worn-out to fight anything anymore.

## Chapter Twenty Two

Cody felt like death warmed over the next morning. Big shocker there, he thought sourly, wiping sleep grit from his eyes as he stumbled to the front yard where Kendra, way too chipper and well-rested, had "politely requested" they all make an appearance as soon as they'd finished with breakfast.

Breakfast hadn't so much actually happened. Paki silently stuffed his face with peaches straight from the can while Frank ate three granola bars in a row and watched him with a worried frown. Cody deduced that for once in his life Paki had kept his mouth shut.

Frankly, he wished Paki hadn't. Knowing he would sooner or later and having to wait for that was worse than getting torn a new one right away. At least then it'd be over with.

Maybe that was why Paki's lips were still zipped.

Maybe he was getting as bristly as Shay, who stood with his back turned to the room, drinking cup after cup of strong black coffee he didn't bother trying to hide from Kendra. Janie made a few noises about too much caffeine; Shay shrugged her off and kept chugging.

Cody had propped himself up on the wall, too tired to eat, nodding at the appropriate places while Alan neatly finished up a bowl of cereal and hovered.

Lord almighty, tired as he was -- he hadn't done more than doze after Alan finally went back to his own bed -- he really hoped Kendra had some hard work disguised as a "challenge" for them. He could use the distraction and he knew hard work would clear out his head. Or he hoped so, anyway.

"Cody, you look exhausted," she said, examining him as she might a

bug under a microscope. "Are you up for participating today?"

Concern had never been faker. None of the great fakes in history had anything on Kendra. Cody scowled at her, wishing for a pair of sunglasses, and grunted.

"Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed," she murmured. Cody near about bit his tongue, thinking for sure that someone would choose now to make a smart comment.

No one did. He still didn't breathe any easier.

Kendra winked at him as if they were sharing some big kind of secret, then clapped her hands far too loudly and backed up so she could address all five of them. "Good morning, and welcome to today's challenge. Are you ready for what comes next?"

Cody, along with the others, squinted at her. The series of "mmph" noises they produced didn't faze her.

"Good! Let's begin." Kendra shifted, her body language changing, her tone becoming silkier. Cody realized she was playing to the camera -- and not doing a bad job, either. "I'll start by reassuring you that this game is not based on eliminations. Your places here aren't in any danger whether you succeed or fail."

"But?" Shay prompted.

Kendra didn't flinch at his unaccustomed interruption. "But," she confirmed, "you are playing for points. Bonus points for creativity and imagination."

"And we're doing...?" Paki prompted. He had grayish circles under his eyes. Frank, keeping watch out for him, looked like a bulldog standing guard over a scruffy calico kitten.

"We," Kendra said proudly, gesturing at the scraggly expanse of Baraunchswood Farm, "are building an obstacle course."

Shay snorted.

Kendra ignored him. "Two obstacle courses, as a matter of fact. Teams of two."

"There are five of us," Frank pointed out.

Kendra's smile became just the tiniest bit strained. No one would have noticed it if they hadn't been avidly watching and hoping. "Yes, Frank, I was coming to that. Two teams of two. You'll draw straws for the odd man out."

"Yeah? And what happens to the odd man out? You know what? Never mind." Paki turned on his heel and stomped back to the porch, his unlaced boots flapping. "Screw all of you. I've got better things to do."

"Paki, there is a negative balance possible with these points," Kendra called after him, sounding delighted by his little show. Cody cringed, knowing that any second now he'd start running off at the mouth in front of everyone in the nation.

Paki flipped Kendra off and kept going. The back door rattled and shook behind him as he slammed it.

"I'll go after him," Janie murmured. "I really doubt you need me here anyway."

She didn't wait for a protest. No worries, as Kendra didn't make one, returning to her spiel as if she'd never stopped. "I think it'll be interesting if we shuffle the group dynamics a little," she said. "I've noticed that some of you are developing friendships that exclude others."

"That ain't what you want?" Frank scoffed.

"Your teams have been pre-assigned," Kendra went on, smooth as silk. "Frank, you'll be working with Cody. Shay, you'll work with Alan."

Cody closed his eyes tight, feeling the sick sensation of his stomach falling. His ears roared with the rush of blood as his pulse rate climbed.

"Is something wrong, Cody?"

"What, with me?" he asked, eyes still shut. "Not a thing, Kendra. I'm peachy."

"I don't wanna work with him," Frank protested.

"And why not?"

"Maybe 'cause he's a dick?"

"Language, Frank," Kendra chided, unable to hide her spark of satisfaction -- or not trying to, either one. "I've seen that you're becoming... dissatisfied. I'm trying to mend the breach between you. Ergo, teams. Alan, Shay, do either of you have any problems? Please feel free to let me know about them. We're all working toward a common goal, after all."

Alan fidgeted. Shay said nothing. Cody couldn't read him.

This? This had 'disaster' spelled all over it in huge neon letters. Okay, not only are you not talking to me, but apparently you hate me, he sent upward, sighing.

Better get it started, then. "We're all good," he said for the group. "So what's involved in this obstacle course game?"

"I'm so glad you asked, Cody. Points for all of you, for starters, and the satisfaction of working as a team."

"Building an obstacle course. Not running it?"

"No."

"So why build it in the first place?" Frank asked bluntly.

"Because we probably don't have enough supplies to build anything else?" Alan muttered, earning surprised, sharp looks from the rest of them and a faint twitch of annoyance from Kendra.

"Spontaneity is the mother of innovation," she returned.

"I thought it went, necessity is--"

"Shut up, Frank," Cody said, as Paki wasn't there to say it for him. He realized as soon as the words were out that they had been a great big mistake. Frank glared at him and flexed his fists.

Cody exhaled heavily. He'd run from that grizzly bear attack when it came. Until then, he'd deal with Kendra. "And we're gonna be racing to beat each other building the course."

"That is the point of a competition, Cody."

"And the winner gets...?"

Kendra placed a finger over her lips and winked. "That's a surprise. You have two hours. Everything you'll need has been set up just beyond the orchard. Remember that creativity counts. Ready... set... go, gentlemen, go!"

### **Chapter Twenty Three**

"So tell me something," Frank started abruptly after forty-five minutes of working in silence unbroken except for hand me that hammer and we got any rope?

Cody tried for an attitude of friendly unconcern. "Conversations that start like that aren't usually good," he said.

Okay, so maybe he failed at pretending nothing was wrong when everything was.

The look Frank shot him confirmed that theory. "This mean anything to you at all? Any of this?" He waved at the farm.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean bein' out here in the first place, asshat. All I heard you say was 'yeah, gimme some money to go to college' and 'I wanted the summer away so I could think'." Frank spat in the dirt. "Gimme the shovel."

Cody kind of hesitated to hand Frank anything he could swing, but they were in the middle of working on a pit trap -- he didn't want to know where Frank had come up with that idea -- so he passed it over and crossed

his arms. "Where are you going with this?"

Frank took over, doing a much better job of digging than Cody had been able to muster. Strong like ox, that was Frank. Where people made the mistake with him was thinking he'd be just about as dumb. "I wanna know," he said between shovelfuls, "if you think it really is all a game."

"You don't?"

Frank viciously jabbed the dirt. "Naw. See, you got somethin' to fall back on if this don't pan out, right? You got a family that gives a damn about each other and you live in a place where there's work if you want it. Me? I'm the only one on that dead ranch who thinks about how it's been ours for a couple hundred years. I'm the one who's not drowned in a bottle of whiskey long since and never coming up for air."

Cody cleared his throat. "I don't--"

"Shut up. I ain't done." Frank sent a load of dirt clods flying, accidentally-on-purpose sending them thudding into Cody's legs. "I didn't come out here lookin' for what they've got on offer. Figured to make enough to buy some groceries for a season. One more season to try and figure out how to save my home."

"Frank--"

"I said shut up."

Cody threw his hands in the air and huffed. "Whatever."

"Whatever, whatever," Frank mocked. "My point is, you could make it without this. I can't. Either I sell my family's land or I let the bank take it, and either way I end up on the welfare line."

"So how would a college degree help?" Cody asked, frustrated. "You're acting like I'm going to do something that'll get us all kicked out. The last time I checked that wasn't anywhere close to the truth, so how about you tell me what your problem is and let's get this over with?" His temper heated too fast, his muscles tensing with the need for some action. "Do you want to take a swing at me for whatever reason? Go right ahead."

Frank growled. "I can indenture," he said with exaggerated patience. "Sort of. Lease the ranch to someone while I'm off at school. Work my ass



off to earn extra money, make some connections. Learn who to tap for loans and find some buddies to go in with me on making it all work again. Get it now?"

"Your situation? Sure. I'm crystal there. What I still don't get is why you're acting like I'm the second coming of Judas or something."

"You're thick as a brick, you know that?"

"Am I? Fine! Enlighten me already."

Frank sunk his shovel spade-deep and glared at Cody. "Kendra's full of horse turds. She says all this is good stuff, and her sponsors are gonna keep on throwing money at us."

"And?"

"And, that's garbage. You really think anyone out there is gonna let this go on once word gets out about five queer boys gettin' up to this kind of stuff out in the boonies?"

Cody's spine prickled a cold warning. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, as long as we had that deal in place about not actin' like horny know-nothings, we could at least give them that as a plea bargain. Show them we weren't here to get in all kinds of decency trouble."

Cody bit his tongue, hard, to keep from repeating back to Frank what he'd told Paki last night. To keep from calling him down as a hypocrite and then pounding him into hamburger. "And you're saying I'm going to ruin that all."

"I ain't blind. You were gone way too long with that dipwad Shay last night, and you come back with your lips all puffed up and your hair messed sixty ways to Sunday. You think you fooled anyone?" Frank hawked and spat. "Paki's all tore up inside because he takes betrayal serious, Cody. It's just him and his mom, right? You ever wonder what happened to his dad?"

Cody's heart sank. "No. I didn't."

"Bet you didn't think about what Paki might need from all of this, too. His momma's shop is a joke, on its way out same as my ranch is. If he gets some kind of degree he can use, that's his future."

"And it's not mine? I want to go to med school."

"So you can earn a bucket of money?"

"No. So I can help people."

Frank rolled his eyes. "No. So people look up to you in your fancy white coat. So you can get away from folks like me."

"I won't miss you after we're done here," Cody muttered. He itched from head to toe with nerves and humiliation.

"Don't tell me what I already know. You wanna know what my problem is with you, Cody? You're one selfish brat and you don't look any farther than your own issues."

"And you do?" Cody couldn't stop himself from firing back. "Ranch, ranch, ranch. Paki, Paki, Paki. What else do you care about?"

"Not breaking promises," Frank said shortly, planting his foot on the blunt end of the shovel blade and digging deep. "Not cheatin' on one guy with another. I saw you last night, you and Alan, and I can't trust you one little bit, Cody, if you think you're gonna play both of them. That's what'll get us kicked out of here, and I swear to you, if you do you'd best start sleeping with one eye open. Understand I mean it. Hear me?"

Cody fought to unclench his fists. "I hear you," he said, clipping off the words. "Fine. I'll keep it in my pants."

Frank snorted. "Whatever. Like I'd believe you. Get back to work."

It'd be a losing battle to argue more. Cody grabbed a length of rope and began weaving it through tree branches.

"You know this'll come back to bite us on the ass, too," Frank said after a moment's silence. "Like hell we're just buildin' the thing."

Yeah. Cody had got that memo already. Obstacle course. Funny, Kendra. Real funny.

## **Chapter Twenty Four**

Lord, but it was good to finally get a solitary chance to work out all this tension! Cody lengthened his stride and sped forward, leaving Frank in the dirt. He grabbed a rope dangling from the branch of an oak tree and jumped with all his might, clearing a heap of rocks with room to spare and then some.

Of course Kendra had told them, smooth as a cat in the cream, that the second part of the challenge was running the obstacle course -- each team running what the other had built.

"It'd hardly be fair for you to navigate the traps you've laid out for yourself," she'd said. Janie had looked like she'd happily slap Kendra and save them all the trouble, though that was par for the course for Janie anyway. "Part of this challenge is to learn how to work with the difficulties others present to you."

Cody purely hated to concede Kendra had any kind of point. Trouble was, she did.

They'd tossed a coin to see which team ran first. Cody might have cheated a little, or Kendra had, one. Either way, he didn't care. He'd have exploded if he'd had to jitter around in inaction any longer.

Hallelujah for small miracles, or the devil's luck.

Cody did have to admit he was impressed by the obstacle course Shay and Alan had set up. He might have expected it to be as it was, less brutal and more intellectual, demanding that he think -- literally -- on his feet. Was that tree strong enough to hold his weight? Which of the strips of cloth serving as flags fit the mathematical pattern he thought he needed to follow

to grab the right one? Where had they hidden the final log to build his own dang hurdle?

He wondered who'd been behind the most sadistic traps -- Shay or Alan? Smart guys were vicious when it came to winning brain games.

If everything hadn't been going to hell in an express basket, Cody knew he'd be having fun. He might or might not have liked these guys if they'd met in the outside world.

He didn't know. The questions ate at him with sharp, hungry teeth.

He kept running.

The course doubled around halfway and led back toward the farmhouse, which Cody thought to be especially clever. His and Frank's petered out in a far-flung field, from which point Shay and Alan would have to face a long, worn-out walk back once they were done.

Huh. Okay, maybe that wasn't such a bad thing where Shay was concerned.

Cody cleared the final obstacle, a makeshift long jump with markers dug into the rocky soil just past the orchard and nearly at Kendra's feet, where she waited with a stopwatch and a smirk. He skidded, landing on his butt, wanting to laugh. His muscles burned and he could barely breathe.

Best time he'd had here so far. He repeated that stubbornly in his head as he wiped sweat away from his eyes and got to his feet. "How did I do?"

"Quicker than Frank," Kendra allowed.

"Not by much. Cody, you might want to move out of the way."

Cody side-stepped fast, warned by the rising urgency in Janie's warning. Good thing, too, as Frank would have skidded straight into him and knocked him down a second time, maybe adding a few more bruises to dignity or breaking his leg.

Frank glared at him. "Fast don't mean best," he grumbled, getting up. He sweated worse than a horse after galloping all night and lord, did he stink now -- maybe not more so than Cody, but still. "You tripped up on that flag thing. Grabbed the wrong color. Didn't he?"

Kendra clicked her tongue. "I'm afraid you did, Cody," she said, plucking the green scrap of cloth from his hand. She wrinkled her nose and cast it daintily aside. "Frank chose blue. Although you finished the course first, I'm sorry to say you've lost by a few points."

Cody gaped at her.

Kendra sailed on, self-satisfied enough to pop. "Shay, Alan, are you ready?"

Shay dropped to a runner's crouch. After a startled sideways glance, Alan copied him.

Kendra clicked her watch. "Go!"

The pair took off. To Cody's surprise, although Shay took the lead from the start, Alan caught up fast and ran neck-and-neck with him until the first rope-climbing obstacle -- up and through an apple tree -- after which Alan came out ahead and lost no speed.

Cody was vaguely aware of staring at them.

A hard elbow in the small of his back had him swearing and turning around as fast as his wobbly legs would allow. He stared down at Paki, who still hadn't laced his boots and looked like he'd sucked on a few lemons while he sulked in the farmhouse.

"I don't want to hear it," Cody said shortly, turning around.

"Suit yourself." Paki elbowed up beside him. "Bet they had a lot to hear from each other while they were working out there, though."

"Shut up, Paki."

Paki dusted off his sleeves. "Wonder when they're going to take a swing at you?"

"No sooner than I--"

"Hey, hey, hey!" Janie exclaimed, high and shrill in surprise -- or was it alarm? Cody whipped his attention back to the obstacle course in time to see that Alan was nowhere to be found, and that Shay failed spectacularly at jumping over pit traps.

Frank grunted. "It ain't that deep. We didn't have time to dig it much. They'll be fine."

"How deep is 'not that deep'?" Janie demanded, hurrying forward and shading her eyes to peer down the course. "Two feet? Three feet?"

Unwillingly, Cody glanced at Frank. "Maybe two feet," he said. "Frank's pretty strong, sure, but it shouldn't be more than deep enough to knock the wind out of them in when they fell."

"I doubt it's two feet," Kendra said, unconcerned -- more like eager. Lord, that woman had some serious screws loose and a good few missing, didn't she?

Cody had that confirmed for him when she added, "From the amount of dirt mounded up at either side, I'd say it's relatively small in diameter but at least three feet deep."

"That's too deep for me," Janie snapped, already running. "What were you two thinking? And in case you haven't noticed? They aren't getting up."

Cody swore under his breath, Paki a beat behind. Frank wasted no air on cussing, already running ahead of Janie. He followed, Paki hot on his heels, flapping boots and all, Kendra strolling along as if she had all day and was doing them a favor by bringing up the rear.

Janie developed a decent turn of speed, and being fresh, got there first. She screeched to a halt at the edge of the pit, clapping her hand over her mouth. Cody's panic increased as did his speed. Lord, if one or both of them had broken their necks over something so stupid, he'd -- he'd --

Frank beat him there by a handful of paces. He too skidded to an abrupt halt, put his hands on his knees and crouched to peer down in the pit.

Then, he whooped with laughter.

Cody had a bad, bad feeling about this. He let Paki pass him, thudding against Frank.

When Paki let out a holler of glee, Cody just about turned around and headed back to the farmhouse. Whatever was going on down there, he had a good notion that he didn't want to see. Call it intuition, or a good grip on how life was out to screw him over.

Either way, he was right in his assumption. Didn't mean he wasn't knocked completely on his butt by what he saw when he walked to the edge of the pit trap and looked down.

Actually, it was more like getting a fist to the gut.

Shay and Alan lay tangled together at the bottom of the pit, and they hadn't gotten all laced together from simply falling. Shay's arm was under Alan's neck, Alan's glasses in his hand, and his stubble burn on Alan's cheek.

He grinned at Cody, cold and humorless.

Alan, for his part, betrayed plenty of heat as he fixed Cody with a glare. If looks could have killed, he'd be a dead man.

Cody knew the guys were all waiting for him to say something, to make a scene, and to humiliate himself on streaming internet feed.

So he didn't. He nodded once, briefly, to the pair and turned around to walk away, wishing with every step and every breath that he'd never even heard of City/Country -- and figuring out just how fast he could get out of there and on a bus back home, college scholarship be screwed.

If they wanted to take him down, fine. He'd bring 'em all along for the real fall to the bottom and it'd be no one's fault but their own.

## **Chapter Twenty Five**

That wasn't exactly the way it all went down. Turned out, no matter what Kendra said -- and what an idiot he'd been to believe anything she'd said -- it wasn't that easy to get out of City/Country. After trying her best at the big-sisterly talks and spectacularly failing, Janie threw in the towel and

passed him over to Kendra.

Cody got the feeling that Janie might have gone to confession and asked for extra penance over that one. She didn't come back for a full day and night.

The end result was the same: Kendra sat him down at the farmhouse kitchen table with the contracts and addendums he'd signed, where he learned firsthand how important it was to always, always, always read the fine print and then get a lawyer to read it for him afterwards.

He was stuck. "You could man up and walk the twenty miles to town, of course," Kendra said, sipping another of her tall, frothy coffees. "Twenty miles is quite a long distance for someone who's not accustomed to it. You live in a mostly urban setting, don't you, Cody? Twenty miles. I'd suggest you consider that."

Cody considered that Kendra would find a way to keep him from taking so much as a purloined canteen with him, and would maybe fill his sneakers with itching powder.

If breaking the contract had hurt only him, he might still have shaken the dust off his shoes and slogged the twenty miles. The real catch was the fine he'd have to pay for leaving ahead of time, enough of a sock to the wallet that it'd clear out his small savings and then some. He'd have to go to his momma with his hand out when on most months it took a few pieces of extra twine to make ends meet.

No. Cody couldn't do that, and he wouldn't. Kendra knew it, too; her smug smile said it all for her when he shoved, disgruntled, away from the table.

The small revenge he got by finding an LED light and speaking into the singing fish wall plaque that he figured held the microphone, announcing despite knowing they'd blur his lips out, to the tune of South Park, that Kendra was the biggest bitch in the whole wide world... well, that satisfied him for a moment, but the moment didn't last.

The next few days, stretching into a week and change, were the weirdest Cody had ever known in his eighteen years. See, ever since freakin' kindergarten, he'd been liked. Maybe not loved, maybe never voted Mr. Popularity -- he didn't have the money for that -- but people grinned and



waved when they saw him. He was accustomed to stopping and chatting with folks, to being the one they came to when they had troubles and needed a sympathetic ear.

After the whole debacle on Kendra's idiotic obstacle course challenge? No one would so much as speak to Cody. Three days in his teeth were on edge and his back aching with tension, and they wouldn't -- let -- up.

And if he tried to talk to them?

That was, more often than not, even worse.

"Alan." Cody rested his shoulders on the wall outside the second-floor bathroom. He was squirmy with his self-perceived resemblance to a creepy stalker guy, but he was also near about desperate. He knocked on the door, slightly ajar due to its warped old frame and a lock that wouldn't catch. "Look, I don't care if you talk to me--" there was a lie -- "as long as you let me say what I've got to say to you."

Silence.

Cody started to hope.

Alan, stronger than he looked, shoved the door closed with a screeching squeal of wood grating on wood. A heavy thump that rattled the knob told him Alan was probably finishing up brushing his teeth with his foot planted on the door.

Cody took a moment to bitterly try and enjoy the mental image of a guy standing like a stork with his mouth foamy and a toothbrush clamped between his lips, decided it wasn't funny at all, and slunk away with his fists shoved in his pockets.

"You know, Cody..." Kendra caught him as he tried to duck past her. Her eyes gleamed. "You seem to have a lot on your mind."

Cody smiled at her politely, singing his new favorite song in his head. "Maybe I'm a little distracted." He hammed it up as he added, "I solemnly swear to do my best, to uphold the laws and statutes of City/Country, even though this isn't anything like City/Country at all but you more or less held a gun to our heads until--"

"Cody," she scolded, gentle as a dove and vicious as a rock snake. "If you're upset, how would you like to go somewhere private and talk about this?" She kept her hands to herself -- a wise move -- but he knew she'd have loved to drag his head down to her shoulder. "No one's accessed this yet, but we do have a small counseling chamber."

No one had gone there because this was the first time Cody had heard of it. More than likely, she'd fitted it out during the past day or so and added the best cameras and microphones possible on her budget, whatever that might be. Confess his sins in private? More like spill his secrets on hi-def.

"No thanks," he grunted, swerving around her human obstacle.

"The offer stands," Kendra called after him.

Cody considered, seriously, telling her what she could do with her offer. His upbringing's insistence on being polite to ladies -- out loud, in their faces, anyway -- might have crumbled if he hadn't, at that moment, caught sight of Shay standing in the corner of the corridor just past them and to the left. His arms were crossed over his chest and the corner of his lips lifted in a taunting smile.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that one, Shay was really enjoying this and that two, both he and Kendra would love nothing more than for Cody to take a swing.

Cody took great pleasure in mentally bidding them a polite screw you before turning around and walking calmly up to the dormitory, where he ignored Paki and Frank's sudden decision to discuss Judas Iscariot and lay down for a nap. Or to fake a nap, anyway.

After they'd run out of taunts and left, no one bothered him, not even when dinner time came. Cody lay curled up on his bed and listened to his stomach growl, not getting up as no one came to fetch him.

He didn't know whether he was grateful or pissed off.

"You think there are snakes in there?"

Janie's question took Cody by surprise; no one had spoken directly to him in four days, closing in on five, not when they didn't have to. In his opinion, Kendra decidedly didn't count.

Cody carefully put down the log he'd started to re-stack on his new and improved woodpile and brushed old bark off his sleeves. "Where've you been?"

"Conference with my advisor. For the thesis."

"Ah." Cody waited for her to go on. She flashed her teeth at him in an approximation of a smile, completely unconvincing, and wound a strand of hair around her finger. Looked more nervous than flirtatious to him; Janie had better sense anyway.

No point in wasting time. "What's Kendra up to now?" He tipped his head to the side. "Why are you warning me? In case you hadn't noticed, I'm not exactly king of the world, here."

"Yeah, but you're still a human being."

"You don't want to give me an earful for being a lousy player in more ways than one?"

"No, I do," she agreed. "Thing is, you're young, Cody. Kids do stupid things. That's the way life works. Don't look at me that way."

Cody heaved a sigh and crouched to pick up another log. He'd hoped he could get it all moved and re-stacked before time for bed. Not that it made a lick of difference whether or not the woodshed was neat as a pin or messy like a tornado; it was just something to do. Getting rid of the kicked-up debris from the night he'd never forget -- and wished he could -- was purely incidental.

Honest.

Janie snapped her fingers at him. "Trust me or like me or not, whatever. Do you want the 411?"

"I'm listening."

"Good. Kendra's about to pull something both dangerous and stupid. Go along with it. When she's gone for the night, go upstairs to that old guest bedroom no one uses because it smells like old lady. There's a cabinet full of knickknacks that I've mounted a camera in." She grimaced. "Clumsily. It's not my specialty. Anyway, camera. I want you to pretend to discover it. That'll take you to a direct streaming feed. I think." She gestured for him to

be quiet and let her finish. "Use that if you're in trouble here, okay? I mean serious trouble."

Cody didn't like that at all. "God almighty, what's Kendra gonna do?"

Janie bit her lip. "I don't know," she admitted. "All I know is that she's been humming to herself all day."

Cody employed a cuss word that even he rarely dragged out.

Janie nodded gloomily.

As if on cue, Kendra called out, sweet as sugar, "Boys? Meeting in the kitchen in five minutes." She tapped on a gong as she walked past. "Five minutes, in the kitchen!"

Cody pushed hair out of his eyes. "Go on. I'll be right there."

He took the time to stack that last piece of firewood just so. There might as well be one orderly aspect of his life, he figured.

Then, he went to meet his fate, wondering if they'd give him one last request.

## **Chapter Twenty Six**

The cheese stands alone, the cheese stands alone, hi ho this is all effed up, the cheese stands alone, Cody's mental soundtrack helpfully supplied as he moped into the kitchen and discovered that not only was he the last to show up, but that there wasn't a seat left for him.

Interesting, considering that there were seven people to gather and usually nine chairs. Paki smirked at Cody after his first, confused attempt to figure it out.

Cody gave up on counting to ten in any number of languages, shut his lips tightly and sat cross-legged on the floor.

"Oh, now why are you down there?" Kendra cooed. As if she didn't know exactly what was going on, and probably where Paki had hidden the chairs. "Let's find you a real seat."

"I'm fine," he clipped out. "I like it here."

"Leave him alone, Kendra," Janie warned.

"Is there a problem?" Kendra queried, not just of Janie, but of the entire group.

No one said a word. Cody wasn't sure if he was grateful for that or not.

Kendra let the inviting silence drag out, probably until she figured enough time had passed for a dramatic roll of music to be edited into the final product. "Let me know if you change your mind, Cody. After all, the Head of Household shouldn't have to sit on the floor."

Backs stiffened and mouths twisted angrily. Cody waited for someone to kick up a fuss.

Nobody did. This, Cody knew he didn't like. What were they up to now? Jeez, given half the chance he'd have thought they'd go straight for the coup.

He actually hadn't thought he'd still hold the position, but on second thought it made sense when you looked at it through Kendra's lizard eyes. Discord, discord, get your hair-pulling man-cat fights here!

Cody thought his inner monologue might be on the verge of a breakdown, too.

Kendra continued. "Given the troubles we had with our last challenge, I thought you might like a chance to make up your lost points." She waited for the chorus of groans and complaints to die down. "You've had some time

few hours off to recover and learn from the mistakes made last time."

Cody sulked and waited to see what in the devil she'd cooked up now.

"As you know, part of the original goal of City/Country is to challenge team members with the difficulties of living without the benefit of modern conveniences. Until now, we haven't emphasized that part of the regime."

"Maybe 'cause this ain't really City/Country?" Frank put in.

"What do you call not having a microwave?" Paki demanded.

"If they're going to do without something, how about you show what a team player you are and give up those five-dollar coffees?"

That last was from Janie, earning her a startled and then respectful look from all except Kendra, whose grip tightened briefly on her tall carry-out cup before she beamed at Janie. Planning her messy death, most likely. "Of course, dear."

Paki made clawing motions in the air. Frank chortled, elbowing him.

Cody was almost tempted to grin.

"Regardless," Kendra went on. "Tonight, we'll see how well you boys face up to the challenge of doing without."

"Uh-huh. Doing without what?" Frank wanted to know.

Kendra purred this next: "Everything."

Cody snuck a glance at Shay, perched as per usual nearest to the coffeemaker. Shay looked right back, dark and unreadable.

Refusing to back down, Cody mouthed is this your idea?

Shay frowned at him. Idiot.

Screw you, Cody returned.

You wish.

Alan's chair legs scraped over the floor. His face reddened as he

unscrewed the top of the salt shaker and began to pop it from finger to finger, spraying salt crystals everywhere.

Cody returned his stare, guiltily, to the patch of kitchen linoleum in front of him.

"Are you finished?" Kendra inquired. "Yes? Good. Now, I know this won't be easy for any of you. However, that's the point and purpose of our exercise." She propped her chin on the back of her hand. "And it won't go unrewarded, you know."

All eyes turned to her. Kendra loved that, Cody could tell. "A cash prize of one thousand dollars goes to the best man among you."

Frank nearly bristled with eagerness, no doubt already planning how to spend it. Cody couldn't grudge him that, not when he was calmer. "How do we earn it?"

"What's the catch?" Shay asked, his intonation flat.

"The catch," Kendra replied, well-prepared for the question, "is that the prize will go to the man who deals best with the weekend's living conditions. The one who shows the most innovation and creativity in adjusting to life without electricity --"

"And running water?"

"Thank you, Shay. Yes, we'll turn off the water, too."

"You gonna scoop out the toilets for us?"

"No, Frank. There's an outhouse on the far left of the house. I'm sure you've seen it."

Paki's jaw dropped. "Tell me you're kidding."

"I'm quite serious."

"That thing's full of spiders!"

"As I said, you'll need to use your innovation and creativity. Put those thinking caps on, gentlemen."

"Kendra, go back a minute," Alan spoke up. He fiddled with the

earpiece of his glasses. "You said 'weekend', not 'night'. Didn't you?"

"I did. Today is Friday."

Cody had lost count.

"If all of you can last until Sunday when the sun goes down, you'll all win a small reward -- and then there's the big prize I mentioned."

"Right." Alan returned his attention to his juggling. "You didn't finish telling us about that. Who decides who's earned it?"

A sickening sense of impending doom twisted Cody's gut.

"Now, who do you think?" Kendra asked sweetly, standing. She dropped her coffee cup in the trash. "As soon as Janie and I have left, the power and the water will be disconnected, minus the required energy for the cameras and sound system. Enjoy your weekend, boys, and may the best man win."

She paused. Cody prayed without any hope of a reprieve.

"It's up to you, Cody," Kendra concluded. "Make us proud."

He couldn't find the energy to growl at her. This? This was just peachy.

## **Chapter Twenty Seven**

The guys held their peace until the coast was clear, or as clear as it ever got in Baraunchswood Farm, Cody had to give them that. They sat around the table in poker-faced silence until the noises of Kendra and Janie



driving away faded from hearing. They even waited until the lights flickered, fizzled and died.

Cody sat cotton-mouthed in the darkness and the silence, heart pounding away in his throat, waiting for them to explode.

They didn't. Maybe they knew how crazy it would make him, or maybe they were all tired, too. He had no clue.

"Welcome to the best summer of your life," Shay finally commented, dry as bone. Cody heard the thunk and clink of the coffee carafe being lifted from the warmer, then the liquid sound of pouring.

"Waste not, want not?" Frank asked, not sounding like he expected an answer.

"What do we do now?" Paki sounded lost.

Alan cleared his throat. "None of you have ever done this before?"

Various noises of dissent grumbled out of Frank and Paki; Shay stayed quiet and Cody didn't make a peep, either.

"Okay." Alan sounded nervous, but determined. "Um, Shay? There are some candles in the cabinet above the coffeemaker. I think so, anyway. No, I know there are. I saw them when I was looking for tea bags."

"Candles ain't much good without matches," Frank commented while Cody listened to the shuffling of Shay rummaging among coffee tins. "You see any of those?"

"Yeah, there are plenty for lighting the gas stove, remember? In the drawer above the pull-out trash can."

Frank grunted, sounding surprise. "Okay. Yeah. Lemme get 'em."

Alan went on, more confident now. "Paki, I don't think we have any candle holders, but those small cups should work. Can you get them?"

Cody half wanted to warn them about all walking around in the dark, and half wanted to listen to them fall on their asses. In the end, he found himself squinting against the suddenly too-bright light from a match. Frank, Paki and Shay worked together without comment, turning to Alan once they

were seated again.

Alan coughed and looked away. "That's as good as I can do," he apologized.

"Doubt it," Frank said. "You've been on your own for a while, longer'n any of us have, anyway. Bet you've done without before."

"And you haven't on your ranch?"

"A time or three. Or ten." Frank exhaled. "Usually, it didn't matter there. Only me to look out for, mostly, and I don't mind the dark. S'different with all you to worry about."

Alan nodded thoughtfully. "Same here."

Paki glanced back and forth between them, looking uncertain. "So what do we do now?"

"Let them think," Shay put in. He'd faded to the background, inscrutable as usual. "I don't see anyone else standing up to be a leader."

Cody's hackles raised. That interfering, trouble-making...

Sure as shootin', the three remaining guys glared at him, and thank you, Shay, what Cody had started to hope would stay faded out was right back on.

He raised his hands, palms out. "Uh-uh. No way. I don't care what you're thinking."

"Yeah? I doubt any of us care, either," Paki sneered. "But if you're going to decide who gets the cash, then I guess we have to kiss your--"

"Not gonna happen." Frank crossed his arms on the tabletop and leaned heavily on them. "Cody, he can do whatever he wants. I don't care."

"The money doesn't matter to you?" Shay asked. Cody itched to slap him around.

"Not as much as my pride," Frank returned. He scratched his chest. "Might all be a trick, anyway. Kendra don't deliver the good stuff; all she's got to hand out is trouble and more trouble. So, fine. We're gonna handle

this weekend, I say we need a new leader. I say Alan oughta be it."

Cody's jaw dropped. He had no problem with stepping down -- dear Lord, did he ever not have a problem -- honest -- but Alan? What on earth?

Shay quirked an eyebrow at Cody. "All right," he said without looking away. "I vote for Alan."

What, this is a democracy now?

Paki tapped the table with his fingernail, drumming out a tuneless tune. "Okay. Alan."

"Hang on a minute," Alan protested, scooting his chair back. "I'm not-- I don't--"

"You could, if you wanted to," Shay murmured. "You showed me before you had the guts to do what it took when you needed to act."

Alan shot him a look filled with suspicion and confusion. "I listened to you about -- about him," he said. "That's one thing. I'm not a leader."

"You can be."

"I don't want to be." Alan stood, his chair screeching out from beneath him.

Frank started to argue with him; Cody wasn't listening. His head spun far too fast to keep up with his own thoughts, let alone spare any concentration on their bickering. Shay had been the one to cook up that whole scheme? Shay had been the one to tell Alan everything before he'd even had a chance to figure out how to explain to him? Jesus. He'd thought Paki, for sure, or maybe even that Alan had seen something and gone to Shay, not the other way around.

And they called him Judas? Screw. That. Noise.

Cody was on his feet in a heartbeat, pounding the wall with his fist. It hurt like a mother and did nothing to relieve his frustration; it did, however, get their attention so fast he knew they'd been waiting on him to make a move.

Except for Shay, Cody suspected they'd expected an outburst for a

completely different reason.

"You got a problem?" Frank asked, eager as a fighting rooster. "Wanna tell us what you object to?"

"No," Cody said shortly, rubbing his knuckles. "I don't give a damn what you all do with this darkness. Go drown in the well, go get your asses spider-bitten in the outhouse, whatever. Sit here and talk all weekend. I'm out of here, and if any of you follow me--" not that he thought they would -- "I'll slap the souls out of you. Understand?"

Shay shrugged. "You're good at running away, aren't you?"

Something snapped inside Cody. "Yeah," he replied, gazing evenly at Shay. "And you're about as good at manipulating people who are trying to figure out how to make it here as Kendra is. No, you're better. Hope you're happy, man, because as much as you don't trust me, I'd walk through hell before I ever trusted you again."

Shay's hostility flickered, startling Cody. "You got what you deserved."

"Did I? For cheating on a guy I'd never promised anything to with you when you near about forced me to? Pushed me until I couldn't see straight?"

"Sounds like a personal problem." Shay stuck out his chin. "I --"

"Hang on," Frank interrupted. He rounded on Shay, his lips curled back. "That ain't what you told us happened. You didn't say you got physical with him, just that he hit on you. You mean you were the one who busted up the deal we all made in the first place?"

"Guess he neglected to mention that."

Shay glared daggers at Cody, who wasn't one bit sorry.

"What, you're listening to him now?" Paki protested. "I caught them in the woodshed, I--"

"You didn't tell me that, Paki," Alan said. He took his glasses off and pointed the earpiece at Paki with short, angry jabs. "When was this? The night they were both gone for a while? That was before Shay came to me. If I'd known he..." He shook his head. "You mean Shay ratted on him? Why?"

"How about you tell them, Shay? Then you all do with that whatever you want. I'm out of here." Cody had heard enough. He hauled ass out of the kitchen, straight for the one place he figured he could be alone. Kind of figured that it'd be the spot where everything had gone tits up in the first place.

But at least there were no cameras. Yippee-ki-yay, huh?

## **Chapter Twenty Eight**

"Cody! Cody, wait."

Alan? Cody faltered half a step, enough of a break in his stride that Alan caught up to him, grabbing him by the arm just above his elbow.

"Cody, would you stop for a minute?" Alan swore at him. "Stop!"

"It's kind of late for that, Alan," he said, wishing to high heaven there was a bed in the woodshed. He'd love nothing better than to curl up in there and sleep the weekend away.

His body, independent of his brain -- stupid bodies never knew what was good for them, did they? -- pulled to a halt.

Alan's grip loosened, though he didn't release Cody. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't think. Would you turn around and look at me? Please."

"Why should I?"

Alan held his tongue, briefly. "I don't guess there's any reason why you should. I'm still asking you to."

Cody's shoulders slumped. "How'd this all get so tangled up?" he asked, not knowing if he queried Alan or karma-at-large.

"I don't know." Alan finally let go.

That was what motivated Cody to turn around. He propped himself on the hallway wall, thumbs tucked in his belt loops. Before him, Alan stood with his head ducked, appearing not to know what to do with his own hands.

"Where'd you learn that whole juggling trick, anyway?" Cody asked, as he couldn't see a reason not to.

"What? Oh. I taught myself. I didn't know for years that it was a whole discipline." Alan looked up, a muscle twitching faintly in his jaw. "I said I'm sorry, Cody, and I am."

Cody shrugged. "So?"

Alan flinched. "Okay. I deserve that. But you've got to understand how it was for me. You and I, I thought we had a chance at something."

"Like what? Forever? We're eighteen, man. If this goes through, we're all headed for college." The words came to Cody, comprehension following fast. He'd been an idiot, but so had everyone else. "We've done everything wrong since we got here," he mused. "Kendra's not the problem. We are."

Alan rubbed his eyes. "I'm lonely, Cody. That's all."

"Yeah. Me too."

"If we'd known each other outside, do you think we might have had a chance?"

Cody shook his head. "There's no way I can say yes or no, Alan."

"Try?"

"Maybe. I don't know. What happened is what happened."

"And whatever might have been is screwed up for good," Alan said bitterly.

Cody didn't disagree with him. Instead, he asked, "Did you like kissing him? Shay, I mean."

Alan looked away. "Not really. It wasn't worth it."

"You thought so then."

"I don't now."

Silence fell between them, the quiet of absolutely nothing left to say. Cody pushed off the wall when he couldn't take it anymore, leaving Alan and a whole load of might-have-beens behind him, back on track to the woodshed.

The way his night was going, he wasn't surprised when a second set of sneakers pounded up behind him and yet another grabby hand tried to pull him to a halt. This one seemed even more determined than Alan, who Cody heard muttering where he'd left him.

"Cody," Shay insisted. "Listen to me."

Wrong approach. So very, very wrong. Cody had no problems with shrugging Shay off. "Not likely."

"So stop me from talking, then." Shay ducked past Cody and stood in his way, blocking the door to the woodshed. His hair stuck out at angles, as if he'd been tugging at it. In other circumstances, Cody thought he might have found it cute, or maybe would have been concerned.

"You want to move," he said quietly. "You really do."

"Uh-uh." Shay pressed his back to the door. "What do you want me to say, Cody?"

"There's nothing to say. Move. Now."

Shay snagged a fistful of Cody's shirt and hung on. "We're having the conversation. I don't offer to talk it out a lot, and--"

Cody considered his options in the blink of an eye and decided that the time was finally upon him. His fist connected with Shay's chin -- the same fist he'd used to hit the wall -- and Shay gasped, his full weight banging into the door -- which promptly gave a mighty screech of protest and popped its lock. As it gave way, Shay tumbled ass over teakettle, falling half in and half out of the woodshed.

Standing above him, Cody shook out the sting in his knuckles.

Shay touched his lip, fingers coming away streaked with blood. He snorted, almost laughing. "Okay. I deserved that. You feel better now?"

"Nope." Cody massaged his hand, which protested. He decided it had been worth it. "What's wrong with you, Shay? What is so screwed up in your head that you've got to play games like this? It didn't have to be this way. If you hadn't been such a -- I don't even know who you are. All I've seen is a jerk and a back-stabber."

Shay licked blood off his lips. "So why'd you go with me when I asked you?"

"Because I'm a moron," Cody said with deep feeling. And, for the sake of complete honesty -- why not? -- he added. "And because not being able to figure you out got me hot."

Shay hooted, falling fully backward. His chest rose and fell. "You're as messed up in the head as I am," he said after a moment. "Go on, admit it."

Cody rolled his eyes. "Don't try and win me over."

"Any chance it might work?"

"I have no idea."

"If I let you take another swing at me, would that help?"

"Maybe. Maybe you could start by telling me why any of it matters to you at all?"

Shay rose, propping himself on his elbows. He met Cody's eyes, his own thoughtful and dark. "I could try."

Cody's chest tightened. "This is a bad idea."

"I agree."

"Shay," someone who wasn't Cody breathed. He saw Alan in his peripheral vision, taking hold of his wrist. Lord, what was it with them and their tugging him around tonight?

Cody made a face and moved to jostle free. Alan hung on tighter.



"Don't. Move."

Shay must have heard the same note of wide-eyed horror as Cody did. That was the tone of voice people used in movies when the zombies were coming up behind them. "What's wrong?" he asked, barely moving his lips.

"Copperhead," Alan whispered.

The blood rushed from Cody's head. He could see it now, not two feet from Shay's throat and pissed off enough by nearly being squished that it wasn't shy about coming close.

"Get up slowly," Cody hissed, carefully reaching for Shay's hand. "It's mad enough to bite."

"And you want me to budge? Nuh-uh."

"Wanna stay there and get bitten?"

"He should. It'll go away."

The snake slithered closer to Shay.

"Hey! What are you all doing out here?" Paki demanded, loud enough to wake the dead and more than loud enough to spook one already-cranky snake, Frank thundering along ox-heavy behind him. Paki pushed past them, right into the path of danger.

Cody moved faster than he'd have thought possible, as did Shay. The snake's fangs still caught him on the rolled-up cuff of his jeans. Shay hollered and shook him off. Why it didn't strike again, Cody had no idea -- until he looked down and saw the head of the snake smashed under Paki's forever-unlaced boot.

The snake's body whipped to and fro until Alan slipped past him, gingerly skirting wide around him, and picked up one of the chunks of firewood.

Cody watched Alan, of all people, beat the life out of that snake until it was only so much mush. Crushed to him -- how he'd gotten that way, Cody didn't know -- Shay cursed a blue streak and shook.

And then it was over.

The four of them stared at each other, breathing noisily.

Cody was the first one to say it, and it felt so good. "Everyone had enough of this mess now? It's not worth our lives."

Paki swallowed hard. "Let's get out of here," he said in a small voice. "Okay? Let's walk out. Tonight."

"Might not have a choice about that," Frank said, the oddest expression on his face.

Oh, lord almighty. What now?

Frank nodded in the direction of the kitchen. "Anyone else smell smoke?"

## **Chapter Twenty Nine**

By the time they reached the kitchen of Baraunchswood Farm, it was already too late.

Paki moved quick as a rabbit when he wanted to and beat them all there. It probably didn't hurt that, being smaller, he could duck in and out between the crush the rest of them made, choking the corridor until Cody bellowed for them to slow down. "Fat lot of good it'll do if one of us falls and breaks their neck!"

Shay laughed, cracking on the descant. "It's all fun and games until someone loses an eye?"

"Or gets bitten by a copperhead." Cody cuffed him. "Don't scare me like that again."

Frank shouldered past them. "You two wanna have a Hallmark moment? Now?"

Cody shook out of it. "Later," he warned Shay, "later we're gonna have this out and finish what we started."

"Holy shit," Paki breathed, halted at the turning of the corridor that lead to the kitchen. "Guys?"

Shay hurried, Cody right behind him. As they came up behind Paki, they too stopped. Shay echoed Paki's curse.

The kitchen crackled, wreathed in fire, the flames spreading fast. You could roast hot dogs over the wreckage of the kitchen table. The curtains had already caught, and the cabinets were smoldering.

"What do we do?" Paki asked, eyes wide with fascinated horror. "I think there are fire extinguishers on the --"

"Cody," Shay murmured, pointing. Cody followed the direction he indicated.

"Oh, damn," he breathed. Gas stove. Gas lines. "Everybody, get out of here."

"What?" Paki screwed up his face, peering over his shoulder at Cody. "We need to put out the fire."

"Not gonna happen. Frank?" The pinched whiteness around Frank's mouth told Cody he'd cottoned to the direness of the situation, too. "Toss him over your shoulder. Now! Get out of here!"

Paki squawked as Frank lifted him easily -- wow, guess working a ranch, even a dead one, gave a guy great upper body strength -- and wasted no more breath talking, wisely choosing instead to run. Cody shoved Shay hard in the middle of the back, sending him stumbling forward.

"Wait," Shay hollered, turning around. "Alan. Where's Alan?"

Crap. They so did not need this. "He better not be trying to play hero,"

Cody muttered, coughing as the smoke started to thicken. The billows were already impeding his vision. "Alan!"

"Back down the hall," Shay yelled back at him.

"I'll kill you myself for this," Cody growled. "Shay, go!"

"Nuh-uh. Not without you two."

"This is not the time to show some manners. I'll carry him. Get!"

"Shut up." Shay half plowed Cody down, body-checking him on his way to grab Alan. What had happened to Alan, Cody had no idea. He'd curled up on the floor, pale and limp.

Don't think about "maybe he's dead", Cody ordered himself. Not yet.

"Okay, I've got him," Shay called between coughs, holding Alan on his feet. Yeah, that'd work. Alan looked limp as a rag doll.

Cody groaned. "Here," he growled, grabbing Alan by the feet. "You take his shoulders and for God's sake, would you go already?"

Some might say they made it out of Baraunchswood Farm with plenty of time to spare. In Cody's opinion, they cut it far too close. Once the fire got a taste of the farmhouse's dry old wood and fragile, flammable innards it set forth to conquer and devour, eating up the walls and corridors in great, hungry bites.

"Go, go, go," Cody babbled, flat-palming Frank where he'd stopped just outside to gawk back at the fire. "What, are you deaf? Move!"

Frank shook himself and got back to running, Paki kicking up a fuss and kicking his legs as he bounced up and down on Frank's shoulder -- until, that was, Cody guessed Paki got a good look at the spreading ruin of Baraunchswood.

Then, he set up an even bigger squall. "Frank! Frank, I gotta go back. My stuff!"

"No way," Frank grunted, fighting to keep Paki from wriggling free. "You ain't worth a bag of trinkets. Hold still."

"A picture of my dad," Paki begged, struggling. "It's the only picture I've got, my mom doesn't even have any --"

Frank shook his head. "I'm sorry. Nuh-uh."

"You got him?" Cody called, hauling Alan along one drag at a time. It wasn't easy, what with him dangling as dead weight -- still breathing, thank God -- and the height difference between the three of them.

"Yeah. What happened to Alan?"

"Dunno," Cody said shortly. There'd be time for talking later. Maybe. "Keep going. Far away as you can."

Frank grunted and pushed on. They made it to the end of the long gravel driveway and a little beyond before the roar Cody had been dreading came, the sound of the farmhouse fully engulfed in flames. He counted his heartbeats, mouth dry as cotton, waiting for the explosion.

"Hit the dirt!" Shay bellowed, dropping Alan and following his own orders, shielding his eyes. Frank let Paki fall, dive-bombing the smaller guy and pressing him down. Cody was the last to obey instructions, and so he got a glimpse of Baraunchswood flying apart from the force of the gas lines igniting before the intensity of the brightness hurt too much to look at.

He kissed the earth, eyes shut tight, imagining that the heat of the flames were scorching him even at a safe distance. Most of the debris, chunks of old wood and fiery shingles, didn't reach them. Not all. Frank yelled, swearing a blue streak, as did Shay. Alan moaned.

Cody didn't think before guerilla-crawling to Alan, eyes still shut tight, feeling his way. He crawled atop the limp body, thinking only of protecting him.

Crawled, and met the solidness and comparative near-coolness of a young man approaching from the other side.

Cody grabbed Shay's hand and hung on tight. Shay squeezed his fingers. Paki wailed and fought from what seemed like miles away, almost but not quite managing to wrench free of Frank.

Finally -- after forever, or maybe just a few minutes -- the worst of the danger passed. The intensity of the blaze died, happy to make a thorough

meal of the wreckage left over.

Cody looked up at last, meeting Shay's stare and nodding after making sure they were both all right.

Frank hauled himself up to his knees, grunting in discomfort. "Can't stop now," he said shortly. "No tellin' how it'll spread. We gotta get as far along the road as we can."

"Can't stop there. It's all forest."

Cody shoved away the fear threatening to drop him like a stone. "Okay. Alan?" He slapped Alan's cheek, gently at first and then harder. "Alan, wake up. Can you wake up? You've got to walk with us. We're getting out of here, right now."

"Yeah," Shay agreed, his lips setting in a bloodless line after he'd spoken. He parted them again to crack wise, "What do you want to be Kendra'll find a way to spin even this?"

No one laughed. They all knew it wasn't funny.

## **Chapter Thirty**

Cody elbowed Shay in the ribs, harder than he'd intended to. He was finding it harder to gauge his strength. Emotional stress of all kinds, he guessed, added to the stress of walking who-knew-how-far in the dark. The bright light of Baraunchswood burning had faded to a dim glow in the distance, even out here without any other illumination except the moon and stars, so he hoped that meant they were making good time.

"What are you trying to do, punch a hole through me?" Shay grouched, rubbing his side. His glare lacked any real hostility. Now that some time had passed, he'd started shivering, every now and then halting to shudder from head to toe.

One such spasm had been too many, prompting Cody's nudge. "Are you okay?"

Shay laughed dryly. "I think I'm kind of far from 'okay'."

"That's not what I meant." Cody matched his pace with Shay's, sneaking sidelong glances at him. "Think you can make it all the way out to the road?"

"I think I'm not quitting until we get there or I fall down," Shay replied. "I'm good for a walk." He nodded at the three others doggedly progressing ahead. "Them, though. Can they make it?"

Cody pushed the weight of his hair off his forehead, a futile move as the sweat sticking in a thick film on his skin, darkened by soot, clung stubbornly and drew his fringe right back in. "Frank, definitely. Alan?" He eyed the bespectacled kid, stubbornly putting one foot in front of the other. "Maybe Alan."

"We don't know why he passed out."

"Smoke? One of us knocked him upside the head when we were trying to fit through the corridor at the same time? There's no telling."

Shay made a hmmph noise. "Maybe he was freaked. Nothing to be ashamed of."

Cody sighed. "Maybe. Doesn't matter now, does it?"

"Nope."

"Paki, he should be okay now that Frank made him lace those stupid boots --"

"You mean, sat on him and made me lace them."

"What you said," Cody acknowledged. He hesitated. "I keep thinking about what he said. That picture he lost."

Shay shrugged, seemingly irritably. "He never mentioned it before. Might just have been panicking."

"Bull."

"A guy like Paki keeps no secrets."

"He's not the biggest mouth around here."

Beside Cody, Shay stiffened, though he kept walking. "This really isn't the time or the place, okay?"

"What else do we have to do?" Cody stuffed his hands in his pockets. Perversely, despite his sweat he was otherwise chilled near to the bone. "They're not listening. And if they are, who cares? It's not like they don't know every other detail anyway."

Shay huffed.

"Fine. If you don't want to talk, I can't make you." Cody kept walking, one foot in front of the other with no idea how much further they had to go. "You can't stop me from talking, though, and if I'm chattering to myself there's no telling how loud I might get --"

Shay cursed under his breath. "Okay! You win. Ass." He stalked in momentary silence. "What do you want me to say?"

"You could start with explaining why you did what you did. Played all of us because we didn't hop to your tune."

"Is that all?" Shay stared up at the sky, across at the trees, anywhere but at Cody. "I don't trust people."

"No kidding."

"You asked, I'm answering. I don't. Trust people, that is. Not ever."

Cody mulled that over. "Why?"

Shay shot him an irritated look -- not much of a start, but Cody would take what he could get. "Why do you think? Take a guess."

"And you think you're the only one that's ever happened to? Idiot." Cody swatted him on the back of the head.



"You don't have any idea what --"

"No? Who do you think I am, Shay? Why do you think we're all here together? We're the same, in a lot of ways. We've been there and done that, and maybe we're all kinda crazy because of it, but you're the only one who shoots everyone down before anyone has a chance."

"Yeah, well." Shay's shoulders twitched. "So maybe I'm not a people person."

"Then why do you jump the bones of anyone who you decide is worth more than sneering at?"

Shay quieted.

"Well?"

He scruffed up his hair. "Usually? I don't. You, though... you got to me. Made me a lot crazier than I normally get about people. At first, all I wanted was to see how far you'd go before you snapped."

"And then?"

"Don't make me say it." Shay bit his lip, looking sideways at Cody. "I'll sound like a wannabe prom queen or something, doodling hearts and flowers in my notebook margins."

"That's another thing you've gotta work on," Cody commented.

"Huh? Doodling?"

"No, idiot. You'll end up inciting someone to murder if you don't quit belittling --"

"Belittling, big word there."

"Bite me."

"Smaller words, yet with more meaning."

Cody couldn't help laughing. "Okay. I'm not gonna get a straight answer out of you. I can see that. So hear me out and we'll call it good enough for now, and call me a Pollyanna all you please 'cause it doesn't change the truth: if you keep driving people away and then playing games

with their heads, you're gonna end up old, alone and bitter with ninety-seven cats."

"Ninety-seven, huh?"

"Or ninety-eight."

Shay exhaled. "I got tangled up inside my head," he admitted, almost too quietly to hear. "I looked at you, and I was so worked up... jealous... and then when you didn't stand up to Paki over what he caught us doing, I..."

"You were an idiot, is what you were." Cody bumped shoulders with him.

"Yeah."

They walked quietly for a few minutes.

Shay cleared his throat. "You said good enough for now. What about later?"

Cody had had time, during the pause, to consider the answer to the question, which he'd known Shay would ask. "I don't think there's any telling. I'd like to say 'yeah, sure, we're good' -- but we're not. You're messed up, Shay. I can't promise you what I might not be able to deliver."

Shay hunched in on himself. He shivered. "Okay."

"You're not gonna argue?"

"Nope. I figure I deserve that."

"Huh." Cody regarded him curiously. "That's a start, anyway."

"And?"

"I'm not sure."

"But it's not a 'get away from me, you heartless cad', is it?"

"Heartless cad? You read Harlequins, don't you?" Cody shook his head, sensing the slow lift of a weight from his shoulders. It'd take time to lift completely.

He might get there someday, though, and for right now that was good enough.

Wherever this road ended up taking them, he figured that at least this was a decent start.

### One Year Later: Where Are They Now?

#### A Look at the Lives of the Infamous Final City/Country Participants

One year after the fact, the five participants in the immediately infamous final season of City/Country have moved on with their lives, claiming they've put the disasters at Baraunchswood Farm behind them. But where are they now and where are they headed?

Paki, known as the jokester among the Baraunchswood Five, wasn't amused when he lost the only link he had to his father in the Baraunchswood fire: a picture of a man he had never even met. After the national coverage of the City/Country catastrophe, however, Paki found himself contacted by none other than the man who had fathered him, Ranjat Sira, who expressed interest in a reunion. Having turned down the network's offered settlement of a four-year scholarship to the college or university of his choice and quoted as saying it'd be "dirty money", Paki currently continues to reside in his hometown with his mother Sheila, assisting in the management of her New Age oriented shop Crystal Dreams. He visits his father once a month. Ranjat says he has hopes of a second chance to get to know his son.

Alan Lancaster, currently a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania, has chosen to major in English Literature with an eye toward a Masters degree in Information Sciences. When asked about the dramatic emotional turns he experienced on City/Country, Alan says he regrets his actions and has apologized to both Cody and to Shay. He prefers to stay out of the limelight and focus his attention on his studies. He participates peripherally in the University's GLBT student union.

Frank, the truculent scion of an established but impoverished ranching family in Pannicle, Texas, has entered Texas A & M State University and is pursuing a degree in Animal Science. He was not available for comment.

Shay, whose enigmatic nature and good looks netted high-profile

attention from the media and the offer of a minor supporting role in American Angels (which Shay refused) lives in New York, where he attends the University at Ithaca and has not yet declared a major. Shay prefers to maintain his privacy and does not grant interviews or permit photographs to be taken. His standard reply to any questions is a request to be left in peace.

However, Shay has maintained almost constant contact with Cody, the acknowledged star of the final season of City/Country and the driving force who motivated his co-participants to flee Baraunchswood Farm on the night of the fire, leading them to safety in the nearby town of Baraunchs, Georgia. Cody continues to pursue the best interests of his City/Country peers, testifying as chief witness in the civil court trial against City/Country's former network host for reckless endangerment (among other charges).

"That whole experience was like being asleep," Cody is quoted as saying with his accustomed unique perspective. "Some parts of it were like great dreams, and other parts were nightmares. I didn't think we'd make it out of there alive, but we did. I'm not a hero, though. Wish people would quit calling me that. I made a lot of mistakes. But learning from your mistakes is what life's all about, isn't it?"

Cody, who attends Clemson University and has chosen to major in Biology -- "Anything but public relations," he jokes -- has confirmed rumors that he and Shay have chosen to pursue a long-distance relationship.

"Maybe it'll work out. Maybe it won't. Lord knows we fight half the time, but the other half's worth the fighting," says Cody. "Just don't try and get pictures of us, okay?"

Cody has been quoted as stating that if he could go back in time and reconsider his decision to participate in City/Country with the knowledge of what would happen, he would still sign on.

"I'm not who I was before I hit Baraunchswood and it hit back," says Cody. "Whether I'm better or worse, I don't know. But I do know this: I like who I am now."

America likes you too, Cody.

Shiela Merriweather, Carolina Times.