



## Episode Four

by Andrea Speed

Quinn knew his obsessive cleaning was probably a manifestation of guilt, but that didn't stop him from doing it.

What a way to win friends and influence people in a new town, huh? Be late for your job. Adam, the cook, was still clearly pissed at him, almost a week later, but he'd walked into some kind of scene today, and his anger was diluted. Adam was cute. So was the guy who was taking up the lion's share of his annoyance, Rider. Adam had been busy when Rider had first showed up, but when he saw him, the temperature in the room seemed to drop about twenty degrees. Whatever he was selling, Adam was

having none of it. But Quinn tagged Rider right away as one of those pretty boys who knew they were pretty, and expected the world to worship at their dick. Generally they were terrible lays, because they figured their being hot was enough. Rider cast interested glances at him, and Quinn's refusal to bite made him that much more intrigued, which was actually fine with him - had to keep options open. Besides, the guy just gave off an aura of money, and you didn't last long anywhere if you pissed off the money guys. Best just to play hard to get for now, and worry about Rider later. As it was, once he got his breakfast, he was out of there.

Quinn had just finished his third obsessive wipe down of the cherry wood bar when Mrs. Boxer showed up. Even though he was still kind of pissed off at him, Adam hadn't ratted him out for being late. Why not? He filed it away as a point in Adam's favor. Besides being a hot piece of ass, which was just another check in the bonus column.

But unlike Rider, who looked like the type of guy who might fuck a hole in a barn door, Adam wasn't giving off a single signal. Maybe it was just that he was distracted, but he got the feeling it wasn't just work that was distracting him, and it wasn't just 'cause they weren't that busy today. Okay, that helped. But no one should curse that much under their breath while making lunch. Woke up on the wrong side of the bed today? Or maybe that was the problem. Unlike Quinn, he didn't wake up in anyone's bed. Poor kid. A guy that hot should have someone, even if it was just a fuck buddy.

The Bear and Bones was kind of funky. The bar's layout and predominance of warm earth tones made him think of that pub in Shaun of the Dead, only with more light and no ancient rifle hanging up behind the bar. It struck him as mildly depressing at first, but as the day wore on and sunlight poured in through the windows, Quinn thought the place had a boho chic kind of shabby charm. He held out hope that meant hipsters would come in here to drink ironically - guys in faux homeless drag or girls in suicide fairy glaze - but so far his only customers had been a couple of older townies whose faces sported the gin blossoms of the career drinker. Disappointing. The couple of times he saw Adam out of the kitchen, he tried to engage in some meaningful eye contact, but he barely even glanced in his direction.

Quinn had given up on having any fun around here and was just counting the hours until he could go when he suddenly heard someone say, "You're new here."

He looked down to the far end of the bar, where a gorgeous hunk of man meat had settled onto a stool. He was young, maybe kind of near Quinn's age or not too much older, with neat brown hair, dark bedroom eyes, and a stain of brown stubble colored his jaw line and cheeks. Quinn felt an almost overwhelming urge to lick it. "Just got into town," Quinn agreed, sauntering over towards him. He was wearing a worn navy muscle shirt that showed off how toned his arms were, and a small tattoo of a heart in flames on his left shoulder. "What can I get you, cowboy?"

He smirked at the name, and said, "Just a light beer. Technically I'm still on the clock."

"Oh. Playing hooky?" Quinn asked, as he pulled a beer from the cooler.

"More like taking a break," the hottie said. After a brief pause, he said, "The name's Tony."

"Quinn," he replied, popping off the cap and putting the beer in front of him. "So what do you do around here, Tony?"

He took a pull from the beer before answering, but his eyes never left Quinn's. "I'm a handyman up at Whispering Ridge."

"I didn't think it was open yet."

Tony grimaced in a humorous manner that made him look totally adorable. He had to know that too, the fucker. "We have to get everything ready for the grand opening, so I've been putting out minor fires. Figuratively."

"Oh damn. I was hoping you were a hot firefighter. I love me a guy who knows how to work a pole." Quinn gave him a sly smile, and Tony returned it. If sexual chemistry was combustible, this entire bar would be burning down.

Finally, Tony looked down at his beer, color rising up his neck. Was he actually blushing? How adorable. Quinn wanted to ride him like the carousel horse in front of the Wal-Mart. "So, um, have you been around Boxer Falls yet? Seen the sights?"

"There are things to see? I thought you all just looked out at the water and whittled on the back porch until Maw called you in for supper."

That made Tony chuckle. "We're not that bad. Where you from?"

"Jersey, technically. But I say Boston now 'cause I don't want to be associated

with those Jersey Shore douche-nozzles."

"I hear that." After a moment where he pretended to be coy - Tony was seemingly the type of guy who was used to being asked, not the kind doing the asking - he said, "I could, y'know, show you around. If you're interested."

Show him between his sheets, more like. But Quinn was so not adverse to that idea. "Yeah, I'm interested. I get off work at midnight. Wanna pick me up?"

Tony half smiled, almost as if put off by his aggressiveness. But he must have decided it didn't bother him that much. "Sure. But most of the stuff around here is better seen in daylight."

"So I guess we'll have to go out some other time, huh?" Quinn rested his elbows on the bar and gave Tony his best seductive smile when he half heard a familiar voice ordering a sandwich to go from Adam. He glanced over and saw Vic, the rough trade cop, now looking big and butch in his cop uniform. Vic, to his surprise, was looking in his direction, and was staring at Tony with intense interest. What was that about?

Tony must have caught Quinn staring at him, because he looked towards Vic. "Is something wrong?"

By the time Tony looked, Vic had looked towards Adam, coming out with his bagged sandwich and a travel cup full of coffee. "You know that guy?" Tony asked. Was Quinn just being paranoid, or did Tony sound a little wary?

"Not really," Quinn answered, and it wasn't strictly a lie.

Who knew better than Quinn that you could fuck a guy, but never really know

him at all?

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Trip stood under the shower until the water turned cold, planning his next move.

Seducing Conrad had honestly been so much easier than he anticipated that in retrospect he had no idea why he'd so obsessively planned it. He'd had a sneaking suspicion that Conrad was a total closet case since he first met him, but it turned out he was just looking for an excuse to run screaming from his confinement. Also his wife. But Trip could hardly blame him there - she seemed like a total bitch.

Finally he turned off the taps and stepped out onto the cold tile floor, snatching a towel from the rack and hastily rubbing it over his bristly hair. It was then he realized he was hearing a weird noise, one it took him a minute to place. It was his cell, set on vibrate, jittering across the bathroom counter like a cybernetic roach.

He wrapped a towel around his waist before he picked it up and saw someone had left him a message, recently too. Probably when Conrad had been fucking him, which might explain why he missed the call. It was hard to film and talk at the same time.

"Hey, Trip, it's me," the voice said. The slight drawl meant it could only be Brandt. "I've found something that's gonna make you very happy. You won't believe the skeletons the Cottens got rattling around their closet. Meet me at the boathouse

tonight around six and I'll give you what I managed to dig up. Oh, and your hunch? It was right. It's not only royal families that have bastards. Later."

Trip stared at the phone, torn between throwing it against the wall or calling Brandt back and screaming at him for being such an asshole, but ultimately he did neither. Because Brandt relished being an inveterate ass, wearing it like a fucking badge of honor.

Trip didn't really know him that well, just well enough to want to avoid any public associations with the man. He was a private detective who fled New York under the cloud of a wiretapping investigation, and while no charges had been filed, Brandt had the greasy reputation of a man who would do absolutely anything if you paid him well enough, no matter how down low and despicable. Hell, he liked it in the mud. No wonder he used to work for a tabloid newspaper.

And that was pretty much all Trip had to barter for. He promised Brandt he'd help him land a job at the newspaper if he could dig up some quality dirt on the Cottens before the grand opening of Whispering Ridge, and Brandt's scummy reputation had left him so unemployable it was the best offer he'd had in a long time. Trip honestly didn't know if it would work or not, but Brandt had come through for him, the sleazy son of a bitch.

So the Cottens did have some illegitimate children? Trip had suspected as much, simply because all powerful men seemed to be weak at the dick. He wondered how many, and if any of them were here in Boxer Falls.

Before putting his phone away, he briefly checked the newly created film file. Yep - It was easy to see that was definitely Conrad, plowing him like some horny fourteen year old who'd just had a Viagra enema. Wouldn't this just crush Oz if he saw it? Oh, he had so much ammunition to destroy Oz with, it was hardly even funny anymore. Well ... okay, no, it was still hilarious. And now he had more to add to the pile.

Trip hadn't realized how late it actually was. He probably had time to catch a quick bite to eat before he met with Brandt, but just barely. He stopped at the coffee shop and exchanged flirtatious glances with the barista before leaving with his scone and double espresso, which he wolfed down in his car. The sun was just starting to set, turning the sky a bloodshot shade of crimson over the mirror finish of the lake, and Trip wondered when he began to loathe such stunning scenery. It was hard to remember now. It seemed like the hate had always been with him, an unborn twin, dormant until he'd come to this sleepy cul-de-sac of a town.

He drove towards the boathouse, passing Cotten Square, and sneered at the signs as he passed. Cotten this, Cotten that - this fucking town was rotten with Cottens. And they were rotten, deep into the cores of their being, pretty, shiny apples full of mold and maggots, even if only he could see that right now. Soon, the whole world would know just how corrupted they were.

The sun was an unblinking red eye as Trip parked near the pitifully named Slappy's Bait Shop and started walking towards the little used boat house. Well, little



used when the tourists weren't around. Some of the locals fished, but most didn't bother with the formality of the bait shop and the public docks. If you were anyone in this town, you had a private dock. Certainly the Cottens did. If there was something they didn't own, then they'd acquire it by any means necessary. Ask his father. Although you'd need to hold a séance to ask his father anything.

The shadows turned long, making the boat house seem more abandoned and decrepit than it usually was in the off season. He'd seen Brandt's brown Oldsmobile with the Pennsylvania plates in Slappy's lot, so he knew he was here. Fucking asshole was probably being dramatic, maybe waiting for him inside.

Trip wasn't sure when the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Was it when he saw the padlock still firmly in place on the boat house doors? Or was it when he heard that strange gurgling noise? He thought it was the lake at first, but it made a gentle noise, waves lapping softly against the wooden pier, a direct contrast to this harsh, rattling sound.

Trip looked around warily, hands balling into fists as he crept around the building, trying to pinpoint the noise, and finally he found it, when he rounded the corner and stumbled over Brandt's leg.

Brandt lay sprawling face up at the head of the pier, blood gushing from his slit open stomach and bubbling through a puncture wound in his neck, air making bubbles appearing in the crimson wet before it all slid down to pool on the dock. Trip had just straightened up and processed what he was seeing when Brandt's chest stopped rising

and falling, and that hideous gurgling noise stopped, one final bubble forming near his vocal cords before popping in the still night air.

Oh God. Oh God. What the hell had he gotten himself into?

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- *Why is Rider so determined to capture Adam's attention?*
- *Will Quinn and Tony meet for a quickie, or is Tony otherwise "engaged"?*
- *What will trip do with the video of Conrad?*
- *Who killed Brandt? And why?*
- *Is Trip in over his head with a dead body on his hands?*

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**TUNE IN NEXT WEEK!**

***Boxer Falls: The bigger they are...***

**AUTHOR BIO:**

Andrea Speed was born looking for trouble in some hot month without an R in it. While succeeding in finding Trouble, she has also been found by its twin brother, Clean Up, and is now on the run, wanted for the murder of a mop and a really cute, innocent bucket that was only one day away from retirement. (I was framed, I tell you - framed!) In her spare time, she arms lemurs in preparation for the upcoming war against the Mole Men. Viva la revolution!

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