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Boxer Falls: Episode Fourteen

By KC Burn

This might be the worst day of his life.

Tony hung back, out of the way of the bustling nurses and doctors, positioned so he could see the door to Phil's room. The sheer amount of activity scared the fuck out of him.

No one would tell him anything, even though he'd been driving and... his breath hitched. It wasn't all his fault, was it? One handed, he scrubbed the fresh tears from his face, ignoring the pull of stitches at his temple.

Miraculously, he'd emerged from the wreck with nothing more than a shallow cut on his scalp that had bled like a bitch, a dislocated shoulder, and a variety of bruises and scratches. The sheriff had interviewed him and the hospital had discharged him hours ago, but he couldn't leave. Not until he saw Phil. Not until he knew Phil was okay. He didn't dare approach the room while either Grady or Zach was there. Seeing them together, distressed, had been like a knife to the gut.

He was a fucking fool. The money had been good and so damned tempting, but he'd had sex with every man in that family. How had he figured that was going to end

well? Especially when the only man he cared about was beyond that puke green door, status unknown.

Another tear traced a scalding path down his cheek. This time he ignored it as it dripped down to wet his tattered T-shirt. The same tattered T-shirt stained with his blood and the blood of the man he never expected to love.

By the time Grady emerged yet again from Phil's room, accompanied by a grim faced doctor, Zach had been gone for some time. Grady's shocked pallor had aged him to the point he only vaguely resembled the virile silver fox Tony had so recently fucked, and fear twisted in Tony's belly like a thousand angry snakes.

The doctor nodded at Grady and strode off, white coat flapping. Grady's gaze flickered around, but like the other night, Tony was almost completely insignificant, even when bringing the man to orgasm. When Conrad Cotten appeared at the end of the hall, Grady moved toward him, clearly seeking comfort and leaving the way clear for Tony to slip into Phil's room.

"Phil?" Tony whispered, not wanting to wake the man if he were sleeping.

Phil sat up. He frowned at Tony, gaze taking in the sling on his arm and the stitches at his hairline. "Are you okay?"

"Me?" Tony stared at Phil's face. There were no signs of the excruciating pain Phil had experienced before the accident, the whole reason Tony had been rushing him to the hospital in the first place.

"Did you want me to call a nurse, buddy?"

Buddy?

"Phil?"

A frown brought Phil's brows together. "I'm sorry. I guess... I know you?"

Agony, more blinding than anything he experienced so far, ripped through him.
"You don't remember me?"

"I'm sorry." Phil's confidence, Phil's strength, Phil's substantial presence,
evaporated in a second, replaced with hesitation and confusion.

"I'm sorry for bothering you." Tony fled, the emotional pain hammering at him
more than the residual ache in his shoulder.

Having sex with Phil and Grady together had only illustrated how insignificant he
truly was to Phil. He'd known Phil hadn't returned his feelings, which was why he'd never
spoken of them, but to be forgotten completely?

When he finally stopped running, he saw a sign for the cafeteria. A bar would be
much, much better, but his truck was wrecked and he was in no condition to drive. He
stumbled inside and sank down at a table in the corner.

Even worse, as the first responders began pulling people out of the wreckage, he'd recognized the driver of the other car. Without Phil to corroborate his version of the accident, he might need a lawyer, but his big, new bank account might not be big enough to take on the Cottens. Who was the sheriff going to believe? The eldest Cotten son, or a part-time laborer?

* * *

Adam had been at the bus station for hours. His ass was almost completely numb from seats designed to discourage loitering. He had his ticket to Boston, but he still had a few more hours to stew.

Was he making a mistake, leaving like this? Should he give Zach the chance to explain? Problem was, no matter what explanation Zach gave, Adam wasn't sure he'd believe it. Wasn't sure it would be smart to give Zach yet another chance to trample his heart.

A determined stride caught his eye, and when he glanced up, the sight of familiar shaggy hair - hair he'd twisted his fingers in during a mind-blowing orgasm - filled him

with joy. Zach must have come looking for him when he found the note. It had to be a sign. They could work things out.

Adam leapt up and jumped in front of the man he loved, arms outstretched for a hug. "Zach!"

Zach rocked back on his heels and his eyes widened. Adam froze. The hair was incredibly similar, and the guy was hot, but he wasn't Zach. Standing mere inches away, the differences were obvious and it was embarrassing that he'd even made the mistake. Ten years older, squared jaw, mesmerizing pale blue eyes and a veneer of maturity Zach might never gain.

"I'm so sorry. I thought you were someone else."

The corners of the stranger's eyes crinkled as he smiled. "Yes, I figured that out. Someone named Zach. I'm a little disappointed I'm not him."

Adam tried to return the smile, reciprocate the good humor the stranger demonstrated, but a strange tremor had taken up residence in his lip and the not-Zach blurred while tears welled. Adam was more than a little disappointed. To come down from that sudden, heady rush of joy was devastating. Bad enough he was going to cry again, but he wasn't going to do it in front of a stranger.

He whirled around, but a strong grip on his bicep prevented him from going anywhere.

"Hey, hey. Come on, now. It can't be that bad." The voice was low and smoky.

Adam twisted back around. "How would you know?"

Sympathy shone from the stranger's face. "Because I refuse to believe one of the best days of my life is happening on the worst of yours."

Adam clutched the ticket in his hand and frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"It's a beautiful day, I'm starting a great new job in a new town, and the first person I meet is a gorgeous guy. I'm Max. Can I buy you a drink? You can tell me all about it, and we'll see if we can make it better."

Like an epiphany, the man in front of him was no longer some stranger in a bus station, but an individual. Max. And from all appearances, a nice guy. Adam found himself wanting to spill his problems. If nothing else, at least he wouldn't be alone.

"Okay."

"So where's the best place in this town to get a drink?" Max rubbed his thumb across Adam's cheek, wiping away the one tear he hadn't been able to prevent escaping.

"The Bear & Bones." The reply was automatic, but he couldn't go back there, could he? "But I just quit work today."

* * *

Quinn slunk into work, scanning the interior as he did so. The pub was as empty as he expected for the beginning of his shift, and the wicked gnawing in his gut began to recede. He'd used work as an excuse to avoid his father, and hightailed it home right after and stayed there. Which had the added bonus of keeping him out of Oz's sights. He didn't know why the fuck his father was in town, nor how he'd found him, and he didn't fucking care.

As for Oz, he was a problem for another day. The guy had started getting clingy. Even though the sex had been spectacular, the last thing Quinn needed was some naïve newbie imprinting on him.

Straightening his shoulders, he swaggered into the kitchen, only to come to a sudden halt.

"Dot? What are you doing here?"

Dot turned, her apron speckled with flour and her hands covered in dough. "I'm afraid it's just you and me, Quinn. I tried to call, but I couldn't get through."

No, of course not. The first thing he'd done after he left work was turn off his phone, and he hadn't bothered to turn it on again.

"Sorry, my phone must be off. Is Adam sick?"

A sparkle lit Dot's eyes for a fraction of second before he realized she was tearing up. The tension he'd been carrying around in his gut since last night trebled, and he found it difficult to draw a breath.

"Shit, he wasn't in that car wreck, was he?" Quinn had been unable to avoid seeing the newspaper headline this morning, but he hadn't read the story. What were the odds of it involving anyone he knew?

"Oh, honey, no." Dot managed a tremulous smile. "Though that was quite a shock. Heavens. Adam gave his notice. He's taken a job in Boston."

Quinn's eyes widened. "He's gone already?"

Dot shrugged. "It was time. He was wasting his talents here, and well..."

"Well?"

"I don't like to gossip. But it's better for him." She turned back to the sloppy mess of dough. The pub wasn't going to benefit from Adam's departure.

Quinn began his preparations for the shift. He'd liked the little shit, and he never would have thought Adam would have the guts to get up and go, and certainly not without notice, but then again, Quinn had been wrong before. Like assuming he'd never see his dad again. Wrong.

Another little sniff from Dot's direction made Quinn wrack his brain for something to say, something to take her mind off Adam's departure.

"I missed the news about that accident. Are there a lot of accidents on that stretch of road?"

"Oh, my, no. Often out on the interstate, sure, but nothing like this. Horrible business. Although there was one time..."

Quinn listened with half an ear as Dot prattled on about various accidents in Boxer Falls over the years while she kneaded.

"I just can't imagine what that poor man is going through. He may be wealthier than Midas, but that's nothing when your son's hurt. I hear he hasn't left the hospital since it happened."

Midas? "Who's that now?"

"Conrad Cotten."

"Holy f-udge." Quinn barely managed to swallow the word he'd truly meant to say. "Conrad Cotten was in that pileup?"

"No, his son, Oz."

Quinn blinked. Then blinked again. His fingers were numb, and his vision blackened a bit at the edges. Despite the undeniable and unwelcome urge to rip off his own apron and dash to the hospital, something kept his feet nailed to the floor.

The front door slammed open, making both Dot and Quinn turn.

"First customer," she said with a tremulous smile. Quinn tried desperately to return the smile but his muscles were frozen.

"Adam!"

Great. Their first customer sounded angry, and finding Adam gone was likely not going to improve the situation.

"Oh." Dot wrung her hands, and Quinn took a deep breath, forcing the knowledge of Oz's injuries into the deep, dark lock box where many other unpleasant things lurked. Dot needed him.

"I'll take care of it." He cracked his knuckles, ready for anything.

A disheveled Zach stood in the middle of the flock of empty tables, looking wired as hell, clutching a piece of paper.

"Adam's not here."

"He's got to be here. This has to be a joke." Zach waved the paper, but if he expected Quinn to be able to read it, he was nuts. "He can't have left me."

Oh. A note. That sucked, and not typical of Adam at all. No one was having a good day in Boxer Falls.

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Adam pushed around a tiny pile of napkin scraps with a forefinger. Shredding the napkin had just... happened while telling Max about himself and why he was leaving Boxer Falls. He hadn't gotten too specific. Hadn't divulged all the details. No. Some were too private, some too humiliating.

Not once did Max's intent and interested regard ever waver. It had been so long since he'd been the sole focus of anyone's attention. Rider didn't count. Rider wanted his ass, or he wanted an Adam-shaped notch on his bedpost. And Zach was always on the lookout for his next pickup, gaze dancing from Adam to every male that walked past. Max, on the other hand, never once took his gaze from Adam, and it felt good. Adam's words had meaning and import, not merely sounds to fill up the silence.

"Do you believe in fate?"

Adam blinked. How had they gone from Adam spilling his guts to Max hitting on him with a tired old pickup line?

"Uh."

Max chuckled. "I know what that sounds like. But I'm serious. I'm a big believer in destiny and in signs from the universe. Meeting you is definitely a good omen."

Adam swallowed heavily. Max's words were crazy, but he couldn't deny how pleasant Max's company was, even if he was a little nuts.

"It is?"

"Oh, yes." Warm and sincere, Max's smile soothed Adam and provided him with a strange sense of safety and security. "You see, I'm here to oversee the construction and opening of a new restaurant."

What? With all the gossip flowing through the Bear & Bones, he would have heard about something as big as this, wouldn't he?

"You are?"

"Yep. And I want to offer you a job."

"But you've just met me. How could you possibly consider hiring me?" This had to be some sort of weird hallucination. Maybe he was still at the bus station and delirious from carbon monoxide poisoning.

"If you're good enough for Forsyth, you're good enough for me. You'll be an invaluable asset and your knowledge of the local customer base will be a huge bonus."

"I don't know what to say." He'd quit his job. Left a note for Zach. Been arrested. How long did it take to open a restaurant from nothing? He could be out of work for weeks or months.

"I'll pay you fair market value, what Forsyth was offering at the minimum."

"It sounds awesome, Max, and I'm flattered." It sounded like a dream come true. He wasn't looking forward to moving to an unfamiliar city, all by himself. Without Zach.

"But Forsyth's offer is a lot more money than I'm making now."

Max nodded. "And Boston is a lot more expensive to live in than Boxer Falls. Trust me, you might even have less disposable income than you do now."

"I need a job now. I've already quit my position here." Even though he didn't want to go, even though he didn't want to leave without Zach, he couldn't live with him anymore. Not until he figured out whether Zach had just been toying with him or not. An increase in salary would let him afford his own apartment.

"Got any objections to asking for your old job back?"

Surely Max wasn't offering him more money to go back and work the exact same job he'd just left. Was he?

"I can already tell you feel guilty about leaving them in the lurch. So, go back to work with them for now, be available for consultation with me, and I'll top up your wages to Forsyth's rate. When the time comes, you can put in your notice again, and come work for me full time. How does that sound?"

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- *Who is Max and why has he arrived in Boxer Falls now?*

 - *What is Tony going to do without Phil and about his liability in the accident?*

 - *Will Adam take the new job and see if Max can give him what Zach can't?*

- *Does Quinn truly have feeling for Oz and if so, will he act on them?*

TUNE IN NEXT WEEK!

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

AUTHOR BIO :

KC Burn has been writing for as long as she can remember and is a sucker for happy endings (of all kinds). After moving from Toronto to Florida for her husband to take a dream job, she discovered a love of gay romance and fulfilled a dream of her own - getting published. By day, she edits web content and at night she neglects her supportive, understanding hubby and needy cat to write stories about men loving men in the past, present and future. You can find her on:

- Web:kcburn.com

■ Twitter: [@authorkcburn](https://twitter.com/authorkcburn)

■ Facebook: [authorkcburn](https://www.facebook.com/authorkcburn)