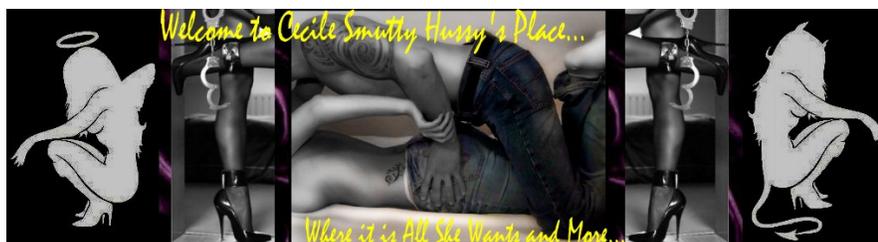




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Boxer Falls: Episode Nineteen

by Kiernan Kelly

Adam left his dreams only under duress. Asleep, a whirlwind of imperfect memories mixed with a healthy dose of perfect fantasy swirled one after another. Boxer Falls was idyllic in his dreams; a place where he and Zach loved one another, lived together, and happily fucked each other's brains out every five minutes. He didn't want to leave it or Zach, and fought hard against waking. Eventually, as was usually the case, sleep lost the battle and his eyes fluttered open.

A half-memory surfaced along with his consciousness, foggy with the last cobwebs of sleep. Had they made love the night before, he and Zach? He frowned, trying to bring the memory into focus, wanting desperately for it to have been real and not a dream. Hadn't he felt Zach's hands on him? The sex had been passionate and hot, and he'd come hard, shuddering and crying out Zach's name, hadn't he? Or had he only dreamed it?

No. He tried to convince himself it hadn't been a dream. How could it be when his body remembered every touch, his skin prickling with the memory of Zach's fingers and lips? When his fingers and palms tingled where they'd wrapped around Zach's hot prick, and his mouth salivated with the ghost of Zach's taste on his tongue? Hell, the smell of sex still clung to the sheets!

Sometime last night, after he'd nearly drunk himself into a stupor, Zach had come back to him, forgiven him for being a suspicious dickhead, and explained about the baby aspirin. They'd shared a kiss, long and deep, and Zach touched him, ran teasing fingers over Adam's chest, belly, and thighs.

He'd been smashed and half-asleep at the time, but he couldn't have made it all up. He just didn't have *that* good an imagination. No, it was real. It had to be. The corners of his mouth lifted into a smile, and his morning wood hardened into steel as he rolled over, reaching for Zach.

The other side of the bed felt cold, the blankets smooth and tucked tightly, the pillow still fluffed. It was obvious no one had slept on that side of the bed.

He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the mattress, and ran a hand over his belly. His fingers found dried, sticky spots. The evidence said he'd orgasmed, but had it been with Zach, or alone, jacking off while thinking about Zach? Had it all been nothing but a drunken wet dream?

If it'd really happened, then why hadn't Zach spent the night? Why would he leave without even saying goodbye?

He groaned, letting his head hang forward, feeling the beginnings of a hangover of epic proportions. His head throbbed, bolts of pain ricocheting around the inside of his skull, his stomach roiled, and his mouth tasted like he'd been chewing dog turds. He couldn't think, couldn't decide what was real and what was imagined.

Maybe a shower would help clear his head. A hot shower, followed by a shitload of caffeine, preferably delivered intravenously. Or better yet, hair of the dog. A stiff shot would take the edge off, let him feel halfway human again.

He walked to the bathroom, then turned and gave the room one last, befuddled look. Why couldn't he remember what was real and what wasn't?

Zach. Somehow, he got the feeling it all had to do with Zach. In fact, he realized most of his problems centered around Zach. He huffed, frowning. What was he doing? He really was being a schmuck. Not twenty-four hours ago he'd been ready to leave Zach behind and start fresh somewhere else, far away from Boxer Falls and every-fucking-one in it, and yet here he was, still in town, still chasing after Zach. Then what happened? Some guy named Max shows up out of nowhere and offers him a great opportunity and a reason to stay in town, and Adam falls for it.

Instead of starting over, forgetting Zach and finding somebody else, somebody stable, somebody who would look at him as more than just a best friend. Why? Because it would give him an excuse to see Zach again. How sick was that?

True, finding out that Zach's bag of drugs wasn't anything more potent than a baggie of baby aspirin had removed the doubt he'd harbored that Zach's desire for him had been pharmaceutical in nature, but still...his relationship (or lack thereof) with Zach had been such an ongoing source of disappointment and heartache for him for so long that anyone with half a brain would've jumped the first Greyhound out of town a long time ago. But no, he evidently didn't have enough gray matter to stop coming back to Zach for more punishment

Well, he was sick and tired of it. He refused to let Zach take advantage of him anymore. No more allowing Zach to depend on him, solving all of Zach's problems, or cleaning up Zach's messes. As far as he was concerned, Zach didn't exist. In fact, he figured he'd be better off if Zach had never been adopted by Grady and Phil in the first place. Then he and Zach wouldn't have gone to school together, and their friendship wouldn't have led to his heart being broken so many fucking times.

The shower helped some, but not nearly enough. Since the very thought of downing anything stronger than coffee made his stomach threaten to hurl itself free of his body via either his mouth or his ass, he opted for a cup of mud made in his one-cup coffeemaker. The caffeine helped clear his mind a bit more. His headache retreated into a dull ache, and his stomach settled enough for him to contemplate getting dressed.

Neither did anything, however, to improve his memory of the night before. He still couldn't decide if his encounter with Zach was real or imagined. In fact, there were times when Zach's face metamorphosed into Max's, which was really weird and just made his headache worse.

He pulled on jeans and a t-shirt, and slicked back his hair. Ignoring the residual pain in his head, he opened the front door to face the world at large with one goal in mind: find Zach and end their relationship once and for all, before his heart could be broken yet again. He could stay on at The Bear and Bones until Max's restaurant was ready to open, or save up a little cash and leave Boxer Falls, this time for good. He wasn't sure at this point what he wanted to do, but he knew one thing -- whatever he did, it would be without Zach.

Outside, snow was falling again. The fat white flakes drifted down, muffling sound, making the street appear eerily quiet. Indeed, the only sound he could hear was the crunch of his boots on the newly fallen powder as he walked down the street in the general direction of the Boxer B&B. He figured after leaving his place, Zach would've gone back there to crash.

He looked up just as he reached the front of the B&B, and was immediately struck by a disturbingly odd sight. The sign still read "Boxer's B&B," but the building with its clapboard façade and tall, shuttered windows was different. It looked shabbier, unkempt. The clapboard, which Adam always remembered as a deep cranberry red, kept freshly painted and immaculate, was now dingy, dirty, and sun-faded. He'd spotted a few missing shingles on the familiar, dramatic Mansard roof. Several of the windows had long, jagged cracks, and the curtains that hung behind them, the rich, burgundy brocade ones Adam had always admired, looked worn and threadbare.

What the fuck had happened here? He knew things were out of sorts for everyone since Phil's accident, but they were really letting the place go to pot.

He climbed the few steps to the front door and let himself in as he'd done a thousand times before. A snarl, deep, throaty, and menacing, stopped him in his tracks. His breath caught in his throat when his gaze cut to his left and he spotted a ferocious-looking Doberman glaring at him, baring its teeth.

"Down Samson." Phil Boxer stood up from the armchair in which he'd been sitting. He looked at Adam with a blank expression. "Do I know you?"

Adam blinked. He was a little surprised to see Phil there. Hadn't Phil left Grady for Tony? *Guess they made up. That's good, at least.* There was obviously something wrong with Phil, though. He looked old. Old, worn, and tired. *Cut the guy some slack, he chided himself. Phil was just in an accident. Lost his memory, remember? Yeah, that explains not knowing me. But when did they get the fucking dog?* "It's me, Phil. Adam. I've been your son's best friend forever." He tipped his head in the dog's direction. "What happened to Tick and Tock? What's with Fido over there?" He shook his head in confusion. Whatever was going on, he really didn't want to deal with it. He waved a hand. "Wait. Never mind all that. Just tell me where Zach is."

"Who? Look, I don't want any trouble. We're not renting rooms anymore, not since fucking Conrad and Grady Cotton started foreclosure proceedings on the place. But just because I'm losing my home and business doesn't mean I'm an easy target. I got

Samson here for protection, so you can turn your ass right around and leave in one piece, or go out later in bite-sized chunks. Your choice."

Adam gaped at Phil. "Whoa, back up! Conrad and Grady Cotton? When the fuck did that happen?"

Phil threw him an arch look. "Years ago. What difference does it make to you, anyway? Go on, get out. Now, or I swear I'll sic Samson on you!"

Wow, that accident did more to scramble Phil's brain than just give him amnesia. He's gotten positively hostile. Adam eyed the dog, which was growling again. "Okay, okay. Just tell Zach Adam needs to talk to him, okay? He knows where to find me."

He took a few slow, careful steps backward, until his rear bumped the door. Reaching behind him, he opened it and, not ever taking his eyes away from the dog, backed through it. He shut it again with a sense of relief.

Trotting down the stairs, he gave the house a long look from over his shoulder. *Damn, that was weird. Poor Phil. Imagine not recognizing the people who've always loved you the most? It's tragic, that's what it is, fucking tragic.*

There was nothing left for him to do except head over to the Bear and Bones and start his shift. He'd make a point of catching up to Zach later, though. He needed closure before the day was out.

He trudged across the street to the Bear and Bones. The snow was falling thicker now in a soft white curtain, softening the contours of the bare tree limbs and covering his previous footprints.

Adam pulled open the front door and walked inside. There were only a few patrons inside, town diehards who routinely come in for breakfast despite the weather. He shrugged out of his jacket and headed toward the back of the room.

"Here for breakfast?"

He looked over at Dot, who was coming out of the kitchen with a tray of limp, blackened squares that may or may not have been a sad attempt at waffles. She plopped a

plate of them in front of a man who didn't seem very enthused to be getting it, if the way his shoulders slumped was any indication.

Damn it. Ira must've been trying to cook again. Why didn't they just wait for him to get in? He was only a few minutes late. "Yeah. Sorry I'm late."

"Late for what? We serve breakfast until ten. You still have plenty of time. Have a seat anywhere. I'll be right over to take your order."

"What are you talking about? I'm not here to eat. It's not my day off, Dot. I'm here to cook." He shook his head and headed toward the kitchen. Maybe Dot was getting old, or just working too hard. She'd never forgotten the schedule before.

To his surprise, Dot hurried to cut him off. "Young man, I don't know what you're talking about, but we're not in the habit of letting strangers off the street into our kitchen." She pointed her chin toward the door. "Now, you just turn that fanny of yours around and head out. We don't need trouble from the likes of you."

"What the hell is going on around here? I went to see Zach over at the B&B, and Phil was acting nuttier than tree full of squirrels. Now I come to work, and you pretend you don't know me."

Dot glared at him. "I don't recall meeting you before. Now, I believe I asked you to leave."

Adam took a step toward Dot, his hands spread in confusion. "Come on, Dot. What is this, some kind of joke?"

Dot took a step backward. "Do I look like I'm joking? You've got five seconds to clear out of here." She called out over her shoulder. "Ira! Call the Sheriff. We've got trouble!"

"I don't understand any of this. Dot, it's me, Adam. I work here, for God's sake!"

"I don't know anyone named Adam. Are you high on that crack stuff?" She took another step backward. Her hand slid to the silverware setting on the table next to her, sliding out the butter knife. She shook the knife toward Adam. "You've got problems,

thinking I know you, thinking you can come in here and start messing around in my kitchen. You need to leave, now. My husband is calling the law right now."

Adam twisted his fingers in his hair, unsure of what to make of anything. Had Dot gone crazy overnight? Was Phil's amnesia contagious? He'd never heard of such a thing, but how could he explain it?

Ira chose that moment to step out of the kitchen wielding a large butcher knife. "Sheriff's on his way. Dot, you get back here by me. Boy, I'd take off if I were you. Sheriff Neale doesn't like drifters in Cotton Falls."

"You mean *Boxer* Falls." Adam began shaking his head, and backing toward the door. "Boxer, not Cotton. Dot, maybe you should go see a doctor. Something's not right."

"I guess I know the name of the town I've lived in all my life! There's nothing wrong with me, but I guarantee there's something wrong with you!"

"Okay, okay. Look, I'm going. I'm going to find Zach, and figure out just what in the blue hell is going on around here. I'll be back later, okay?"

"Don't you dare show your face around here again, or I'll have you arrested!"

Adam put up his hands as if to ward off a possible attack, then turned and nearly ran out the door. Had the whole town gone nuts? God, all he wanted was for somebody to act fucking normal! Nothing had gone right since the night before. He wanted a do-over.

"Adam?"

He started, and turned, peering through the snow at the approaching figure. He recognized Max, and stopped, waiting. "Hey, Max. You know me, right? Please tell me you know me."

Max smiled, and Adam was struck again by how much he looked like an older version of Zach. "Yes, Adam, I know you."

"Good. For a few minutes, I thought I'd lost my mind. Something crazy is going on in town, Max. I can't find Zach, and nobody seems to know me. I know Phil is having

issues, but now something's wrong with Dot and Ira, too! Do you know anything about what's going on?"

"Of course, I do."

"Well, what the fuck is it?"

"That's easy. Look, we think we live in our own little universes, each of us an island unto ourselves, but that's just a lie we tell ourselves when things get tough and we want to cut and run. The truth is, our existence has direct impact on the existence of everyone we ever come in contact with, from our family to our friends to our acquaintances. People are like a long line of dominoes, set up in an intricate pattern. Take one away and the whole pattern is destroyed."

Adam blinked snow out of his eyes. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You wished Zach had never been born, never been adopted, never come into your life. Well, this is the way your life would be if he hadn't. In this reality, Grady didn't

choose Phil thirty years ago. He chose Conrad Cotton. Because of that, Conrad never married his wife, and Oswald and Rider were never born.

"Phil doesn't know who Zach is because he never adopted Zach. He never got over losing Grady to Conrad, and started drinking soon after. He drove the B&B into the ground, and now is losing it to the Cottons, which just compounds his bitterness.

"Dot and Ira don't know you because you never made friends with Zach in school. You were a loner, and left town right after high school to pursue a culinary career in New York."

Adam snorted. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard! I don't know what sort of game everyone's playing, but I *do* know this isn't "It's A Wonderful Life," and I'm not Jimmy-fucking-Stewart. "Look, you go on playing your little head games. I'm going to find Zach, and figure out what the hell is going on."

"You won't find him. He's not here, Adam. I told you Phil and Grady didn't adopt him, remember? He grew up in the orphanage, and ran away when he was sixteen. He had no money, no friends, and lived on the streets. Heroin was his drug of choice, when he could turn enough tricks to afford a fix. He died in an alleyway, strung out and alone."

Adam's mouth fell open. "What the fuck are you talking about? That's crazy! He's not dead!"

"Sorry, Adam. He is, and do you know why? Because he didn't have you in his life. You were fated to be together. You protected him, kept him on the straight and narrow, saved him from himself time and time again. Without you in his life, his depression sent him into a downward spiral that he could never reverse."

"You're lying! This is all some sort of prank, right? A Boxer Falls version of 'Punk'd'? Who are you supposed to be, my fucking guardian angel?"

Max laughed. Adam could see his eyes sparkle with amusement, even through the snow. "No, not by a long shot."

"Then who are you? Why are you doing this to me?"

"I'm someone who's been sent to keep you from making the biggest mistake of your life, Adam."

Adam narrowed his eyes. He didn't -- *couldn't* -- believe any of this. "Sent by who?"

Max took a step closer. The smile on his face was soft. "By you."

Adam's temper finally escaped his control. He reached out and tried to push Max, but to his shock, his hands met empty air.

Max was gone.

Adam twisted around, peering into the snow, looking for Max, but there was no sign of him. Worse, when he looked down, he saw only one set of footprints in the snow...his own.

He backed away, shaking his head. "It can't be. I'm not crazy. I'm not, but this can't be happening." Who was Max? For that matter, *what* was Max? Had he been a figment of Adam's imagination all along? Or was he...something more, something else? He felt cold and clammy, but nervous sweat trickled down between his shoulder blades. He felt like he'd lost his mind.

One thought broke through his fear, and gave him something to cling to, a life preserver in the tumultuous ocean his life had suddenly become. Zach. He had to get to Zach.

Finding Zach had been his objective since he'd left home that morning, but now he needed to find Zach for a completely different reason. He desperately needed somebody to ground him into familiar reality, to assure him that he wasn't crazy, to give him a sense of normality, and the best person for the job was his best friend, and the one person he loved more than anyone else.

Forgetting he'd been ready to end it with Zach for once and all just an hour or so ago, he broke into a run and dashed back to Boxer's B&B.

He burst into the B&B, forgetting that the last time he'd been in there he'd nearly become a chew toy for a vicious canine. Never slowing his step, he took the stairs two and three at a time, heading up to the attic where Zach lived.

Had lived.

Did live, he kept telling himself. He'll be there. He will!

He didn't bother knocking on Zach's door. Instead he pushed it open and ran inside. "Zach! Zach, where are you?"

For one heart stopping moment he heard only silence, his voice echoing in the apartment. Was it true then? Had he somehow wished Zach away, out of his life? Or had he simply gone insane?

"Adam? What are you doing here?" Zach walked out of the bedroom, wearing nothing but a towel wrapped low around his narrow hips. His hair was dripping wet, rivulets of water running over his pecs and ropy abs.

"Zach!" Adam leapt forward, dragging Zach into his arms. He held Zach tight, reveling in every inch of firm, solid flesh that pressed against his body. He nuzzled

Zach's neck, breathing deep, filling his lungs with Zach's scent. "You're here. You're really here."

"Dude, you're crushing me. I can't breathe." Zach wiggled a bit until Adam was forced to loosen his death grip. "Of course, I'm here. Where else would I be?"

"I thought...it's nuts but, I was afraid..."

"Adam, are you okay? You seemed all right last night when I left, but you--"

Adam hugged Zach closer again, ignoring Zach's overly dramatic wheeze. "That was you last night!"

"Of course it was me! What, you thought I had a fucking twin?"

Adam grinned happily. "No. Why did you leave, though? You didn't say goodbye or anything."

"You feel asleep, you jerk. I didn't want to wake you. I needed to come home."
Zach pushed Adam away. "Look, I know you found my stash, and I can explain--"

"Don't. Please. I don't want to talk about that now. I need to talk about us."

"Us? You mean, last night? Look, Adam, you don't need to worry about that. I was feeling a little needy, that's all. I came over to your place, and found the door unlocked. I let myself in, and when I saw you all sexy and sleepy on the bed, I just...lost control. That's all." Zach lowered his head, refusing to look Adam in the eye. "Look, can't we just forget it? It was a mistake, that's all."

"No, that's not all. Not this time. Look at me, Zach. I said, look at me!" He caught Zach's chin and forced his face to tilt up. "I love you. Is that clear enough for you? You're my best friend, and yeah, you're a major fuck up sometimes, but I love you anyway. I always have. You and I are meant to be together. And this time I'm not going to take no for an answer!"

He drew Zach closer and kissed him, hard and deep. His hand slid over the small of Zach's back to his hips, and ripped the towel away before cupping a handful of Zach's

firm little ass and giving it a proprietary squeeze. He smiled against Zach mouth when he felt Zach cock fill and press against him.

Zach broke their kiss, although he made no effort to pull away. Instead he locked his arms around Adam's back, as if afraid Adam would let him go. "Everything I touch turns to shit. Tell me I'm not fucking up the one good relationship in my life."

"You're not. This is the way it's supposed to be. You're mine, Zach."

"Good. But we have a problem already."

"We do, huh? What's that?"

Zach looked at Adam with the sexy, saucy grin Adam loved so much curving his lips. "You've got way too many fucking clothes on."

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TUNE IN NEXT WEEK!

Boxer Falls: The bigger they are...

Author Bio:

Kiernan Kelly lives in the wilds of the alligator-infested U.S. Southeast, slathered in SPF 45, drinking tropical, hi-octane concoctions served by thong-clad cabana boys.

Actually, the truth is that she spends her time locked in the dark recesses of her office, writing gay erotica while chained to a temperamental laptop, drinking coffee, and dreaming about thong-clad cabana boys.

Sigh.

Slaving away has paid off, though. Kiernan currently has twelve novels and a plethora of shorter works available in both print and ebook formats.

Readers can find links to the full body of Kiernan's works on her website, www.KiernanKelly.com.

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